

Boy Soldier

Andy McNab and
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About the Author

Also by Andy McNab & Robert Rigby

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About the Book

SAS HERO TURNS TRAITOR

For Danny Watts, 17, whose life-time ambition is to be a soldier, this news story is the beginning of the end.

THE WORST SORT OF SCUM

The grandfather he's never met, SAS hero Fergus Watts, sold out to the Columbian drug cartels and was supposed to have died, rotting in jail.

SAS TRAITOR MASTERMINDS PRISON BREAKOUT

Danny is determined to track down the man who has ruined his life. But how can he find an expert in covert operations who is trained to avoid capture?

As Danny makes his first move, so does someone else. Someone who has been watching Danny. Someone for whom Fergus Watts is a loose end which needs tying. Permanently.

The first book in the *Boy Soldier* sequence is an explosive, fast-moving and thrilling adventure packed with authentic detail from Andy McNab's SAS expertise.

ANDY
McNAB
and ROBERT RIGBY

» **BOY SOLDIER**

RHCP DIGITAL

GLOSSARY

Alabama lie detector	<i>Baton used by some US police forces</i>
Bomb burst	<i>Split up</i>
Contact	<i>In a fire fight with the enemy</i>
CTR	<i>Close target recce</i>
Cuds	<i>Countryside</i>
Dead ground	<i>Ground that cannot be seen</i>
DMP	<i>Drug manufacturing plant</i>
ERV	<i>Emergency rendezvous</i>
FARC	<i>Colombian drug traffickers</i>
FOB	<i>Forward operating base</i>
IBs	<i>The elite of the Secret Intelligence Service</i>
LUP	<i>Lay-up point</i>
Mag	<i>A weapons magazine that holds the rounds</i>
Maggot	<i>Sleeping bag</i>
Make ready a weapon	<i>To put a round in the chamber, ready to be fired</i>
MoD	<i>Ministry of Defence</i>
MOE	<i>Method of entry</i>
NVGs	<i>Night viewing goggles</i>
OP	<i>Observation post</i>
Pinged	<i>When someone is first seen</i>
Recce	<i>Reconnaissance</i>
The Regiment	<i>What SAS soldiers call the SAS</i>
RIB	<i>Rigid inflatable boat</i>
Rounds	<i>Bullets</i>
RV	<i>Rendezvous (meeting place)</i>
SOP	<i>Standard operating procedure</i>
On stag	<i>On guard</i>
Stand to	<i>Get ready to be attacked</i>
UGS	<i>Underground sensor</i>
VDM	<i>Visual distinguishing mark</i>

SURVEILLANCE TALK

Complete	<i>Inside any location – a car, building, etc.</i>
Foxtrot	<i>Walking</i>
Held	<i>Stopped but intending to move on – i.e. at traffic lights</i>
Mobile	<i>Driving</i>
Net	<i>The radio frequency the team talk on</i>
Roger	<i>OK or understood</i>
Stand by! Stand by!	<i>Informs the team something is happening</i>

Static	<i>Stopped</i>
The trigger	<i>Informs the team that the target is on the move</i>

HACKING TALK

Exploits	<i>Hackers' targets</i>
Root access	<i>When the hacker has control of the system under attack</i>
Script kiddie	<i>Novice hacker</i>
Script	<i>A program written by a hacker</i>
Spoofing	<i>Hiding a computer's IP address</i>

PROLOGUE

1997, Colombia

Fergus had chosen the base camp carefully. He was always careful. Being careful had kept him alive during his twelve years in the Regiment and now that he was operating alone nothing was going to change.

The jungle floor was wet and muddy and covered with decaying leaf litter. Strong shafts of sunlight, as tight and bright as spotlights, speared through the tree canopy high above, illuminating the almost airless clearing.

The morning rains had stopped thirty minutes earlier but water constantly dripped from the canopy, and every small insect that flew or crawled seemed determined to take a bite out of Fergus. The air was hot and sticky and uncomfortable, but then comfort never had been the top priority in his line of work. Staying alive had.

On SAS operations Fergus had learned the hard way about the seven Ps – Prior Planning and Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance – so before setting up the base camp he'd made certain that two escape routes were available in the event of a surprise attack.

Carefully disguised rat runs had been cut into the undergrowth on either side of the camp. One led deeper into the jungle; the second went towards the river, where the four inflatable Zodiacs were hidden and camouflaged, just a metre or two from the water's edge. Their fuel bladders were still connected to the engines, their bows faced the water. They were ready to be launched within seconds.

Fergus stood facing the young guerrillas. They didn't look happy.

'Again,' said Fergus, in Castilian Spanish, keeping it as simple as he could. 'We do it again. Do it like I do.'

One of the Colombians sighed and muttered to his friends. Fergus didn't understand what was said – the words came too quickly – but he knew exactly what was meant. They were bored; they didn't want to spend time stripping down and cleaning their AK-47 assault rifles. They wanted to use them.

Fergus held his AK in his right hand and the curved, thirty-round magazine in the left. He checked the top of the mag to make sure the shiny brass rounds were seated correctly before placing it in the assault rifle's mag housing and listening for the reassuring click as it locked into position. Then he gave the mag a quick shake to make sure it was fully home.

'Now you,' he said to the sweat-drenched guerrillas. 'Just do what I did.'

