



MACKENZIE SMITH

FAVOUR **THE DEAD**



**'Smith is back and hits gold
with his most gripping adventure yet.'**
BEAR GRYLLS

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About the Book

My name is Christian McKie and a few months ago I was killed in military action in Sierra Leone.

I am undercover with the only people who know I am alive.

We were all killed in action.

And now we must use death to our advantage.

We are the Regiment of the Dead.

About the Author

Mackenzie Smith studied English Literature at university. A serial entrepreneur, pilot and big-game hunter, he lives in Wiltshire with his wife and four young children.

Also by Mackenzie Smith

Who Pays the Piper

Favour the Dead

Mackenzie Smith



arrow books

To Arabella

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Prologue

March 1982

CORPORAL DANIEL RAGLAN had hardly moved a muscle for approaching six hours yet he was still soaked with sweat. His eyes ached from peering through his binoculars and his elbows were rubbed raw from propping himself up where he lay beneath a camouflaged groundsheet. By any standards, it had to be an odd way to spend a birthday.

The late afternoon sun shone brightly and in some respects the scene was reminiscent of his home in Wales. Before him lay a wide green valley, flattening out onto a plain. Beyond, the South Atlantic glinted a deep blue. Sheep grazed right up to the high barbed wire fencing that surrounded Rio Gallegos, the largest military airbase in Argentina.

Each time an aircraft took off, he noted the type and time. Every fifteen minutes he transmitted a compressed high frequency BATCO message on a short-wave radio which would be picked up by HMS *Spartan*, the British Hunter Class submarine sitting just beneath the swell about a mile offshore. Within seconds this information would be relayed to the Admiralty in London. From there, it would be passed on to the RAF, who were now flying combative sorties over the Falkland Islands from the aircraft carrier, HMS *Ark Royal*.

Since the invasion of the Falklands three weeks before, all leave had been cancelled and all British forces had been in a high state of preparation. The SAS had been tasked with delivering an early knock-out blow against the Argentinians. The plan was a full-blown airborne assault on their largest

airbase to destroy their fighter aircraft on the ground. Without fighters, British air superiority was a given and the invasion more or less over.

But there were bad feelings at Hereford. People had been openly discussing the fact that it was a suicide mission. They had no doubt they could successfully 'crash land' a Hercules full of troops on the main runway, take over the airbase and take out a load of MiGs on the ground. Piece of piss. But then what? They could even hold the place for a few hours. Still OK, but then thousands of enemy troops would turn up with armour and butcher the lot of them. Not OK. The evacuation strategy was to disperse into small groups and walk out to Chile, over 400 kilometres away through hostile country. Utterly mad. Even senior brass were likening it to the infamous St Nazaire Raid in 1942 where 400 British commandos blew up the dry docks under the noses of the Germans in Northern France and five, *five*, men evaded capture and made it home via Spain. The objective was achieved but at hideous cost.

The valley looked peaceful and it was hard to imagine that in about nine hours the 114 men of A and G Squadrons 22 SAS combined would be hitting the tarmac. However uncomfortable his birthday had been, it was certainly going to be a memorable one.

Raglan knew that any minute he was likely to hear one of the other three members of the patrol approaching the forward OP to take over the next six-hour shift. They were positioned the other side of the ridge behind him. As he wiped the sweat from his eyes and raised his binoculars for what he hoped would be his final look around, he noticed sheep scattering to avoid several four-tonne military lorries driving at speed along the road that hugged the perimeter fence. His senses kicking into gear, he heard distant shouts coming from away downhill to his left. The lorries had stopped at intervals and troops were spewing from the back of them.

Raglan's body pumped with adrenalin as he transmitted the development to HMS *Spartan*. He rubbed his hand nervously through his short, black, curly hair. The troops had formed a line and were making their way towards him through the thin fir trees that peppered the valley sides. He slowly rose to his knees and folded away the groundsheet. He looped his arm through the carrying strap of the radio and lugged it onto his back. As he turned to start his retreat over the ridge, several shots rang out and echoed around the valley. The line of soldiers half a mile below him stopped momentarily in their tracks.

