

# Fumblings

## Series 1

**By Obadiah Georgiopolous**

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## **Episode 1. The Matt Banahan Affair**

Vickery set the silver tray with crystal glass down on the small Queen Anne wine-table that stood next to the large, heavily-draped four poster bed. It was the same bed, so it was said, in which Henry VIII had spent several nights while courting Catherine Parr at nearby Sudeley Castle (the mattress still carried a pronounced dip in the centre). The butler coughed politely, tapped gently on one of the bed-posts and pulled back one of the curtains.

“Bloody hell Vickery” growled the voice beneath a tangle of fine-linen sheets. “What the hell do you want? It must be before dawn!”

Before his loyal retainer could answer, the stable clock struck ten mournful chimes.

Baz pulled the covers from his face.

“Dammit Vickery! You should have woken me earlier, “Young Rory’s supposed to be coming over for his lesson at twelve. Last week was an absolute mudbath. I need you to polish my balls.”

Vickery gave a polite smile. “I did that while you were sleeping sir. And perceiving that you returned to the house in the small hours, I took the precaution of preparing a glass of Vickery’s Restorative.”

Baz picked up the glass and gave an appreciative sniff. Vickery had always refused to reveal the ingredients of his mother’s secret recipe, but Baz’s connoisseur nose usually managed to detect something akin to Crème de Menthe, with distinct liniment notes.

He closed his eyes. “Down the hatch then.” He took a long gulp and shuddered, then smacked his lips. “That’s better!”

Baz swung his long legs, clad in Hugh Heffner satin, to the side of the bed. “Now, I was thinking of wearing my John Daly Originals today. What do you think?”

Vickery sighed. His employer had always shown himself to be in complete command of every sector he had turned his hand to – from organic cheese to computer chips. But the golf clothing store in the village, which also served as the local post office, had proved a rare exception and, unfortunately, the samples kept on landing on Baz’s desk.”

Before Vickery could offer a view, Baz’s mobile phone started to vibrate. It was the latest prototype from the boffins at his technology company *Bazsoft*, made entirely from graphene and known only by the code-name “Son of Samsung”. This model’s ringtones were connected directly to Baz’s Spotify so it could automatically select a song depending on who was calling. Johnny Cash’s unmistakable tones filled the

bedroom, "San Quentin, may you rot and burn in hell..." Baz flipped his finger across the screen and put the device to his ear.

"Martin! How are you?" There was a pause. "No, that's absolutely right..... Correct... a hundred quid a week in his boots. Oh yes and he'll burn his old shirt on the centre spot the first game of the new season.... No you don't have to do that.... No honestly... Got to go.... Really...Yes, maybe in a couple of months... No, sorry really got to go... Yes, you too.... Yes, I'll hang up first... Yes... Bye now... Bye...Bye."

Baz threw his head back on the pillow and grinned. Vickery gave a polite cough. "Would this be something to do with the O'Banahan matter sir?"

Baz tutted. "Banahan, Vickery. It's Banahan." Despite Baz's long and careful explanations, Vickery remained ignorant of anything to do with the game of rugby. At Kingsholm he would sit defiantly at the back of his employer's private box, polishing his nails and flicking through back copies of American Vogue.

"Am I to assume then that you spent the evening with the gentleman at Farleigh House?"

"I did Vickery, I did."

"And I presume negotiations proceeded satisfactorily?"

"We played cards, long into the night."

"And I presume the outcome was to your advantage sir?"

"Damn right it was. And I won on the final hand. And as a consequence one of their favourite sons will be starting in cherry and white next September."

"If he was that valuable to them what may I ask sir did you wager against him?"

Baz grinned. "Fumblings."

Vickery looked shaken. "Fumblings sir? This seven hundred year-old house its 3,000 acres of parkland and it's beautiful knot garden designed by Michael Teague himself. Against a rugby player?"

"Exactly Vickery."

"And what would have happened to me sir?"

"Oh, I threw you in as well."

Vickery went suddenly white and clasped his hand to his chest, "Sir you mean, you would have me in service to that.... that..."

“Oh hush. It was never in danger. Why do you think I’ve had Charlie “Card” Sharples over these past weeks teaching me some of his granny’s best poker strategies. Old Ena was one of the first women poker professionals in Salford you know.”

“But sir... oh never mind. I suppose it all turned out for the best.”

As Vickery crossed the room to draw back the heavy tapestry curtain he tripped on something that his employer had left on the floor the previous evening. He picked it up. It was Baz’s original Marshall and Woodward blazer. As he picked it up and started brushing off the pieces of lint on the collar, something fluttered out of the sleeve onto the polished parquet floor. Vickery bent down and picked it up and turned it over in his hand. It was the ace of spades. The ace of spades.

