

Chapter One

He rounded the corner just as I was about to jump. He put down his guitar and leant against the railings, gazing out across London. When he caught me staring at him, he nodded a good-natured hello. 'Cheer up, mate. Might never happen,' he said in a jokey sort of way. Then he patted his pockets, asked, 'don't suppose you can spare us a smoke?' and made a flicking motion with a thumb.

I tossed him a packet of Rothmans and my Dunhill lighter. 'Keep them,' I said in such a way as to make clear that I wanted to be alone.

He raised an eyebrow and gave me a curious look. 'Giving up?' he asked and nodded slowly when I looked away. 'Thing is,' he said. 'Statistics prove ten out of ten bods who top thesselves die a premature death. But what do they know, eh? Eejits,' he scoffed. 'Fact is, one in every two jumpers bodge it and end up as cripples.'

I stared down towards eternity and gulped. I had assumed that jumping off Suicide Bridge would be a foolproof way to go - scramble up the railings, hold my breath, close my eyes and leap to freedom. Not for one moment had I considered failure and the lifelong agony that might bring.

In no apparent hurry, he continued to stare across London soaking up the view. After minutes that felt like hours, he turned to me and said, 'considered putting your

head on the train lines? Never fails. Real messy, though.’ He raised a finger, struck by a thought. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘Hows about taking an overdose? No blood, see.’ As I shrank back, his smile faded. ‘Then again, you could try talking.’ He offered me one of my own cigarettes. ‘Go on, one more ain’t gonna hurt. Let’s face it, even a condemned man gets to have hissself a last smoke. This?’ he said when he saw me staring at the lighter. ‘It were give me by a mate, but here . . . you best have it. Never know when it might come in handy.’

I snatched the lighter from his hand, clutched it to my chest and burst into tears. A fortieth birthday present from Sophie, it was - and still is - one of my most treasured possessions. Maybe it was something in his eyes - a flicker of humanity, perhaps - that made me say, ‘don’t suppose you could spare a few minutes for a chat?’

‘As it happens, mate, I got all the time in the world. And know what? So have you.’ He put an arm around my shoulders and steered me back from the brink. ‘Kristy McGill,’ he said. ‘But they call me Krill. Leastways, they will one day.’

We found a bench and talked. I gild the lily; the fact is that by and large, I talked and McGill listened. When I enquired about his accent, he explained that he was an Ulsterman but left to see the world a good many moons ago. He quipped that accents - like back pain - are never lost. Not entirely. Other than that, he said very little. Not that I much cared. The fact was that I found the

conversation difficult. I am not and never have been one for baring my soul, so skirted around the issues that had reduced me to such straightened circumstances. I limited myself to saying that my wife had left me when I fell upon hard times. After all, how can you tell someone that you have only just met that you find it impossible to live with yourself through no fault of your own?

Having spent so long without a shoulder to cry on, I unburdened my soul, at least insofar as Sophie was concerned. Fearing that the weather might take a turn for the worse, I invited McGill back to my house to continue the conversation. I recall him saying words to the effect that that would be prudent considering my frame of mind. He seemed a thoroughly decent sort. I have little doubt that had I been in his shoes, I would have made my excuses and gone on my way at the earliest opportunity. But I am grateful that he did not. Little could I have guessed how his simple act of kindness would shape the course of history.

Needless to say, I was nervous about inviting a stranger home. After all, it was a long time since I last had company and McGill was hardly the type of chap I used to be in the habit of associating with. As we walked, I studied him from the corner of an eye. A little taller than me, he was well built and had an easy way about him. Assured. At a guess, I would have said that he was roughly my age, but looked a good deal younger, hardly surprising bearing in mind what I had been through. I fancy that we must have looked like a pair of ne'er do wells, as he was wearing jeans, workboots and a scruffy leather jacket, and although I was in a pinstripe suit - my funeral gear as McGill jokingly

referred to it - much like me, it had seen better days. Frayed at the cuffs and threadbare at the seat of the pants, it had been my constant companion for the better part of eighteen months.

Sophie's parting gift had been to sneak back to the house when I was out and restyle my wardrobe with a pair of pinking shears. At the time, I was livid that in a typically spiteful gesture, she had stripped the place of almost everything that was not nailed down or plumbed in, but had left Berlusconi - she knew how much I loathed the animal. That said, I must confess that I have since grown extremely fond of her. Company, I suppose.

I should explain that Berlusconi is a cat. Sophie had christened her Berlusconi in jest, but I cannot for the life of me see anything remotely funny about the name. Had I been given a say in the matter - which true to form, I was not - I would have suggested Felix or possibly Sooty, to my mind a far more appropriate name for a black rescue cat with a white bib and paws. I have always thought Berlusconi more of a dog's name. Maybe that is what Sophie found so hilarious. I must say, my estranged wife had a peculiar sense of humour.

I could tell that McGill was impressed by my house. With very few exceptions, most people were. Set back from the road behind a tall fence, it was at one end of Millionaire's Row, as my street is colloquially known in Crouch End. However, in recent times Chez-Tucker - as Sophie used to jokingly refer to our grand retreat - had fallen into disrepair. As I led McGill up the overgrown drive, I asked

myself what on earth I was doing. Earlier that day I had bidden a last farewell to my mock Tudor albatross, so why, in heaven's name, I asked myself, had I returned? I winced as I cast an eye over the flaking paintwork, missing gutter and loose roofing slates. Stricken by a momentary sense of despair, I was all for returning to Suicide Bridge when I spotted a familiar whiskered face peering through a dormer window. When Berlusconi saw me, she pricked up her ears and scrabbled at the glass, all paws and claws and pitiful meows. How long would she have sat there waiting for me, I wondered - forever and a day? That might not have seemed long when I left, but it did now.