Fergus could load, unload and strip down a weapon with his eyes closed – he had done, thousands of times – but now he kept his eyes on the twelve young men as they copied his actions. Young men. They were kids, most of them not yet twenty and the youngest maybe seventeen.

Most were dressed in ripped jeans and old Brazil or Man U football shirts. Some had thin, wispy beards. It was as though they were trying to prove they really were man enough, mean enough and brave enough to be FARC guerrillas. The younger boys were smooth-faced; they probably hadn't even started to shave.

Their faces were sullen and sulky. They hadn't left their poverty-stricken villages to clean rifles. They wanted to make their fortunes. They wanted action.

They were about to get it.

The attack came suddenly, without warning and at the worst possible moment. The government

troops must have been watching, waiting for the perfect time to strike.

Fergus heard the helicopter gunships first. The deep, throaty growl of the engines, immediately followed by the ominous chop of the rotor blades. The tree canopy swayed and shifted and rainwater came cascading down.

‘Shit,’ murmured Fergus, as he looked up and saw the first helicopter overhead. ‘Stand to! Stand to!’

The guerrillas ignored the command. Most of them simply panicked and started to run towards the boats, unaware that a gunner was already lining them up through the sights of the heavy machine gun mounted in the doorway of the gunship.

Fergus grasped the pieces of his own rifle and dived to the ground. ‘No!’ he shouted, rolling away through the mud. ‘Not the boats! Stay away from the boats! Stay low, stay low!’

But it was already too late. Bullets thudded into the wet earth as the young Colombians hurtled towards the river, their weapons forgotten and abandoned. The youngest boy, Nino, stood rigid and petrified like a rabbit in car headlights, his eyes wide with fear.

The camp was surrounded: ground troops were approaching from all sides and shouted orders were drowned out by the sound of automatic gunfire. The attack had been expertly planned, and Fergus felt a moment of professional admiration as he mechanically loaded his AK.

He grabbed the terrified boy and dragged him towards the forest escape route. Before they had moved more than a few paces Fergus heard a stifled cry, felt Nino jerk away and turned to see him falling into the leaf litter. Blood oozed from his head.

Fergus was hit before he could return fire. The bullet smashed into his thigh and sent him spinning away, face down in the mud. Searing pain burned through his body. He lifted his head and saw blood and red bone protruding from the gaping wound in his leg.

The thudding sound of heavy machine-gun fire drifted back from the river. Fergus knew that the guerrillas who had made it to the boats would have been picked off by the helicopter gunships and that, by now, their bodies would be floating downstream.

And then it was all over. The firing stopped as quickly as it had begun. Fergus tried to crawl towards the undergrowth as he heard more shouted commands and then men running towards him. He was grabbed by the shoulders and turned over. Four Colombian soldiers stared down at him, their camouflaged faces glistening with sweat as they jabbed their rifle barrels into his face and excitedly shouted to their commander. ‘Gringo! Gringo!’

Two of the troopers moved aside and an officer wearing the uniform of the Anti-Narcotics Police stepped through. He smiled at Fergus, reached into the breast pocket of his camouflaged combat jacket and took out a photograph. He looked at the photograph and laughed, then beckoned to a paramedic before viciously kicking Fergus in his wounded leg.

The agonized scream echoed away into the jungle.

2005, Army RCB Centre, Wiltshire, England

DANNY WAS RUNNING. His pace was as steady and constant as his breathing; he moved with a natural rhythm. This was what he'd been waiting for – at last he was really showing what he could do.

Sometimes when Danny ran, when he was training, he would wear a Walkman and sing to himself under his breath, fitting the tempo of the song to his strides. It helped maintain the pace and stopped him from getting bored on a long run. But not today. Today he was focused. He wanted to win, even though they'd been told it wasn't a race. But Danny still wanted to win. He always did.

He was way ahead of the others as he approached the stream. The muddy stretch of water was too wide to clear without the aid of the strong rope dangling invitingly from the thick branch of a tree. Danny's eyes narrowed as he neared the edge and without breaking his stride he leaped into the air, grabbed the rope with both hands and swung effortlessly across to the other side.

The watching NCO smiled his approval and checked the list of names on his clipboard. 'Good effort, Mr Watts, keep it going,' he boomed as Danny ran on towards the high wall.

Danny grinned. *Mister* Watts. Him? He couldn't remember anyone calling him Mister Watts before. A few other things maybe, but never Mister. But it was all so different here.

When they'd assembled on Day One, nervous and self-conscious, a sergeant had told them they would all be referred to as Mister. 'That's because officers are gentlemen,' he said. 'And that includes potential officers like yourselves.'

Danny wasn't bothered what they called him – General Watts, for all he cared – just as long as he got one of the Regular Commissions Board bursaries at the end of the three-day selection course. He had to get a bursary; it was the only way he could possibly afford to take up a university place and then go on to Sandhurst Military Academy.

And the weeks of preparation were paying off. Danny had sailed through the medical and fitness tests, handed in a decent current affairs essay, and if the rest of his written work wasn't exactly *University Challenge* standard, he was pretty sure he'd done well enough. In the briefings and interviews he had been confident but not cocky. He'd even laughed at the officers' bad jokes.

He knew they were being assessed at every moment, and that included their relaxation time. So when a few of the others got stuck into pints of bitter in the mess, Danny stuck to Diet Coke. It was a big sacrifice – he couldn't stand the taste of beer anyway.