## **Episode 2. The Graham Spring Affair (featuring Ken Burnley)**

ickery cast a baleful gaze down the length of the Buxton Gallery at the row of forlorn looking figures, fidgeting uncomfortably on the original 18th century Saint-Andre chairs. Above them in large gilded rococo frames were scenes of the Grand Canal and the Lido painted by some of the greatest Italian masters - Chistolini, Polledri and Bortolami. Vickery looked down at his clip-board and saw that they were but half way through the day's auditions. The lights were already starting to come on in the orangery, across the East Courtyard, where the Bazettes could be seen gyrating energetically, part of their rehearsals for a guest appearance on the following Sunday's Songs of Praise (filling in at short notice for Aled Jones). At this rate, they would still be auditioning until well after that evening's European Challenge Cup game, which was due to kick off at 11.30 pm.

Vickery turned and looked back through the baize-covered door. Baz was shaking his head, "No, no, no, Mr. Blessed! This won't do at all! You must project more – project man!"

The large bearded figure was wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. "I'm so sorry. It's just that I'm so nervous. This is the role I feel I've been preparing for all my life. This has never happened to me before. I'm sure if, I could just take a moment to..."

Baz screwed up the CV and performed an expert basket shot into the bin in the corner. "NEXT!", he yelled.

Brian Blessed picked up his coat and shuffled miserably towards the door. He turned and looked imploringly at Baz, seated in his deep wing-backed leather Tavis Knoyle recliner. "Please", he whimpered, "If I could just have one more..."

"NEXT!"

Baz was already beginning to regret taking that call.

*"Really Martin, you've got no one else who can handle it?... No I see.... No I agree it's the most important job at the club... No I do see.... No there's no need for that.... No I'll do it.... Please, you've said enough already.... I'll do it... No Graham Spring IS going to be very difficult to replace. Alright then.... Well, call Camilla and she might be able to find a slot towards the end of May. No... Yes, you too.... Yes, I'll hang up first... Yes... Bye now... Bye...Bye." What had he agreed to take on?*

Vickery looked down at his clipboard. "Next on the list is the gentleman from the local BBC wireless service, a Mr. Kenneth Burnley."

"Good Lord Vickery. He's outside?"

"Yes sir."

“Did you remember to lock the cellar?”

Vickery gave a reassuring nod. “I did sir.”

“Well that’s something. You’d better show him in, I suppose.”

Baz turned to the polished oak Kingsley Jones sideboard, took down the original Strokosch crystal decanter and poured himself three fingers of McCrae’s 25 year old Speyside malt. A sorry-looking figure shuffled into the room, nervously wringing his cloth-cap in his hands.

“Burnley, is it?”

“Yes sir.”

“Well just try and relax. Here, this might help steady your nerves.” Baz poured him a large glass of Aldi’s Vintage Original Orange Juice (“made with real concentrate”). “We’d better make a start then I suppose.”

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As the last of the candidates shuffled back down the mile-long drive to the village bus stop (little knowing that the night bus to Cheltenham had already left at half past six), Vickery emptied the large number of CV’s out of the waste-bin into the open fire. Baz was looking through his notes. “Stephen Fry – too smug. Matt Baker - too northern. Mary Beard – too shrill. Gordon Ramsay – too reserved.” The list went on.

“Hell Vickery, what on earth are we going to do? I can’t spend another day doing this. I already had to cancel this month’s meeting of the North Cotswolds Distressed Young Gentlewomen’s Relief Society – and it’s damned difficult to get these things into Bill Wyman’s diary!”

Vickery gave one of his polite coughs. “If I may be permitted sir?”

“Go on Vickery.”

“You will recall that you have a significant investment in the Fuimaono-Sapolu Institute for Advanced Linguistic Research.”

Baz looked surprised. “Do I? I confess I had entirely forgotten.”

“Indeed you do sir. And I took the precaution of inviting Professor Galarza from the Institute to spend a few weeks with us. He has been working away in the old recording studio that Mr Bono had built when he was the owner of Fumblings. It’s in the Old Dairy beyond the ha ha.”

Baz was surprised. "I thought that the Performing Rights Society had ordered that place to be sealed up and for all references to it to be removed from Google."

"They did sir, but if you climb into the attic from the old apple store you can come down through the hatch and into the old studio."

Baz rubbed his chin. "And is all the equipment still there?"