He quickened his pace uphill through the trees. More shots rang out; this time bursts of automatic fire. It meant one thing. The other three members of the patrol must have been compromised at the lying-up point. They would be retreating with covering fire along the adjacent valley.

By the time Raglan reached the crest of the ridge, he was breathing heavily. Taking care not to skyline himself, he crawled forwards and looked down into the next-door valley. There was now almost continuous fire with intermittent grunts from large-calibre machine guns. He struggled to hold his binoculars still as he surveyed the long, steep expanse. Within a couple of seconds, he spotted the other three members of the patrol lying 500 or 600 metres away towards the valley floor. They were huddled amongst a pile of rocks firing their weapons. Raglan's eyes followed down the line of the valley. Then he gasped.

There were too many enemy troops to count. They rattled off suppressing fire up the valley while more edged up towards higher ground. The patrol were pinned down in the rocks with a steep open area behind them. As Raglan grappled to assess the position, one of the patrol broke cover and started a zigzag run uphill. Within twenty metres, he fell and lay motionless.

The rocks had become largely obscured from view by dust kicked up from the mass of incoming rounds. Enemy

soldiers were within a couple of hundred metres of their target. It would be grenades next. They surged forward and several fell.

Once they made it to the rocks, the firing ceased. Raglan grimaced as he saw a figure hauled from among the stones. He could not identify which of his comrades it was, but the man was forced to his knees and held in position by two soldiers. Raglan flipped his binoculars to one side and rested his M16 on the rocky ground before him. He peered into the telescopic sight. A tall soldier in a peaked cap drew a pistol and shot the kneeling man in the back of the head. A lifeless body flopped forwards.

Having witnessed how he could expect to be treated if he was captured, Raglan knew he had little to lose. He fixed the cross hairs of his sights square in the middle of the tall soldier's chest. Conscious of the distance and the slight cross-wind, he adjusted his aim and squeezed the trigger. Momentarily, he lost sight of his target as the rifle jerked up, but he regained his view in time to catch the last wisps of dust disperse into the air just to the right of the Argentinian officer.

Raglan watched for a moment as soldiers darted in all directions, desperately seeking cover from the unseen sniper. He emptied the rest of his magazine in the general direction of the rocks and then sprang to his feet, knowing this was the moment to get going.

1

October 1999

CHRISTIAN MCKIE FELT relief as he hung up the telephone in the High Commissioner's office. Even hearing Colonel Deveral's voice made him feel better and reminded him that there was still an ordered and real world out there. The last time they had spoken was moments before the assault on Geri Bana in Sierra Leone. After this conversation, his life had imploded.

He had been shot, left for dead, captured and imprisoned. He had been tortured, witnessed his friends being killed, turned into a gangster, nearly been killed again and lived in a parallel universe, allowing his family and Regiment to think he was dead.

It was hardly surprising that he had become a properly committed smoker in the process. But making the call to Deveral had ended his dual existence. He had achieved what he had set out to do. He had risen from the depths of human existence as prisoner of the demonic West Side Boys to being a British Army officer again with a bright and exciting future, as well as a colourful but secret past.

Deveral had told him not to contact anyone else and to await details of his repatriation to Britain. He thought it would be later that day but could not say for sure. Christian was brought breakfast by the High Commissioner's wife and spent the morning dozing on a sofa watching Sky News, which was still dominated by the failed terrorist bombing of the Egyptian Embassy in London. Whilst his plan had worked well, he still felt unnerved by the intense media frenzy

about the identity of the perpetrator. Sure, he had framed Sam with total precision, but no plan was ever completely watertight. His 'Dick Turpin' style alibi would be hard to challenge, as no court or lawyer was ever going to be able to check the date of his escape with the West Side Boys or al-Qaeda.

Thinking about his conversation with Deveral, it was the use of the words 'pure genius' that worried him. Something about this choice of words hinted that Deveral knew. It was possible, but he would not have long to wait and find out. The High Commissioner came in and told him that Deveral was on his way to Morocco personally to collect him. They would be going to a nearby military airport about an hour's drive away to meet his plane.