McGill followed me into the kitchen, flicked a light switch, frowned and offered to check the fuses. When I told him not to bother, he nodded as if a penny had just dropped. He looked around and admonished me with a muttered, 'really, mate.' Shaking his head, he draped his jacket over the back of a chair, rolled up his sleeves and set about tackling an embarrassment of dirty crockery in the butler's sink.

Thankful that there was still a little oil in the tank, I put the kettle on the Aga cooking range to boil while McGill rooted through the kitchen cupboards in search of sugar. Needless to say, the cupboards were bare . . . almost. He found a packet of cat biscuits, held it at arms' length, screwed up his eyes and read aloud. 'Says here, Prolongs Active Life. Just the job.' He sampled a few and nodded. 'Don't taste too bad. Chickeny. Want some?' When I turned up my nose, he said, 'looks like someone does,' and emptied the packet into Berlusconi's bowl. 'Cats, eh?' he

said as he stood back with his arms crossed and watched her tuck in. 'Eat, sleep, eat, sleep - what a life. You can put me down for that.'

Rather than setting me at my ease, McGill's good-natured banter merely served to amplify my sense of despondency. After all, it was one thing to sit and mope while my life collapsed around my shoulders, but quite another to see the squalor through someone else's eyes. Up until that moment, I had not fully appreciated the extent to which my house - a house that had once been the envy of all who set foot in it - had lost its soul. Now little more than a travesty of the colour-supplement home that Sophie and I had so painstakingly - and so expensively - restored, it felt more like a dungeon than a castle.

McGill poured us each a mug of black tea, sat down at the kitchen table and made himself at home. He stretched his legs, sat back with his hands behind his head and looked up at the spotlights. 'So, your `lectric's been cut off and you got bills coming out of your ears,' he said casually, as if commenting on the décor rather than my dire straits. He picked up an envelope and, when he saw my name, said, 'you're that bod as was in the papers, ain't you?' He cocked his head and gave me a quizzical look. 'You know, I thought I clocked you, back there on Suicide Bridge,' he said. 'Mind, you lost weight and that beard threw me. Makes you look older.'

My spirits - such as they were - slumped. Bitterly disappointed, I said, 'if you recognised me, why did you stop me from jumping?' I pushed my mug aside, took off my

spectacles and rubbed my eyes. 'Want to hear a funny story?' I made a brave attempt to smile. 'For someone once regarded as having the sharpest mind in the City, I have been a damned fool.'

'Ain't no laughing matter,' McGill said. 'Then again, life ain't, but it's the only one we got. Wake up every morning and there it is. Mind if I take a look?'

I withdrew into a difficult silence as McGill thumbed through the red utility bills, threatening solicitor's letters and hate mail on the table. 'Smoke?' He offered me a cigarette. 'Usually rolls me own, but a mate give me a pack of ready-mades earlier on.' He grinned when I offered him a light. 'There you go - said it would come in handy, didn't I? Still, could be worse. Least you still got a roof over your head.'

'Not for much longer.' Riven with shame, I showed McGill a High Court Order demanding that I repay my outstanding mortgage within seven days or the bank would repossess my house.

He read it, winced, and read it again. 'Ain't messing, is they?' he said. 'Considered selling up? I mean, a posh gaff in this neck of the woods got to be worth a mint.'

Studiously avoiding his eyes, I told him that my debts far exceeded whatever equity I still had in the place. I explained that Sophie and I used to lead busy lives, so craved domestic privacy. To all intents and purposes, this house ticked all the right boxes - detached and set back from the road behind a gated fence, it was at the bottom of

a quiet cul-de-sac so had no overlooking neighbours. Over and above the four double bedrooms, three spacious reception rooms, this large kitchen, a double garage and the best part of half an acre of garden, the deciding factor had been planning permission for a large extension where Sophie could entertain her wide circle of friends. I had a word with my bank manager and - knowing that I was about to put pen to paper on a lucrative new remuneration package - he encouraged me to borrow up to and beyond the hilt. In what proved a calamitous error of judgement, I went out on a limb and borrowed more to fund the renovation and the new extension. 'So there you have it,' I said, burdened with the guilt of hindsight. 'Like a damn fool, I saddled myself with a mountain of debt.'

McGill put the repossession order back on top of the other final demands. He thought a moment and said, 'hows about renting the place out?'

Difficult though I found it, I managed a smile. 'Come on,' I scoffed. 'Who in their right mind would want to live somewhere that's about to have the rug pulled?'

McGill cast a needless glance at the door and lowered his voice. 'Tyler might,' he said in a loud whisper. 'Needs to find hisself a new place smartish - yesterday if he can. Know what? I reckon this would be a perfect fit.'

'You haven't been listening,' I said, fast losing patience. 'I'm in way over my head.'

'No mate, it's you as don't get it. If the place suits, Tyler will sort you out - everything . . . the lot. Heard of Page-R?'

‘If you are talking about bankruptcy, I couldn’t stand the shame. That’s why . . .’ I looked away to hide my reddening eyes.

Undeterred, McGill persisted. ‘No, it ain’t like that - ain’t like that at all.’ He shook my arm to demand my attention. ‘See, Page-R wipes the slate, but let’s you keep what you got. Worked for me.’

‘Please,’ I said, fighting a tremor in my voice. ‘I have spent months clutching at straws. Take it from me, there is no way out except . . .’ The word suicide froze on my lips.

McGill got up, walked to the window, opened it and stared out at the extension. I remember thinking how strong he was; the sash cords had seized and it was all that I could do to nudge them up by an inch or so. After some thought, he turned to me and said, ‘bite the bullet and you gets your life back, Tyler gets a new base and I gets a place to live.’