"It is sir. There are piles of his old tapes in there."

"And have you actually listened to any of them?"

Vickery flushed deeply. "I... I... I'm afraid sir that I have. You see sir I have this weakness for..." . The butler's voice tailed off to no more than an embarrassed squeak.

Baz frowned. "Look Vickery, as far as I'm concerned this conversation never happened. We will never speak of the matter again – do you understand?"

"I do sir. And can I just say how grateful I am for your understanding.."

"Never mind all that. I think old Eustace may have lit a bonfire in the kitchen garden earlier." Baz gave his butler a knowing look. "I understand that acetate burns particularly well." Vickery nodded. "Now let's go and meet Professor Galarza."

Baz dropped down through the hatch in the dairy ceiling and performed a perfect forward roll on landing (one of the few things from his time in the SAS that had stuck). Vickery dropped down through the hole and landed clumsily beside him."

At the sudden commotion, the bespectacled figure in a white coat, huddled at a computer screen, turned and stood up. Vickery gestured towards the tall figure. "Sir, may I introduce you to Professor Galarza, one of the world's leading scientists working in the area of neurolinguistics."

Baz nodded to him. "Good to meet you Professor. Now what is all this? All these wires what are they doing...?" Baz's eyes followed the tangle of hundreds of cables that went from a box to the back of the room and over the back of a black leather swivel chair."

Professor Galarza beamed at Baz and spoke in the strong accent of his native Argentina. "Senor, your timing could not have been better. We are nearly there. Our subject has been fully prepared and all we have to do is press this button..."

"Subject?"

"Si senior." The professor put his hand on the arm of the chair, and swung it round.

Baz took a step back at he saw the figure with its shaved head peppered with dozens of electrodes connected to the nest of cables running up from behind the chair. .  
“Good lord.. it’s...”

Vickery interrupted him, looking very pleased with himself. “Indeed it is sir. It is Mr Graham Spring himself.”

Baz looked right into Spring’s face. “My word. It looks to me like he’s been drugged. He chewed his lip, “Mind you, you can never really tell.”

Vickery moved to reassure him. “Mr Spring has signed all the necessary consents sir.”

Baz examined the sheaf of papers that were pushed under his nose. “I think you’ll find it’s spelled G-R-A-H-A-M.”

Vickery nodded. “I’ll have it attended to right away sir.”

Professor Galarza rubbed his hands together impatiently. “Senor, would you like to have the honour of initiating the transfer process.”

Baz held up his hand. “Just a moment Professor. What will happen to Mr Spring? Will there be any side effects?”

Galarza shook his head sadly. “I’m afraid his IQ will be reduced to that of an imbecile and his communications will be amount to nothing more than the wildest ramblings.”

Baz looked shocked. “And then what will become of him? How on earth will he fill his days in such a catatonic state?”

Vickery touched his employer’s arm reassuringly. “We have taken the precaution of subscribing him to *Come on My Lovers*.”

There was a look of relief on Baz’s face and then he grinned broadly. “Here goes nothing then!” And with that, he thumped the large red button. Lights flashed and the computer started beeping loudly. Small puffs of smoke started to appear by the electrodes on Spring’s head.”

Almost as soon as it had started it was over. Spring collapsed into a heap in the chair, bubbles of phlegm dribbling down his chin.

Galarza held out his hand. “Now senor, please, your smartphone.”

Baz slipped his hand into his pocket and retrieved his graphene ‘Son of Samsung’. Galarza took it and connected it via a USB cable to the back of the computer. After a minute or two it had updated and he handed it back to its puzzled owner.

Galarza smiled reassuringly. "Please, click on the new app."

Baz did as he was instructed and a logo featuring Springer's kindly face (pre-transfer) filled the phone's screen. Galarza fished in his briefcase and brought out a piece of A4 paper. "Now señor, I have this list of players from the Pacific Islands. Would you please read them into the phone."

Baz enunciated each name with the utmost care. "Tuimoala Lolohea, Siosaia Vave, David Nofaaluma, Sio Siua Taukeiaho."

After the briefest pause, Springer's voice with its gentle Gloucester burr started to sing back at him from the phone's little loudspeaker. "Two My Lala, Sausage Valve, David No Foul Mama, See-saw Tacky Whore."

Baz clasped the phone to his chest in delight. "It's incredible Professor. It's perfect!"

At that moment the phone started to vibrate Johnny Cash's "San Quentin Blues" started to fill the room and Baz flipped his finger across the screen.