Christian watched the white puff of smoking rubber as the wheels of a familiar Gulfstream 4 met the baking tarmac. The aircraft manoeuvred against a backdrop of rusting barbed wire fencing towards a row of sandy-coloured concrete buildings, where Christian waited under the suspicious gaze of two plain-clothed Moroccan military policemen. He felt uncomfortable standing there in slightly too tight borrowed chinos and baggy blue short-sleeved shirt.

Deveral's head appeared before the steps had fully lowered. The noise of the engines forced Christian to mouth his words of thanks to the High Commissioner. He walked forwards and started up the steps towards a casually dressed Deveral waiting at the top. Christian tried to read his expression but could not pick up anything except a wide and delighted looking smile. The outstretched hand added to the sense that even if he did know something, he was still on side.

Christian glanced down the empty cabin and saw that two seats had been screwed into the floor at the back of the

plane. As he followed Deveral and sat down, the steps lifted and the G4 began to taxi.

‘No point hanging around for anyone to start getting any bright ideas,’ said Deveral, turning sideways to look at Christian.

‘Quite right, sir,’ Christian replied. ‘I’m pretty keen to get going too.’

‘Well, you’ve had a fairly busy time of it by any measure,’ Deveral responded.

Christian pondered on another of Deveral’s odd choices of words. People held in captivity could hardly be described as ‘busy’. Of course, Christian *had* been busy, ultra busy, covertly sneaking in and out of the UK to deal with Sam.

The powerful engines pushed them back in their seats as they sped down the runway. It was not until they had taken off and levelled out that Deveral restarted the conversation. Christian was happy to let him lead.

‘You know what, Christi, whatever happened to you and whatever you had to do in there, you will always have my unwavering support and respect. We all go through the training and, sure, it’s the best preparation anyone can get, but we all know nothing can prepare you for when the shit really and truly hits the fan. That’s the real test. No chance of a tap on the shoulder and a friendly RTU. No trucks waiting to pick you up at the end of the exercise. You’ve done it for real and you’ve exceeded any possible expectation that even this Regiment could ask. Most unusual, Christi, most unusual.’ Deveral looked straight ahead as he spoke, with just an occasional glance in Christian’s direction.

‘Well, sir, kind words, sir, but let me assure you . . .’ Christian began.

‘There’s no need to assure me of anything,’ interrupted Deveral. ‘The facts speak for themselves. Play it down as much as you like but, take it from me, you’ve done very well.’

Christian nodded and looked at the floor of the aircraft in front of him. He knew that his motivation to escape had been to get back at Sam, who had shot him in the firefight in Geri Bana and left him at the mercy of a sadistic militia rabble. He had been spurred on by a deep-seated thirst for revenge, nothing to do with any sense of patriotic duty. He had robbed and deceived, killed and duped, albeit rather successfully. Perhaps that was what Deveral meant? Maybe that was what *was* expected? He didn't know, but it didn't feel strictly heroic.

After several minutes of silence, Deveral spoke again.

'Is there anything you'd like to know about Barras or the operation in Mauritania, or about Jamie and Tim? Or, dare I mention, Sam Carter?'

Christian shrugged and turned to Deveral. His pained expression answered the question. Deveral read the signs and continued.

'No, I thought not. Let's just leave it there. I guess you must be looking forward to getting home and getting back to normal?'

Christian took a breath then paused.

'Sir, to be honest, I'm absolutely bloody dreading it. No one's going to understand what happened and quite why. Things broke down, people broke down, the whole show broke down. Not sure if it's really for me any more. It's hard to explain, but it's just how I feel at the moment.'

Deveral shifted in his seat and turned to face Christian, his foot starting to tap slowly.

'No, no, I get where you're coming from one hundred per cent. Things did go wrong, and, I agree, people went wrong. You don't need to explain yourself to me. I can guess roughly how you must feel. But may I run something past you? It'll probably be a no, but there's someone I'd like you to meet before you make any decisions and before we announce your return. It's just an idea and may be totally

misguided. On the other hand, it could be very much up your street.'

