

Sage Counsel of a Solar Panel Serviceman

Chapter One

I pressed play and, to the sounds of *Lady Soul*, dodged uphill past the commuters heading home and the, still-sober, revellers heading out.

With Aretha high on my headphones, the sixties engulfed me. I pictured tie-dyes and bell bottoms and afros and hula hoops and big shades. I imagined austerity optimism, illusory independence and the thrill of new sounds and freedoms. My head was clearing of negative thoughts and my chest was puffing. I demanded respect. Had 'The Man' presented himself, I would have stuck it to him. He didn't, so I stared defiantly at the bouncer at the *Matthew's Flag* instead.

Inside the pub, the scratched tables and exposed beams created a well used, practical atmosphere while the recessed lighting and frayed paintwork made it homely. I withdrew my earphones and the wall speakers replaced *People Get Ready* with *The Riverboat Song*. I hummed along for a few bars. It wasn't too bad a place, even if the soundtrack was several decades too late for my mood.

In the main room, the tone was set by the professional clothes of office workers stopping for 'just the one'. The buzzing of their chatty cliques was reassuring, like the hum of bees or the sound of distant mowing.

I looked around for my party while chatting to a barmaid with a diamond nose-stud. So far only Jared had arrived. He was hogging a table near where they would set up the mics, with his legs bridging two chairs.

Jared was tall and dark with black hair in a ponytail, a gaunt but strangely beautiful face and no spare fat anywhere on his body. He'd removed his leather jacket and his T-shirt sleeves rode up over swelling biceps in a nonchalant exhibitionism of which he was entirely conscious. His unlaced boots hung in mid-air and one foot drummed in time to the music.

When Jared was happy, his smile was full of goofy egotism. When miserable, heavy brows descended over sullen and sulky eyes. Right now, his expression was set in obsessive vacancy as he flicked through a magazine of the type favoured by unmarried builders during sugared-tea breaks. The glass beside him contained an inch of flat lager which he had left, no doubt, for tactical reasons.

I ordered two beers because Jared never refuses a freebie and chips because I'd not had time for lunch. The jewel-nosed barmaid promised to bring the chips when they were ready.

Jared looked up when I dropped my camera on the table. He reached out for the nearest pint and tipped it to me in salute.

'Chiurz.' His voice was a lazy bass.

I sat.

He dived into the story he'd clearly been waiting for someone to tell.

'Right, so what's the best bit of advice you've ever been given? 'Cos I got a doozer I was given today.'

I smiled. The question was rhetorical. Jared believed his own pearls of conversation were more valuable than those cast by others.

'This morning, right,' he went on, 'we were on the way to this cottage mansion over by Bath...'

Jared was spending the spring fitting solar panels to posh houses in the rustic commuter-belt. Contrary to health and safety law, he chose to ride on the back of the pickup, jammed in between ladders and vacuum tubes. He said he preferred the fresh air on his face.

'...and I was, like, playing Leonard Cohen into the wind, 'cos it seemed kind of right for a Friday.'

He filled the journeys with al fresco sax refrains. He said it was the best time to practice and he enjoyed the stares of startled pedestrians.

‘...and well, Barry, yeah? Barry’d been staring at me for ages - daggers, you know.’ He used crooked fingers to symbolise the weapons flying from Barry’s eyes.

Barry was a wrinkled, beatnik bohemian who disliked anyone who was still young. He’d shaken hands with Bolan, heard the news of Hendrix’s death while hitching a ride to Glastonbury and was one of a select few who’d seen Nick Drake live. Barry’s musical frame of reference was stuck at about the time Jared was born and didn’t feature saxophones. Technically, Barry was the fitter and Jared was the fitter’s mate. They weren’t, however, matey.

I sipped my beer impassively to calm my overwhelming, if imaginary, excitement and nodded to confirm that I understood the reference to daggers. Jared went on:

‘Then we, right, slow down for some lights and Barry, like, says: ...’

Jared dropped his boots off the chair, adopted an exaggerated pout and leant forward until his chin was so close I could smell stale hops. I stared back, unwilling to yield my personal space.

“*I’se some advice for yer, boy. From one as knows.*” Jared imitated a cigarette-scarred Somerset burr.