"Hi Martin.... Well I have some great news. We've found our new announcer .... Yes it's sorted.... Uhuh... No there's no need. No... no..... Just one thing...Don't sit Graham Spring next to me in the Golds.... Super... Ciao.... Ciao."

### **Episode 3. The David Cameron Affair**

Baz stood at the study window, fingering his glass of McCrae's 25 year old Speyside malt as he watched the two youngsters fetching their tools from the rusted old Gloucester Rugby kit van. The club name and logo had been painted out and over the top an inexpert hand had daubed "Burns Bros, Builders and Plummers – No Job Too Small – OAP Discounts." The lads were trying to rebuild the high wall that surrounded the old outdoor pool, the one where the famous photograph had been taken of Mary Whitehouse frolicking naked with John Profumo and Lord Longford.

The wall had been demolished in an unfortunate incident the previous May, when the Australian coach (whose name Baz could no longer quite remember) had driven Baz's second best Bentley out of the old stable garages down the drive, twice around the turning circle by the inner gatehouse before skidding the length of the south lawn, shooting straight into the water - narrowly missing Camilla, who had been floating on a lilo at the deep end, topping up her all-over tan. Unfortunately, the coach had also been unharmed.

Martin could not have been more apologetic. He had sent over "a couple of his lads" to sort things out. And here they still were six months later, having completed just the first two courses of bricks. Most days had been spent reading The Sun, posting pictures of their muscles on Instagram and arguing over who was going to drive the mini-digger.

At the time Baz had sworn that he would never give careers advice again, but now here he was doing exactly the same thing. As he turned back to the room, he looked at Camilla poised on the edge of her Pendlebury chair, her pen raised artfully above her notebook. Not one copper-coloured hair among those tumbling coils was out of place. And Baz thanked God every day for the buoyancy properties (or lack thereof) of the Continental GT3 Concept. In the corner of the room, sitting in the leather Tavis Knoyle armchair his guest was also gazing at Camilla, his eyes flitting between the hem of her tight Nathan Charles mini-skirt to the deep V of her pure silk Josh Hohneck shirt. Baz waved his hand at Vickery who had been standing motionless by the 16th century, oak-carved afoa.

"I think our guest might like some more refreshment." Vickery crossed the room silently and poured another generous measure of Lidl's Finest Blend Moldavian Whiskey from the shimmering Bezuidenhout decanter.

The guest immediately looked up from Camilla's shapely ankle. He stammered slightly. "Look, I'm most awfully grateful to you for finding the time..."

Baz cut him short. "Well you didn't listen to me last time did you? And look what a mess you made of everything."

The guest hunched his shoulders and wiped his perspiring hands on the knees of his charcoal-grey Simpson-Daniel suit. "I know. I can see that now. I wasn't ready. I was young and foolish. But now I really want to have another go."

Baz looked down at the imploring face, tears starting to smear down the pudgy pink cheeks. He sighed. "Well, alright. Though it's against my better judgement."

"Oh thank you. Thank you."

For a moment Baz was worried that the man was going to fall to his knees. Baz took two steps backwards, just in case. "Well you are going to have to start from the bottom again."

"Oh I realise that. I do. I do."

"And you know it can't be Witney."

"But all my friends.. you know Rebekah and Jeremy and then there's those nice people with their farm shop."

Baz looked at him sternly. "Those people are no good to you."

"But, but..."

"No buts. No you need a constituency where you can build a bit of credibility."

His guest scratched his chin and brightened suddenly. "Well there's Burford. I could settle for Burford."

Baz shook his head firmly. "No, I have other plans for Burford."

"Where then?"

Baz stared his guest full in the face, challenging him to defy him. "The Forest of Dean."

The guest gripped the arms of the chair. "You're not... you're not serious?"

Baz drained the remains of his malt and poured himself another. "I never joke about such matters. A vacancy will arise in June and there will be a by-election shortly afterwards. You will be the official candidate of the Conservative and Unionist Party. Just don't tell Theresa, not yet anyway."

The guest looked crestfallen. "If that's what you think. If you're sure...Oh god. What will I tell Sam?" And then he appeared to remember something else. "But what... but what about my new hut?"

Baz was at the limit of his patience. "For God's sake man! It's got wheels hasn't it?"

The guest nodded sadly. "I guess. That's it then. I suppose I should be grateful to you."

Baz needed to bring this to an end. "Just don't mess things up this time. Camilla has a folder here for you with everything you need, including the keys to a small semi in Cinderford and a voucher entitling you to lifetime membership of the local rugby club."

"You mean I have to spend my Saturday afternoons with those.... those... people..." He sounded as though he was about to cry.

