



NICK KANE will raise
hell to get the
TRUTH . . .

DEVIL
TO PAY

Ross
KEMP

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About the Book

Nick Kane is a man with nothing to lose, and everything to prove.

A model soldier fighting for Queen and country, it seemed nothing could stop him becoming one of the very top officers. But that was then.

And this is now.

Injured in a bomb blast on reconnaissance in Iraq, he's forced out of the army and into the quiet life. But after a year in civvies rebuilding his life and his relationship with his family, things for Nick are looking up. That is until he finds out that his old army buddy Ben Webster is dead.

Word is that he took his own life, but Nick knows that Ben had everything to live for, and when he starts to question the circumstances of his friend's death, he discovers that there are people who will stop at nothing to cover up the terrifying truth.

DEVIL TO PAY

Born in Essex in 1964, Ross Kemp worked for the BBC for ten years and ITV for four years as an actor. He then had a change of career and started making documentaries. He has subsequently been nominated for three BAFTAS for his series on Afghanistan, Gangs and Africa. He and his team won the BAFTA for best factual series in 2006. He is a patron of Help for Heroes and has spent time on the front line in Afghanistan with 1 Royal Anglian, 5 Scots, 16 Air Assault and 45 Commando.

Also by Ross Kemp

Warriors: British Fighting Heroes

Gangs

Gangs II

Ross Kemp on Afghanistan

Ganglands: Brazil

Pirates

Ganglands: Russia

**DEVIL
TO PAY**
Ross
KEMP



arrow books

Aside from Kabul, all locations in Afghanistan in this novel are fictitious.

Chapter 1

Ben MacDonald did not kill himself. I knew the man and was certain of that, whatever anyone said.

Ben was a man who valued life - his own and that of his friends - and I should know because I owe him mine.

It was back in 2008, during the Battle of Basra in Iraq, and we were out in a team of four, identifying mortar positions and calling in the Yanks in their AC-130 Spectre gunships with the Iraqi army steaming in behind us, trying to get rid of the insurgent nutters from the Mahdi army. These boys were serious opponents - fanatical, well armed, plenty of them and with a local knowledge no outsider could hope to match. Still, they had to go, which was why we were there.

We'd kept a low profile on the way in, we were good at that in the SRR - the Special Reconnaissance Regiment - and we'd made it to our observation position without attracting attention. Well, much attention.

Basra's a sniper's dream - higgledy-piggledy blocky buildings that have had convenient gun holes blown into them by a series of wars - death holes we call them because it can be almost impossible to see a rifle inside one. The city's got flat roofs, balconies and a tight maze of streets to run through for a quick change of position. You can add to that a fierce sun and bright white walls so that anyone moving stands out like a rat on a wedding cake.

We had a few close calls - the odd bullet wasp past the ear - but nothing to get too excited about. The same narrow streets that are useful to the snipers are pretty useful to anyone trying to dodge them, if you know what you're doing. Mines were a big problem, though. The place was full of them and the going was slow.

We were playing things by the book - plenty of cover, constant observation. We always played things by the book because there's a name for a maverick when you're involved in street-to-street fighting: dead. So that's how I can say that we were doing things properly and professionally to the best standards of our training, despite the disaster that was to come.

We took out a couple of snipers. I got one. He was defending the main street in. First rule of sniping: move often. He didn't. Probably thought he was well concealed operating out of no more than a tiny hole in a wall. His muzzle flashed twice and I stuck an LASM into him - light anti-structure missile, a single-shot weapon. That was the end of him, and most of the side of the house where he was hiding. Ben got the other. We kept them honest with suppressing fire while Ben flanked them. With all the noise they never heard him coming. A grenade later we were moving on.

We'd made it very far into the city and had remained pretty much unseen. I identified the mortar position from a roof - it was behind a water tank on a high building and well concealed. I called in the big Spectre and watched as it came lumbering in above us, cutting a lazy circle around, dropping flares as it did as a precaution against anti-aircraft fire. Essentially, the Spectre is a variant of the Hercules transport plane but, where the Hercules carries people, this thing carries guns. Lots of them. More than virtually anything else in the sky.