I was shocked. Up until that moment, it had not crossed my mind that McGill might be homeless. Indeed, he struck me as relatively civilised. He was quick-witted, polite and certainly did not want for confidence. Whereas I laboured to articulate my thoughts - and in particular, my feelings - he had a down to earth grip on life that suggested a keen intelligence and a fertile imagination. Maybe it was my low esteem, but - dare I say - I felt intimidated by the force of his personality.

‘Don’t judge a read by its cover,’ he said when I remarked upon his unfortunate domestic circumstances.

‘Let’s just say, I’m currently between fixed abodes.’ He joined me at the table and sat down, mug cupped between his hands. Somewhat indiscreetly, I thought - bearing in mind that we had only just met - he confided that he and some friends had been squatting at The Man and Trumpet public house in Lower Holloway, a stone’s throw from The Emirates Football Stadium, a couple of miles down the road. ‘As it happens,’ he said, ‘the place got busted last week. It’s a crying shame - I mean, the gaff’s been empty since I don’t know when and Spillers Brewery ain’t gonna do nuttin` with it, is they? And we wasn’t causing no bother - not so as you’d notice. That’s why Tyler needs a new base, and smartish. Somewhere out of the way.’ He ran an eye around my spacious kitchen and nodded. ‘I reckon this place would do him a treat.’

‘That is absurd,’ I said, beginning to doubt the wisdom of having invited this amiable drifter into the sanctuary of my home. ‘London is full of vacant office space.’

‘All right, cards on the table. Tyler’s a financial engineer. Plays the market - stocks and shares and that.’

‘Your friend manages a hedge fund?’ I was, to say the least, dubious that anyone of means would choose to associate with the likes of McGill.

Either McGill did not notice the scepticism in my voice or he did not care. Probably the latter; he exhibited a degree of self-confidence remarkable for a fellow in his position. ‘Could say that, but Tyler’s got hisself this special angle, see?’ he said. ‘A computer programme based around some complicated software gubbins to rig the markets.

Foolproof it is - guaranteed to generate mega-bucks for his stuck-up clients. It's run by Mikhail from Back Office, down Islington way.'

'Miguel?'

'Mikhail. The bod's from Moscow not Torremolinos. He's top dog in Tyler's outfit.' McGill offered me a cigarette and when I shook my head, helped himself. 'Between you and me - and her, of course.' He glanced down at Berlusconi who was rubbing against his ankles, purring loudly as if he was her new best friend. 'The Boss has this team of boffins who trade crazy volumes of shares - billions in a split-second - to make sure them bets of his come good. He's got to hide this bunch of geeks somewhere so they ain't linked to his operation.' He shoed Berlusconi away and relaxed into his favourite position - legs outstretched, hands behind his head. 'The team was working out of the squat down by The Emirates, but now that's been busted, he's got to get hisself a new base, pronto.' He checked about for an ashtray and gave me a disparaging look when I suggested that he use a saucer. 'See, in Tyler's line of work, time is money,' he said as he flicked ash into the palm of a hand and rubbed it into his jeans. 'That's why running into me could just be your lucky day.'

'So your friend is rigging the stock market, is he?' I said. 'That's illegal.'

'Oh, come on - do us a favour.' McGill rocked back in his chair with what was - to my way of thinking - an inappropriate smile. 'An hour ago, you was planning to top yesself 'cause you been shafted by the system, and now

you're getting all high and mighty about a harmless little scam? Time you took a good look in the mirror, mate. Would you rather give Page-R a go or settle for Page-Z?' He ran a finger across his throat. 'I mean, what you got to lose?' he said. 'Except your chains.'

Chapter Two

Mister Tyler struck me as the type who does not tolerate fools gladly. Small with a military bearing, his grey hair, tweed suit, club tie and arcane mannerisms reminded me of the merchant bankers I used to rub shoulders with at my gentleman's club - my former club, I should say. Despite a pronounced limp, he seemed spritely for a fellow of his advancing years. His handshake was formal and polite, lacking warmth or generosity. I assumed that he was not aware of my past. If he was, he disguised the fact. His expression gave nothing away. In that - as in most other respects - he could not have been more different from McGill.

When I showed him into the hall, he frowned and turned up his nose as if he could smell something noxious festering behind the skirting boards. He clicked his fingers at a younger man at his shoulder, waved his cane at the chandelier and said, 'get rid of it, Harrison.'

Thankful that Sophie was not present - she had spent an age choosing the fixtures and fittings, so goodness only knows the colourful language she would have come out with - I was about to apologise for the lack of electricity when McGill handed Harrison a Zippo cigarette lighter. 'Here, Arnie,' he said. 'Best check the fuse-box.'

As Harrison ventured down to the basement, I took McGill to one side. Not sure what was going on, I said, 'fuse

box? And if you had a lighter, why did you ask me for a light on Suicide Bridge?’

‘Broke the ice, didn’t it?’ McGill clicked his tongue and winked. ‘And don’t you worry about Arnie. The exercise will do the eejit good.’

Before I could press the point, Harrison reappeared brushing cobwebs out of his hair, his angular face silhouetted by the lighter’s flickering flame. Standing smartly to attention, he told Tyler, ‘all fuses present and correct, sir. The problem must be in the street. Want me to take a look?’

Tyler leant on his cane, straightened his back, glared at Harrison and snapped, ‘suppose it hasn’t crossed your mind that the power might be off?’ Muttering under his breath, he checked his pocket watch, tucked it in a waistcoat pocket and set off for my extension. He pushed through the door, looked about in the manner an estate agent inspecting a slum, turned to Harrison and said, ‘paint it white. No - magnolia. And get rid of the furniture. Looks like a bordello.’ He pulled a chair up to the table, flicked a wrist to indicate that I should sit opposite, took a file out of his attaché case and asked, ‘live alone?’ as if it was something to be ashamed of.