Baz couldn't take any more. "Vickery, would you kindly show our guest to his car. You might have to ask Freddie to move his van."

Baz sat on the velvet Tom Heard footstool by the fire and sighed deeply. After a moment or two, he could feel Camilla's long elegant fingers kneading the knots in neck.

"Sir," she breathed in that smart but sexy Cheltenham Ladies College way she had. "This is probably not the time... but I was wondering if you might be able to give me the benefit of your long experience..."

Baz sighed another deep sigh and then turned and smiled. "For you Camilla, of course..."

"You know I've rather been wanting to appear on the frontispiece of Country Life? Well that nice Richard chap from the Stroud Camera Club was over again the other day and... well now he's sent me these proofs. Could you tell me what you think?"

Camilla went to her leather Akapusi Qera shoulder bag that was hanging from the back of her chair and took out a packet of 7x5 prints.

Baz flicked through them, turning one or two of them through three hundred and sixty degrees as he struggled to work out which way was supposed to be up. "You know, I'm not really sure they are right for Country Life. They usually expect their subjects to have more... more. What's the word I am looking for?"

Vickery, who had just returned to the room ventured "Might the word you are looking for be 'clothes', sir?"

"Exactly Vickery. Country Life generally prefer their subject to have more clothes." He pointed to one particular photograph and held it up to the light. However, this one might well do for the cover of "Snake Keeper's Monthly."

Camilla looked disappointed. Baz put a reassuring arm around her. "Look, I know the editor at Harper's, I think that might be more your thing anyway. I might bump into him at Kingholm on Saturday."

His secretary brightened. "Is he a member of the 1873?"

"No he still prefers it over with the council people on other side. And he queues up for hours to get that particular spot. You see him on the telly sometimes – he's the one with the model of the Shed on his hat."

"Oh him?" Camilla said knowingly. "It's always the quiet ones."

Baz patted his secretary gently on the shoulder. "Now I need to get this other business wrapped up. Can you get me the number of the Forest of Dean constituency office please."

Camilla punched a number into her phone and handed it to her employer. After a few moments someone answered "Oh Mark, it's you. Good.... I'm fine thanks. No.... No... I'm a bit busy until the summer. Look I'll cut to the chase. I think you are ready for the next stage of your career.... Uhuh.... Well I know, but that will take way too long. This is something a bit different.....Well how do you like New York?...Uhuh... bagels, that's right. I like them too.... Well this would be... well there's no pussy-footing around this. How would you like to be UN Secretary-General?....Of course I can. Have I ever let you down before?.... Exactly.... The competition? No problem. Officially, it'll be a two-horse race..... You'll be up against Sarah Huckabee Sanders.... No, of course she doesn't know it yet."

#### **Episode 4. The Obadiah Georgiopolous Affair**

It was not long after dusk had fallen. Vickery had already shuttered the ground floor windows against the hammering rain. He had just climbed out onto roof of the main to lower the flag, the ancient standard bearing the sacred family crest of a golden bear hanging from a tree, when he heard an urgent banging from beneath the portico below. Vickery leant between the battlements to look for the source of the commotion and saw below a huddled figure in a light tweed jacket, his collar turned up in a vain attempt to stave off the elements.

“Can I help you?” cried Vickery, his voice just about audible above the howling wind.

The forlorn figure looked upwards “Can I come in please? I’ve been walking for miles in this. I’m soaked to the skin!”

“Yes I can see your predicament.” Vickery looked down by his feet and picked up a loose slate and threw it down with some energy. “Now bugger off! This isn’t the bloody National Trust!”

The figure moved just in time and the slate bounced down the limestone steps, smashing into tiny pieces on the drive.

“Please!” The young man fished inside his pocket and waved something up at the tower. “I’m here to see Baz. This is his card!”

Vickery dropped the second piece of slate he had been aiming at the young man’s skull. “You wait there, don’t move!”

Five minutes later and Vickery was hauling back the giant bolts on the main door. The bedraggled figure stood, dripping on the doorsteps covered up to his waist in mud. He stepped into the hallway shivering uncontrollably. Vickery glared at him. “This had better be good.”

At that moment, Baz stepped out of the Blue Drawing Room arm-in-arm with the lovely Stephanie, youngest daughter of Sir Trevor and Lady Woodman. Stephanie was keen to launch a career in interior design and Baz had asked her to take a closer look at the ceiling of the master bedroom. Baz stared, horrified, at the sodden creature and the muddy footprints crossing the original Bartolami tiles.

“Good heavens Vickery! What on Earth do you think you are doing....?”

