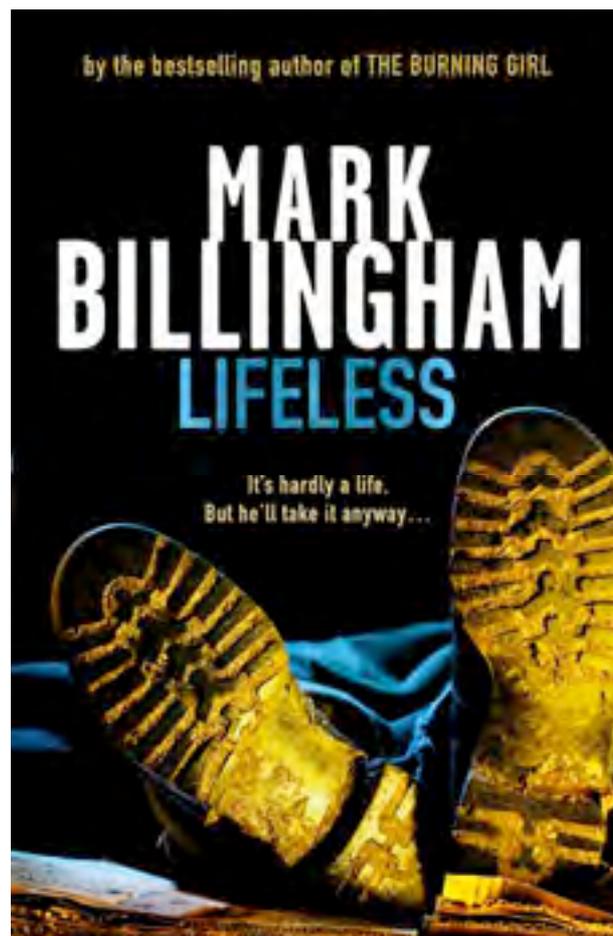


PART ONE

BREAKFAST AND BEFORE



The first kick wakes him and shatters his skull at the same time.

He begins to drift back towards unconsciousness almost immediately, but is aware of the intervals between each subsequent kick - though actually no more than a second or two - warping and stretching. It gives his brain, which is itself already beginning to swell, the time for one final, random series of thoughts and instructions.

Counting the kicks. Counting each smash of boot into flesh and bone. Counting the strange and oh God, the glorious spaces in between.

Two...

Cold, in the early hours of the morning and damp. And the attempt to cry out is agonising as the message from the brain dances between the fragments of bone in what had once been his jaw.

Three...

Warm, the face of the baby in his hands. His baby. The face of the child before it grew and learned to despise him. Reaching in vain for the letter, dog-eared and greasy, in the inside pocket of his coat. The last link to the life he had before. Groping for it, his flappy fingers useless at the end of a broken arm.

Four...

Turning his head, trying to turn it away from the pain towards the wall. His face moving against the floor, the stubble-rasp like the breaking of faraway waves. Feeling the blood, warm and sticky between his cheek and the cold cardboard beneath. Thinking that the shadow he'd glimpsed, where the face of his attacker should have been, looked blacker than black. Slick, like tarmac after a shower. Thinking that it was probably a trick of the light.

Five...

Seeming to feel the tip of the boot as it breaks through the delicate network of ribs. Aware of it in there, stamping around, distorting his organs. Kidneys - are they his kidneys? - squeezed out of shape like water-filled balloons.

Sinking fast through six, seven and eight, their impact like crashes at a distant front door, vibrating through his shoulder and his back and the tops of his legs. The grunts and growls of the man standing above him, of the man who is kicking him to death, growing quieter and further away.

And, Christ, what a jumble, such a scramble of words. Riot of colours and sounds. All slipping away from him now. Fuzzing and darkening...

Thinking. Thinking that this was a terrible and desperate kind of thinking, if it could still be called such a thing. Sensing that the shadow had finally turned away from him. Luxuriating then, in the bliss as the space grew, as the knowing grew that, sweet Jesus, the kicking had finally stopped.

Everything so strange now, and shapeless and bleeding away into the gutter.

He lies quite still. He knows there's little point in trying to move. He holds on tight to his name and to the name of his only child. Wraps what's left of his mind around these two names, and around the name of the Lord.

Prays that he might cling on to the shape of these few, precious words until death comes.

ONE

He woke up in a doorway opposite Planet Hollywood, with a puddle of piss at his feet that was not his own and the sickening realisation that this was real, that there was no soft mattress beneath him. He exchanged a few words with the

police officer whose heavy hand had shaken him roughly awake. Began to gather up his things.