Christian met Deveral's gaze.

'Who? Who do you have in mind, sir?'

Deveral glanced up the aircraft towards the cockpit, then lowered his voice.

'Well, I don't want to put too fine a point on it, but, on certain occasions, we've lost people, or to be more accurate, thought we've lost people when in fact we haven't.'

Deveral looked awkward, knowing he was not explaining himself very well.

'What I mean is that on more than one occasion, people have been presumed killed in action when it turned out that they were only in fact *missing* in action. Two very different things as it turns out.'

Christian felt his interest aroused by Deveral's inability to explain himself with his usual precision. This man tended not to beat about the bush. He opened his mouth to speak when Deveral continued.

'Well, this is a tricky one to set out, so bear with me. The point is that on several occasions, people who have been officially killed have, in fact, made it back from operations alive and well. And, if you think about it, it doesn't take too much imagination to work out that someone who is officially dead has certain advantages.'

Deveral paused and searched Christian's face for signs of interest. Christian nodded slowly, his eyes narrowed.

'Go on, sir,' he said quietly.

'Well, the fact is that we run, or to be more accurate, allow to exist, a unit made up of people that are officially dead. They work in parallel to the rest of the security forces. They are not soldiers, not civilians, not even British citizens any more. They don't have names, National Insurance Numbers, et cetera, and really don't exist except in the form of an alias. They can draw upon the full resources of MI5, MI6, us

obviously, the Navy, pretty much whoever they need and whatever they need. They can do things no respectable government can. They operate in a hinterland, more or less outside the law. Now, you know, inadvertently, you've just qualified. That is if you would like to consider it?'

Deveral was now turned fully sideways on his seat, looking directly at Christian. He continued.

'You can either think about it or simply forget everything I just said. The fact is that being dead can have some quite meaningful upsides. Why not come and meet this person I have lined up for you?'

2

SAM CARTER SAT on the floor with his back against the door of his prison cell, his knees tucked up under his chin. Every ten minutes someone flipped up a metal disc that covered the small peephole into his cell and looked inside. Sam felt his position below the door offered him some small vestige of privacy, being the least visible part of the cell.

He clasped one hand in the other to stop his fingers from shaking just long enough to identify a tiny scrap of remaining fingernail to bite at. His teeth met and he tasted blood. The briefest moment of satisfaction passed in a fraction of a second.

He heard footsteps and then the familiar metal on metal scratch above his head. The sound meant another ten minutes had passed. He calculated that he was likely to hear this noise about another twenty times before they came for him.

He thought back to the last moment when he had led a normal life. He remembered the shock of answering the door one Sunday morning in the middle of breakfast and a wall of armed police invading his house. He had been bundled into a van, taken to Paddington Green police station, then extradited to Egypt and charged with detonating a bomb outside the Egyptian Embassy. He was certain that he had been framed by Christian as the most devious act of revenge he could possibly imagine.

Sure, he had shot Christian, but he had never set out to do so. Things had got out of control in the heat of the moment and it had just happened. There was no malice of forethought. It could almost be described as an accident.

But Christian, on the other hand, had brooded over this vile act of revenge. He would have known Egypt still implemented the death penalty for acts of terrorism and he would have known precisely that the Egyptian Embassy in London was considered sovereign territory.

The first few weeks in Mahmood Prison, six miles to the south of Cairo, had been a blur. He had been held in the relatively comfortable 'International' wing. For up to fourteen hours a day he had been interrogated by a series of Secret Police officers. They had threatened violence but not given him anything more than an open-handed slap around the face. All within safe limits, he had thought, for this part of the world.