One 'real ale man' ended up making a total prat of himself, downing four pints in less than an hour. It was three and a half pints too many: he threw up on the floor before being dragged off to bed. The duty officer wasn't impressed and neither was the steward who had to mop up the vomit.

Four Pints, as the others named him, woke up the next morning to a king-sized bollocking that did nothing to make his hangover feel better.

But it was a useful reminder to Danny to get everything right. This was his one chance, he had to take it, and with the assault course run being the final event it was all working out perfectly.

He clambered over the two-metre-high wall and sprinted the final hundred metres to the finish line, where a waiting sergeant clicked a stopwatch and made a note of his time. 'Very good, Mr Watts, very good indeed. Says on your application that you've run for your county.'

'Middle distance and cross country.'

‘And is that something you’d wish to continue in the army?’

Danny paused before answering, reminding himself to say the right thing. ‘As long as it didn’t get in the way of my other duties.’

The sergeant laughed. ‘I shouldn’t worry about that, Mr Watts, the army always wants to sponsor top quality athletes. Look at Kelly Holmes – she did ten years in the army and look at her now: double Olympic gold medallist. Take my advice, you stay in training.’

‘I will, sir. Thanks.’

‘Sir? I’m no Sir. I work for a living.’ The NCO pointed at the three small green stripes sewn on his combat jacket. ‘It’s Sergeant. Now get yourself off to the showers while I wait for the also rans.’

As Danny jogged away towards the changing rooms he could see the next few years panning out exactly the way he’d planned. University, then Sandhurst and then a commission as an officer in the infantry. And on top of that, they might even pay him to run. It couldn’t get any better.

The selection course ended with an after-lunch debriefing from the colonel in charge. He was a round-faced, cheerful old boy who told them exactly what they expected to hear: they’d all done very well and it had been one of the best RCBs he could remember.

‘Bet he says that every time,’ whispered someone sitting behind Danny.

The stifled laughter died away as the colonel reminded them that with only a certain number of bursaries available, some of them were going to be disappointed.

Thirty minutes later they were in the reception area waiting for the coach that would take them to the train station. They were a mixed bunch: a few, like Danny, comprehensive kids, but the majority from public school, Officer Training Corps and Army Cadet Corps.

Some were from old military families. Four Pints had boasted he could trace his family all the way back to Wellington and the Battle of Waterloo. That was just before he was sick.

As far as Danny was concerned Waterloo was the place where he changed trains on his way back to Camberwell. Military history could wait until Sandhurst. Firm footsteps sounded from along the corridor and the sergeant from the assault course approached. ‘Mr Watts?’

‘Sergeant?’

‘Good lad, got it right that time. With me, please, Colonel’s office. Leave your bag there.’

The sergeant turned away and retraced his steps down the corridor and Danny felt the eyes of the other candidates on him.

‘Looks like you’re in,’ said Four Pints, with a wink. ‘Must have been your run that did it.’

Danny hurried after the sergeant, his thoughts racing. Was that it? Was he in? The colonel had said the letters to the successful candidates would go out the following day.

They reached the colonel’s office at the end of the corridor and an abrupt, ‘Come,’ was called in response to the sergeant’s firm knock. He opened the door, nodded for Danny to go through and then pulled the door shut. His combat boots echoed away down the corridor.

The man seated on the far side of the dark wooden desk was not the colonel. He was blond-haired, mid forties, and in his slick, dark blue suit and custard-yellow and red striped tie, looked every inch a top civil servant. Danny recognized the tie – he’d once been on a school trip to a Test Match at Lord’s and had seen dozens of them worn by the MCC members in the pavilion.

A half-full cup of coffee stood on the desk. The man was studying a buff-coloured army RCB file with Danny’s photograph stapled to the front of the cover. He spoke without looking up. ‘Sit.’

Danny obediently sat in the chair on the near side of the desk but felt his face flush. He wanted to say, ‘Look, mate, I’m not a dog, and what happened to *Mister* Watts?’ But he didn’t.

A clock on the wall ticked loudly. Danny realized he was counting the passing seconds until, last, the man looked up. ‘The Regular Commissions Board will be turning down your application for bursary, Watts.’

The words stunned Danny like a surge of electricity. ‘But . . . but why? I did well on everything, passed the medical, my written tests were good. Good enough.’

The man shrugged. ‘Hardly Einstein.’

‘And I won the assault course race.’

‘Yes, you can run, Watts, you can certainly run. And while your predicted A-level grades are adequate for a place at one of the modern so-called universities, we all know that education standards are slipping. But the army is looking for better than average, Watts. We want the cream.’

He seemed to be enjoying it, taunting Danny, deliberately winding him up. ‘On the other hand, you made your own way through university and, by some miracle, exceeded expectations, you could apply for a commission. But . . .’

The thin smile was more like a sneer, and the way he left the ‘but’ dangling in mid air made perfectly clear to Danny that he had virtually no hope of ever becoming an army officer.

‘I don’t have family to pay for university.’

Another thin smile. ‘I am aware of that.’

Danny was fighting to hold back his anger. ‘You knew my predicted grades. What’s the point of getting me down here and putting me through all this if it’s just to turn me down?’

‘We believe in equal opportunities for all.’

