

One

So the rumour was true. He was back in town.

I'd heard it mentioned a couple of days earlier, when I'd been having a few Saturday evening pints with some of my old army mates. It was a rare chance for me to unwind at our favourite Hereford watering hole.

Big Brian Duffy, my former Troop sergeant in 22 SAS, had let it slip. When he realised what he'd said, he'd looked decidedly embarrassed. The cheeks of his grey-bearded face reddened deeply.

'Sorry, boss,' he said in his thick Dorset accent, whilst studiously avoiding my gaze. 'Just summat someone said. Expect it's just the usual tittle-tattle, you knows.'

I noticed that our mutual companions were shifting a little uneasily. They all knew my marriage was over, that I was out of work and that my life was in freefall. And they were equally aware that it was Sally's affair with the brash young Family Officer that had proved to be the final catalyst. An army regiment is like a village and the jungle drums appear to beat faster than the speed of light.

Everyone seemed to have known what had been going on except me, and no one had felt it his place to interfere or give me the bad news. Duffy was a good friend and the best comrade-in-arms you could hope for. It had been him who had saved my life during that final ambush in Afghanistan. So I certainly didn't want to make him feel bad for letting this proverbial cat out of the bag.

To defuse the sudden tension, I forced a smile. 'I'm not the *boss* any more, Brian,' I reminded. Duffy had been pensioned off at the age of forty-five and I'd been invalidated out.

He shrugged and the powder-blue eyes finally met mine, realising I was letting him know it was all right. 'I knows,' he said. 'But old habits dies hard. Don't them – *boss*?' The gentle giant's shoulders shook as he laughed.

Everyone in our group had then moved the conversation on with artificial haste,

but I had thought of nothing else for the rest of the evening.

On the Sunday I'd phoned the adjutant's office at Stirling Lines barracks and spoke to an old pal, known as 'Banger' Cumberland, who was on the duty desk.

But he was cagey. 'Sorry, Dave old son. More than my life's worth to tell you if he's back in the country. And certainly not to give you an address.'

I understood. 'In case I murder the bastard?' I suggested.

'Something like that.' Cumberland hesitated for a moment, obviously deciding how much he could say. 'Tell you what though, Dave, I *can* tell you he is due to be "returned to unit". It would have happened sooner, only you know how stretched we've been. His face never really fitted and, after the business with Sally became public, no one wanted to know him.' He added, 'Hope that makes you feel better.'

It hadn't, but on the Monday morning I suddenly *did* feel better. Because that was when I saw Lieutenant Luke Hartley with my own eyes. As I was leaving the front door of the dilapidated building, where I rented a single room with mildewed walls and a worn carpet, Hartley was walking by on the opposite pavement.

He was in civvies: smart cords, a tweed hacking jacket and brogues. He was every inch the toff with that old-fashioned yet timeless classic look the landed gentry go for, carrying it off with a slightly arrogant, easy swagger.

I pulled back into a shop doorway so that he wouldn't spot me. As I did so, I caught sight of my reflection in the window glass.

I couldn't help noticing the comparison, me in scruffy jeans, trainers and a leather bomber jacket; his face smooth and tanned, mine drawn and unshaven, haggard from too little sleep and too much booze. At thirty-six he wasn't even ten years younger than me, but I thought I looked old enough to be his father. My own cold blue eyes stared back at me, tired and weary eyes that had seen too much. I ran my fingers through my thinning fair hair, absently thinking that if I really wanted to land a job I ought to get it cut.

But now my planned visit to the Job Centre was out the window anyway. I had Luke Hartley in my sights and I was damned if he was going to get away. As he strode towards the town centre, I stepped out of the doorway, shoulders hunched and head bowed, following at a discreet distance. I kept him in view through the gaps in the passing traffic, confident that he wouldn't notice me.

I had been back in Hereford a year now, following eleven months at Birmingham Selly Oak Hospital, where they'd glued me back together again, and then a remorseless

rehab course at Headley Court in Surrey.