But then came the hammer blow. On the day of his appearance in court, the day Sam was sure the charges would be dropped, things went from plain old awful to terminal. Despite the bomb he had been accused of detonating not actually killing anyone, he had been charged with attempted mass murder. Ordinarily, he was told, this would result in a death sentence that would be commuted to life imprisonment. But Sam's refusal to reveal which terrorist organisation had hired him to do the job had made things worse for him. The fact was that he had had nothing to do with any bombing, but the evidence was irrefutable. He had the option to confess and grass up the other parties involved, but how could he? There was no one else, otherwise he would have sung like a canary.

Now with the added indignity of being on suicide watch, he had even been stripped of his standard prison overalls and sat in a white paper robe. He stared around the filthy, greyish cell walls as if expecting some imaginary door might appear from nowhere. He envied the solitary mosquito that buzzed in and out of the small barred window through which he saw a tiny sliver of night sky.

His body jerked as he heard metal on metal once again. He did not think it was possible for his state of extreme

tension to get any worse but it just had. A key scraped in the lock just behind his head. As he processed the implications, he heard the sharp clank of a lever and then voices. It suddenly made sense. Of course, they would come early and catch him off guard. Or was it some tiny act of kindness to spare him from a couple more hours of hell? It didn't matter, the room filled with a blur of prison guards wearing helmets and riot gear. They were clearly not taking any chances and Sam knew he had two choices. Either be beaten to pulp and then executed or just be executed. Before having time to decide, he found himself pinned to the floor and his arms twisted up and backwards. A hood was yanked down sharply over his head and he felt a drawstring tighten around his neck.

Despite not understanding a word of Arabic, Sam detected tension in the clipped bursts of language he heard around him. But one voice, noticeably deeper and calmer than the others, snapped instructions that were obeyed. Whoever it was, he was in charge and had done this before. This was routine.

Sam felt hands and arms pass around his body and the sensation of restriction as straps tightened around his waist, upper arms and knees. If he were planning on putting up a last-minute struggle, he had missed the chance. Next there was a moment of weightlessness as he was hoisted into the air. He heard the scrape of the cell door open and then felt a sharp burst of pain as his shoulder hit what had to be the concrete door frame.

He knew the execution chamber was only at the end of the row of cells. He had been cruelly shown inside on his way to the holding cell the day before. Still Sam clung to the microscopically minute belief that someone was about to intervene. The whole thing would be explained away as one big misunderstanding. It was just a matter of when, but it would happen.

Through the hood, Sam noticed an increase in the level of light. He must be out of the gloomy corridor of cells and in the brightly lit execution chamber. He heard a couple of the men carrying him exhale as they hoisted him higher in the air. His next sensation was his foot hitting something that sounded like a chair and his flip-flop falling off. He heard it land softly on the floor.

His mind swirled in a horrendous mixture of adrenalin, exhaustion, fear, disbelief and anger. This was Christian's fault. It was outrageous and light years out of proportion to what could be deemed justifiable revenge. Then a thought more terrible than death occurred to Sam. Was Christian going to be one of the official observers? He had been told twelve members of the public had to witness all executions. If Christian was capable of arranging all this with such precision, perhaps he could have got himself a position in the execution chamber too?

This was a thought too far. Every muscle in Sam's body ripped with tension as he hauled his legs up into his chest and then lashed out. The men holding his feet let go as he bellowed with rage. He twisted sideways and writhed like a wounded buffalo. The guards were only taken by surprise for a fraction of a second before regaining their grip. More hands held him more tightly, then a hand pushed between the back of his thighs and grabbed his scrotum. The hand twisted and Sam screamed with pain. The message was clear. 'You fuck with us and we make this a whole lot nastier than it has to be.'

Thud. He landed hard on the heavy wooden table he had seen before. The hands busied themselves with buckles and straps. Before the paralysing pain in his balls had subsided even infinitesimally, he was utterly immobile. His left arm had been released from behind his back and was strapped down to a protruding section of table.

A shock of white light followed as the hood came off. Sam craned his head forward for a momentary glance around the

room. There were two rows of chairs against the wall. No Christian, just anonymous men in dark suits and a couple in Arab dress. They chatted quietly to one another. He had seen enough. He rested his head down and stared at the strip light above. He felt a prick just below his elbow. The token jab of anaesthetic was followed almost immediately by a much sharper pain. Sam strained against the straps as he felt cold run down his forearm towards his hand. His fingers tingled.