I didn’t take the opportunity he gave me to applaud his thespian talents, so he continued: ‘Then Barry kind of, stops and looks out at the stone houses. Well, I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of asking for his advice, so I just paused to clear my reed, right?’

Jared grinned, proud of the cool he’d shown and returned to his impersonation of Barry.

“*Earn yer money firs’, kid. Only after - be a hippie.*”

It was the punchline and Jared threw out his arms and sniggered, inviting me to share in his derision.

I elected not to judge.

Instead, I asked Jared how long he'd been at the pub.

'Finished the job about four and they dropped me here on the way through.'

'I guess contract labourers are honour bound to drink each week's wages by Sunday.'

'Hey, in my defence, it's pretty strenuous stuff, right? I've been climbing over rooftops all day, you know, and lugging great blocks of glass about and stuff. It's not like sitting in some air-conditioned office deciding what coffee machine to raid. And I started pretty early.'

'I can see you started early.'

Gillian turned up next. She was wearing Suzi Quatro leathers with her red hair freshly blackened and freckles spoiling the look. The non-trivial heels of her leather boots made up for her disappointing height and the Kohl almost hid her pretty eyes. She carried a few extra pounds on her arms and chest which left no doubt that she was capable of a powerful slap. Today, her lips were the colour of Morello cherry and her expression left no doubt that a slap was entirely possible.

She strode down the room with guitar slung from one shoulder and clacking footsteps warning the punters to make way. Gillian liked people to know when the band had arrived. She also liked to give Jared fair warning that she was coming.

Jared's magazine was in the saxophone case and he was busy fitting a reed before she reached us.

She ignored the chair Jared kicked out for her, scowled and leant against the table. Then, without comment, she swung her guitar to an active orientation and began fiddling out mindless chords.

Jared blew a few notes into her tune and leant back. 'Like the hair.' He ostentatiously flicked his own fringe from his eyes.

Gillian sniffed and moved onto some blues riffs. Jared ran an alto voice over the top of them.

‘Don’ do it for you to *like it*,’ she replied eventually. Her accent was Walsall and her voice high, insistent and tiny, like that of a solemn child.

Jared took another breath, ‘...hides the grey well.’ His mouth was busy but his eyes revelled in his own wit.

Gillian switched to *Can the Can*. Jared couldn’t follow that and didn’t try.

Piers opened a white door marked *private* and nodded over his shoulder. ‘Darryl’s here. He’s backing Morrison around.’

Gillian swung the guitar over her head and handed it to me. Jared rose and handed me the saxophone in imitation. They marched out like extras from *The Matrix*.

‘Trousers on first; then shoes,’ I called to Jared, but he ignored me. He’d probably forgotten asking for the best advice I’d ever been given.

The barman cleared a giddy couple from the corner and handed me an envelope marked ‘*Friday - Music*.’ Barmen always want to give me the cash. It’s probably because I wear a suit.

I propped the instruments by the wall, dropped the envelope on the table and picked up the camera.

Piers, Gillian and Jared relayed in the speakers and amps and mics. Then Piers and Jared carried in Darryl’s drum cases. I took a few action photos for the record. After Gillian fired me a warning glance, I only included her in group shots.

Darryl came last, hurrying a bar stool in each fist as if they were maracas. One had a teak seat and annulus foot. The other was a diagonal bundle of chrome tubes with a white leather seat. Darryl placed them respectfully before the mics and disappeared back through the *private* door.

Gillian and Piers plugged in and began tuning up. Darryl returned with a high backed oak carver seat and matching diner's chair. Sweat patches were appearing at his armpits and hints of red on the black skin of his face. Having placed the chair he waved at the other band members, pointed, beckoned unspecifically and smiled hopefully. Gillian ignored him, Jared shook his head and Piers mouthed an unmistakeable 'no'.

With a shrug, Darryl bundled over to me, optimism radiating from his smile.

'Hey, mate, please, please, please, you wouldn't let me down, eh?' He pressed his hands together in prayer and swayed from foot to foot.

'Just a little, you know, help with moving a few of the pieces – won't take a second, you won't mind - I know you won't. You've always, like, been the best and really decent guy and...' His slur-y baritone kept coming in the short wheezy blasts of a fat man engaged in energetic activity. Eventually, I ran out of reasons to refuse and followed him through the door while he thanked me intensely.