Danny snapped. He stood up and banged a fist on the desktop. ‘That’s bollocks.’ The man raised an eyebrow but said nothing and Danny had no alternative but to bluster on. ‘It’s because I’m not from the right background. I don’t speak with a posh accent like you and I didn’t go to the right school. I thought all that family crap was a thing of the past in the army.’

The reply was totally calm and measured. ‘The working-class chip on the shoulder doesn’t help either, Watts.’ He let the application form drop onto the desk and raised his voice slightly. ‘Now sit down.’

Danny sank back onto the chair, and the thought that perhaps all this was deliberate flashed through his mind. Another test. Of his ability to withstand pressure and provocation. If it was, he failed it. Big time.

‘You need to learn to control your temper, Watts. And contrary to what you believe, family connections still play a very important part in the army. Your own, for example.’

‘Mine?’ Danny looked as bewildered as he felt. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

This time there was no smile. The man got up from his chair, walked round to Danny, and sat back against the desk. ‘When did you last see your grandfather?’

‘My—’

‘Fergus Watts?’

‘I . . . I’ve never seen him. Ever.’

‘Are you certain about that?’ The laid-back, laconic style had gone; Danny’s interrogator was now firing in questions like rounds from an AK-47. ‘Has he tried to make contact?’

‘Not with me, no. And what’s he got to do with this?’

‘Not with you? What do you mean by that?’ He leaned closer. ‘Answer me, Watts.’

Danny could smell the coffee on the man’s breath. His own mouth went dry. It wasn’t meant to be like this. ‘Someone contacted social services and asked about me, when I was sixteen. I don’t know who it was. If it was my granddad he never got in touch.’

The man stared into Danny's eyes. His look was almost hypnotic, probing. Finally he seemed satisfied. ~~He moved away and went back to his chair. 'Fergus Watts betrayed his country and his regiment. You knew he was SAS?'~~

Danny shook his head. 'I knew he was in the army, that's all.'

'There are certain matters we need to clear up with your grandfather, and if you could help us in any way . . .' He picked up the application form again. 'Well . . . there will be other RCBs.'

THE BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPH was yellowed and faded. Three young men in army uniforms, the arms around each other's shoulders. They were smiling, happy. Young comrades.

The photograph was the only link Danny had ever had to his grandfather. He looked at it again and then tore it down the centre and threw the two halves towards the already full wastepaper basket on the far side of the room. They missed and landed on the carpet.

Elena was standing in the doorway of Danny's bedroom. 'You might regret that.'

Danny sat on his bed, his face dark and sullen. 'Why? The only thing he's ever done for me is stop me getting into the army.'

'Don't sulk, Danny, it doesn't suit you.'

'Tough.' The journey back from Wiltshire hadn't improved his temper. He was seething, as well as sulking. 'The guy kept asking questions. Did I know where my granddad was? Was I certain he'd never been here?'

Elena glanced at the two halves of the torn photograph lying on the carpet. She could still make out the smiling faces. 'But what do they want him for? After all this time?'

'He wouldn't tell me. Just said they needed to talk to him.'

'Well, don't *you* want to know?'

'I don't want to know anything about him. I hate his guts.'

The sound of voices drifted up from the floor below and Elena shifted uneasily in the doorway. 'I'd better go down. Dave the Rave's gonna go ballistic if he catches me up here.'

Danny got up from the bed. 'I might as well look in the evening paper, see if there are any jobs going for army rejects. Part time at Tesco won't do any more, will it?'

'But what about your A levels?'

'What's the point now?' said Danny, brushing past and going towards the staircase at the end of the landing. Elena grabbed the two halves of the photograph from the floor, slipped them into the back pocket of her jeans and followed him.

They lived at Foxcroft, a privately run hostel for teenagers in Camberwell, south-east London. Danny had been there for five years. It was home, or the closest anywhere had been to home for as long as he could remember.

His parents had both been killed in a car crash when he was six. Danny was in the car too, but he had no memory of the crash. Not even in his dreams. With no relatives around to look after him, he had become a 'kid in care', a social services statistic. He'd been farmed out to four sets of foster parents over the years, but none had worked out.

It wasn't that Danny was a troublemaker. He was independent, he liked his own space, and fitting into other people's idea of family life wasn't for him. He'd lost his own family and he didn't want to be part of someone else's. So when he got the chance of a place at Foxcroft he'd jumped at it. It suited him.

Elena had been there for eighteen months, moving in soon after her mum died. There was no one else for her either; her dad had gone back to Nigeria years before, telling Elena and her mum he was going to make his fortune. He'd always been full of big ideas. Big ideas, but no result.

Danny and Elena had hit it off straight away; they just clicked, even though Elena was a year

younger. And at first Danny thought they might be more than mates but Elena soon put him right on that score. 'I want a friend, Danny,' she told him when he made a clumsy attempt at kissing her. 'I'm not interested in going out with anyone. Not yet, anyway.'

So Danny settled for friendship, even though he still really fancied Elena. And sometimes he thought she fancied him too. But maybe that was just what he wanted to think.

Elena was confident, clever and sharp. No one intimidated her, and she knew how to handle people. And that included Danny, who was looking guilty as she joined him at the top of the stairs.

'I didn't even ask about your GCSE results.'

'You're right, you didn't.'

'Look, I'm sorry. So tell me then.'

Elena smiled. 'You want me to be modest or just go for it?'

Danny laughed. Elena always did have a way of making him laugh. 'When were you ever modest?'