A voice read something out loud in Arabic. Sam blinked away a mixture of sweat and tears in time to see an expressionless doctor stepping back from him. If he could believe what he had been told, he was in the last eight to twelve seconds of his life. He could expect his heart to fail, quickly followed by unconsciousness and death.

No one was coming for him, and even if they were it was too late now. Christian had succeeded. He had been utterly crushed. How could it have been worse? A lethal injection from an anonymous doctor in front of a bunch of bored looking Egyptian businessmen. Not even the offer of a firing squad that might have in some way reflected a degree of the military respect he deserved. No burial in an immaculately maintained British military cemetery. It would be a cheap wooden box and then probably a stinking rubbish dump roamed by rabid dogs and rats.

Through closed eyelids, Sam felt the intensity of the strip light above him increase. The sound around him faded to silence. His head rolled to the right and his lips mouthed his last thought. 'Fucking, bloody, bastard.'

3

HAVING BEEN AWAKE for more or less forty-eight hours, Christian slept from the moment Deveral had stopped talking to the point where the G4 met the tarmac at Brize Norton. He peered through the window and caught sight of familiar green hangars passing by as they taxied down runway eight.

Deveral pushed some papers into a folder which he then shoved into a battered brown leather briefcase.

'Well, that was pretty painless, I suppose. Shits on the C130 every time,' he muttered as he stood up and looked at Christian.

'Yes, sir, certainly does,' replied Christian with an awkward sideways smile.

As the aircraft came to a standstill, Deveral's grey Vauxhall Senator appeared at the bottom of the steps with its hazard lights flashing. A man wearing orange ear defenders and a yellow high visibility waistcoat got out and held the driver's door open. Deveral popped his head into the cockpit and nodded some words of thanks to the pilots before heading down the steps with Christian immediately behind him.

Despite having been out of the country for less than twenty-four hours, Christian glanced down at the tarmac and felt a sense of homecoming he had not experienced as he had piled into the back of Armalite's Land Rover when he had been smuggled back in a couple of weeks before. This time, he was setting foot on British soil for real, as a returning British serviceman, not as a fugitive packing illegal firearms, millions of pounds' worth of blood diamonds and a

pile of cocaine. The RAF ground staff were now on side, not there to catch him. He could look them in the eye. That felt better.

Christian walked around the side of the car and got in the front passenger seat next to Deveral. As the doors closed, conversation became possible once again.

'Feel free to stop me any time and I'll drive you straight home to Lymington,' said Deveral, slightly too loudly, as if still speaking over the noise of the engines of the G4.

'Thanks, sir. Of course, I appreciate that,' answered Christian.

'We're heading for a little place near Llangorse - you know, the big lake where we do the canoeing stuff. Shouldn't take more than an hour or so. Think you'll like it. It's a pretty nice spot,' continued Deveral, still in sales mode.

As the A roads gave way to smaller and twistier Bs, Christian began to wish he had not ditched his packet of cigarettes in the sand in Morocco that morning. He had assumed that once he got home for real, he would automatically resume his ardent anti-smoking views. But this element of his parallel existence seemed to have followed him back through the rabbit hole into the real world.

'Sir, forgive me, but I picked up the odd bad habit down there. Any chance we could pick up some fags? I am going to kick it but . . .'

Deveral smiled.

'Open the glove pocket. For God's sake don't tell Mrs D, but I keep a packet in there for special occasions. Sorry they're Rothmans, but that's what Cornwallis smokes, and I need to be able to pretend they're his if she ever looks in there.' Deveral began to laugh, and pressed on the car cigarette lighter.

'The guys would love to hear that, sir,' Christian said as he rummaged in the glove pocket.

Christian found the packet and flipped open the lid.

'Only two left, sir.'

'Well, let's face it, there have been quite a few special occasions recently, largely on your account, Christian. Not to mention the light-fingered Cornwallis, who uses this car too,' said Deveral, grinning.