Assuming the question to be rhetorical bearing in mind the cobwebs and the dust, I shrugged. Although tempted to say that pastel colours and reproduction furniture were not particularly to my taste - interior design had been Sophie’s department - I settled for, ‘did McGill tell you who I am?’

Mister Tyler examined me over the rim of his spectacles as if I was an exhibit from a rogues' gallery and said a terse, 'I make it my business to know who I am dealing with.' He opened the file, cleared his throat and read aloud. 'John Tucker. No middle name. Forty-two. A commercial lawyer by training and an unusually sharp one by all accounts. Promoted from Head of Legal Affairs to Managing Director of the Poppy Seed group of companies, but left under a cloud.' He took off his spectacles, gave me a disdainful look, said, 'nasty business,' put his glasses back on and turned the page. 'Let me see . . . ah, yes - according to Mikhail, you owe the best part of four million for a property worth half that in the current climate. Careless for a man of your standing, what?' With the help of his cane, he got to his feet, smoothed out a set of plans on the table and tapped the outline of my extension with a fountain pen. 'This can be my dealing room,' he said and pointed to the bedrooms one by one. 'I'll billet the team here, here and here and install the machine-room in your garage.' Satisfied, he clapped his hands. 'Splendid. I'll have my people move in tomorrow.'

Taken aback, I said, 'steady on. We haven't discussed rent or anything. Where am I supposed to live?'

'Here of course. Where else?' He waved his cane at the ceiling to indicate my bedroom on the first floor overlooking the garden. 'You can share the kitchen as long as you don't poke your nose into matters that are none of your concern.'

Unsure, I hesitated. ‘What’s in it for me?’ I asked guardedly.

‘Ah yes, your side of our Faustian bargain, eh?’ he said with a pinched smile. ‘Assuming you agree, you will wake up tomorrow morning debt-free. Well, Tucker, do we have a deal?’

After a moment’s hesitation, I shook his hand. After all, to paraphrase McGill, what did I have to lose? Other than the chains of my financial servitude.

Leaving McGill to tidy the kitchen by candlelight, I retired to bed, exhausted by a day of emotional turmoil. In my mind’s eye, I had endlessly rehearsed the split-second when I would relinquish my grip on life, so it made little sense to find myself staring at shadows on the bedroom ceiling in an all-too familiar state of ennui. I cursed my continued existence, or I did until I heard the familiar patter of paws as Berlusconi jumped onto the bed and curled up at my feet. Was this now my *raison d’etre*, I asked myself? Four legs, whiskers and a tail.

Thankfully, two sleeping pills put me out like a light and I awoke the following morning relatively refreshed, albeit with a muggy head. When I saw the digital clock blinking on my bedside table, it struck me that the electricity must have been reconnected during the night. So maybe Mister Tyler’s offer was not as far-fetched as I had assumed?

The doorbell rang as I was giving Berlusconi her breakfast. As she scuttled through the catflap to the garden, I answered the door to a giant of a man. Dark skinned with the physique of a heavyweight boxer, he was a dreadlocked head taller than me - and I am five-eleven when I stand up straight. At first, I took him for the gangmaster of a refuse crew until I noticed a small black triangle on the top pocket of his overalls, identical to the motifs on the tie that Mister Tyler had been wearing the previous day.

He introduced himself as, 'Marcus - Tyler's head tech.' He ran an eye over my shabby suit, grinned and said, 'let me guess - you must be Tucker.' Chuckling for reasons best known to himself, he squeezed past me and headed for the garage. After a cursory look around, he opened the shutters and waved to a truck parked on the drive. Under his watchful eye, a team of labourers cleared away the detritus of my life and unloaded a dozen or so large packing crates.

Wasting no time, Marcus set to work. 'A Faraday cage,' he explained as he lined the garage with steel mesh. 'Stops electronic interference and keeps digital snoopers out.' When he finished, he set about installing racks of servers and sundry peripherals linked by a spaghetti of cables funnelled through aluminium trays suspended from the ceiling. 'This hub is child's play compared to some of Tyler's other rigs,' he told me as he worked. 'They're something else.' He stood back, wiped his hands on his overalls and nodded at a rack of electronics that reminded me of Warp-Drive Command of The Starship Enterprise, a serialised

science-fiction television drama that I used to follow religiously as a youngster. ‘You ain’t gonna find kit like this in your local high street. Light years ahead of its time,’ he said proudly. ‘I design the nuts and bolts and CyboSynch knock up the hardware.’

To say that I was surprised would be the mother of all understatements. A household name in the world of commercial and industrial computing, CyboSynch was to industry and commerce what Apple is to the man in the street. I knew more than most about the company, as shortly before my ignominious departure from Poppy Seed I had commissioned CyboSynch to install their state-of-the-art network technology in all our branches and subsidiaries. Although initially dubious - their quote had been substantially more than the Chinese counterpart - after a detailed cost-risk analysis, I plumped for speed, efficiency and above all, security over economy. ‘How can Mister Tyler afford to use the market leaders in mainframe technology for a small-scale project like this?’ I asked.

‘Cause it’s his outfit, that’s why,’ Marcus told me with a grin. ‘Got in at the ground floor back in the day. Picked up the shares for a few cents in the dollar when NASDAQ crashed in the early Noughties, I hear tell. And now look . . .’