He'd parked Morrison in the pub-yard and left the back doors open. Inside were a teak occasional table and a cherrywood computer desk. They were beautiful items. Darryl was a craftsman and all his furniture was flawless. He never let anyone doubt that he loved making it, was proud of each cut and joint and, most importantly, that he was very skilful.

We each took an end of the desk and he took the table in his spare hand. Despite being four inches shorter than me, he could lift with one hand what was straining both of mine. To his screams for care, we bashed down the corridor into the bar-room.

Piers' guitar strap was over his shoulder and Jared's mic was arranged to pocket height. The speakers were on and crackling.

Darryl arranged the desk and table beside Jared with glowing eyes. In my mind his ratatat commercial mantra played on loop: 'You've got to go

for it, mate. There's no profit in embarrassment. Thrust your ideas in their faces. Shove it under their noses and stuff. In fact, rub their noses in it if you can. All's fair in promotion and marketing, you know. No point in having it if you don't flaunt it. And anyway – you're doing it for them. They'll love it if they get the chance. Don't bottle out. Don't hold back. Don't lose your nerve. Fear's no reason to fail, y'know.'

I shook my head to clear it of such fragments and wondered, not for the first time, how much of success is just confidence and presentation. No one looks behind the scenes if the actors are pretty.

On stage, Piers confirmed the playlist with Jared. Darryl hung an embroidered flag from the desk and another from the snare-drum stand. The one on the desk read '*Cathedra Concepts Ltd – Design at Home.*' It matched some canary coloured flyers he'd stacked on the bar. The one on his drum-stand read '*After Extra Time.*' Piers had taken the band name from the Thousand Yard Stare song.

Gillian screwed down the white leather stool and perched on it. She began playing *She Sells Sanctuary* while gradually turning up her mic.

The pubgoers broke off their conversations to look.

Perhaps they might have just one more drink before going home.

Piers nodded to Darryl and they were off.

They were good that night. The drinkers stayed late and shouted along to *Love Will Tear Us Apart* and *Sheena is a Punk Rocker*. I got some photos in which, excepting Gillian, they are all smiling.

It was probably the last comfortable time for that band.

I never got the chips.

Chapter 2

Carlotta, my live-in landlady and colleague at the law firm where I worked, wanted me out of the house that weekend while her mother was visiting. ‘You two would only gang up on me and I can’t have that.’

She was cleaning the kitchen when I went in search of breakfast. I told the back of her head about a clip I’d heard on the radio concerning the importance of keeping up blood-sugar to aid concentration.

She didn’t seem interested, so I told her about a dream I’d had in which a fireman had borrowed my wallet and was trying to return it through a boy at school I hadn’t seen in years. She made a non-committal sound and sprayed the oven with white foam.

The atmosphere was tense, so I left without trying to reach the cereal or describe the obscure role in the fireman/wallet story played by the frequent reappearance of a piebald goat. To Carlotta’s apparent relief, I turned the corner out of sight before Mrs Finn-Berkley’s Audi turned the other corner, into sight.

I potted across town to Piers’ flat with the partially-formed plan of catching lunch there and listening to him deconstruct the previous night’s performance.

Urgency would have been counterproductive. I knew better than to turn up before midday on the morning following a gig.

Instead, I padded a meandering path under a lint-coloured sky with cane broolly in hand and wax-jacket over my arm. The morning was cold, damp and boring and I spent too much of it eating marble cake in a franchised coffee-shop and wondering whether I shouldn’t have something better to do with my time than listen to my own thoughts.

Eventually, I wound up in front of Piers’ flat, ringing his bell. I had a spare key in case of emergencies but I didn’t use it. It felt like a liberty which might need to be justified. Instead, I waited outside like an energy

company salesman or collector of doorstep charity. It was a lonely wait and I had to ring three times before I could rouse a response.

Piers was not on good form. He made a performance of complaining that I should have warned him before coming.

‘I doubted that you’d be awake. And anyway, think how lucky you are that I’ve appeared to entertain you,’ I suggested cheerily. He frowned back.

‘Bad penny, more like.’ He spoke with a clipped, public school English which was well suited to his normally serious nature.