As it turned in towards us I talked the pilot in.

'You see the communications mast south-east of the water tower?'

'Affirmative.'

'Target that.'

'Roger that. Heads down.'

That's the sort of advice you do well to follow. I got flat to the roof and put my fingers in my ears. The ground shook and debris came pattering down on me. When I looked up again, there was no water tower, no mortar and not much left of the building it had stood on.

'Next target?' said Ben.

I nodded.

We made the street. I was first through the door, Gary and Ian next, Ben last man, covering each other all the way. Like I said, we were doing the whole thing by the book. You could have used our operation as a training film.

However, in a situation where people are throwing high explosives about and shooting at you from every nook and cranny you have to accept that, no matter what you do, sometimes it just goes wrong. As it did that day.

The motorbike came through at speed, the pillion with an RPG on his back. Ian took them down with a burst from his G3 assault rifle but what happened next, I don't know.

One second I was standing under a doorway, the next - nothing. We think it was an IED, although it could have been that one of the lads on the bike was wired up as a suicide bomber. Whatever it was it had a devastating effect. Ben got blown back into the house, Gary and Ian died where they stood and I was knocked cold in the street.

It turned out later that I had a smashed leg, fractured skull, broken jaw and dislocated shoulder, but I was spark out so it wasn't worrying me at the time.

Ben was the only man of the patrol who was conscious and relatively unhurt. He checked the street and saw that Ian and Gary had been killed and that I was lying by the side of the building, probably dead too. He had every right

to think only of himself, every right to just get out and try to disappear. But he didn't.

The Mahdi lads were pouring into the end of the street, shouting and screaming and shooting up everything that moved and a lot that didn't. Ben spent ten minutes encouraging them to stay where they were with a combination of his grenade launcher and automatic fire and radioed in our position and status. Then he got some smoke into the street and dragged me back into the house, though a bullet grazed his leg. Despite that, he got a line in me. Sod's Law says that all the air support will be needed elsewhere at moments like these and he had to hold his position until it turned up - fifteen minutes later. That may not sound like a long time but, believe me, in a fire fight it's an age.

Eventually an Apache came in and lit the street up with 113mm fire, giving enough cover for him to carry me out of there. Despite his injured leg.

Now, Ben didn't have to do that. He could have just run and he'd probably have made it - lost himself in the warren of streets. He had every right to assume I was dead anyway. That didn't matter to Ben. There was a chance I was still alive so I was his responsibility and he came through for me. I owe him everything. Everything. And it's a debt I take very seriously indeed.

I respected Ben more than I did any man alive - not just because he was a good soldier but because he was a good bloke, a proper, decent human being. I can remember his delight when he came to find me awake and recovering in the medical centre. And I can remember what the death of his friends Gary and Ian meant to him. Ben loved life, mine, his own and anyone's that he cared for - not least his wife and kids. So, like I say, he didn't kill himself. I know that like I know my own name.

It was late summer when I found out he was dead, one of those bright blue days you dream about - the sun warm

on the water, pretty girls everywhere and a light offshore breeze ruffling the sails of the yachts.

I was in Cowes, the harbour town on the Isle of Wight, having brought over a bunch of property developer types on the little yacht I'd started to run when I left the army.

They were meant to be on a team-building exercise learning to sail, but were clearly more interested in getting pissed and watching the rugby so I docked early and took them to a boozier - not a classy place but expensive, big, new flat screens in every corner but with a nice balcony looking out on the bay.

I love the sea, it's always been my escape, right from being a kid. My best mate's dad had a little sailing boat and we used to spend hours tearing around the coast on it. I feel safe on a boat. Life can't touch you on the water.

To tell the truth, I'd wanted to catch the rugby myself - England vs Scotland in the opening match of the Six Nations. Strangely, I was actually thinking about Ben that afternoon because we often used to watch this fixture together. He was Scots - an Aberdeen boy more interested in football than rugby but he came along anyway - not wanting to miss the chance of calling me an English bampot for eighty minutes. Not that he stopped after eighty. Last I heard from him he was over in Afghanistan, doing the contractor bit like a lot of ex-soldiers do. CP - close protection, convoys. Tough stuff even for a guy of his experience.