It was there that I learned that Hartley had been sent on overseas assignments with the SAS, having completed his short stint as Family Officer. That role is sometimes considered to be rather like that of a tea boy in the commercial sector, part of the rights of passage for a young captain. In retrospect I wondered if he'd been sent away sharpish because the regiment hierarchy had wind of his affair with my wife. The Regiment likes to look after its own. After all, I was an experienced WO1 – warrant officer, first class – who'd been in the Regiment since 1991 and Hartley had only just passed 'Selection' from the Intelligence Corps to do his first three-year SAS tour as a junior 'Rupert'. Rumours of him and Sally were never going to be good for unit morale.

As I followed him down the street, I had absolutely no clear plan or idea what I was going to do. Confront him, I suppose. Demand why the hell he thought he could play fast and loose with my wife in our house while I was in hospital, recovering from wounds that had almost cost me my life? Why had he no conscience about shagging her on the sofa while my young daughter Daisy was in bed upstairs? It was something that Sally had admitted to me once in a flood of tears.

Then again, I thought, what was the point in challenging him? His fling with Sally was long over and, as far as I was aware, wasn't likely to start up again. Perhaps I should just punch his lights out for the hell of it.

Ahead of Hartley, the sidelights of a BMW convertible, parked at a meter, suddenly blinked. It took a moment for me to realise that the vehicle was his. Damn, I thought, as I stopped and stared. I didn't want to confront him in a busy street. So now what was I going to do? My mind raced. He was already in the car, had started the engine and was nosing the vehicle out into the stream of traffic. At that very moment a taxi drove up behind me. I waved frantically and just caught the driver's eye as he passed.

He hit the brakes. I opened the rear passenger door and dived in.

I grinned at the driver as he turned round. 'I've always wanted to say this. Follow that car, will you?'

Irritatingly, the man was unfazed, as if people said that to him every day of the week. 'Which car's that then, guv?'

'The BMW convertible,' I replied. 'Just spotted an old friend of mine. Not sure where he lives now.'

That brought a chuckle from the driver. ‘Then I hope he hasn’t moved to London, guv,’ he said dryly. ‘Could be an expensive ride.’

In fact Luke Hartley hadn’t moved far at all. Fifteen minutes later, I discovered he had a neat but very expensive-looking townhouse in a small new development on the edge of town.

As the BMW pulled into the short drive, I leaned forward to the cabby. ‘Just drop me here, will you. I’d like this to be a surprise for him.’

After I paid the driver off, I stood on the pavement and stared down at the loose change in my palm. Just four pound coins. The sudden realisation hit me that it was all the money I had left in the world.

A lorry driver on the main road hit his air horns as my taxi suddenly pulled out in front of him. I jumped, nearly dropping my precious remaining change.

Abrupt noises did that to me now. Doors slamming, exhausts backfiring, car wheels on gravel sounding like machine-gun fire, a glass or plate dropped in a pub . . . it didn’t take much to trigger my frayed and shredded nerves. Even silence was no protection, because I just had to see a sudden movement from the corner of my eye . . . and I was back on the streets of Iraq or Afghanistan. It hardly mattered which. And . . . people. I couldn’t stand crowds or busy places, any more. I never felt safe, constantly on alert.

It didn’t seem to matter that I was back in England, my brain seemed to overlook that simple fact. My eyes would be scanning, flashing up images in vivid psychedelic colours, my hearing so fine-tuned that its high pitch and resonance almost hurt my eardrums. I was still always searching for the man or woman in the crowd who was a suicide bomber. Or praying that I, or one of my patrol members, would be sharp enough to spot the hidden roadside bomb.

I shut my eyes momentarily and inhaled a deep lungful of air. For God’s sake, I told myself, get a bloody grip.

After a minute or so I felt my heartbeat slow and the adrenalin surge at last begin to ebb. I took another deep breath to clear my head of the fading mental pictures, then I continued along the pavement towards the house with the BMW. There was a small front garden behind some low railings. I rang the bell and waited.

When it opened, Hartley didn’t recognise me at first. ‘Can I help you . . .?’ He sounded hesitant and when I didn’t reply immediately he squinted uncertainly. I was unshaven and looked pretty scruffy. ‘Aston? It is, isn’t it? Dave Aston.’

I was aware of a sarcastic smile on my lips. ‘The very same.’

Hartley shuffled awkwardly, almost imperceptibly starting to edge the door shut. I saw the cloud of concern pass behind his eyes. ‘It’s been a while,’ he commented, trying to find something to say.

I ignored that. ‘Aren’t you going to invite me in?’