Christian reached for the lighter as it popped up and lit the first cigarette. He offered it to Deveral.

Deveral took the cigarette in his fingers and took a drag as Christian lit the second.

'The problem with this job is that it's a pretty bloody special occasion more or less every day. How is anyone meant to quit properly? Anyway, the thing we need to think about is what we say to your family if you decide to have a go at this,' said Deveral.

'In theory, everyone is meant to think you are well and truly dead, but I can see that might not sit all that comfortably with you. If it helps, we could always bring your parents in on things. Parents tend to be pretty reliable when it comes to their kids. It's brothers and sisters where it wouldn't work, but that's not a problem for you, being an only child,' Deveral continued.

'Yes, sir, that's critical to me. I couldn't have my folks wandering around putting flowers on my grave while I'm alive and kicking. Wouldn't really feel, you know . . .'

Christian pulled hard on his cigarette.

'Leave that to me, Christi. I'll sort that. Now, we'll be there in ten minutes if I can find the place. You're about to meet a most unusual man.'

4

WITH LOW DRYSTONE walls lining the road and a mohican of mossy green down the middle, they continued in silence. Deveral slowed the car and pulled into a gateway to allow a small grey tractor to pass. The sun was still bright but low in the sky as Deveral exclaimed, 'Ah! This is it here. I normally drive straight past, but this is it.'

They passed between two weathered stone gateposts and drummed over a cattle grid. The drive looked like it had once been tarmac but now consisted of two lines of potholes falling away across a field dotted with grazing sheep. Christian saw a white farmhouse with woods to one side and a lake on the other. The Brecon Beacons provided a backdrop.

'Told you you'd like it,' said Deveral, leaning forward over the steering wheel as he tried to avoid the worst of the potholes.

'Yes, sir, this is what Wales is all about,' replied Christian, smiling.

'Now, it's less of the sir, please, Christi. From now on, it's Nigel. However odd that may feel. Not Nige, though, if you can manage that?'

Christian nodded, still looking around and taking in the place.

Deveral parked the car next to a battered green Land Rover with thick red mud splattered down the sides. There was a small porch with numerous pairs of walking boots piled in an old wine box. The front door was ajar and they could hear a U2 track playing inside. As Deveral raised his hand to push open the door, it was pulled wide open.

'Hey, hey, hey, the Devil's here!' boomed a voice with a tinge of a Welsh accent.

Standing immediately behind Deveral, Christian could not see the source of the voice but guessed whoever it was had to know Deveral pretty well. Arms in a woolly blue jumper with hairy hands appeared around Deveral's back and squeezed him.

'Rags! Good to be here. Looking good. Always love this place!' Deveral exclaimed, just as loudly.

The arms patted Deveral on the back a couple of times and pulled him inside. Finally he was released.

'So you must be Christian McKie,' said the owner of the arms, now pushing a hand in Christian's direction.

'Yes, that's right,' Christian replied, nodding awkwardly and smiling.

'Well, I'm Danny Raglan and it's a very great pleasure to meet you. The Devil here has told me quite a few things about you, but maybe it's what he hasn't said that I find most intriguing,' said Raglan, grinning.

Christian looked at Raglan's ancient blue jumper and faded DPM shorts. He wore no shoes. He was medium height with curly black hair dropping down into bushy sideburns. Christian felt his piercing blue eyes assess him and suddenly felt self-conscious of his too-tight cotton trousers and too big, rather bright blue shirt. Bad enough in Morocco but even worse in the Welsh hills. Like some kind of tourist.

Deveral detected his discomfort and came to the rescue.

'Christi, the first thing we need to do is get you some kit. Come on, Rags, you must have something that isn't either worn out or covered in sheep shit you could lend the lad?'

'That will narrow things down somewhat, but I may be able to find something less . . .'

'Less blue,' suggested Christian, starting to smile.

'Less blue indeed,' Raglan agreed. 'You guys go in the kitchen and sort out a brew and I'll be down in a moment.'