

# FIVE STILL MISSING

(Opening Chapters)

by

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Six Magic Numbers Ltd

## **FIVE STILL MISSING**

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## CHAPTER ONE

I never intended to ruin such a nice guitar by smashing it over a drunk in a tacky bar but looking back it changed everything. Epiphany moments have a habit of happening when you least expect them, it's like hitting your head on a low beam in the pub when you've been concentrating on not spilling the beer in your hand. Sometimes these moments of clarity are good, sometimes they're bad, and sometimes it's a wake up call.

For twenty-five years I'd been running from my past and now I was going to be forced to go back and face up to the mess I'd left behind. We all have our reasons for going down certain paths, the trouble is no matter how far you go or how long you're gone for you take your emotional baggage and pack it in your suitcase.

After travelling the world I had ended up in Spain, playing 'Miko's Bar' doing my one man set to backing tracks, strumming the guitar as best I could to entertain the holiday drunks. When I had started out playing music I thought that I had the gift, a skinny slick haired rock god straddling the monitors in my tight black jeans. With my dark fringe flailing around, pumping that guitar as hard as I could I thought I was the next Joe Strummer. It was my dream when I set out to conquer the music world to be headlining festivals by now with a long list of 'greatest hits' but reality has a habit of slapping your dreams down hard.

That evening I was enjoying a break, fifteen minutes every two hours. I may as well have been working in a mine because it sure killed me to be doing that but I couldn't afford to have a luxury like pride, I was operating on necessity, basic survival. A little amphetamine helped me get through sometimes but the comedown was crap.

Standing at the bar eating my runny omelette I heard it again, a song called *The Sleeping Gallows* about a highwayman being caught and hung. It was sweeping the world with its catchy chorus, you know those songs that once you hear them they stay with you, like it or not? The thing is this particular tune was familiar to me, not just the catchy melody it was like I knew the tune deep inside. Most of all I soon recognised the artist and I knew where he'd got the title, I'd grown up with him after all and co-written it in a garage in the Close where we lived.

Carl had been my best friend up until I was sixteen. God knows why, he was a selfish manipulating bastard with a crooked sense of humour. Last time I saw him was when I'd punched him out for stealing a girl away from me. He had no right to use that song without my consent. I'd hoped that stealing Charlotte was the last lousy thing he'd do but he was back for more despite the blessing of geography putting plenty of miles between us. One thing I'd learned from my travels was that as time marched on the world was becoming a smaller place. He would have known that it would open up old wounds for me. That was the thing with Carl though, he never thought of anyone else unless they could serve a purpose.

I'd already been asked to play the song long before I'd heard it. You get that a lot in bars, people yelling out song titles when you are half way through another, they think you should know the entire catalogue of every song ever recorded like a walking iTunes, thinking I could skip tracks like a puppet without a brain. I would usually smile at these people and if I didn't know it say *'I'll learn it for you for next time.'* Of course usually there never was a next time, if there was they wouldn't remember the request anyway because they were so trashed.

There was one lobster-faced drunk that night pushing his luck a bit. He was just another of many who came and went throughout the season to get wired, trashed, knob someone and then go home itching their private parts. However this one was different, a persistent bastard and the straw that broke the camels back or my guitar neck rather. This idiot did the worst thing you can do to a musician he started messing with my guitar as I played while carelessly balancing his pint in his other hand, splashing beer. I pushed him off in between chords and he started edging towards my amplifier and I knew already that if he damaged my VOX then I wouldn't hesitate to boot him off the stage as I had done many times before to similar idiots. One night there had been four of them on stage jumping around and I'd shepherded them off with a deft nudge here and persuasive push there - I have to point out that *stage* meant several beer crates and a sheet of eight by four foot chipboard.

A musician's equipment is out of bounds to everyone except roadies, soundmen and the band. And we never, *never* appreciate people coming up asking '*Mind if I have a go mate?*' It's like us saying '*Mind if poke your girlfriend?*'

Keeping the mob in order in a shooters bar on a small holiday island was difficult and these rules didn't mean much to Mr Lobster currently overriding my precious amplifier tubes by turning the knobs up at random. A shrieking feedback cut through the bar and people clapped their hands to their ears.