I'd been out of the army six months and was doing OK for myself. I'd done in my leg properly in Basra - it was more than a year's recovery before I could stand on it again, another eight months before it was anything like normal. Two years after the injury, I thought I was match fit but the medics disagreed. I was offered a desk job. Not really me, I'm afraid.

And, to be honest, all that time out of the firing line had changed me.

In the months of my recovery Rachel, my ex, allowed me access to my beautiful daughter Chloe again and I was concentrating on repairing my relationship with my kid. With one thing and another I'd spent a long time away, a long time undercover. I really wanted to make that up to her, to give her back the dad she'd missed out on. There were people asking me to go out to work in Afghan and Iraq but I wasn't interested. I was enjoying the easy life doing not much for a month or two. Then the boat offer came up and I jumped at it.

One of the officers in my unit put me in touch with a mate of his. The deal was that I'd clean and maintain the boat and, all the time he didn't want to use it, it was mine to rent out to people who wanted to learn to sail, hen and stag parties, couples getting married, anyone who'd pay, really.

It was never going to make me a millionaire but it suited me right then, I even slept on the boat to keep my living costs down. I was loving it, the odd asshole client aside.

The trip with the property boys starts OK. All of them are over thirty but they're still like kids, messing around, throwing things at each other, talking about the car or house they'd bought, how much they've made, how much 'Charles' they consumed at a mate's wedding, fights they've been in, deals they'd done. I had been trying to do my best to look impressed but it is starting to wear a bit thin.

When we get to the island and into the pub, though, their behaviour goes from childish to horrible. It's not that their chief team-building exercise seems to be going to the toilet together, wiping their noses and taking the piss out of the locals. No, it's a lot worse than that and something that I take very personally.

Just before the rugby, there's a news bulletin. Third item up - after a piece about some tax-dodging billionaire scab

on the face of society who's bought his way into the government, and another about school buildings collapsing because they can't afford to repair them - the newsreader says: 'A British soldier has been killed by an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan.'

I feel a lump in my throat. How many times did I hear that news when I was out there? How many more times am I going to hear it?

'The soldier, from the Royal Anglian Regiment, was serving in Helmand Province.'

My old regiment, back before I moved to the Det.

'His family have been told.'

Five short words. I've never been unlucky enough to have to go and tell someone's wife or mother that their son is dead but I've visited the houses of mates who have been killed. There's a stillness to those rooms that you get nowhere else.

'Idiot.'

It's one of the property boys talking, a big doughy-looking tosser with the sort of public-school accent you don't acquire for under eight grand a term.

'Me?'

'No, the soldier. He's an idiot getting killed like that.'

I'm trying to say something reasonable, trying to remember that I'm in the leisure industry now and this man is my client, that I'm supposed to just smile and say 'That's right, sir.' Every part of me wants to smack him in the mouth but I'm not going to.

My old man gave me two things in life - the ability to take a punch and the ability to hand one out. Make that three - a bad temper. What the fat git doesn't know is that it's only because I was the sort of stupid wanker who joins the army that I've got the discipline not to nut him right now. If I hadn't learned self-control he'd be shitting his teeth tomorrow morning and I'd be in a cell - so we'd both be losers.

'They get paid less than they would if they worked at McDonald's,' says another of them, a red-faced fool who looks prime for a stroke by the time he's forty.

'Why would anyone do that? I mean, what goes through their heads?' says another one.

'Shrapnel!' says the first guy. They all laugh.

'I was in the army,' I say.

They go quiet. In fact, everyone around us goes quiet. The barmaid looks nervous, the man at the bar next to me moves away. All eyes are turned towards us now, but they needn't worry. I won't be wasting the effort, not today.

The big doughy guy shrugs. I can read him, the way he leans forward slightly and then back. He wants to back down, wants to apologise, and maybe he would if he didn't have a beak full of coke. But he's the big man here, the alpha male. He has to keep face in front of his mates.