Stephanie gripped Baz’s arm, and turned towards the wretched figure, tears welling in the corners of her eyes. “Oh you poor man. You must be terribly cold.”

Without pausing Baz continued “...what on Earth do you think you are doing Vickery, not taking this young gentlemen upstairs, running him a hot bath and finding him some warm clothes?”

An hour later and Baz was seated at one end of the fifty foot long mahogany Albanese dining table - in black-tie, as was his custom. Stephanie, looked ravishing - her hair up, slender and graceful in an original long backless silk gown by Protheroe. She was fingering her long dangling Strokosch earrings that her great-grandmother had purchased in St Petersburg just before the revolution. The young man was seated to Baz's right. He was something of a contrast in a bright pink Gloucester European shirt with the Mitsubishi logo in the middle of his chest and a pair of original Ian Poulter union jack golfing trousers (with matching socks).

Next to Baz, sitting attentively as his master patted his head was the largest dog that OG had ever seen. Baz flipped a large chunk of Kobe beef into its jaws and the dog slavered appreciatively. "This is Hamilton. He's a Scottish deerhound. He may look fierce, but he's a great big softie really." Hamilton snarled. "If he runs too fast he falls over his own feet."

Vickery brought in a large tureen of steaming Collazo, a speciality of the cook, Mrs Kalamafoni. It was a traditional recipe from her native village in Northern Tadolala. Baz smiled indulgently at Sophie and turned to the visitor. "So what's your name and how can we help you?"

The young man, who had just filled his mouth with an enormous spoonful of Collazo, swallowed hard. "My name is Obadiah Georgiopolous - but my friends call me OG. And I'm in a spot of bother, I'm afraid. I've lost my job - a job that meant the world to me and now I have nothing."

Baz nodded at him to continue. "Well, you see I was second under-librarian at Lady Gaga Hall in Oxford. It had everything I had ever looked for in a job. I was so happy. Anyway, one day I was retrieving some old service cards from the chapel for the college archive and somehow the door got locked shut behind me. It was four hours until evensong and I you know, I had to....I just had to..."

"Call of nature?" ventured Baz.

"Exactly. There was nowhere to go except....?" He looked up at the ceiling, searching for divine forgiveness.

"Except?"

"Except the communion chalice. And the lighting is very poor and so no one seemed to notice when they added the wine. Everything would have been fine, except it seemed to have curdled where it had been left next to the radiator and anyway, to cut a long story short, half the senior common room ended up in the gastro-intestinal unit at the John Radcliffe. Three of the more elderly emeritus fellows are still in there."

Baz shook his head. "And you owned up to this."

"I did"

"Well," said Baz, "That was very..."

Before he could finish Stephanie interrupted him. "That was very truthful of you."

Baz coughed. "Yes I was going to say '...very honest of you.' But I don't see how I can be of any help to you?"

"Well now you can see, I have no job, no money and all I have are my clothes upstairs and your business card. Otherwise, I am completely and utterly destitute."

Baz looked at him suspiciously, "And how did you come by my card?"

"It was given to me by my old tutor, Professor Thinus Delport. He told me that you had been helpful to him a long time ago in finding the Hitler Diaries and getting them published in The Sunday Times."

Baz coughed and reddened. "Well Thinus really shouldn't..."

The young scholar was not going to be interrupted, "... and he thought I might be just the person to write your memoirs."

Baz sat back in his chair, speechless for a moment. It was Stephanie who spoke. "Oh Baz, this is such a sweet idea. You've done so many wonderful, wonderful things in your life. I could see them queuing up to buy it in the Post Office. Please say you'll do it."

Baz thought for a moment. "How much were they paying you at Lady Gaga's?"

OG looked at the floor, embarrassed to be talking about money. "£11,500 a year, plus a free parking space for my bike."

Baz thought for a moment. "Well how does £11,600 sound to you? You can park your bike behind the apple shed and we'll open up the dairy, throw out all that old recording equipment and set you up a camp-bed in there. You can take your meals in the kitchen with Mrs Galarza."

OG stammered. "I...I... hardly know what to say."

Stephanie jumped from her chair and threw her arms around Baz. "Oh Baz you lovely, lovely man!" And she kissed him full on the lips, leaving behind a smear of deep red Pierre Capdevielle lipstick.

Baz slapped the young man on his arm enthusiastically. "And you're going to need some togs. Go to the Post Office and get yourself kitted out at the golf clothing section. Help yourself to anything you like – provided it's from the remainder rail."