'Oi mate, no touchy the stuff okay, get yerself another drink.' I shouted, forcing a smile.

He tried to focus on me with eyes like piss holes in the snow going in different directions. Miko, the owner, was looking at me from behind the bar not doing anything about the trouble as usual, he was too penny-pinching to

hire a bouncer and told me hecklers were my problem and part of what I was paid for. At the time I was barely covering the cost of the room I rented from him above the club, it was a stinking hole even by my standards and I'd certainly roughed it for years across the globe. The toilets in the bar below my window were so wrecked, most of the seats were torn off or the sinks were kicked in but Miko didn't care as long as they kept buying the cheap booze.

'Come on superstar play the song.' Said Mr Lobster on stage, swaggering towards me again like he was on a lively cross channel ferry.

'Mate can you just piss right off the stage?'

'Sure.' He grinned and I returned to my riffing. Within a few seconds I felt a tapping on my leg that grew heavier and I looked down to see that the bastard had taken my request literally and was pissing *off* the stage and some of it was spraying on my jeans, the only pair I had.

Mr Lobster then grabbed the microphone from the stand and began screaming down it, the speakers started to feedback again. I nudged him with my shoulder but he pushed me back this time. I kicked out at him and he wobbled back into the amp toppling it off the back of the stage. It went quiet, I knew he'd broken the tubes and they would cost me loads to get replaced.

'You're paying for that you stupid aresehole.' I yelled.

He dropped what was left of his beer on it and turned to have a go at me with his arms swinging. I therefore did what any professional self-respecting bar-musician would do. I hit him as hard as I could with my guitar.

Les Paul guitars are pretty sturdy, you could probably use them as cricket bats but I must have caught him awkwardly as it split in two and flew out of my hands hitting one of the floor length mirrors. Mr Lobster careered into a group of

girls at a tall table, scattering them from their barstools like bowling pins as he went crashing to the floor. His friends stood there waiting to see what he would do but I thought I'd killed him. Then he let out a moan, rolled around, face bloodied trying to find his focus. I was shot through with adrenaline, holding my precious bits of broken guitar the metal truss rod inside the neck dropped out clanging across the floor. He'd just destroyed my livelihood, I was livid but there were about half a dozen of them.

To my surprise they suddenly let out a huge cheer, gathered their mate up like a sack of spuds and carried him out of the bar singing the chorus to *The Sleeping Gallows*.

\* \* \*

Miko had to shut the bar early because of the mess and broken glass, he didn't look happy, storming about shouting at the bar staff to get the mops and cleaning gear out. The only time I had sensed any happiness in the bloke was when he was flirting with drunken girls half his age trying to get them back to his room.

I was trying to dry off my amplifier with bar towels when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned quickly thinking it could have been Mr Lobster but it was Miko and he had my canvas backpack.

'You're out.'

'Out? That wasn't my fault, you saw it.'

'Here.' He handed me a load of Euros, some of the notes floated down across the stage and I peeled them off the beer soaked wood before they turned to mush. 'We are all settled up now piss off.' He spat.

'Now listen.' I said, standing up and following him towards the bar, 'I've put up with a lot over the last six months here,

you can't just throw me out.'

'Go.' He pointed to the door.

I grabbed him by his bright coloured shirt and he said something in Spanish loudly. I looked over his shoulder to the door where his arm was still pointing. Two local Police waved at me. They weren't like the Police I'd grown up with, these had guns and I knew it was hopeless for me to argue.

\* \* \*

I wasn't sad to leave Miko's crappy bar and room but it was my home, as squalid and crappy as it was I actually needed at least four walls to call my own. I took my amplifier and stuck it on a makeshift trolley that I'd cobbled together, put the bits of guitar in the case and grabbed my backpack. I ended up down on the beach, looking for a spot to sleep. I'd managed to smuggle a bottle of rum inside the guitar case while I was making my exit so I felt a tiny piece of comfort there.