‘What do you want?’

‘To talk.’

‘A bit difficult, actually. I was just going out.’

‘You’ve only just got in,’ I said.

The gap between the door and the jamb was still narrowing. I placed my foot in the way. Hartley forced a smile. ‘Will it take long?’

‘I shouldn’t think so.’

He swallowed hard and reluctantly backed off, allowing the door to swing open and me to step in. I was shown into the front lounge. It was tastefully and expensively decorated: shag pile carpet, dark leather armchairs and settee, with a huge plasma TV and a Bose home entertainment system, which took up most of one wall.

I was still glancing around when a woman entered from the adjoining dining room. She seemed to go with Hartley, a long blonde, dressed in suede and chiffon with heels that were too high to be wearing around the home.

Her nose wrinkled a fraction as she noticed me. ‘Who’s this, Luke?’

Hartley hesitated. ‘An old army acquaintance. Dave.’ He turned to me. ‘This is Tara, my fiancée.’

She made no attempt to smile or offer me her hand. ‘Please don’t be long, Luke. I want to get the packing finished before lunch.’

Turning briskly on her spires, she disappeared again and closed the door. ‘We’re getting married tomorrow,’ Hartley explained. I think it was his nerves that made him keep on talking. ‘Chelsea Registry Office with family and friends. Then a honeymoon in Goa. A lot to do and think about . . . so Tara’s a little wound-up just now.’

I smiled faintly. ‘So I see. Known her long?’

‘Since we were kids . . .’ His words trailed off. ‘Oh, I see what you mean . . . No we weren’t engaged then . . .’

I helped him out. ‘When you were humping my wife.’

He looked awkward. ‘Look, Aston, I’m sorry about that. It was never intentional.’

‘It just happened?’ I suggested.

His eyes narrowed with a distinct look of contempt. ‘As a matter of fact it did. And it was Sally who made the move on me.’

‘You were our Family Officer,’ I said in a low voice. ‘I was badly wounded and it was your job to help us through that bad patch. Not make things worse.’

Hartley’s chest swelled with indignation. ‘I didn’t have to make things worse. Sally was already at her wits’ end with you. Your drinking, your gambling, your short temper . . . She told me how you nearly hit her in a drunken rage.’

Anger flashed in my head like red lightning. ‘Hit her? *Nearly!* I deflected the blow to the wall beside her head and broke my bloody fingers!’ I glared at him. ‘I can’t believe she left that bit out . . . And you know what happened to us since, don’t you?’

The man sighed. ‘Of course, everyone does. You lost it. You turned down a desk job at Hereford HQ. Then you couldn’t handle civilian life. You hit the bottle, you gambled money you didn’t have . . . Then you assaulted the boss in your new job—’

‘The car wash.’

‘It was still a job.’

The anger flashed again. ‘*Because* he made some snide comment about Sally having an affair. Even he’d heard it on the grapevine – *outside* the army. I’m told you were always boasting about your *conquest* when you’d had a few.’

‘That’s not true,’ he countered. Then he shrugged. ‘Anyway, if you’d treated Sally properly . . . if you hadn’t been so bloody proud and taken the advice on offer to you, you wouldn’t be in this mess right now.’

I felt my blood pressure rising, like a tumultuous volcanic power growing from deep within the core of me. Calmly I said, ‘You mean if I’d taken the advice from my friendly Family Officer.’

There was a hint of a sneer on his face. ‘Despite everything, it was excellent advice I gave you back then.’

He didn’t see it coming, or if he did he left it too late to evade the straight right jab to his face. It was so hard I actually heard the snap of bone and saw a tooth spin across the room. Hartley tried to follow his tooth, flying backwards over an armchair, tripping and crashing to the carpet. I heard the thud as his head hit the floor. Then blood from his nose began pumping over the shag pile.

I rubbed the sore knuckles of my right hand with the palm of my left as I looked down at him. He just lay there, motionless with his eyes shut, his jaw dropped open at an odd angle where it had been dislocated. I wondered if he’d also cracked his skull.

But at that moment I just didn't care.

The adjoining door flew open and Tara stepped in. 'What's going on . . .?'

She froze, staring down at Hartley. 'Oh, Luke!' She dropped to one knee, putting her hand to his cheek. More blood began trickling from his mouth. Then she glared up at me. 'What the hell have you done?'