"You'll be expected to help out with some minor household chores – polishing the Bazette's practice poles and checking them for burrs, modelling occasionally at Post Office fashion nights and taking Hamilton out for his pre-breakfast walk."

OG nodded. "I'm sure that won't be a problem."

Baz held his hand up to silence him. "The route he likes to take is out through Redpath's Wood and over the fields. It's at least four miles..."

"No problem. I'll do it."

"...out and five miles back. He gets very upset if he doesn't catch at least five rabbits. Mrs Galarza will be happy to prepare the remains for your lunch."

Stephanie gave Hamilton a big hug and Hamilton licked her face appreciatively. "I just need to go and powder my nose. I'll leave you boys to get to know each other better."

As she sashayed out of the room and the door closed behind her. Baz gripped OG's pale, thin librarian's arm until it started to hurt. A fierce glint came into Baz's eyes and there was real menace behind his voice. "Now here are three things you need to understand. When you are writing this book, you will NEVER, EVER speak of my first wife. Secondly, you will make NO MENTION of the agreement that I made with St Quentin when I lent him the money to buy the club that the Mira stand will never, ever pulled down as long as I am alive."

OG was sweating now. He blinked quickly, gulped and nodded "And the third thing?"

And the third thing is if you should find any old audio tapes in the dairy, you take them to Eustace and get him to throw them in the incinerator. IMMEDIATELY!"

OG found that he had lost the power of speech – so he just nodded. Baz relaxed back into his chair and smiled. "Now where is Vickery with that Taylor's '63?" He pressed a small button under the table and waited for Vickery to return.

OG gave Hamilton a weak smile. Hamilton made a horrible choking noise, then promptly regurgitated a small piece of beef-fat onto OG's two-tone blue and yellow Goretex Footjoys.

## Episode 5. Baz's People

Baz was sitting in the rear-most row of the JS Security stand, his hands plunged deep in his pockets, a cherry and white scarf wrapped tightly over his chin. Kingsholm Stadium was empty except for the elderly groundsman, trundling up and down on his equally ancient Davies & Ryan tractor and a mean-looking lone seagull sitting on the roof of the Mira stand. A familiar figure in his beige gabardine raincoat was climbing the steps up the central aisle. Baz could see the swept back grey hair and old-fashioned tortoise shell spectacles. He made his way to the back row and carefully lowered the seat next to Baz. Still breathless from the long climb, this slightly portly, middle-aged gent sat down gingerly, while continuing to look directly in front of him towards the Tump. It was as if he and Baz were as well acquainted as two strangers sitting next to each other on a Central Line train in the London Rush hour. After a few moments he finally spoke.

“Baz.” He said by way of greeting.

Baz replied in similar vein. “Smirkey.”

“It’s been a long time.”

Baz gave an imperceptible nod. “It has.” And added after a pause. “I’d hoped it would be longer.”

“When was it? Prague? ’82?” John Smirkey knew very well when it was. The fragment of the bullet still lodged in his shoulder reminded Baz of it every day.

“Come on, you can do better than that. You don’t have to patronise me Smirkey. Not after what I went through for you and your friends.”

“It was a close run thing if I recall. You are lucky to be sitting here today. Lucky in so many ways.”

Baz could feel his neck starting to redden. “Okay, enough of the games. I think you owe me an explanation. Where the hell were you that night? You were supposed to be waiting in the Trabant with the engine running. When I got to the border, no Smirkey, no car – just a friendly little reception committee, complete with a twelve gun salute – Kalashnikov style.”

Smirkey started to polish his spectacles on the end of his tie. “You must realise, Colonel Dawidiuk and his KGB friends had blown the thing wide open weeks before we tried to break you out. At that stage it was a case of every man for himself.”

Baz curled his lips inwards. “I know why you did it. Why you left me there. It was because of Ann wasn’t it? You couldn’t stand it that she loved me and not you. She was going to leave you, you know.”

Smirkey sighed patiently. "Ann is long gone Baz. Neither of us will ever see her again. Look, the past is the past. We have to talk business -urgent business. The Circus is leaking like a London Irish defence. We think Control has been passing information to the Russians for years."

Baz grimaced. "But why isn't anyone higher up acting on this? If you know, they must do. Surely?"

Smirkey replaced his spectacles. "I tried to tell the Foreign Secretary when I saw him in the gents at the Carlton Club, but it was after lunch and he just started reciting a limerick about "a ballerina called Ivanna who danced naked on top of a pianna". So anyway, now I've got no choice. I'm running an operation off the books – out of London altogether."

"But aren't you officially retired? It must be what ... eight years? "

"Officially, yes, but I've set up a small section of specialists from the old firm here in this city."