The night was cool; I wrapped myself up in my jacket and began to sip at the alcohol, looking out to the waves, wondering what I would do next. I'd slept on the beach before but usually with some friends around a campfire, I used to like that as it reminded me of my childhood where we would play in the woods behind the Close. I'd kept the nicer memories and held them in my head as detailed as possible. It hadn't been entirely bad before I'd run away but then again it was so long ago I probably rose tinted it to ease the pain of never being able to go back.

I laid on the sand and stared up at the sky, the same sky I'd seen when I began my adventure across the world over two decades ago. I'd wandered so far from my original path, the one I'd set out on, a rock star enjoying the spoils

of stardom. It had briefly gone okay but then I'd slid further and further down until I'd ended up here, alone, freezing my nuts off coming down off cheap speed, drinking stolen rum with just a few Euros in my pocket for company.

In-between the shouts of drunken revellers I began to work out a plan. Sometimes it's best to leave the past where it is but there was a small voice somewhere inside of me telling me it was time, time to take a trip back. It wasn't ideal but I was tired. It felt like I'd been running most of my life and perhaps now was the time to go back and see if I could actually find what I'd been running *from*. They say if you dig up the past you're going to get dirty. I was about to find out if it was true.

## CHAPTER TWO

I woke up in a UK Bed and Breakfast, the first time in years. An empty duty free tequila bottle rolled off the duvet and clinked across the floor against a rusty radiator. I felt a sense of dread as my headache arrived along with the realisation that I was only half an hour away from the Close. When you only have a small amount of money in your pocket some people would be excited and relieved to be 'home' but not me. There was too much of the unknown I would have to face if I wanted to resolve some important issues. I had no idea how deep they really were, maybe if I knew what was ahead I would have got the hell out quick but hindsight is a glorious thing we can't touch until we go through the mire to get to it.

I rolled out of the bed and washed my face in the small cracked basin. As I rubbed the rough towel across my unshaven face I thought I saw something in the mirror, a shadow behind me. When I turned around there was nothing except my jacket on the wardrobe door. I always had a vivid imagination but there were times when *he* still actually appeared. It hadn't happened for a while but perhaps being back was stirring up the dead bones of my past more than I'd been prepared for.

\* \* \*

I walked downstairs and nodded to a couple of people who were finishing their breakfast. The landlady, all housecoat and dry foundation rolled her eyes at me. I thought she looked like *Mrs Doubtfire's* evil twin.

'Great. I suppose I need to get the pans back out of soak then?' She said in a rough smokers voice.

I looked at my watch.

‘It’s not nine o’clock yet.’

She pointed to the one on the wall. It was ten past. I wondered how accurate my fake watch was, it only cost me ten euros on the beach from a bloke who had a basket of them.

‘Sit down. You’ve caught me on a good day.’

‘Blimey.’ I said as she vanished back into the kitchen. ‘I’d hate to see her on a bad day.’

‘That’s my mum.’ Said the man.

‘That’s a *she*?’ I muttered myself.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Don’t be. You can’t pick your parents.’ I patted him on the shoulder and decided to help myself to some of the orange juice sat on a plastic tablecloth. It was too risky to try the sticky looking cereals, I watched as a raisin suddenly took off from a bowl of muesli, it was actually a fly and I swatted it away.

The couple stood up and gave me a dirty look. The man was larger than me and I remembered one of my favourite lines from the film *Get Carter*;

*‘You’re a big man but you’re in bad shape, with me it’s a full time job.’* Then he clouts the bloke from *Coronation Street*.

I grinned to myself and stared at the guy raising my eyebrow as if to invite further comment if he had a problem but his glare melted away and they left. I’d had my fill of bust ups for the time being, maybe I was really changing at last.