I said quietly, 'Just settled an old score.'

He didn't respond, out for the count. Tara looked up again. 'You bastard! You've killed him!'

'Just call an ambulance,' I replied helpfully. 'Sorry to have spoiled your big day.'

I turned and slowly walked out of the room and out of his house. On the pavement I paused.

That, I thought to myself, had been a bloody stupid thing to do. I was already subject to a suspended sentence for grievous bodily harm to my one and only boss in Civvy Street. Now I'd almost certainly be doing time behind bars.

But did that or *anything* matter any more? After all, being in jail would solve the immediate problem of having nowhere to live and no money. Then again, it was just postponing the problems I would eventually have to face.

Then I heard her voice through the open window. 'My husband's dead!' She was almost screaming on the telephone. 'The man's just killed him!'

Shit, I suddenly thought. I haven't, have I?

He wasn't moving when I left him and I hadn't checked he was still breathing. What was the matter with me? I should have checked his airways were clear, checked he wasn't choking on his own blood or vomit. Checked he hadn't had a seizure. I was a fucking trained medic for God's sake; I'd done time in hospital A & E departments on Regiment programmes.

On impulse I turned back and banged on the front door, hard. I saw her at the window with a telephone handset clamped to her ear. 'Oh, it's him! He's back! He's trying to break in!' Her voice level took off into the stratosphere.

I stepped back. This was hopeless, she'd never let me back in and who could blame her?

I tried to tell myself she was wrong. Luke Hartley would survive, of course he would, even if he needed a set of false teeth. Of course he would. Bastards like him always bloody survived. Officers like him sent their men to die, but they always survived.

Don't shed any tears over that bastard, I scolded myself. He'll be all right. Turning sharply on my heel, I strode off back towards the centre of town.

Only minutes after setting off, a police car passed me going the other way, its blue lights flashing eagerly, like some mechanical dog on a scent.

I ducked into a side street and took a more circuitous route back to my digs. By the time I got there my right leg was really playing up.

I'd almost lost it back in Afghanistan. I was told the bone was badly shattered and it was only held together by shredded muscle and sinew – and my body's obstinate determination to stay in one piece. It had been touch and go whether or not I lost it at the field hospital in Camp Bastion before I was casevaced back to Britain. At Selly Oak Hospital the senior orthopaedic surgeon had no doubt that he should amputate. It was only the pleading of a new junior surgeon to let him try to save it – because he wanted some practice – that persuaded him to change his mind. Ironically he was from Pakistan, the very country where so many elements in its government supported the Taliban.

Anyway, I was grateful for his youthful enthusiasm and, for once, refusal to accept conventional wisdom and experience. My leg could throb and ache sometimes, keeping me awake at night, but at other times I hardly knew there was anything wrong with it, except that I walked with a slight limp. Somehow I'd lost the best part of an inch off that leg.

At last I reached my digs and collected my one holdall. In it I had one suit that was twenty years old, reserved for job interviews. Then there were two ties; three white and two casual shirts, and a change of socks and underwear. I stuffed my toilet bag on top of the pile and snapped the lid shut. I'd already paid my rent up to the end of that week, but there was no point hanging around, waiting to be arrested. I returned to the street and caught a bus to the house that had formerly been my own.

I alighted at the stop on the main road and took the next turning to the neat street of 1930s semis with their carefully tended front gardens. There was no car parked on the short tarmac drive. I glanced at my watch. Just gone twelve thirty. Perfect timing, Sally would be back for her lunch break at any moment. I barely had time to smoke a rollie, when the old family Discovery came into view at the end of the road.

It pulled in beside me and Sally clambered down. I thought how good she looked for a woman in her late thirties. She was only around five-four tall with a slim but solidly built body that showed off the jodhpurs and well-cut tweed hacking jacket

nicely. As usual she wore only the scantest of make-up, yet that just seemed to accentuate those beautiful, bright-blue eyes more than ever.

She broke into a smile, a hand brushing the wave of short blonde hair from her eyes. 'Dave! What a lovely surprise!'

I smiled back hesitantly. 'Still working at the stables, I see.'