'Which regiment were you in?' He says it like he doesn't believe I'm telling the truth, like he has a right to question me.

'Same as the bloke who died.'

That's true, to an extent and as much as I'd ever tell anyone. I was in the Royal Anglian from the age of seventeen - five years out of a twenty-year career. After that it was 14 Company aka the Det - or the Special Reconnaissance Regiment as it later became - undercover stuff in Serbia, Iraq, Afghan, all that madness.

'How long were you in for?'

'Twenty years.'

'Did it make you rich?'

'No.'

'Well then you're an idiot too,' he guffaws.

I don't react. If I valued his opinion I'd probably be annoyed. As it is, an insult from a bloke like that amounts to a compliment. I don't care what he says about me. It's what he said about the dead soldier that makes my blood

boil. Still, I keep a lid on it. It's what I've been trained to do.

'Steady, Josh!'

It's one of his friends pulling his arm back. Is he thinking of hitting me? I can't believe he is. I've only been polite to him, he's got no reason to think he's been insulted by me - not unless he's a mind reader.

Josh stands up tall. He's a big bloke - a head above me.

'Just remember who's paying for the boat and who's getting paid sod all to drive it,' he says, 'then consider who's winning here.'

He's in my face now but I'm still prepared to back down. So an asshole has an asshole's opinion. What a surprise. It's deeply annoying and offensive and no one would blame me for chinning him but I've spent twenty years learning self-control. I'm not going to chuck it away for a no-mark like this.

But then he goes to push me, raises his hands. You can say what you like to me, no problem. Sticks and stones and all that. But put your hands on me and we're heading somewhere else. I give him a look and he knows what it means. He takes a pace backwards. For a second I want him to come on, to put him straight the old-fashioned way about all those blokes who died, blokes whose boots he's not fit to lace. But no.

'I'll watch the rugby somewhere else,' I say. 'I'll be at the boat for seven.'

I walk outside and wander a few metres down by the harbour. I'm not in the mood for the rugby now. I've let myself down. For a second I was my old man in there, wanting it to kick off. I light a cigarette. This makes me feel worse. I control everything in my life. I'm obsessive about it - too obsessive, according to my ex. I'm the kind of bloke who organises the socks in his drawer by colour, I plan my day to the last second when I can, I even have to have the tea bags stacked straight in the box. But I can't control

this. Is that a bit of my dad coming out? Maybe, but I'm different to my dad. I was looking for an excuse to batter him; my dad never needed one.

I call my Chloe, dialling her number from memory. I nearly brought her with me on this trip but when I heard it was all lads I decided not to. My phone's the very cheapest Tesco can provide but it does the job. I finished with expensive mobile phones when yet another of mine got kicked into the drink. Third one in six months I've managed to soak.

She's not picking up but it's good to hear her voice. 'This is Chloe, leave a lovely message, you lovely person.' She sounds so grown-up - ten years old. I still think of her as five when I'm away from her. Rachel left me back then, said it was either her or the army. We were up to our necks in it in Iraq, fighting the insurgents close up. I couldn't leave the boys to that. I never thought she'd go, let alone stop me seeing Chloe. She said I wasn't good for her. And maybe I wasn't. Being in a war zone does things to your head and your relationships. The only guy in our unit who seemed to hold his marriage together was Ben.

'It's Dad, just calling to say I love you. Be good for your mum.'

I sit for a while, watching the water - a white sail catches the sunset, turning it to burning bronze. Like I said, there's nothing like the water to make you chill out. My phone rings. Number withheld. I reject it, probably someone asking me if I'm 100 per cent convinced my life insurance is up to scratch. Actually, it isn't. I could never get any when I was in a war zone. Which is fair enough. I wouldn't have insured me, to be honest.

It rings again. I reject it. It rings once more. This time I answer it.

'Nick?'

'Yeah.'

'Nick Kane?'

I recognise the voice. 'Yes, John, it's me, what do you want? And more to the point, how did you get my number, you spooky bastard? I only bought this phone yesterday and I didn't register it.'

'Ways and means,' says John, 'you bought it with your debit card, didn't you?'