Well, well, well - it seemed that Mister Tyler was not the stuffy old fuddy-duddy that I had taken him for. CyboSynch held a virtual monopoly on the provision of server technology and operating software to major financial institutions, corporations, governments,

telecommunications giants and security agencies around the globe. And this meant that Mister Tyler must be an extremely wealthy man. And an extremely influential one. 'So how many businesses does Mister Tyler own?' I asked.

'Got no idea, and if I did, I couldn't say. Knowledge is power and you ain't ready - not by a long chalk.' Marcus tucked a dreadlock behind an ear, knelt down, shone a torch under a rack and reached for a screwdriver. 'Later maybe, when you're one of us . . . if you ever are.'

Concerned that I was getting under his feet, I left Marcus to his labours; by the looks of things, he had a long day ahead of him. On the way back to the kitchen, I poked my head into the extension where a tall girl - mid-twenties at a guess - and an older man were installing more computer hardware. As with the new machine room, I was impressed; Poppy Seed Towers had been equipped with cutting-edge technology, but that was positively arcane compared to the space-age paraphernalia on the new workstations.

When he saw me, the man stuck up two fingers and shouted, 'fuck off, baby killer.'

So he knew . . . The passage of time made the slurs no easier to bear. They still stung me to the quick, but I no longer had sufficient tungsten in my spine to fight my corner. I had long since learnt a bitter truth that people will believe what they see fit irrespective of the facts, so left without a word. In any event, I had been relegated to the status of a lodger in my own house and the extension was off-limits. I withdrew to the kitchen where I found McGill

drinking a cup of tea and reading the Daily Planet, the nation's leading mass-circulation tabloid newspaper. The scurrilous rag was as familiar to me as the kitchen curtains; one of my responsibilities at Poppy Seed had been to hire and fire editors, a duty that I discharged with an alacrity that made few friends.

'Cheer up, mate. Might never happen,' McGill quipped in an echo of our meeting on Suicide Bridge. Sensing that it already had when he saw my miserable expression, he changed the subject. 'I see you met Marcus doing his thing in the garage. Don't let that smiley face and them natty dreadlocks fool you - his mind's sharp as a blade. He could earn a packet working for Apple or IBM. I seen the offer CyboSynch made him - a shedload of zeros . . . and the rest.'

Relieved to have something to talk about other than my usual preoccupations, I pulled a chair up to the table and poured myself a cup of tea. 'Why didn't he accept?'

'Marcus? Never. Him and Tyler is tight as ticks. Take it from me, he ain't never gonna jump ship.'

'Is the girl an intern?' I asked, remembering how she had turned to her colleague for reassurance when she saw me staring at her.

'Rosa, an Intern - well now, don't that take the biscuit?' In a Pavlovian response, McGill helped himself to a chocolate digestive from the communal biscuit tin. 'Tucker,' he said as he dunked the biscuit in his tea. 'That girl is the nearest thing I ever met to a genius. If Albert Einstein

got hisself reincarnated in Doc Marten boots, a hoodie and a mini skirt, that'd be her.' He raised a cautionary finger. 'But don't go getting no ideas. Rosa might be a looker, but she's trouble with a capital T. I mean it, mate - hands off. Anyways she ain't into that, she's . . . how d'you say? Cerebral - a geek. Apart from Mikhail, there ain't a body on the planet can bang out code like that German chick.'

I was surprised. After all, Rosa was hardly my idea of a stereotypical German girl. She was dark rather than blonde, tall and painfully thin rather than . . . well, suffice it to say that she was hardly what I would have called buxom.

'She growed up in Berlin,' McGill explained. 'But you'd never guess. See, she don't talk much - keeps hesself to hesself. Like I always say, still waters run deep.'

'Who is her friend?' I asked. Stockier and a good deal older than Rosa, I regarded his attitude as needlessly antagonistic.

'That'll be Ben. Him and Rosa's shacked-up together.' McGill fished a soggy crumb out of his mug with a finger, examined it, shrugged and popped it in his mouth. 'Believe it or not,' he said as he helped himself to another digestive. 'He's Spanish, but you'd never guess 'cause he speaks English better than a native - well, better than me anyway, but that ain't saying much,' he added with a self-depreciating smile. 'His Da was some kind of diplomat and he growed up in South Africa. He got the language bug as a kid - speaks a dozen tribal lingos better than a local. When his old man got posted round the world, he picked

up the patters like fag ends off the street. Finds it easy, would you believe?’

McGill rocked back in his chair - hands behind his head - stretched his legs and scuffed his heels on the quarry tiles. ‘Tyler bought him in to translate the operating systems for Rosa’s software. I’m telling you, mate - watch out for that one. He’s gotta mean streak bigger than the Irish Channel - turns real nasty if you rub him up the wrong way.’ He sat up, glanced over a shoulder and lowered his voice. ‘Keep it to yesself, but I once seen him go for a bod twice his size with a broken bottle `cause the fecker called him shorty. Had to drag him off by the scruff of the neck otherwise he’d have slit the fella’s throat. Hang about,’ he said as Marcus poked his head through the door and gestured with a finger. ‘Looks like the big man needs a hand in the machine room. Won’t be long.’

Left to my own devices, I gazed around the kitchen supping tea and nibbling chocolate biscuits - a rare treat. It struck me that I could cope with the trauma of losing my house if I could keep this one room. What I found most difficult to come to terms with was that I had nowhere else to go. I had no family or friends and no longer had the means to furnish a deposit on anywhere else to rent. If I lost this roof over my head, Berlusconi and I would wind up on the street - a new-age Dick Whittington and his faithful cat hiking to oblivion rather than in search of fame and fortune.

When McGill returned, the nagging itch of insecurity prompted me to broach a matter that had been playing on my mind. 'Will Mister Tyler really settle my debts?'