Sally did the admin and accounts there, when she wasn't sneaking a crafty ride. We'd always joked she'd loved horses more than me. A pity she hadn't stuck to four-legged critters, I thought in a flash of savage anger.

'I'm still there for the moment,' she replied. 'But they think they may have to lay some people off. Business is tough.'

I nodded. 'Hopefully it won't be you. Expect you're indispensable.'

'Hopefully I am,' she said. 'And you, Dave? How's my rough diamond?' It had been her pet name for me since our earliest days together. She frowned, then added hesitantly, 'You're looking a bit . . .?'

'Rough?' I said helpfully.

'Are you eating properly?'

'Yes,' I lied.

She tilted her head to one side in an expression of mild disapproval. 'And drinking properly as well, no doubt.'

I shrugged. 'I do my best.' Quickly I changed the subject. 'How's Daisy?'

'Missing you a lot.' She sighed wearily. 'And so what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?'

'I wondered if I could collect a few things?'

Sally moved towards the front door, extracting a key from her shoulder bag. 'Of course, Dave. It's your house.'

'Not any more.'

'Only because you gave it to me.'

I ignored that. I said, 'I've done something stupid.'

As the door swung open, she turned back. 'Again?'

'I bumped into Luke Hartley.'

Her face paled. 'Oh.'

'I'm afraid I hit him. And a bit harder than I intended.'

There was a sadness in her eyes. 'Oh, Dave, that was so pointless. You know it's all long over between him and me.'

I nodded. 'I know. But it made me feel better.' The words were out before I realised that it hadn't made me feel better at all. Quite the opposite, in fact.

'But it's *you* who'll get hurt, and you've been hurt enough already.' She stepped aside to let me in. 'He's bound to call the police.'

I didn't want to go into any more detail, didn't want to tell her I thought I'd killed him. 'That's why I'm here. To collect a few things.'

'Making yourself scarce?'

'Thought I'd leave town for a bit.'

She shut the front door behind us. 'Just as well. That room you've been renting sounded awful.'

I didn't tell her that was better than what I was likely to be facing from now on. A wanted murderer, on the run with nowhere to hide.

I shrugged. 'I didn't have an option, Sally. An out-of-work soldier with a criminal record doesn't seem that high up on the council's list of housing priorities.'

Sally looked pained. 'You could stay here for a bit. Until you find your feet. I could soon clear out the spare room.'

I shook my head. 'We're divorced, Sal. Best not to look back. The cops could be here any minute. I need to get away.'

She shrugged. 'OK, if that's what you think. Do you know where you're going?'

'Not yet.'

'D'you want to go upstairs and get your stuff? It's still all there in the wardrobe.'

It was strange going back to the bedroom that I'd shared with Sally for so many years. The same curtains, carpet, duvet cover . . . so familiar, like an indelible photograph imprinted in my mind, a room I'd conjured up so many times during a lonely night in some far-off war zone. And there was that soft and floral feminine smell of the place. It was hard to know if it was perfume, air-freshener or just clean laundry. But it was unmistakably home.

I went to my side of the louvred door wardrobe and opened it. On the floor was my old, huge DPM camo bergen, alongside all the kit I used to keep together, ready to pack at a moment's notice – if and when a call came. A lot was army-issue, but much was private purchase to ensure the very best.

Carefully I began spreading it all out on the floor beside the double bed. Main equipment including a camouflaged Gore-Tex bivvy bag, a basha sheet, arctic sleeping bag, Jetboil stove and mess tins. Clothing was a mix of army DPM and plain olive drab.

I decided the thick Norwegian Army shirts would be especially useful, along with a lightweight, fibre-filled top made in dark-green Pertex.

Adding boots and Gore-Tex gaiters to the top of the bergen, I zipped up the lid.

I'd barely done that when I heard Sally's voice from downstairs. 'Dave! The police have arrived! A car's just pulled up!'

I shoved my empty holdall into the wardrobe, shouldered the bergen, and headed for the stairs. Sally was waiting on the ground floor, indicating for me to go through the kitchen at the rear. 'Quick,' she said. 'I'll stall them. You go out the back way. The Fosdykes will be out at work.'

I nodded. 'Thanks, Sal.'

I wasn't expecting the quick kiss to my cheek. 'Now go,' she said. 'Keep in touch.'