‘Good morning to you too.’ I said to my reflection in a painting and lifted the orange juice; the jug was stuck to the vinyl cloth and slowly peeled itself free. Whatever happened to hospitality I thought, grabbing the newspaper from the

couple’s table? I began to read the headlines as I sipped at the sharp tasting juice that must have sat there for a week. It needed some vodka in it to make it bearable but I doubt Mrs Doubtfire’s evil twin would oblige me with that.

I felt a rumble in the ground; a familiar train noise running close to the bed and breakfast, calling to my inner being. I had a flashing image of the tunnel a dizzy sensation that made me uneasy. I had to drink more of that rotten orange juice just to snap out of it, the sour taste forcing me to wince and let out a groan.

The newspaper headline I turned to read: *‘Drunken night at holiday resort ends in tragedy.’*

I closed the paper without reading any more; I had enough to worry about without more depressing news reports. I studied the garish pictures on the wall, wondering how many people had sat there in that room staring at them and what their stories had been passing through this horrible point of rest before going on with their journeys.

‘Picture, picture on the wall, open up and tell us all.’

The landlady walked in with a pot of tea. She looked at me then towards the hallway.

‘I thought there was someone else you were chatting to.’

‘Just admiring your pictures.’

‘Oh, well anyway here you are.’ The pot of tea slopped about and a splash leapt from the spout hitting my leg. ‘You looked like a tea drinker.’

‘I prefer coffee actually.’ I said, wiping the warm liquid off my dirty jeans. Not that you would have noticed if it had stained.

‘Well I’ve made tea now.’ She said, leaning over me and plopping the pot down onto the plastic table cover. A waft of stale sweat and cooking oil entered my nostrils and I gagged.

She wiped her hands down her housecoat. Now she was closer I could see dried egg and grease among the pattern on it. She hovered and I put the paper down and looked up at her, she had the air of a headmistress, someone who hadn't had sex for a long time, up tight and on the warpath with anyone in sight.

'So, what's your business here?' She said.

'I used to live here.'

'What in this house?'

'No in the area.' I said.

'What road?'

'Gallows Close.'

'Never heard of it.'

'Well its a few miles into town.'

'We only came here when the new road was built.'

'The *glorious* new road.' I said.

'I wish we'd stayed where we were.'

'And where is that?' I said.

'Where I grew up.'

I went to ask exactly where that was but decided silence to be a better option and closed my mouth slowly. I wondered if the writers of *The League of Gentlemen* had perhaps stayed there and got ideas from this woman.

'Do you like your bacon well done?' She said.

'Yes.'

'Good job, I can smell it burning.' She turned without so much as a twitch of a smile and waltzed back through the long multi coloured streamers into the kitchen. A puff of smoke appeared making her look like something out of the talent show *Stars in Their Eyes*.

*'Tonight Matthew I'm going to be Mrs Doubtfire's evil twin singing 'You Shook Me All Night Long.'*

\* \* \*

I finished the grilled breakfast, the bacon tasted like fried cardboard and the tomato sauce had been distilled more than once with vinegar.

As I went to stand up *The Sleeping Gallows* came on the small radio in the corner. I felt myself cringe at it, I wasn't entirely happy with what Carl had done with the song, it sounded too different compared to the original version I recalled. For the first time I tried to really listen to the lyrics. I didn't remember writing those.

'I love this song.' The Landlady said, appearing like the Shopkeeper from *Mr Ben* beside the table. I turned and watched as she wiped the table free of sauce spots with her apron.

'You didn't finish your egg?'

'No. But the rest was fine.'

'Filled a hole?' she said.

'Yeah just the little Dutch boy.'

She stared blankly at me then looked down at the newspaper.

'Bad news, all of it. Don't know why I buy it, I mean look at this, the lad goes out for a night on holiday and is found half-dead.'

'Yeah it's a pisser. You do take Euro's don't you?' I said.