'Don't you worry, mate - they're all took care of. Page-R has already wiped your slate.'

'So you keep saying, but . . .'

'Look, I'll spell out.' McGill rattled the empty biscuit tin, shrugged, propped his elbows on the table and rolled a cigarette. 'Cause Tyler's so well connected and CyboSynch technology runs the networks of all the financial institutions - utilities, credit card providers and the like - the old man's got this software programme as can archive any computer records he wants in a file only him and Mikhail can access - suspend 'em till Kingdom Come, if you like.' He shook his head when I gave him a sceptical look. 'Put it this way - Page-R is like Google in reverse. Rattle in a name and it don't come up. Ever. So far as the world is concerned, you don't exist. Never did.'

'Come off it,' I said. To be frank, I found the idea preposterous. 'You honestly expect me to believe that Mikhail can erase my credit record, just like that?' I clicked my fingers.

'Sure. Already has. Check for yesself. Your overdraft, mortgage, unpaid bills, bailiff's records and every scrap of computerised data relating to John Tucker Esquire is history . . . Page-Z. Money-wise, you're as naked as the day you was born. Oh, you're still gonna owe the local milkman and don't try opening no new accounts.' He raised a finger

and looked me squarely in the eye. 'But don't mess with Tyler. Don't even think about it.' He took a deep - a very deep - breath. 'As of now, he owns you. When he whistles, you come running.'

Chapter Three

Much as I resented having been unjustly ostracised from my former social circle - chairmen of Footsie One Hundred companies, successful entrepreneurs and merchant bankers in the main - when the guillotine first fell, I drew a measure of solace from my solitary confinement; I needed time to reflect upon the catastrophic events that had blighted my life. And then - after Sophie left - I got by as best I could by living each day by numbers . . . wake up, shower, dress, feed Berlusconi, brew a pot of tea, take a walk in the garden, drink more tea, sneak a catnap on the sofa and dwell, perchance to dream.

As time went by, I succumbed to ever-more severe bouts of melancholy. More often than not, I slept all day and stayed up all night chain-smoking and drinking black coffee. I showered less often, ate infrequently, wore the same clothes day-in, day-out and rinsed an occasional cup or plate rather than wash up. I grew a beard as I no longer had the will to shave. Ridiculous though it sounds, my only routine was to feed the cat.

Bearing in mind the solitude that had defined my existence for so long, it came as no surprise - or it should not have done - that I found difficulty coping with the infestation of unruly freelance operatives drafted in to help Rosa in Kontrol, as the computer hub in my extension was known. This scruffy bunch of urchins went by the name of Invisibles and were hardly the type of ragamuffins I cared to brush shoulders with. When they acknowledged me - which they rarely did - it was with a singular lack of regard, more often than not referring to me as Old Four-Eyes or Gay Dad.

After agonising for days, I plucked up the courage to bring the Invisibles unacceptable behaviour to McGill's attention. I should say at this point that McGill commanded the respect of all who worked with him. He exuded an air of calm authority and led by example rather than dictat. Despite his easy-going Ulster charm, there was always a serious and, at times, an intense determination behind his amiable smile.

When I raised my concerns, McGill fobbed me off with platitudes. 'Do us a favour, Tucker,' he said. 'They're only kids. Don't mean no harm.' He raised his voice when I persisted. 'Come on, mate - give it a rest. Remember what you was like at that age.' Then he gave me one of his quizzical looks, cocked his head and muttered, 'maybe not.'

I found the next few weeks nigh-on impossible. After eighteen months of relative inactivity, I struggled to come to terms with the influx of rowdy yahoos, so kept to myself insofar as I was able. That said, McGill was always willing to lend a sympathetic ear should I need some moral support. As I got to know him better, I found that he possessed a rare degree of empathy for those less fortunate than himself. Indeed, I thought him unlike anybody I had ever met. Although I am uncomfortable in social situations, I came to regard him as someone I could turn to when I feared that I was losing my grip. No matter how busy he was, he always found time to listen and tolerated my mood swings with good grace. He encouraged me to eat his cholesterol-rich breakfasts and bucked me up with cheerful banter should I suffer one of my debilitating bouts of melancholia.

I must confess that this was one of the most difficult periods of my life. Mentally I was in a bad place. With the benefit of hindsight, I realise that those were the darkest hours before the dawn. With every passing day, I felt a little stronger.

‘Know what?’ McGill said one morning as he cleared the breakfast table. ‘I reckon it would do you a power of good to get down off that high-horse of yours and muck in. The brain’s a muscle, mind, so it’ll take time to get back up to speed. Best take it one step at a time.’

Needless to say, I disagreed. I might have lost my self-confidence, but not my self-respect - not entirely. Somewhat huffily, I pointed out that I was used to running a multinational corporation. I assured McGill that compared to cracking a managerial whip over twenty-five thousand employees, marshalling a handful of Invisible teenagers would be a proverbial walk in the park.

‘You reckon?’ McGill raised an eyebrow. ‘Here . . .’ He pinned a small enamel badge to my jacket lapel - a black triangle within a red circle. ‘It’ll let the others know you’re on the team.’

Determined to prove McGill wrong, I set to work immediately. After drawing up a list of provisions for him to purchase, I drafted a rota for the Invisibles to ensure that Mister Tyler’s share portfolios would be monitored round the clock. Then I instructed Marcus to hang a noticeboard and coat hooks in the hallway and ordered Ben to procure fire extinguishers, wastepaper baskets and a coffee percolator for Kontrol. Finally, I prepared a schedule of household requisites - towels, toiletries, crockery and cleaning utensils - which I pinned to the kitchen door marked for Rosa’s attention. Having spent the best part of a day applying

my flagging energies to a few simple tasks that would once have taken less than an hour, I withdrew to my bedroom followed by Berlusconi, who appeared bemused - my pun - by the novel experience of watching me work.