‘I’ve come for lunch,’ I prompted winningly.

‘Oh, no way. Come on – I’m feeling old and knackered and hung-over and cooking is definitely not going to happen. Just the thought is far too depressing. You can’t just invite yourself round and expect to be fed. And anyway, I only just got up - the point of being single and living on your own is you don’t need to bother with things like *making lunch*. It’s hardly very rock and roll, is it?’

This meant the warm baguette under my arm and the butcher’s prime-cuts sausages in my coat pocket were not, after all, required.

‘If you’re not up for cooking lunch, I’m sure the *Worthy Fieldsman* would feed us,’ I suggested.

He was prepared to go with that.

‘It’s not as if I’ve anything else to do. And the Rugby world cup will be on so I won’t have to rely on your conversation, at least.’ He coughed loudly.

‘You will, however, have to change out of the dressing gown.’

I waited in his living room while he dressed. There was little in there. I’d helped him drag all the sofas and chairs down to the basement studio when he’d moved in. The instruments, music systems and computers were down there too, along with a well-used beer fridge.

The only items which were left on the ground floor were the ones he didn't often need. There was a fold-out dining table from his parents' house, some unbent books and a few dull vases. Sitting in the corner, under the dust of long inactivity, were a brush and a vacuum cleaner. All the paintings he'd inherited had been sold to avoid insurance premiums.

On one wall was a photo of baby Piers and his parents. It served as an icon and I was careful to avoid it. Unlike the unmarried uncle who had reluctantly become Piers' guardian and spent his inheritance on boarding school fees and residential holiday courses, Piers' dead parents were not a permitted subject for criticism or comment. If he found me looking at their photo I could expect, at the very least, a lecture on my failure to keep in touch with either of my own living parents or, if he was in an emotional mood, immediate banishment.

I didn't have anywhere else to go, so, for safety's sake, I looked out the back window onto the tiny concrete yard while Piers kept up the conversation from the bedroom. Despite being a little rough from the singing, his voice passed comfortably through the wall between us. Adolescent band camps had taught him to project and enunciate well enough to fill even the largest wedding marquee without a microphone.

He was mostly moaning about Darryl littering the stage with furniture. This was no big deal and part of a harmless arrangement they'd reached long-ago. Darryl could advertise his furniture on stage provided the rest of the band were not required to transport or move them.

In return, Darryl never took his share of the appearance fee preferring to announce loudly that he needed the money less than the exposure. If Piers had really cared, he could have banned the furniture. He didn't because he didn't.

I drifted away from the window and checked a photo of our boarding school class hanging by the door to see if any more faces had been graffitied.

Piers had not enjoyed school, largely because many of our peers had displayed little sympathy for emotional, obsessive and unathletic orphans. In turn, Piers had never forgiven the torments he had suffered at their hands and still sometimes took a petty proxy revenge on the pictures of the perpetrators.

I mused on the vagaries of cause and effect. Despite his continuing hostility, Piers probably owed his lifestyle to those defaced ruffians. He'd taken up the piano and guitar in part because they never visited the music room. Without them, he might today be an unremarkable optician or a bank clerk without a dream. Perhaps with the passage of years he should have learnt to be more grateful.

Their educational terrorism had also contributed to his initial relationship with me. I'd followed him to the music room because the same rough lads were as intolerant of academic ability as they were of orphans. He'd accepted my presence once I'd worked out how to pick the simple locks on the instrument cabinets. Over the following years, our alliance had strengthened into a defensive minority of two, guarding each other's backs against brickbats, jibes and the inevitable shower of homophobic allegations endemic in single-sex schools.

After I'd helped him through his A-Levels, however, my practical value had waned and unlike the taunting, I suspected Piers had already consigned the memories of such comradeship to history.

I shrugged off these dispiriting thoughts and examined the photo. Happily, no additional faces had been obliterated and in particular, my own youthful image remained free of annotation. Maybe, I thought optimistically, he had a use for me yet.

Piers' mood was still low at the Worthy Fieldsman. He was judgemental and ungenerous and back to a favourite hobby of dissecting *After Extra Time's* failure to break into the big time. In his analysis, this was because its members weren't working hard enough and weren't hungry enough to succeed. He compared *After Extra Time* unfavourably with its predecessor.