\* \* \*

I packed up my bag and guitar case. I'd sold my beer soaked amp back in Spain along with what was left of some speed I'd been using to get through those awful nights playing at Mikos; it would have been a pain in the arse to get shipped

over, the amp that is, I wasn't dumb enough to try to smuggle the other stuff. I paid my euro money, persuading Doubtfire's evil twin that it was fine. She huffed as she held the foreign notes to the light and shook her head slowly then gave me a look like I'd just reversed over her cat, which I probably would have if I'd had a car.

With just a few euros now left to my name I headed out across the main road towards the train station. It was closed and so was the hospital further along. I remembered the hospital well because I'd been rushed there after an accident when I was ten. I often wondered if my problems began that day, the protest that ended up with me in intensive care.

I could remember the room where I'd seen the psychiatrist afterwards. Sometimes I wished I'd visited one later in life, I sure wasn't proud of the scrapes I'd got into and the way I'd dealt with them but I figured I was one of the good guys in the small wars I faced. The thing that really ate away at me was that I'd felt as if I was running all my life but I never really knew what from, for a while I thought it was to forget my childhood ghosts, or to find a better place, to escape the creeps and bullies who I'd scrapped with in bars and wherever I'd had to defend myself but the shadows on my shoulder were always there. How can you pin something like that down and face it if it doesn't show itself?

I decided to squeeze through a break in the fence and head around towards the back of the derelict hospital site. Memories began to return about the happy times, my folks still together back then, Adam still alive. All before things went to hell on a hotdog stand. Despite their seemingly happy marriage my parents had split up the year I left school. They had stayed together for longer so it wouldn't affect my exams but at the time I felt cheated to find out they had been living a charade, probably since I was about

eleven, a year after the accident. Dad went to live with my Uncle eventually moving to Canada. It was painfully easy for them to move on and adapt to this new set-up and I never understood why because it did my head in completely.

Mum's new boyfriend was '*Slimy Stu*' as I nicknamed him from day one, he tried hard but you could tell he didn't like me either it was just to keep sweet with mum. He did buy me a Raleigh Grifter bike that was the best thing I'd ever seen until I found out he'd got it on the sly from a bloke in the pub. I was accosted one day in the woods by a lad who said it was his bike and he even knew the security number etched under the base of the frame. I didn't know what to say as his dad took it away from me. I ran home to tell Stu but he denied it and wouldn't come with me to try and get it back in fact he didn't even look up from the television, as mum wasn't there he didn't need to pretend he was interested.

I thought I was making it easy for everyone to get out of the picture and leave them to it. My childhood had been pretty good up until then and I wanted to preserve it as best I could. Carl, my supposed best friend had by then betrayed me more than once and I saw no reason to stay around and let my good memories get tarnished. If I ran fast and hard enough for long enough surely I could preserve them. Besides there were darker things growing in the secret garden in my head. After the accident there were strange occurrences that I couldn't explain, call them ghosts, call them hallucinations, they began to scare the hell out of me more and more and the open road seemed the best place to deal with those. Keep moving on, run away and cover your tracks, don't let them find you and haunt you anymore. That's what I lived by.

So I left Gallows Close and for many years it worked.

I still kept in touch through postcards and the odd phone call but it always felt like there would be no going back physically. It used to upset Mum, especially at Christmas, she'd always make the invite and I would always have an excuse, I would tell her *'It's triple money playing gigs over the holidays here...'* and then find myself on Christmas day in a crappy bar playing cover songs to a drunken party of strangers then going back to some crappy lodging for a burger, longing for Yorkshire puddings and Mum's crispy roast potatoes. I just wasn't brave enough to go back and face things, not if *he* was there waiting. That's the trouble; Ghosts don't count the days, they can sit tight eternally until they get what they want from you.

Now I had no choice, the two worlds of my past and present were clashing and I was back to referee the match, to see if my fears were genuine and find out what was left in the Close.

The plan was to get in, catch up with Mum and some of the old gang, find Carl and get some credit for the song he'd nicked and get out as fast as possible. Our best-laid plans however can often go to waste and deep down I knew this time *he* wouldn't let me run so easily.

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