As one day drifted into the next, I grew ever more dispirited by the lack of progress. No noticeboards went up, stinking ashtrays and discarded garments cluttered the reception rooms, wastepaper overflowed from a myriad of cardboard boxes and Rosa's lackadaisical Invisibles traipsed into work as and when they pleased.

Sensing my frustration, McGill sat me down at the kitchen table with a glass of tap water - we had run out of tea and coffee. 'Thing is,' he said, 'we can't be doing with Chiefs and Indians round here. I know it ain't easy for an executive type like you, but managing the place means doing it yesself, not handing out lists to bods who ain't got enough hours in the day to work their own shift, let alone yours.' He salved my injured pride with a chummy pat on the back. 'Give it a go, mate.'

Despite feeling affronted by what I deemed a slight, I swallowed my pride and turned my hand to a variety of menial tasks. Although at first, I found the effort as demeaning as it was exhausting, I was pleasantly surprised by the results. For example, I spent the best part of an hour admiring my handiwork after taking an afternoon to screw a noticeboard onto a wall, albeit at the fifth attempt, and admittedly a tad skewwhiff. I was later to describe to McGill in graphic detail how I slotted not just one, not just two, but four . . . four . . . Rawplugs into precisely the right number of holes drilled by my own fair hand. 'All in a day's work,' I told him with a nonchalant shrug of the shoulders.

The sense of achievement I felt when I overheard one Invisible say to another, 'go see Gay Dad - he'll sort the blocked loo, no problem. Top man,' bolstered my self-esteem beyond anything I could have envisaged. After eighteen months of self-absorbed navel-gazing, my old self started to re-emerge from its introverted shell. The old me? No - I was markedly different. It was as if I was seeing the world through stronger lenses with a renewed sense of purpose. I began to feel an indispensable member of a team rather than an aloof and - if I am honest - a worthless encumbrance.

I am pretty sure that McGill positioned me on the bottom rung of the household ladder deliberately. In hindsight, I suspect that not merely did he believe that I needed taking down a peg, he felt that I would benefit. If it was a test, I passed with flying colours.

With time, my essential - albeit menial - role in Tyler's organisation restored a fragile sense of self-worth. However, as yet I was uncertain what the future might hold, or rather what I wanted it to hold. If I examined my life through a glass darkly, I could see much of what was wrong, but had no idea how - or even if - I might put things right. I felt as though I inhabited a spiritual vacuum because I lacked whatever it was that fuelled the ardour of my new housemates. Belief? Principles? Faith, perhaps. I was not sure, but I envied them their selfless dedication. Such thoughts preoccupied me as the weeks went by, leading to a growing conviction that there must be some other - unspoken - element to Mister Tyler's activities.

As I settled into my role as housekeeper cum handyman, little by little my confidence returned. Far from being belittling, I would say that if anything, working with my hands proved a liberating experience. I had no need of a multinational organisation to ply my trade, I merely donned my overalls and a flat cap, packed a thermos flask into my trusty tool case and off I went. Needless to say, there were occasional pressures. The time the downstairs toilet flooded comes to mind. My word, I worked my fingers to the bone that day. As I remember, I hardly had time for a tea break. But by and large, as long as I fulfilled my duties, my time was my own. I could let my mind wander. What I found most satisfying was the sense of achievement I experienced when I completed a task. In my previous incarnation as a corporate mogul, I spent my days, my weeks, my months - my life - cementing endless bricks into an infinite wall, brick upon brick upon brick. Looking back, it was as if the process was all - a means to a series of financial false horizons rather than an end in and of itself. In large part this was because the goalposts had a tendency to move should I take my eye off the ball. How different my life now was. This was bought home to me one day when I was asked by the Invisibles to rig some goalposts on the lawn for a kickabout. Accordingly, I rigged some goalposts on the lawn for their kickabout; two poles, a spade, a dollop of elbow grease and job done. When asked to move them, I dug two new holes and moved them. Another job done. What is more, the goalposts did not move of their own accord the moment I turned my back.

Having said that, I must confess that I found my duties more challenging than I anticipated. I had always dismissed manual labour as a mindless bore, but soon found that even the simplest task requires thought and application. Take my noticeboard . . . as time went by, I became ever more frustrated that it was marginally off-kilter. Absurd though it might sound, this kept me awake some nights. And so I learnt to measure to the millimeter, use a spirit level, clean my tools and think before I blundered in. In short, I came to take pride in my work.

In part to hone my skills and in part to improve my quality of life, I put my newfound skills to use by renovating the garden shed to provide a refuge from the horde of Invisibles infesting the house. I replaced the missing windows. I refelted the roof. I repaired the gutters. I sanded and waxed the floorboards. I built cupboards and a wardrobe. I salvaged two armchairs from a refuse skip - one for me and one for Berlusconi. I made a woodburning stove out of an old dustbin and a length of aluminium piping. I refurbished an abandoned rug. I made curtains from scraps of discarded material. Oh, and I used some of my meagre allowance to buy new batteries for an old transistor radio I found in the attic. Before long, Berlusconi and I were - as the saying goes - as snug as two bugs in a rug. I invested my remaining cash in a carton of cut-price supermarket plonk and invited Kristy McGill, Marcus, Rosa and Ben to my shed-warming party. Rosa did not respond and Ben laughed in my face but McGill turned up with two bottles of palatable screw-top wine. Marcus joined us with a tin of Jamaican patties and a carton of Red Stripe lager. I can honestly say that I had a most enjoyable evening listening to McGill's shaggy-dog stories and Marcus's tales of his harebrained antics growing up in a shantytown suburb of Kingston, Jamaica.