John Fardy is an old mate of mine, a Black Country kid from Walsall, dragged up by his single mum in a one-bedroom flat. He's about the brightest bloke I know. Got his accountancy qualifications in the Pay Corps but transferred to the Det when he was about twenty-eight. Now he works for SOCA - the Serious Organised Crime Agency. He's not a copper, exactly, but he might as well be. He specialises in spooky stuff: surveillance, financial tracking, finding people who don't want to be found. He also specialises in cutting to the chase. This time, though, he doesn't. There's a silence and for a while he says nothing.

'John?'

More silence. I'm about to hang up, thinking the phone's gone dead, when: 'Ben's dead.'

At first I don't take in the words properly, they take time to register. Stupid thoughts go through my head. 'The guy who died was Royal Anglian. Ben's a contractor, it can't be him.' Of course, the fact that contractor deaths don't make the news doesn't occur to me, nor the fact that it's very possible, if not certain, that more than one person could have died in Afghanistan that day.

'How?' It's like I'm not actually speaking, like I'm an outsider hearing my own voice.

'He committed suicide.'

'What?' I can't believe what I'm hearing.

'He committed suicide.'

'No, he didn't.'

The words come out automatically. I don't think about them, just say them because there doesn't seem anything else I could say.

'It's hard to take, Nick, but I heard from Claire yesterday. She couldn't get hold of you and she asked me to try. He's dead, he shot himself.'

He didn't, though, he just didn't, and I know he didn't like I know the street I grew up on.

When you say you know someone, you really know them, what does it mean?

It means you've seen them in every situation and mood - happy, sad, scared, elated, bored, interested - and you can say without thinking how they would react. It's possible to know someone in ordinary life, of course, to be so close that you can finish their sentences for them. Most people, though, don't really know their friends. They're like the property boys in the bar - just exchanging monologues, going through their whole lives seeing each other in the same situations, doing the same things. They're not tested, by happiness, by despair, by much, really - a divorce, the death of a parent. Big stuff, but nothing like a war.

When I say I knew Ben, I knew him. For a start, I had actually experimented on him, tried to make him crack. Ben was a Para - a tough little Scots bastard with an insane appetite for danger. That, if anything, was his weakness. He applied for 14 Company - and we were sceptical he was going to make it. We needed brave men - and women too - in the Det. We didn't need gratuitous risk-takers.

Not many people have heard of the Det. We were a special forces unit established during the Troubles in Northern Ireland to carry out surveillance work - we worked hand in hand with the SAS but had a slightly different skill set. Everyone in the unit had to be able to handle arms to an extremely high level but there was also all the undercover stuff to learn on top. I caught the end of that but, to be honest, it was all winding down by then. Where it really kicked off for us was the former Yugoslavia, during the madness over there and, after it, hunting Serb war criminals in Serbia. The former Yugoslavia provided us

with a lot of our experience and we were still digging dirty little murderers out of Serbia well into the new century.

You had to be able to do the lot in the Det - burgle, hide, take photographs, bug people, drive and, if it came to it, fight with whatever weapon you had available, from a grenade launcher to a chair leg.

I'd been working in the unit for a couple of years and had been earmarked as a trainer. I didn't really want to go down that route but I was interested in becoming an interrogator so I agreed to help handle the mock interrogation of applicants to the company.

I enjoyed the psychological challenge of getting inside someone's head. I interrogated Ben over a period of about four days. The psychologist who was part of the assessment reported that Ben was 'psychologically sound'. I had a shorter appraisal of his mental state. 'Unfuckablewith' just about summed him up.

For a few seconds neither me nor John say anything on the phone. It's me who breaks the silence.

'How did he die?' I ask.

'He shot himself. I just told you that.'

'Yeah.' Not thinking straight. Calm down. Sort yourself out. What's the most likely explanation? Somebody who didn't like him in his close protection unit? Argument with another contractor?

'Is a coroner going to look at him over here?'

'What do you mean?'

'When the body's flown back in, will a British coroner look at him? Presumably only the Afghans have seen him so far.'

'He didn't die in Afghan, Nick, he died over here.'