He raised his face slowly skywards as he started to walk, hoped that the weather would stay fine. He decided that the emptiness at the centre of him, which might have been simple fear, was probably even simpler hunger.

He wondered whether Paddy Hayes was dead yet. Had the young man charged with making the decision pulled the plug?

Moving through the West End as it shook away the sleep and slowly came to life was always a revelation. Each day he saw something he had never seen before.

Piccadilly Circus was glorious. Leicester Square was better than it looked. Oxford Street was even shittier than he'd thought it was.

There were still plenty of people about, of course. Plenty of traffic. Even at this time the streets were busier than most others in the country would be during the rush hour. He remembered a film he'd seen on DVD, set in London after most of the population had been turned into crazed zombies by some plague. There were bizarre scenes where the whole city appeared to be utterly deserted, and to this day he didn't really know how they'd managed to do it. Computer tricks, like as not. This - the hour or so when the capital showered, shaved and shat - was about as close as it ever came. Far from deserted, but quite a few zombies shuffling about.

Most of the shops would be shut for another few hours yet. Very few opened their doors before ten these days. The caffs and sandwich bars were already up and running, though. Hoping to pull in passing trade for tea and a bacon sandwich, for coffee and croissants, in much the same way that the burger vans and kebab shops had tempted those weaving their way home only a few hours earlier.

Tea and a sandwich. Normally he'd have spent the previous night gathering enough together to get himself something to eat, but today someone would be buying him breakfast.

Half way along Glasshouse Street, a man in a dark green suit stepped out of a doorway in front of him and tried to pass. They moved the same way across the pavement, and back again. Smiled at each other, embarrassed.

“Nice morning for a dance...”

The sudden knowledge that he'd clearly encountered a nutcase caused the smile to slide off the man's face. He turned sideways and dropped his head. Shuffled quickly past muttering, “Sorry” and “I can't...”

He hoisted his backpack higher on to his shoulder and carried on walking, wondering just what it was that the man in the suit couldn't do.

Return a simple greeting? Spare any change? Give a toss...?

He walked up Regent Street, then took a right, cutting through the side streets of Soho towards Tottenham Court Road. A strange yet familiar figure, stepping in unison alongside him, caught his eye. He slowed then stopped, watching the stranger do the same thing.

He took a step forward and stared into the plate glass at the reflection of the man he'd become in such a short time. His hair seemed to be growing faster than usual, the grey more pronounced against the black. The neat-ish goatee he'd been cultivating had been subsumed under the scrubby growth that sprouted from his cheeks and spilled down his throat. His red, nylon backpack, though already stained and grubby, was the only flash of real colour to be seen in the picture staring back at him from the shop window. The grease-grey coat and dark jeans were as blank, as *anonymous*, as the face that floated above them. He leaned towards the glass and contorted his features ; pulling back his lips, raising his eyebrows, puffing out his cheeks. The eyes, though - and it was the man's eyes that told you *everything* - stayed flat and uninvolved.

A vagrant. With the emphasis on vague...

He turned from the window to see someone he recognised on the other side of the road. A young man - a boy - arms around his knees, back pressed against a dirty white wall, sleeping bag wrapped around his shoulders. He'd spoken to the boy a couple of nights before. Somewhere near the Hippodrome, he thought. Maybe outside one of the big cinemas in Leicester Square. He couldn't be certain. He did remember that the boy had spoken with a thick, north-east accent : Newcastle or Sunderland. Most of what the boy had said was indecipherable, rattled through chattering teeth at machine-gun speed. Head turning this way and that. Fingers grasping at his collar as he gabbled. So completely ripped on Ecstasy that it looked as though he was trying to bite off his own face.

He waited for a taxi to pass, then stepped into the road. The boy looked up as he approached and drew his knees just a little closer to his chest.

“All right?”

The boy turned his head to the side and gathered the sleeping bag tighter around his shoulders. The moisture along one side of the bag caught the light, and grey filling spilled from a ragged tear near the zip.

“Don't think there's any rain about...”

“Good,” the boy said. It was as much a grunt as anything.

“Staying dry, I reckon.”

“What are you, a fucking weatherman?”

He shrugged. “Just saying...”

“I've seen you, haven't I?” the boy asked.

“The other night.”

“Was you with Spike? Spike and One-Day Caroline, maybe?”

“Yeah, they were around, I think...”

“You're new.” The boy nodded to himself. He seemed pleased that it was coming back to him. “I remember you were asking some fucking stupid questions...”

“Been knocking about a couple of weeks. Picked a fucking stupid time, didn’t I? You know, with everything that’s going on?”

The boy stared at him for a while. He narrowed his eyes, then let his head drop.