'That was the best band I've ever had,' he reminisced. 'You know, *Turing's Apple*. There was something so alive about those guys. They all had so much passion about what we were going to achieve.'

'Wasn't that why it broke up?' I asked innocently when he paused to cough. I'd heard this analysis enough times to feed him the lines without having to pay attention.

'Yeah, self destructed spectacularly,' he said, running his fingers through his hair. 'That kind of energy was bound to tear us apart in the end – all the best bands break up in anger. And they were really good – I mean *really* good. Jared doesn't count - he's just a space-filler – but the rest were so talented – not only could they really play but they also had it burning inside their heads, you know, like I do. I'm not saying it was an easy band to manage, or anything, but I could deal with that – you know, you can handle the personalities when there's something worth fighting for. I invested so much in that band, tried so hard, but I knew it wasn't going to work out, even when I was doing it. I almost gave up at that point. Totally exhausted, you know.' He cleared his throat and tugged on the knuckles of his fingers in a nervous way.

'Were they really any more skilled than Gillian and Darryl?' This was the next prod to keep the lecture going. He nodded gently in acknowledgement of the importance of the question.

'Gillian, well, yeah – I mean she's as good a guitarist as anyone and probably better than me if I had to tell the truth. But she's a bit of a dark

cloud. Brilliant to have in the band, don't get me wrong, but sometimes I don't know why she does it. And I wish she'd stop looking at me as if I'd just poisoned her dog. Darryl, well, he's fine to have around, but he wouldn't make it into a proper band. Not really. Drifts out of time more often than not. Even you must be able to hear it.' He regularly sneered at my inability to play an instrument. My lack of music made me *fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils* and he liked reminding me of the quote. The irony was that I'd pointed it out to him during an adolescent English class.

The Worthy Fieldsman was full-ish with a background of noisy chatter. Piers looked around for any friends we might be able to join and was disappointed to recognise no-one. The barman said they weren't serving food so Piers absently ordered a stout instead. 'Comes to the same thing in the end,' he mumbled.

I asked about crisps but the barman had turned away. Piers was already explaining how music lessons and part time work at the postal sorting office were distracting him. He found fixed working hours incompatible with writing music.

'...and all the women there are so boring, they just babble on about their families all the time as if that was the only important thing in life. I never really saw the point in kids, they cramp your style and by all accounts are really expensive and time-consuming. And if you don't want kids, I'm not sure I see the point of women either. Certainly not women like that. It's amazing some of them even managed to have children. They look like snowmen, half of them – white and bulbous and round and chilling – drive me to drink in a matter of minutes.'

Piers took a long draft from his beer, ran his fingers through his thin widow's peak and plastered it down as flat as possible. He was heavier than

he'd been and his eyes were darker. He looked like he hadn't been sleeping properly. He went back to tugging on his knuckles and frowning.

'At least you've been able to get something. Jobs aren't so common as they were,' I observed.

He coughed hollowly, scowled and looked at a group coming through the street-door. Still no-one he knew.

'Especially when you're only qualified to live off a trust fund,' he self-pitied. It was actually his father's life insurance policy, but I didn't split hairs.

'Look,' I suggested, '*After Extra Time* is obviously a viable band and you've got bookings for months in advance to keep you going. It'll just take that breakthrough moment to start a cult following and reap the benefits of festival invitations and social media trends. Have a go at something different - something to get you noticed.'

He looked at me as if I were a cretin.

'I've been doing this fourteen years and no one's noticed yet. This isn't London or Manchester, where the streets are paved with scouts. We could be Oasis, but down here who's going to know?'

I reminded him that defeatism is boring but he wasn't in the mood to apologise. He seemed to be in the mood to order more stout. This time I mentioned the crisps in time.

'...and what if someone on the band quit?' he went on. 'Darryl could finally meet the Shah of Qatar and lose all his free time to welding chrome to oak for the palaces of the indolent orient. I might survive that, although it's always hard to find someone who is prepared to be a drummer, but what if Jared accidentally knocked up some hoop-eared chav and had to get a serious job? Or Gillian got fed up of being the only female mechanic in Britain and settled down to start a dismal dynasty of gloomy Goths? I don't

think I could form another band now. I feel like a cat who's dodged the bin-lorry for the eighth time.'