I pause a second, breathe. OK, that's the fact. Now deal with it.

'I thought he was in Afghan.'

'He'd been back over here for three weeks, according to Claire.'

Claire. Oh God, Ben's wife. Poor girl, Christ, what must she be feeling? Back in the country three weeks? This is getting more mental by the second. I got an email from him two weeks before but he sounded fine. No mention of him being back home. But while this is running through my mind John's used an interesting phrase: 'From what I've been able to tell.'

'You don't buy this either. You've been looking into it.'

'I don't know, it just ...' He tries to complete the sentence but I can hear his voice cracking and I guess he's trying to hold on to his emotions. '... it wasn't him, was it? Suicide. It wasn't something he'd have done. I've had a little dig around about it.'

'So what have you found?'

'Nothing yet. I've ordered up the coroner's report. I can do some digging on his email account too. I might be able to find out where he was emailing from when he contacted you.'

'How did you know he's contacted me?'

'I already hacked his Hotmail account.'

'You don't hang around, do you? Anything?'

'No, not really - just that he had emailed you as if from Afghan when, by looking at a couple of the other emails, he was definitely over here.'

That might mean nothing. For all I know he might have decided to get off the beer and didn't want me forcing him out to get pissed. Unlikely, but you never know. John clearly thinks something's up. Your first reaction when you find your mate's dead is to send his widow a bunch of flowers, not hack into his email.

'OK, look, I think I better go and talk to Claire, can you text me her number? How has she taken it?'

'I only talked to her on the phone. She can't believe it either. I can't imagine what her and the kids are going through.'

'Yeah. Stay in touch, right.'

'Yeah, I will.'

It's then that I realise - Claire is in Shepherd's Bush up in London. I'm skint, bang up against my overdraft limit, and I haven't got any way of getting there.

Luckily a solution presents itself. Lumbering from the pub comes Big Twat. Like all bullies, having realised he can't intimidate me he's decided to try and make me his mate. Also, Brain of Britain has worked out he's relying on me for the trip home.

He sits down beside me, his fat arse squelching on to the bench like the sucker from a toy arrow hitting a window. He puts his arm around me and breathes in my ear.

'Are we cool, mate?'

'Yeah, we're cool.'

He reaches inside his jacket pocket, which he's wearing despite the heat and the fact he's been indoors for a while. Obviously thinks he looks good in it - he's wrong.

'Smoke?'

'Ta.'

I take a cigarette and he gives me a light.

'So we're cool?' he repeats.

'Yeah, we're cool.'

'What time are we headed back?'

'I said seven but I can stay later if you like. Whatever time you like. I'll be on the boat all night, so if you want to go clubbing don't let me stop you.'

'Cool. I think we will. You're missing the rugby.'

'Yeah. What's the score?'

'Eight all. We should be murdering this lot by now we should be ...'

He stops, clocks the way I'm looking at him. He probably thinks I'm trying to intimidate him. Actually, I'm reining it in, trying to be nice.

'I'll see you inside,' he says.

'Yeah.'

He goes in. I get up and walk down the quay.

I'm not someone who breaks the law lightly. If you start picking and choosing which laws you want to follow you can't start moaning when someone else does the same and comes and burgles your house or smacks you over the head with a length of iron railing. But I do break the law when I need to. I've been trained to do just that - burglary, fraud and even, as Doughboy probably won't even realise when he finds out his stuff is gone, pickpocketing. He has £1,500 quid in his wallet - a glory wad of fifty-pound notes and a variety of credit cards. He also has a set of Audi car keys - it's a TT, I know because I saw him pull up in it - and what look like the keys to his house. I pitch the house keys into the water and make my way to the boat.

Sometimes breaking the law is necessary - and this is one of those times. I feel a bit guilty about nicking the money but I look on it as a donation to fallen soldiers, whether he wanted to make it or not. I get back into the boat, cast off and head back to Southampton using the engine. There's a ferry for the property boys if they can get on it - it'll show them how the rest of the world lives.

As I cut out into the Solent, my head is spinning. I just can't take it all in. I'm sure of only one thing: Ben didn't shoot himself. So someone else did.