He stood where he was, kicking the toe of one shoe against the heel of the other until he was certain that the boy had nothing further to say. He thought about chucking in another crack about the weather, making a joke of it. Instead, he turned back towards the road. “Be lucky,” he said. He moved away, his parting words getting nothing in return.

As he walked north, it struck him that the encounter with the boy had not been a whole lot friendlier than the one earlier with the man in the green suit who’d been so keen to avoid him. The boy’s reaction had been no more than he’d come to expect in the short time he’d spent living as he was now. Why should it have been? A wariness - a suspicion, even - was the natural reaction of *most* Londoners, whatever their circumstances. Those who lived and slept on the city’s streets were naturally that bit more cautious when it came to strangers. It went without saying that anyone who wasn’t abusing or avoiding them was to be viewed with a healthy degree of mistrust until they’d proved themselves. One way or another...

It was a lot like prison. Like the way a life was defined behind bars. And he knew a fair bit about how *that* worked.

Those who slept rough in the centre of London had a lot in common, he decided, with those sleeping in whitewashed cells at Her Majesty’s pleasure. Both were communities with their own rules, their own hierarchies and an understandable suspicion of outsiders. If you were going to survive in prison you had to fit in ; to do what was necessary. You’d try not to eat shit, of course you would, but if that’s what it took to get by, you’d tuck right in. What he’d seen of life since he began sleeping rough told him that things were pretty much the same on the streets.

The café was a greasy spoon with ideas above its station. The sort of place that thought a few cheap sandwich fillings in Tupperware containers made it a delicatessen. The reaction, within a minute or two of him shambling in, sitting down and showing no obvious intention of buying anything, was predictable.

“Hey!”

He said nothing.

“You going to order something?”

He reached across for a magazine that had been left on an adjacent table and began to read.

“This is not a dosshouse, you know?”

He smiled.

“You think I’m joking...?”

He nodded towards a familiar figure outside the window as the fat, red-faced proprietor came around the counter towards him. With impeccable timing, the man he’d been smiling at pushed through the door, just as the café owner was leaning in menacingly.

“It’s OK, he’s with me...”

The threatening expression on the proprietor’s face softened, but only marginally, when he turned from the tramp’s table and looked at the Metropolitan Police warrant card that was being thrust at him.

Detective Sergeant Dave Holland pocketed his ID, reached across and dragged back a chair. “We’ll have two teas,” he said.

The man sitting at the table spoke in earnest. “*Mugs* of tea...”

The owner shuffled back towards the counter, somehow managing to sigh and clear his throat at the same time.

“My hero,” the tramp said.

Holland put his briefcase on the floor and sat down. He glanced round at the two other customers : a smartly dressed woman and a middle-aged man in a

postal uniform. Back behind his counter, the owner of the place glared at him as he took a pair of white mugs from a shelf.

“He looked like he was ready to chuck you out if I hadn’t come in just then. I was tempted to stand there and watch. See what happened.”

“You’d have seen me deck the fat fucker.”

“Right. Then I’d’ve had to arrest you.”

“That would have been interesting...”

Holland shrugged and pushed dirty blond hair back from his forehead. “Paddy Hayes died just after eleven-thirty last night,” he said.

“How’s the son doing?”

“He was pretty upset beforehand. Wrestling with it, you know? Once he’d decided, once they turned off the machines, he seemed a lot calmer.”

“Probably only *seemed*.”

“Probably...”

“When’s he going home?”

“He’s getting a train back up north this morning,” Holland said. “He’ll be getting home around the time they start the PM on his old man.”

“Won’t be too many surprises there.”

They both leaned back in their chairs as the tea arrived with very little ceremony. The fat man plonked down two sets of cutlery, wrapped in paper serviettes. He pointedly nudged a laminated menu towards each of them before turning to empty the ashtray on the adjoining table.

“You hungry?” Holland asked.

The man opposite glanced up from the menu he was already studying. “Not really. I had a huge plate of smoked salmon and scrambled eggs first thing.” His eyes went back to the menu. “Of *course* I’m fucking hungry.”

“All right...”

“I hope you’ve brought your cheque book. This could get expensive.”

Holland picked up his tea. He cradled the mug against his chin and let the heat drift up to his face. He stared through the narrow curtain of steam at the dishevelled figure sitting across from him. “I still can’t get used to this,” he said.

“What?”

“This. You.”

“*You* can’t get used to it? Jesus!”

“You know what I mean. I just never imagined you anything like this. You were the last person...*You are* the last person...”

Tom Thorne dropped his menu and crossed stained fingers above it. The decision made. He stared hard across the table.

“Things change,” he said.