'In that case, I did brilliant. Six A stars and four As brilliant. Boff or what? Now, let's go down.'

Elena was a genius, her school's star pupil, but definitely no boff. She didn't spend hours and hours with her face buried in textbooks or bore you with endless streams of useless information. But she didn't mind letting her friends know how brilliant she was. In the nicest possible way, of course.

Foxcroft was an old building. Victorian, with three main floors and an attic where the below stairs maids would once have had their poky little bedrooms. At some time between the First and Second World Wars it had been the home of a government minister.

You wouldn't have thought so now. It was faded. Sad. The paintwork was flaking, the boiler down in the cellar wheezed and spluttered like an old man after a lifetime of too many untipped fags, the sash windows jammed in their runners, and when the wind blew the whole place seemed to groan and shiver. But there was something about Foxcroft that almost everyone who lived there liked. It was reassuring. Something to do with old glory that refused to lie down and die.

Danny and Elena made their way down the stairs to the first floor. The staircase was broad and grand, with a dark oak banister and a threadbare carpet that might once have been red. Boys' bedrooms were on the second floor, girls' were on the first. Telly room and living rooms were on the ground floor.

Dave the Rave appeared on the first-floor landing just as Danny and Elena arrived. There was no chance of slipping quietly by. Dave was a huge bloke. He'd been a rugby player with Saracens in his younger days and might have made it into the England team had it not been for a back injury.

But he was all right; you knew where you stood with Dave the Rave, and right now they knew they were in trouble. Dave was scowling. 'Elena, you know you're not meant to be on the boys' landing.'

'Sorry, Dave, I was giving Danny the good news about my GCSEs.'

'You can do that downstairs. You two are supposed to set an example here.'

Danny and Elena didn't usually step out of line at Foxcroft. They respected Dave Brooker and his wife Jane. They were fair, they didn't try to be like parents, or teachers, or even mates. They were just Dave and Jane: they owned the place and they made the rules.

Dave's brilliant blue eyes softened – he never stayed angry for long. And he was almost delighted at Elena's exam success as she was. 'I think she's the first genius we've ever had at Foxcroft,' he said to Danny, who didn't reply.

'Look, Danny,' said Dave gently, 'I'm really sorry about the army. I know how much it meant to you.'

Danny shrugged as though it didn't matter. 'I'm fine, Dave. I'll find something else.'

‘Yes, but . . .’

It was as far as he got. Danny had already started down the lower staircase. Elena looked at Dave, raised her eyebrows and hurried after Danny.

On the ground floor the theme tune from *EastEnders* was pumping out from the television room. When they went into the room reserved for peace and quiet. Television, Game Boys and even mobile phones were banned. As usual, it was empty.

Elena threw herself onto the huge old sofa that stretched along one wall. ‘You really giving up on your A levels?’

Danny sat in one of the armchairs. It didn’t match the sofa – none of the furniture in the room matched. ‘I don’t have a choice. I can’t afford university and I can’t stay here. I’ll have to get a job and somewhere to live.’

‘But Dave would let you stay.’

‘He can’t. I’m seventeen, over age for this place if I give up school.’

He got up from the chair and moved over to the tall sash window that looked directly out onto the street. One of the panes had a crack in one corner; it had been there ever since Danny moved in. He traced a finger over the crack and gazed out through the window. ‘He’s out there somewhere, Elena, and he’s got no idea what he’s done to me.’

The evening sun dipped behind the houses on the opposite side of the road and the room was instantly filled with shadows. Danny turned back to face Elena. ‘I’m gonna find him.’

Elena had been picking at a loose thread on one arm of the sofa. She stopped and stared at Danny. ‘Your granddad? But you said—’

‘I know what I said, but you’re right, I *do* want to know about him. I’m gonna find him and make him see how he’s ruined my life.’

‘Yeah, like how, Danny?’

Danny thought for a moment and then shrugged. ‘You’re the genius. You tell me.’

IT WAS A good spot for a roadside burger bar. A busy spur from the main London-to-Southend arterial road, it was used by huge numbers of vans and lorries streaming in and out of the light industrial and residential sprawl of south-east Essex.

White-van and lorry drivers were Frankie's main customers. He got the occasional suited company rep pulling in for a secret egg and bacon sandwich with tomato ketchup. 'My wife wouldn't be very pleased if she saw me eating this,' they'd say with a guilty smile. 'She likes me to have muesli. Bloody rabbit food. Hope you can keep a secret.'

Frankie kept many secrets.

The lay-by was potholed but wide and deep, with plenty of parking space for the biggest trucks. The landscape was flat and treeless, so drivers could spot the pull-in café, with its Union Jack flying above, from at least half a mile away in both directions.

Business was good, and for regulars in a rush there was a mobile phone number painted on the side of the van. They could call in advance with their order and their ETA and then collect their takeaways and be back on the road in a matter of minutes.

But most customers liked to stop for a leisurely cuppa and a chat with Frankie. Two regulars, Reg and Terry, painters working on a factory unit in Benfleet, had arrived for their usual full breakfast baps and strong teas. Bacon, sausages and burgers were already sizzling on the hotplate.

Reg dropped his third spoonful of sugar into the steaming mug of tea. 'I dunno how you do this all day, Frankie,' he said, stirring the brown, milky tea vigorously without spilling a drop. 'Don't you ever get bored? You know, stuck all day in a six-by-four tin can with nothing to do but watch the cars go by?'