His geopolitical awareness, carpentry and character assessments were all questionable, but I let it pass. 'You'd have to go solo. Perhaps you could play some of your own songs?'

He was coughing again, although the air seemed reasonably free of dust.

'Wedding parties and drunks don't want to hear new stuff. I'll play my songs for an agent or scout, but no-one's going to book me to surprise their customers on a Friday night.'

Piers had a daft concept of integrity.

'Looks like you'll have to throw caution and pride to the winds and thrust your light into the faces of the powerful. They say that desperation is fuel in the machinery of achievement,' I drivelled.

'Do they? Sounds to me like *they* have well-paid professional jobs to fall back on.' He'd eaten all the crisps.

'Perhaps the more common phrase is – "*necessity is the mother of invention*".'

'Anyway,' he continued, 'talking of comfortable professional jobs, how's the legal world? Been promoted to judge yet?'

I smiled. He wasn't really interested in the answer and I wasn't in the mood to provide it. A catalogue of complaints about the combination of stress and boredom which formed my daily chores wouldn't amuse either of us. Anyway, everything he knew about the law came from Carlotta and if I wanted to argue about it, it would be more fun to argue with her.

Instead of answering, I asked if he thought I would make a good judge, like the TV celebrities on *The Show Goes On*. He took twelve minutes to assassinate each of them in turn.

'...but what really annoys me is that they do get some decent bands and singers on that show. They just can't seem to recognise superficial whiny-

pop from better quality music. Serious musicians like to sneer at TV competitions but I'd love to be a judge and actually select the good stuff.'

'Why don't you enter it yourself?'

'You have to be a new act, which we aren't. And, anyway, I'm not having some lime-light seeking non-entity with half my talent telling me what I'm doing wrong, before I lost out to someone young and sexy with no idea of harmony and melody. Unless, of course, Harmony and Melody are her band members...' He grinned. Piers' jokes are rarely strong.

They were turning on the big screens and turning off Coldplay. The Fiji v Canada rugby match was starting and Piers had settled in for the afternoon. I leant back and thought about sausage sandwiches.

Chapter 3

Carlotta called me at my desk on Monday morning about a new matter. Last year she'd helped one of her clients buy a business and problems were now emerging with it.

'Problems,' she said, 'are what you are for. I'm not interested in them myself.'

Minutes later she blew into my office, slammed the door with her foot and bounced into the visitor's chair by the window.

Technically my senior, she could have told me to come to her. However, we were both inmates of long standing and she probably wanted to get away from the trainee solicitor who shared her office and enjoyed eavesdropping on things which didn't concern him. Either that or she wanted to savour my view over the gentleman's nightclub and Turkish chip shop.

'Morning handsome. Ready for another bright week of separating widows and children from their daily bread and repossessing the family cat?' She had the dealmaker's ironic distaste for litigation and the stereotypical solicitor's Surrey accent.

Rod Stewart says that the morning sun, when it's in your eyes, really shows your age. In her case, the beams from the window were lighting up the profile of a matriarchal figure approaching forty. Her eyes were beginning to crinkle and her long cheeks were turning matt. She carried herself on low heels and soft toes in a practical manner which meant you didn't notice that she was still slim.

She had never been pretty and wasn't going to start now. However, it was easy to see fairness in her eyes and sometimes you could imagine them sparkling as she bounced a theoretical baby on her knees. Other times you could see frustration behind the fairness.

‘Only if you choose to mortgage Moggy and can find a bank which will collateralise cats,’ I replied. ‘How was Mummy?’

‘Impatient for the sons in law and grandchildren she is demonstrably not getting.’

‘How many did she want?’

‘At least one of each I believe.’

‘Good thing I was out of the way. Trying to pass me off as one or the other could have been too much of a temptation for you.’

‘Even she is setting her sights higher than that.’

Carlotta was a good landlady. She’d taken me on when I was a new recruit and she was a junior associate. Eight years later I still hadn’t moved out because the arrangement was convenient. She probably saw me as a good stop gap until something better came along – perhaps in another decade. That would be about the time we both decided what we wanted to do with our lives.

‘So, have you brought me a tasty and diverting challenge, to tax my intellect and engage my yearning for justice?’ I asked.

