

The background of the cover features a dark green military-style cap with gold braided rank insignia. A wreath of red carnations is draped across the cap. The text is overlaid on this image.

Anna-Leigh Brooks

*Ring
Of
Hope*

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After Jamie's drunken one night stand which destroyed his relationship, he left the base on Sunday 27th June 2020 a broken man, and threw himself into his career, using the physical pain of the endurance training to try and mask the emotional pain he was in.

Five years on, with a recent promotion to Corporal he requests a secondment back to the base and discovers a secret which makes him question his new (somewhat lacking in the bedroom department) relationship and his future marriage plans.

Will Jamie get the closure he so desperately needs and go on to marry his fiancé or will his return to the village change the course of his life forever?

Ring of Hope is the sequel to *The Older Woman*, a beautiful love story, a second chance 'first love' relationship for Jamie and Jess that ensued after a chance meeting back in Autumn of 2019.

A love story both raunchy and heartfelt that will keep you captivated until the end.

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Prologue

Corporal Jamie O'Halloran left his first base on Sunday 6 June 2021 at the tender age of twenty, though of course he believed himself to be mature for his age, having been in a serious relationship with a thirty-six year old divorcee, Jess Willets.

Jamie was deeply in love with Jess and planned on proposing to her the night before posting out, until a couple of weeks before his planned proposal, a reckless one night stand changed everything.

He left that base a broken man and moved onto a new base, working hard and pushing himself to ignore the pain. Enduring long hours of physical training, he pushed himself harder still as the physical pain was nothing in comparison to the emotional pain he felt.

The ring he had bought Jess remained in his possession. It was his only hope that one day he would give it to her, as he never stopped loving her and told her he'd wait for her, no matter how long it took.

Now, five years on he is engaged to be married to someone else, but feels he needs closure so decides to return to that base on a twelve week secondment. He has no idea if Jess is with someone else, or even still living in the village but what he learns on his first day back after a visit to The Bowl will change his life forever.

He discovers that not only is Jess still living in the village but she's been harbouring a secret from him since he left. Will he get the closure he's looking for and go on to marry his new fiancé?

Chapter 1

Something To Think About

Jamie has that inexplicable feeling again, in the pit of his stomach, like he's missing something or someone.

He's awake early, it's just gone 0350hrs, and he can't remember the last time he slept more than four hours in any one period, and even achieving that has been a struggle. When his relationship with Jess ended, he slept even less, the odd hour if he was lucky and it was a good eighteen months before he started sleeping for as long as four.

He'd lie awake thinking about Jess, their sex life, their relationship and most of all how he had managed to destroy everything they had for a one night stand on a drunken night out, fueled by rage after an argument with Jess over her parents.

He never understood why she couldn't tell them, she would always say to him "my mum's difficult, she's complicated" she didn't like people like Jamie, he figured that much, he wasn't someone she wanted her daughter with, she wanted her to be with someone who was posh like them.

He has recently come across an opportunity for a secondment, for 12 weeks initially and it will be a great opportunity to showcase his skills as a newly promoted Corporal, but it does mean going back to that same base and the village where he lived with Jess.

He books a meeting, with his Sergeant, to talk to him about the secondment. He wants to apply but he needs his Sergeant's recommendation, which will secure the placement for him for 12 weeks, with a possible extension to 12 months.

In the meeting, his Sergeant tells him that going back isn't always a good thing and asks him if he is sure about doing this. He saw him after the break up and watched him punish himself hard as a result of his actions.

'I need closure Sarge,' Jamie answers.

'Are you sure it's closure you're after Corporal O'Halloran?'

'Yeah Sarge,' he says, very convincingly he thought.

The Sergeant tells him to go home for the weekend and think it through, before he puts him forward for the placement, if he's 100% certain when he arrives back to base on Monday morning, then he'll put him forward with his recommendation. At this stage Jamie hasn't even told his mum or Tara, he doesn't want to give them any cause for concern, not yet, not when it hasn't even been confirmed.

Chapter 2

Holiday Romance

Leaving work at 1630hrs, he needs to call Tara and update her on his change of plans. He was going home to stay with his mum for the weekend, but he needs to put Tara off from coming tonight, he needs to talk to his mum, tell her what his plans are and his reasons behind it.

Tara picks up and it's nice but a little awkward that she sounds happy to hear his voice.

'Tar, I'm not coming back till tomorrow,' he says, and listens to her sighing in response and asking why not. He tells her he's got "loads of shit to catch up on" and needs to have the training logs ready for Monday. She sounds disappointed, but tells him she understands, and he arranges to go round to her tomorrow, stay the night and then head back on Sunday.

He doesn't like lying to her, but he just needs a bit of space, some time to think, he needs to be alone and figure out what he wants - his future's in the balance.

He and Tara are due to get married on 18 July, 2026 - next year, it's all booked and paid for, but he's not sure if he can go through with it. He's been questioning himself lately - does he want to spend the rest of his life with Tara?

He loves her in his own way, but he's realised that he is not 'in' love - he knows that for definite. He thought he could love her, he did when he was in Cyprus, he missed her when she went home and looked forward to her visits, in fact for Jamie it was like a long holiday romance, now he wonders if that's why he proposed, maybe he got caught up in the moment.