Chapter 2

It's still light by the time I get to West London - not too difficult a drive as I can cut off the A40 to where Claire lives without having to shove any further through the traffic into town.

The house is nothing special - a 1930s semi just on the edge of the White City Estate in Shepherd's Bush - an up-and-coming area that has never quite up and come. It has big bay windows redone in UPVC, a neat garden, pebble dashing. Millions of people lead decent, unremarkable lives in exactly this sort of house, which is what Ben and Claire planned to do when he left the army. The problem was that there's not an awful lot someone with Ben's skill set is cut out for. He could have become a private detective but the pay's rubbish. Beyond that there aren't too many options - and few that would pay the sort of cash he'd have been getting as a contractor team leader in Afghan.

I ditch the car in a back street in East Acton - no CCTV there, though I'm still careful to keep my head down. Plenty of householders have CCTV nowadays and you could get caught on that. Not that the police are going to go to the lengths of collecting it for a stolen car but I'm obsessive about this sort of thing. You do it right or don't do it at all is my view.

I've changed on the boat so I'm not wearing the same clothes the property boys saw me in, not even the shoes, and I've dug a greasy baseball cap out of the back of the

cabin. The car park the Audi was in did have CCTV, so the cap and sunglasses were important there. Most CCTV gives a bad image, when it works at all, but you can't be too careful.

I give the car a quick wipe for my prints just in case and leave it with the key in. That'll keep the local hoodies from nicking the car of someone who doesn't deserve it at least, and hopefully it'll make it disappear off the map. I catch the Tube the remaining two stops and change again at the big McDonald's on Shepherd's Bush Green. Paranoid? Certainly, but it's an ingrained habit.

I make it to Ben's house and take a deep breath on the doorstep. I ring the bell. Claire knows I'm coming but we haven't said much on the phone. She's too upset when she hears my voice.

Claire's a remarkable woman - you have to be to be an army wife. Ben was gone a long time in their marriage but she stuck by him, brought up his kids and was looking forward to seeing more of her man once the mortgage was paid off and they had enough financial stability for Ben to take a lower-paid job.

There's barking inside - Ben's little Border terrier jumping at the glass of the door. Then more shapes appear - the kids, or two of them. Jim Leighton MacDonald, putting his hand against the glass, Alex - as in Alex Ferguson McLeish MacDonald - pulling on the handle, blurred images like something half remembered.

The door opens and there's Claire - five foot two, dark, pale and pretty in that neat Scots way, with the youngest, Lara, just a baby on her hip. Claire's face is puffy. It's obvious that she's been doing a lot of crying.

'Hi,' I say.

'Thanks for coming.'

I give her a hug and her body is stiff with grief. I can't tell her it's going to be all right because it isn't. Words just

aren't up to it in some situations and I just hold her, little Lara pulling at my collar.

'Come in,' says Claire.

I follow her inside. The decorating's half done - the hall wallpaper stripped, the new wallpaper in rolls stacked in the hallway. Jim stretches out his hand towards me, pleased to see me, but Alex is looking at me with a trembling lip, a sort of defiance on his face. He wants me to go away, I can tell, not because he doesn't like me but because he doesn't want me to be visiting because his dad's dead, he wants me there like I used to be, swinging him around at a barbecue, letting him beat me up on the sofa, there with his dad.

I've been in some hard situations but there's nothing harder than this. What do you say to the kid? 'Your dad was the most amazing man I ever knew and he ain't coming back. Sorry, life's shit like that.' Of course not.

I just hold out my hand and his anger breaks and he runs up to me, hugs my leg and buries his face into it. I swallow. It won't help things if I start crying so I don't but - believe me - I feel like it.

I pick him up and give him a hug. I still haven't got any words for him, nothing to say to make it better. There are no words that could do that, no actions.

'Hello, Uncle Ejit,' he says and he smiles.

He's Ben's son all right, a tough little man.

We go into the living room. It's the sort you can find anywhere - big TV in the corner, white leather sofa, pale wooden floor, large windows looking out on to a garden that has a big enclosed trampoline on it. There's a shelf full of cheap trophies. Ben was a champion clay pigeon shooter - something he got from his dad. On the wall is a big photo of Ben with his family - one of those where they snap you mucking about on a white background in a studio somewhere.