‘No. I’ve brought you a job reeking of manure and incompetence.’

There was a time when I would puzzle over new cases and find them running through my mind at night and grabbing my attention over breakfast. It had, however, been several years since any legal conundrum had seemed more important than fried egg, sausage and bacon. This one seemed unlikely to break the trend.

Carlotta explained her client’s problem.

The client was a Georgia finance company which had bought a UK brokerage called Farmgate Futures Limited. Farmgate Futures had a risky but very profitable business model which involved committing to buy farm products in advance of annual harvests.

‘Listen carefully sunshine, this may be a bit difficult for your non-commercial brain,’ she said with mock concern.

Farmgate Futures, she explained, would be approached by market traders who would ask for certain volumes of organic wurzels to be available on a specified date, say, six months later. Farmgate Futures would then enter contracts with the traders promising to supply the wurzels on those dates. The prices would be fixed in advance in the contracts.

The traders would skip off to the market to sell on the right to receive the vegetables. They’d paid a fixed price so they would try to capitalise on subsequent market fluctuations.

If the market price for future vegetable deliveries went up, they could sell their rights for a profit. If it went down they would hang on, hoping that it would go up at some time before the deliveries were due.

Meanwhile, Farmgate Futures would arrange to fulfil the orders. In order to do so, it would enter contracts with its syndicate of farmers and commit itself to buy the necessary wurzels at market price when they were harvested. As it had agreed to sell at a fixed price but entered contracts to buy at variable ones, it would lose money if market prices moved in the wrong direction. Alternatively it would make profits if the market moved in the right direction.

If the ‘farm-gate’ price at harvest was less than the fixed price Farmgate Futures had agreed with the traders, then Farmgate Futures would pocket the difference. However, if the price was higher, Farmgate Futures took a loss. Some years would be good and some bad, but provided Farmgate Futures could set the fixed prices at which sold to the traders high enough, it could make healthy profits in the long term.

To my mind it was simply gambling on fluctuations in vegetable prices. That was probably because I have a non-commercial brain.

‘It’s a standard futures arrangement, dear. It’s about risk transfer and the value of certainty. Like hedging.’

As far I could see, gambling was also about risk transfer: a transfer from there being no risk to there being lots of risk. I didn’t argue this point with Carlotta who, as a lawyer specialising in commercial and corporate transactions, naturally understood risk much better than I did.

I didn’t argue about hedging because my knowledge of that subject did not go beyond roses and firethorn.

Carlotta continued her explanation of the background.

‘Right-ho. What you need to understand is that Farmgate Futures was, for ages, rather a snobby outfit. Only dealing in organic and free range goods – higher prices, you see. It pitched itself at the top end of the market and adopted all the airs and graces to match. It collected the Agricultural Association certificates – that’s how you prove the farm’s organic credentials – from all its syndicate farms as a matter of course. Then it’d make a point of sending a copy of the relevant certificate to its trader clients whenever a new contract was placed. An ‘in your face’ style of reassuring clients that they were getting what they paid for.

‘In order to do this, of course, Farmgate Futures needed quick access to all the relevant certificates and needed to be sure that everything was up to date for its entire syndicate of farms. Naturally, it didn’t trust its farmers because such people tend to be more concerned with bladderwort than paperwork, so it took over responsibility for their applications and membership fees and held on to all the original certificates on their behalf.

‘I had a fun time during the company sale process sifting through the entire set to confirm they were all present and correct, as I’m sure you can imagine. Still with me?’

I was, except for the reference to bladderwort. I didn’t think that point was central so I nodded for her to continue.

‘Right, but all this changed in the last year before the company was sold. Farmgate Futures changed tack and started selling conventional, meaning non-organic, produce as well as organic stuff. Again, I had a delightful time looking at the paperwork.

‘It seems like the organic boom was petering out in the face of harsh economic realities. If your disposable income has halved you can get a lot more potato for your penny if you don’t object to its being large, consistently coloured, appealingly bulbous and free from burrowing insects. Who’d have thought it, eh? Anyway, this means demand for organic veg was falling and so were prices. At least half, if not more than half, of the formerly organic syndicate farms had re-converted to conventional farming techniques before Farmgate Futures was sold.’