Although I was now accepted as a member of what McGill called his family - albeit more a distant uncle once removed than a sibling - I rarely joined in with the banter. I had no interest in discussing my former life or the trials and tribulations that had reduced me to such straightened circumstances. In any event the Invisibles conversed in what I would describe as a foreign language. The dinner table conversation largely related to music, computer games and social media. Rosa intrigued me, but I cannot remember us exchanging more than an occasional word. She was painfully shy, whereas Ben was the quite opposite. He made no bones about his feelings towards me.

As time went by, I began to make occasional forays into Crouch End. At first it was to the local hardware store, but when it became clear that nobody recognised me - whether because of my unkempt hair and beard or the fact that I wore overalls rather than a suit - I felt sufficiently confident to sit with a cappuccino at a kerbside café and watch the world go by. On occasion, I lashed out a few pounds on repurposed clothes from one of the many charity shops on The Broadway; the MIND shop in particular always had a serviceable selection of preloved slacks, shirts, cardigans and jumpers. And so it was that I settled into an undemanding routine, but one that suited me.

Although I began to relax about the house, I continued to harbour a dread of crowded places. Aware that the scars of my depression ran deep, McGill encouraged me to push my social envelope. 'You need to put yesself about,

mate,' he said on more than one occasion; I was to learn that one of his qualities was an ability to empathise with his fellow beings . . . and command our respect. One Saturday - I remember it well - shortly after breakfast, he turned to me and said, 'come on, Tucker - time for work.'

'You've got a job?' I expressed surprise. 'I assumed that you were unemployed.'

'Me - a layabout? Give us a break, mate. I'm a busker. Pays the rent - leastways, it would if I had any.' McGill pointed to his guitar case. 'Grab ahold of that,' he said. 'Never had a bagman in a suit and tie before. Might pull a better class of punter.'

In that it was a sunny day, we chose to walk to Camden Lock rather than catch a bus. The route took us by way of Suicide Bridge. We paused half-way across to gaze down at Archway Road.

'Got a spare smoke going begging?' McGill asked, the twinkle in his eye a reminder of the day we met. He lent against the railings and toyed with his cigarette - mindlessly passing it from hand to hand - staring at the city skyline, deep in thought. 'The past's another country, ain't it?'

'More like another lifetime,' I said. 'This last month has turned my world upside down.'

'Don't look in the rear-view mirror, mate.' McGill flicked the cigarette butt through the railings and gave me a chummy punch on the shoulder. 'Take each day as it comes, like it's the start of the rest of your life.'

'Wake up every morning and there it is, eh?' My slow nod became a slow smile.

I had to dig deep to recall the last time that I visited Camden market - my memory was not what it was, in no small part due to the side-effects of my anti-depressants. After giving the matter some thought, I decided that it must have been shortly after I moved to London, almost twenty years ago. In the intervening years, the street-market had changed beyond recognition - as had I. Memories being what they are - snapshots frozen in time - I was expecting bric-

a-brac stalls, street-vendors and long-haired scruff-bags sporting bandanas and Afghan coats, but not a bit of it. More like a fairground than a street market, a dizzying collection of fast-food kiosks vied for custom with stalls offering t-shirts, branded merchandise and glitzy mementos of a day out in London. Crowding the narrow aisles were camera-toting tourists sampling greasy food and talking at the top of their voices in every language under the sun including a smattering of English.

Clutching his guitar for dear life, I followed a pace or two behind McGill. Step by step and yard by yard, my paranoia eased as we pushed through the crowd towards the canal towpath. Far from being an object of curiosity as I feared, I was but one more face in the milling throng. Looking back, I suppose that this is when I turned the corner and started to come in from the cold.

The moment that McGill opened his guitar case on the cobblestones, a crowd began to gather. 'Me regulars,' he told me as he strapped on his battered acoustic guitar. 'Plenty more will show when word gets round I'm here,' he bragged, and blow me if he wasn't right. Within minutes, there were upward of eighty expectant fans jostling for position as they waited for the entertainment to begin.

The odd occasion when I had heard McGill singing in the bath hardly prepared me for what was to come. His gravelly voice sent shivers down my spine. To my untrained ear, every song sounded familiar as if plucked from the ether rather than having been laboriously crafted, line by line. In between songs, he chatted to the audience with the relaxed familiarity of a seasoned raconteur - the gift of the Ulster gab, as he was later to say. All the while, his dark eyes flirted shamelessly with little girls, their mothers and an occasional blushing granny at the back. An off the-cuff remark would be followed by an anecdote or two which invariably developed into a rambling monologue punctuated by witty observations about the lives we lead - our trials, our tribulations and our comical misadventures. It was apparent from the off that he possessed a common touch and a rare talent for communicating with people from all walks of life, especially the young. Above all, he was blessed with an extraordinary voice and a catalogue of stirring songs to match.

After milking the applause with several encores, he finished with a galloping rendition of *The Wild Rover*. 'Thankee, ladies and gents, boys and girls,' he announced with flourish and a bow. 'I'll be seeing you again. You can count on it.' As the crowd dispersed, he counted his takings, grumbled, 'feckin` skinflints,' and pocketed the best part of a hundred pounds. Then he said, 'just kidding,'

tapped his nose and winked. 'Not bad for a layabout. Better than grafting for a living, ain't it?'

With an echo of the riotous applause still ringing in my ears, I nodded. Having said that, I suspect that the question was rhetorical. Kristy McGill knew full well how talented he was. Indeed, he gloried in the fact. Whatever his shortcomings, no one - least of all me - would have counted modesty as one.