Two figures were outlined in the front-door windows as I slipped away through the back to the kitchen. Once in the garden, I crossed the lawn, scrambled onto the disused coalbunker and jumped the neighbours' fence. I crossed their lawn and slipped down the side of the house and into the next street.

Until I'd put a mile or so between the house and me, I didn't slow. It was a mild late-summer day, the sun was out and I was perspiring under my heavy load. I was painfully aware that I was nowhere like as fit and agile as in my army days. I found a roadside bench and sat down. I had to think things through, come up with some sort of plan.

After an hour or so, I made my decision. First I needed to say goodbye to my daughter, Daisy, explain that I loved her and she would see me again before too long. Mind you, that could mean visiting me in prison while I was on remand for murder. I wouldn't want that.

I pushed the thought from my mind. After talking to Daisy, I'd make my way to Brian Duffy's place.

Since he'd left the regiment, Duffy had been making use of his HGV licence and doing a fair amount of work for a local haulier. When I'd been drinking with him on Saturday, he'd mentioned that he was due to be heading off to France tonight. At least it would be free transport if I could hitch a lift, because I wasn't going to go anywhere fast on four quid.

I took my time making the journey to Daisy's school and waited for her opposite the gate as the exodus of teenagers exploded across the playground in a sea of uniform

colour. My fourteen-year-old daughter was quite easy to spot. She'd inherited my height and, luckily, her mother's fair good looks. Those looks weren't enhanced by her sloppy weekday dress style. Her blouse was half hanging out of the waistband of her skirt, and her socks had collapsed around the ankles of her long, white and painfully thin legs.

'Dad!' she called, suddenly recognising me and leaving her group of friends to cross the road.

'Hello, sweetheart. How you doing?'

She smiled broadly. 'Fine, Dad. But how are *you* doing? Are you coming home?'

That hurt. 'You know I can't come home. Mum and I are divorced now.'

'You could try.' Her head bowed slightly, but her mother's beautiful eyes still looked up at me coquettishly. 'I'm sure she wouldn't mind really.'

I didn't want to tell her there was no hope. 'Maybe one day, sweetheart. But we really need our own space for now.' It was the opportunity I needed to break it to her. 'In fact that's why I wanted to see you. To tell you, I'm going away.'

Her brow fractured into a frown. 'Why?'

'Looking for work,' I replied. 'There doesn't seem to be anything around here.'

The corners of her mouth down turned. 'So I won't see you at all . . .'

'Not for a while.'

'Where are you going?'

'I'm not sure yet.'

'To friends?'

'I don't know. I'll be OK.'

'Are you going for weeks, for months?' she pressed. 'Will you come and see us at Christmas?'

God, was this daughter of mine deliberately trying to break my heart? 'I hope so,' I replied, 'but that's still a long way off yet.'

She forced a smile. 'It's not. Time flies, you know.' Another thought occurred to her. 'It's only a year before I leave school.'

I frowned with mild disapproval. 'Unless you do your A-levels and go to university.'

Daisy straightened her back and suddenly looked very grown up. 'You mean land myself with a huge student loan to pay back . . . for a degree that employers say are ten a penny.'

‘I don’t know about that . . .’ I began, somewhat defensively.

‘It’s true, Dad. Most degrees nowadays aren’t worth the paper they’re printed on. And jobs are drying up all over the place. That’s what the sixth-formers are saying.’

‘It’ll get better,’ I said with more optimism than I felt. ‘Recessions don’t go on for ever.’

She smiled, realising I was trying to cheer her up, and put her hand on mine. ‘I know, Dad . . . Anyway, I can always join the army.’

‘Don’t you even . . .!’ I blurted, even before I realised she was teasing.

Her laughing eyes looked into mine. ‘I’d better go now. Promise me you will take care?’

I nodded. ‘I love you, little lady.’

‘I love you, too,’ she replied, turned and scurried off to catch up with her friends.

Feeling not a little saddened, I watched her go. Then, taking a deep breath, I set off on my own journey across town to where ‘Big Brian’ Duffy lived.

Late summer sun filled the landscape with a mellow and dusty light as the shadows lengthened. Walking along a country lane, the bergen weighing on my back, I was reminded momentarily of the magical desert light of Afghanistan where Duffy and I had last served together.

I remembered clearly the day when it had marked the beginning of the end for the both of us.