The story wore on as many such stories do. As often seems to be the case, Farmgate Futures’ profits had tumbled as soon as the new owners bought the company. As is also invariably the case, those new owners were confused by how little money they were making. As a story it had all the crushing inevitability of a car-wreck in a scrap yard.

Nonetheless, as far as I could tell, this all seemed a legal, if slightly unreal, way of doing business. I could see how it must delight the mind of a corporate lawyer but wasn’t seeing much in it for me. As Carlotta talked, the sun passed behind some celestial fluff, and I got distracted by thoughts of royal icing.

The problem when it finally appeared had nothing much to do with Farmgate Futures’ lottery of a business plan. It was far more down-to-earth. Apparently, one of the syndicate farmers, tilling the soil at a fine estate named Brakespen Farm, had written directly to the Agricultural Association expressing an interest in conversion to organic methods and enquiring about the standards required to register as an organic grower.

This had surprised everyone at the Agricultural Association, as the farm was already registered as an organic grower. It was one of those for which Farmgate Futures' held an organic certificate and which had, according to the sale documentation, continued to supply organic produce throughout. The Agricultural Association redirected the enquiry to Farmgate Futures.

This had annoyed the tenant of Brakespen Farm. Apparently he was unaware that he was farming according to strict organic husbandry techniques and, according to Farmgate Futures' records, had been doing so for almost seven years.

He had driven a tractor to Farmgate Futures' town-centre offices to explain his point of view. He plopped the tractor across three parking bays and splatted through the polished glass door wearing green wellies and brown sludge.

At the front desk he startled the receptionist with a handful of straight, nearly luminescent, blight-free, out of season carrots which he had yanked from his pest-exterminated, chemically-fertilised greenhouse that very morning. The receptionist, whose name was Pamela, didn't know what to say. The farmer filled in the silence:

'Are ye trying to tell me that they's organic grown, ye numpty? Any fool can see they's too good for thaa' and they's what I'se been sellin' ye for the laast secks yar.'

'Word for word,' said Carlotta, who I suspect had only ever spoken to farmers about ponies.

This was embarrassing for Farmgate Futures and, if it got out, the market traders who had bought previous years' produce might make inconvenient enquiries into the goods which had been supplied.

In addition, the farmer had noted logically that if he had been supplying organic produce he would expect to have been paid at the rates for organic

produce rather than the rates for conventionally farmed carrots which he had actually received.

Following his point to conclusion, the farmer had demanded payment of the difference between the conventional and organic prices for all the vegetables he had ever supplied to Farmgate Futures. Carlotta did not try to impersonate the delivery of that message, which was just as well.

She carried on, 'Probably some gory admin mix-up, I expect. They've registered him as an organic farmer but they've got the wrong farm or something.

'Unfortunately the only people who really knew how the business ran were the former owners and the main guy left when he sold the shares. His name, would you believe, was Archimedes. Archimedes Tennant. Half Sicilian if you're wondering. I never met him but everyone said he was an arrogant pain who smoked stupidly expensive cigars.

'Anyway, he's completely gone and the buyer sent over a junior Yank to run the show until it could be merged with one of their other businesses. Just for fun, the Yank's name is Buck. Buck Hessler. I spoke to him this morning but he knows nothing and is going to be useless. You will probably need to get down there in person and see what you can dig up from their files.'

'Buck Yank?' I asked.

'Buck Hessler. The Yank,' she clarified.

'...and Archimedes the half Sicilian vegetable broker?'

'The half Sicilian *former* vegetable broker.'

'Right.'

'Got it?'

'...and an irate non-organic carrot sower.'

'Uh-huh.'

‘...who we have been pretending to our clients is actually a contented *organic and free range* carrot sower?’

‘Just organic. We’re talking vegetables, darling.’

‘Organic carrot sower. And tiller of chemically un-enhanced loams.’

‘You’re getting there.’

‘Okay. I’m with you.’

This sounded like something that could wait until later in the week.

I thanked Carlotta extensively for bringing this exciting new work to my attention and, when she had bobbed away, I enjoyed a short telephone conversation with Mr Hessler. He lived up to Carlotta’s description.

I managed to make it a sleepy afternoon reading the papers and looking up Farmgate Futures and the Agricultural Association online.

CONTINUED

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