Frankie cracked an egg onto the hotplate. 'I have plenty to do,' he said, reaching for another egg. 'This stuff doesn't cook itself. And I read the papers and listen to the radio. You get to learn a lot doing a job like this.'

Terry slurped tea from his mug. 'Yeah, fair enough, but – and don't get me wrong 'cos I love you cooking – but the smell of fried food all day would drive me round the bend. It clings to you, don't it?'

Frankie cracked the second egg onto the hotplate. 'You mean like the way the smell of paint clings to you?'

Reg laughed, and pulled a copy of the *Sun* from a deep pocket in his overalls. 'He's got a point there, Terry, a very good point. He stinks of fry-ups, we stink of top coat.'

He turned to page three and studied the photograph for a few moments. 'No, I could handle the smell, no problem. What would get me would be being stuck in this little van for hour after hour. It's like being in a prison cell.'

The eggs were almost cooked and Frankie turned away to spread butter on the baps. This, a prison cell? They had no idea. A prison cell was a dark, windowless concrete cube, three paces long by five wide and crammed with twelve other prisoners. The burger bar was heaven compared to all that. You could open the door and step outside. You could look out and see the road and the grass verge and the houses in the distance. You could listen to the radio. And you could talk to people.

Frankie had acquired his new identity three years earlier, soon after he'd finally made it back to England. It had taken a long time to get back, a full nine months after he'd led the breakout from the Colombian prison.

First he had to cross the two hundred and fifty miles of jungle to the Colombian border with Panama. It took three months and he used all his skills to evade capture, living off what he could trade or pick.

In Panama he stowed away on a Japanese cargo ship as it went through the canal towards the Atlantic Ocean. He hid amongst three thousand new cars, ate only food waiting to be thrown overboard and jumped ship when the vessel docked in Turkey six weeks later. Then he hitchhiked and hid in trucks until he reached France. He finally entered England along with seven illegal immigrants hiding under the cross-Channel train.

Essex seemed as good a place as any to settle. It was teeming with people too busy with their own lives to worry about one more ordinary, anonymous-looking bloke with a limp.

He did odd jobs to begin with, casual work for cash, no questions asked. He kept every penny he earned, but when he did start to spend, he spent wisely. A new National Insurance number bought in a pub cost him just fifty quid. That was when he became Frank Wilson. Changing his name and living as another person was something he was used to from his years on covert operations in the Regiment. The rule was: always have a first name starting with the same letter as your real name. It helped you remember.

Frankie always dealt in cash; there was no bank account or credit cards to help trace him. He started in a bedsit, but since buying the second-hand burger bar his finances had quickly improved. Now he rented an old cottage, pretty dilapidated but very private. And that was all he wanted. Privacy. To be left alone.

Frankie placed the two full breakfast baps on the counter. 'There we are, gentlemen. Help yourselves to sauce. And enjoy.'

THE WEBSITE STRAPLINES spewed out the story in graphic and horrifying detail:

SAS HERO TURNS TRAITOR . . . *Fergus Watts, the former SAS hero . . .*

WHAT MAKES A HERO TURN TRAITOR? . . .
Highly decorated SAS man, Fergus Watts . . .

And it got even worse:

BRITS WHO BETRAYED THEIR COUNTRY . . .
Philby, Blunt, . . . Watts . . .

There were more. Many more.

Danny and Elena were online in the quiet room, using Elena's precious laptop. 'If what your granddad did is so terrible, we're bound to find something about it on the Internet,' she'd said to Danny. She simply typed 'Fergus Watts SAS' into Google and the details began to emerge.

They scrolled through the websites and got most of the information through old newspaper stories going back eight years. And they didn't make good reading, even though the Fergus Watts story started so well.

He'd been an excellent soldier and was eventually 'badged' into the SAS. He did tours of Northern Ireland at the height of the conflict, and in the first Gulf War was decorated for his work behind enemy lines. He rose to the rank of Warrant Officer and could have got out at the age of forty, but the Regiment was his life and he chose to stay on.

As they delved deeper into the life and history of Fergus Watts, Danny kept reminding himself that this shadowy figure was not just some anonymous stranger, but his own father's father. They were flesh and blood. Family.

Every new fact was a revelation. Fergus Watts's special skill was explosives. He had a natural flair for languages, particularly Spanish. It was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle without the box cover to guide the way.

The SAS man's skills led him to Colombia and the war against the FARC drugs barons. His ongoing mission had been to lead patrols deep into the rainforest, to seek and destroy drug manufacturing plants. Danny tried to imagine the jungle, the heat, the heroic battles.

But then hero turned villain. Fergus Watts vanished and soon after it was discovered he'd gone over to FARC, purely for the money.

'It's true,' said Danny as they scrolled on to another page. 'It's exactly like the guy at my RC school. He said, he betrayed the Regiment and his country.'

A long in-depth article from a correspondent in Colombia said that the manufacture and export of cocaine to the USA and Europe was a multi-billion-dollar business, and that in selling his skills and taking the FARC 'blood money', Watts shared the responsibility for the deaths of thousands of young drug users.

'He's no better than a murderer,' said Danny angrily. 'A mass murderer.'

The newspaper stories revealed that the traitor had eventually been captured after a gun battle between his small band of FARC guerrillas and Colombian soldiers. Watts had taken a bullet in the thigh during the fighting and was later tried and thrown into a Colombian prison to rot.