He's grown his hair out a bit and he's smiling at the camera, holding Lara while the other kids have their arms

around Claire. It can't be more than six months old and he doesn't have the expression of a man who's about to kill himself.

I sit down, Alex and Jim wrestling with each other, showing off to me really, before they lose interest and go and play on the trampoline. This is how it is with kids, I've found. One minute you think they're fine, the next ... well. Let's not think about that.

Claire and I sit looking at each other. She offers me a brew. I don't feel like it but I have one anyway. It's part of the protocol when you visit a dead soldier's house. You have a brew. I don't know why - the psychologists came up with it, I think. It's just something you do.

She comes back and passes me my cup and then we sit looking at each other. She doesn't know what to say and neither do I.

'How are you?' I venture, finally.

She shrugs. Shit question, really.

'When did you hear?' I ask her.

'The day before yesterday.'

We keep looking at each other. I can't say what I want to say. She says it for me.

'I can't take this in.'

'No.'

More silence. She shakes her head.

'I mean, Ben. Of all people. I knew, you know. I knew it might come to this one day and I'd prepared myself for it, as much as you can. But I thought it would be the army at my door, not coppers.'

'Did the press bother you?'

'No.'

'No journalists?'

'No.'

Strange. You'd have thought someone shooting himself was a big enough story to make at least the local papers.

'What have the coppers told you?'

'He shot himself in the head.'

'In Hammersmith.'

'Yes.'

Again, I can't say anything and again, I don't have to.

'I have no idea what he was doing there,' she says.

'What have the police said?'

'Suicide.'

I feel my eyes widen.

'I can't believe it,' she says.

'No, nether can I.' I pause for a moment, thinking. Perhaps Claire can offer me an explanation for something that's so inexplicable. 'Why do you think he did it? There was no note?'

'Nothing.'

Again, what to say? She's in enough distress already without suggesting that her husband might have been murdered.

'I don't know. Did he seem depressed?'

'He didn't seem himself last time he came back.'

'In what way?'

'He seemed down. He was a bit, I don't know, angry. No, that's not quite right, not angry, just a bit snappy.'

'Did he say why?'

'No.'

More silence. This time a long one. I can't hide what I'm thinking for a second longer.

'Claire, I don't believe he killed himself.'

She pushes out her chin, purses her lips. 'Do you know something?'

'Nothing. I just know Ben.'

She turns away, catching my implication. Digesting it. After a time she speaks. 'I don't believe he would have killed himself either.'

'The police were certain?'

'That's what they said. I told them that he was the last man on earth to do that.'

'What did they say?'

'That you can't tell what's going on inside someone's head all the time. The most surprising people do it.'

'Have you identified him yet?'

'No. I go down tomorrow.'

'I'd like to see him.'

She nods.

I think of the email he sent me, the one that was supposed to come from Afghan.

'Did he have a laptop or anything?'

'Aye, that was away out of the house so they didn't get that.'

'I'm sorry?'

'We got burgled last week. Luckily we've got nothing to steal so they just had the DVD player. Twenty-one pounds from Asda, they're welcome to it.'

'It must have been kids, even the junkies aren't stealing DVDs any more, there's no market in them.'

'Probably. They took the PlayStation too.'

'Definitely kids. Shitting themselves and grabbing the only thing they'd really want.'

'More than likely.'

'Can I have a look at the laptop?'

She brings it down and I power it up. Or rather, I don't. The battery's dead. Claire gets the lead and plugs it in by the side of the sofa.

'What's his password?'

'I don't know. That's his work one, I never touched it.'

I try a few things. The kids' names. Claire's name. Alex Ferguson. 12th Man - the name of the Aberdeen crowd. Dandies, the team's nickname. Dandies1. Pittodrie, Aberdeen's ground. None of them work. I can't get into it but I know a man who might be able to.

'I can get someone to look at this if you like. Can I take it?'

'Have it, it's no use to me.'