He's been back in the UK for a year now and is receiving his second promotion to Corporal, but he's become unsettled again, he hates this feeling, he's not been able to settle or find any peace in himself since he split with Jess back in June 2020.

He left her house on the night of 5 June 2020 after confessing to her that he'd had a drunken one night stand, and he hasn't seen or spoken to her since. He wanted to go and see her on many occasions but his heart was broken, he couldn't risk seeing her, as he knows he would not have been able to handle it. All he wanted was to be back there with the woman he did - and still does - love.

Jess cut all contact immediately with him and his family and their mutual friends, and he thinks she also must have changed her number as whenever he called it, it went through to voicemail. He hasn't left her a voicemail for more than five years now, but he still feels the temptation to. He wants to tell her how much he missed her – and still misses her. He wants her to know how he's just had his second promotion, how he knows she'd be so proud of him, but more than anything he needs to tell her how much he's changed and matured. He's twenty-five years old now, not that stupid twenty year old boy that fucked it all up.

He unlocks the file on his phone, where he has stored all the messages from Jess or photos of them together or the selfies she had sent him. He couldn't delete them, so he has them in a locked file and every now and again he'll look through them and re-read their messages. He realises he's been looking at them a lot more often of late.

Chapter 3

Mother's Advice

He pulls onto the drive at his mum's lovely three bedroom semi-detached house. It was built in 2020 and he purchased it that same year for his mum to move into after Sean joined up in July 2020 - he wanted to get her away from the old estate.

There's no other way to describe it, the area he grew up in was rough. It was tough staying on the straight and narrow, avoiding getting caught up in the gangs and the drugs. When Sean joined up, Jamie was seriously worried about his mum living in the house alone as the estate had changed a lot even in the two years he'd been in the Army, definitely for the worse.

He walks in to the house and sees his mum looking surprised to see him as she'd heard from Tara, telling her he wasn't coming back tonight. Anne looks concerned, she knows her son and she knows when he's troubled - and she can see on his face, he looks troubled.

'Don't tell anyone I'm here Mum, will yer?' he asks.

'I won't Son, but what's wrong?'

'I need to talk to yer, but first I need a shower and some food,' he replies and heads off upstairs for a shower.

When he bought this house he made sure he'd have one of the double bedrooms and a double bed, unlike the last house where he had the box room with a single bed, which was fine when he was on his own, but when he was with Jess and they'd stay, it was difficult sleeping in a single bed - even worse when they were trying to have sex, discreetly on the floor – the memory of this is making him smile now.

His mum shouts up asking him if he wants a take away or if she should rustle something up.

'It's ok, I've ordered a Chinese, it should be here soon,' he shouts back to her.

Jamie comes down in his Regiment branded T-shirt and training shorts. He keeps clothes here now for when he stays, training and running gear, that way he doesn't have to bring anything with him, his mum will wash his clothes and put them in his room ready for when he comes next time, be it a weekend or on a week's leave.

They sit at the kitchen table talking as they eat, Jamie needs a beer, he's sure he left some in the fridge last weekend. Getting up to get one, he sighs – his heart feeling heavy. He knows he has some big decisions to make, life changing ones, he just wants to feel happy with life again after all.

Anne is worried, she saw him at his worst when he was completely broken after his split from Jess. Even though there was a big age gap, she liked Jess, they got on really well. She tried to contact her a couple of weeks after it all happened but it just went to voicemail. She sent her a text message also but it came back un-delivered. She even thought about getting one of the girls to drive her down as she needed to speak to her, to ask her if she could possibly forgive him and give him another chance.

In those early days after the split, there were times she thought that her son wasn't going to pull through, she worried he'd do somethings silly. She dreaded her door bell ringing or an unknown number calling her phone. She had nightmares of someone telling her Jamie was gone. She doesn't have a favourite child and she loves all her kids equally but Jamie, well, he has a special place in her heart, he's sensitive and caring, in a different way to the other four of her kids - he's the one she worries about the most, always has and probably always will.

She's noticed a big change in him since posting back from Cyprus, just over twelve months ago. Something is bothering him and she knows he's not happy

'What's up Son, you're very quiet.'

'I don't know how best to tell yer, so I'll just come out with it. I'm going back, I've put in for a twelve week secondment,' Jamie says and takes a drink of his beer and stares straight ahead.

'Do I need to ask why?' Anne questions, concerned that she already knows the answer.

'I need closure Mum, I can't marry Tara with this cloud of doubt hanging over me.'

'Jamie, what if she moved away, back to her parents or worse still she's married now and still lives there? What then? How are yer gonna feel?'

'That's just it Mum, I don't know. If she's moved then that's it. If she's married, I don't know but I need to see for myself.'

'Have yer spoken to Tara about any of this?'

He shakes his head, he doesn't know how to tell Tara as he doesn't want to hurt her, none of this is Tara's fault.

'Listen Jamie, if yer feel like this yer need to tell Tara, it's not fair on her. I know yer don't love her, not the way yer loved Jess, but Son, don't put yerself through this, or Tara.'

He looks down at the table, shaking his head as he says, 'I've tried mum, I've really tried, she's a sweet girl, she deserves better.'

'Go Son, if it gives yer the closure you're looking for then things might be different with Tara. When yer gonna tell her?'

'Tomorrow, I have to, it's an immediate start - a week Monday, on the twenty-seventh.'