After the trial and jail sentence, the name Fergus Watts disappeared from the newspapers for over four years, but then there was a dramatic return to the headlines:

SAS TRAITOR MASTERMINDS MASS PRISON BREAKOUT

Since the breakout Watts had never been seen, or heard of, again.

‘He’s here,’ said Danny. ‘He’s in England.’

‘You can’t know that,’ said Elena. ‘He might still be in Colombia – he might even be dead.’

‘Yeah? So who was it made the enquiry about me? It had to be him, there’s no one else, and I’m gonna find him. I’ll phone the SAS to start with and see what they can tell me.’

‘Danny, it’s a secret regiment. What you gonna do, ring one-one-eight and ask to be put through?’

Danny was in no mood to be corrected. ‘Yeah, all right,’ he snapped, ‘it was a stupid idea. So what do I do?’

Normally, Elena would have snapped back, but she knew Danny was devastated by what he learned about his grandfather. ‘Try some other army numbers – they must be listed in the phone book. And maybe you should make the calls in the garden. We don’t want anyone else knowing about this. I’ll see if I can find anything online. But if we *do* find him, what then? Really?’

‘I’ll turn him in,’ said Danny, picking up the phone directory. ‘I want him to suffer the way he made other people suffer.’

The garden at Foxcroft was like the quiet room, hardly ever used. There was nothing wrong with it: it was beautiful, if you liked flowers and plants that trailed in and out of trellises fixed to the high brick wall completely enclosing the garden. But as most of the residents of Foxcroft couldn’t tell a root from a stick of rhubarb, they generally stayed away.

And that suited Jane Brooker, who tended the garden almost as lovingly as she looked after the kids in her care. The garden was Jane’s escape from the stresses and strains of life at Foxcroft. She needed it.

It was almost like being in the countryside. Only the constant thunder of traffic snaking its way past and from the centre of the city and the jagged broken glass cemented into the coping on top of the crumbling brick wall gave away the fact that the garden was in a busy and sometimes dangerous district.

Dave the Rave often joked that the broken glass was there to keep the Foxcroft kids in rather than to keep unwanted visitors out. But it wasn’t like that. Foxcroft had been burgled many times – not that there was much worth stealing.

The garden was deserted when Danny arrived with his mobile and the phone directory. He sat on the wooden bench and started to look up numbers. He tried the local recruitment office, the Army Pensions Office and even the National Army Museum. No joy.

While Danny was on the phone, Elena went back to the online search engine. She punched in ‘SAS’ and was rewarded with a list of sites ranging from Scandinavian Airlines to Surfers Against Sewage.

‘Idiot,’ said Elena to herself. ‘Use your brain, Elena, be specific.’ She typed in ‘Special Air Services Regiment’. There were pages and pages dedicated to the Regiment. Most were tribute sites.

run by wannabe warriors or SAS anoraks.

But Elena worked quickly online, swiftly deciding which sites could be discounted and which needed checking out. Eventually she logged onto the SAS Association, an organization for ex-members of the Regiment.

‘Nice one,’ she said, making a note of the contact phone number. She shut down the computer and hurried out to the garden.

Danny got through to the SAS Association and after a few brief words was put on hold. He paced impatiently up and down a small patch of grass between two flowerbeds and glanced over at Elena. She had taken his place on the garden bench and was staring at an unopened blue airmail letter she held in both hands. The envelope was addressed to her and bore an unusual stamp.

‘Aren’t you gonna open that?’

Before Elena could answer, the phone line crackled and a woman’s voice came on: ‘You did say Watts, caller?’

Danny sighed. ‘No, *F. F* for Fergus.’

‘And you say he left the Regiment about ten years ago?’

‘Something like that. I think he’d be about fifty-two or -three now.’

‘Just one moment, caller, I’ll check again. You do realize that if he is listed I can’t give you an address or number?’

‘He’s my granddad. I just want to know if he’s still alive.’

The woman sounded sympathetic. ‘Oh, dear, that’s a shame. Putting you on hold, then.’

She was back in less than a minute. ‘We do have a Watts, but he’s much more recent. Wrong generation completely. They don’t all join the association when they leave, you know. Some just seem to . . . disappear.’

‘Oh great,’ said Danny. ‘Now what do I do?’

It was a question that he didn’t expect to have answered, but the woman obviously wanted to help. ‘Did you say you were calling from London?’

‘Yeah, and I’m running out of credit on my mobile.’

‘Well, you could try the Victory Club. A lot of the old and bold go there. Someone might remember him.’

It wasn’t much, but it was a lead. ‘Thanks, thanks a lot,’ said Danny. ‘Bye.’ He went over to the bench and sat next to Elena. The envelope was still unopened. ‘From your dad?’

Elena didn’t sound happy. ‘Who else do I know in Nigeria?’

‘Don’t you want to know what it says?’

‘I already know. He’s realized the money my mum saved is there for me now, and he wants it. Money’s the only thing he’s ever been interested in.’

Since turning sixteen, Elena had been allowed to use the money her mum had left her. So far, she had delved into the savings only once, to buy her laptop plus the hardware needed to turn the Foxcroft broadband connection into a hot zone. It meant she could use her machine wire-free anywhere in the building.

Elena already had her future mapped out. After university she planned to become a computer scientist, so her state-of-the-art laptop was no toy, it was an investment.

Danny reached over and checked out the stamp on the letter. ‘Read it. Maybe you’re wrong, and at least you’ve got someone who wants to be in contact.’

Elena hesitated. She’d been disappointed by her father so many times before. The single birthday

card she'd received over the past eight years was tucked away at the back of a desk drawer in her room, along with the one letter he'd written to her mum asking for money. He'd even got Elena's age wrong on the card. But now this. She handed the envelope to Danny. 'You read it.'

'Me?'

'I've been doing things for you for hours, it's your turn to do something for me. If he mentions the money once, just once, I want you to tell me. Then I can tear it up and throw it away.'

Danny slipped a thumb under one corner of the envelope and sliced it open. It wasn't a long letter – two pages of cheap, lined paper torn from a notebook – but Danny carefully read every scruffy written word, aware all the time that Elena was deliberately looking in the other direction. When he finished reading, Danny refolded the two sheets of paper and handed them back. 'You don't have to tear it up.'

Elena said nothing but she was pleased. And relieved. She unfolded the pages and began to read.

ABOUT A MILE upstream from the Houses of Parliament, on the south side of the river Thames close to Vauxhall Bridge, stands a strangely shaped building known as Vauxhall Cross.

It looks like a beige and black pyramid with its top cut off. There are staged levels with large towers on either side and a terrace bar overlooking the Thames. With a few flashing neon lights added it could easily be mistaken for a casino.

But Vauxhall Cross is no casino. It is the headquarters of the Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6. Those on the inside rarely, if ever, use the term MI6. As far as they are concerned they work for 'The Firm'. They are responsible for overseas intelligence gathering and for covert operations. Their job is to 'maintain the UK's influence overseas'. They keep the 'Great' in Great Britain.

George Fincham arrived early, as he did most mornings. Dressed, as always, in a smart suit, crisp white shirt and favourite MCC tie, he swiped his identity card through the electronic reader and easily opened the single metal door. He carried no briefcase or papers. Staff at Vauxhall Cross do not take their work home with them, not even high-ranking IBs like George Fincham.

He walked down to reception, where the first visitor of the day was waiting to be collected after being issued with a badge that read: ESCORTED EVERYWHERE. Fincham simply nodded a good morning to the two female receptionists seated behind blastproof glass and walked on to the lifts.

His office was high up and at the rear of the building, with a river view up to Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. Fincham reached his floor and stepped out of the lift. The long corridor kept its usual secretive silence. The only sounds were the faint hum of the air conditioning and the hard, audible electronic buzz of the fluorescent lighting.

In one of the small staff kitchens, two other early arrivals, their IDs slung on chains around their necks, stood making coffee. They spoke in soft voices. That wasn't unusual: everyone at Vauxhall Cross spoke softly when away from the privacy of their office.

Fincham arrived at his own office, unlocked the heavy wooden door and went inside. He felt at home in here. The room was functional and impersonal. There were no paintings on the walls, just two plasma TVs mounted on a wall bracket in one corner. One screen constantly scrolled through Ceefax world news headlines; the other was tuned to BBC News 24, with the sound muted but with subtitles at the bottom of the screen.

The desk stood close to the picture window, which stretched the entire width of the office. Fincham went over to the window and opened the venetian blinds and the morning sunlight immediately warmed the room. There was little traffic on the Thames; not even the tourist pleasure boats had started their daily journeys up and down the couple of miles of brown, murky river water.

A sharp double knock at the door interrupted Fincham's thoughts as he stared out toward the Houses of Parliament. He answered in his usual way: 'Come.'

Marcie Deveraux looked immaculate. She always did. Her black trouser suit was definitely not on the peg and was way out of the price range of most female IBs. Fortunately for Deveraux, her expensive tastes didn't depend on the salary she received from the British government. Her family was of West Indian origin and her ancestors had made their fortune way back, by cooperating with the French when they arrived to colonize their island.

With her high-cheekboned exotic looks, closely cropped jet-black hair and slim figure, Marcie Deveraux looked like a supermodel. She could have been. She had it all. Style. Class. Va va voom.

But Marcie Deveraux had always had different ambitions. Her first in Social and Political Science at Cambridge had led to her being recruited by the Firm, and she had quickly been identified for accelerated promotion. And she knew that within ten years, with luck and the right breaks, she could make it to 'C', the name given to the head of the Intelligence Service.

But for now she was number two in Fincham's section, which was responsible for the Firm's internal security. That included making sure that no one in the service was selling secrets to the enemy, while at the same time keeping the government from knowing too much about the Firm's activities. It was policy to keep politicians at arm's length. Whenever possible.

'Good morning, sir.'

Fincham turned away from the window, gestured to Deveraux to sit down and settled himself in the high-backed executive chair on his side of the desk.

'What do you have for me, Marcie?'

'It looks as though your plan is beginning to pay dividends, sir.'

She slid a single sheet of paper across the desktop towards Fincham. Danny's army RCB file was also on the desk. His photograph had been removed from the cover.

Fincham picked up the paper and speed-read the small type as Deveraux continued, 'He's already been a very busy boy. Four contacts reported, even the Army Pensions Office. Shows great initiative.'

'And we're watching him?'

'Oh, yes, sir, we're watching him. Closely.'

Fincham allowed himself a half smile. 'Good. Very good.'

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