Baz whistled. "Gloucester, that's a bit off the beaten track, no? Whereabouts?"

Smirkey looked Baz straight in the eye. "Are you still sound, Baz?"

"Well if you mean am I still bound by the Official Secrets Act, I wouldn't wipe my backside with it. But there's a substantial strip of my old hide hanging on a piece of barbed wire on the Polish border that still flutters in the breeze on St George's Day. Is that good enough?"

Smirkey nodded. "Alright, but if this is blown, the future security of our nation will be imperilled." He pointed to the floor of the stand. "You're sitting on it."

Baz sat back in his seat. "What?"

"There's an old storeroom underneath this stand. It has been ... requisitioned."

Baz chuckled. "John Smirkey – 'JS Security'. You old fox. You never change. You make the name so bloody obvious that no one would ever suspect."

"And it carries a number of distinct advantages. Easy communication with our colleagues in Cheltenham. Discreet flights in and out of the country via Fairford. And free tickets to all home games, including pre-season friendlies. Should our cover look like it is about to be blown, we have an arrangement with a well-known cider maker – they are ready to take over at a moment's notice – so we have time to decant without leaving a trace. That too is a shell company, by the way."

“I’ve got to hand it to you Smirkey, there was never anyone like you for tradecraft. So where do I fit in here?”

Smirkey dug his hands deep into his pockets. “Moscow has changed since our day Baz. It’s no longer about espionage, it’s about destabilisation. They use the power of the internet and social media to undermine free and fair elections in the west.”

Baz looked nonplussed. “We do get the papers at Fumblings you know.”

“Well they’re about to start up an operation here.” He turned and looked at Baz intently. “Look, I am only going to say this once. You do realise that the Board of Premiership Rugby stands for all that is honest and good and decent about this country?”

Baz nodded. “Of course. Everyone knows that.”

“We’ve heard from one of our people working undercover in St Petersburg, that the Russians are going to try and get elected to the chairmanship of PRL a wealthy ignoramus, a bouffant braggart, a completely unscrupulous villain who will say and do anything to advance the interests of his own organisation, regardless of the damage done to the sacred institutions of the country. We suspect that the US elections last year were just a dress rehearsal for the big one.”

Baz went white. “This individual inside the PRL. You don’t mean...?”

Smirkey looked grim. “I do. And if that happens rugby and this country will never be the same again.”

Baz’s voice now took on a more humble tone. “Look, of course, I’ll do my bit. But I’m a long time out of the game. I don’t see how I can be of use.”

“Baz, you are the only person in the Western Hemisphere who has the resources to take this on. Bazsoft is the most advanced technology company in the world. We need you to take on the Russian bots and crush them.” Smirky clenched his fist tight. “If we don’t pull this off, there will certainly be no future for Gloucester Rugby and the game in England will become a charade – a plaything for rich, vain individuals. We might as well take our Superdry shirts to the charity shop and start practising the tomahawk chop. Baz, we need you now like we’ve never needed you before.”

Baz stuck stood up and stuck out his jaw defiantly. “Alright. I’ll do it Smirkey. I’ll do it.”

Over on the Mira stand the seagull gave a loud squawk and a long streak of yellow and white appeared down the length of the window in front of the Chairman's box.

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Smirkey was waiting by the steps to the main house as Baz, on a magnificent white stallion, came trotting through the inner gatehouse and up the sweeping drive. Camilla was keeping step with him on a large chestnut bay. Hamilton was lolloping behind them, his jaws still red with gore. Baz pulled up in front of the spot where Smirkey was standing. He swung one leg over the saddle and dismounted smartly onto the gravel.

“Smirkey, sorry to have kept you waiting. Let me introduce you to my secretary, Camilla. Hell of horsewoman – she’s been taking me through some jumps.”

Camilla removed her riding hat and shook her long copper locks free. She tugged off a kidskin riding glove and extended her perfectly manicured fingers. “Mr Smirkey,” she purred, “I’ve heard so much about you.”

Smirkey blushed like a schoolboy. “I’m delighted to have made your acquaintance Miss.... Miss...?”

Camilla leant over and took Baz’s reins in her right hand and tugged on her own with her left. “Nice to meet you Mr Smirkey. I’m just going to take these two for their rub-down. She turned to Baz. “Your other visitor should already be here. I asked Vickery to show him into the billiard room.”

Smirkey watched admiringly as she retreated down the drive, the rear of her jodhpurs bobbing up and down rhythmically, like a piston on the wheels of a steam train.

The elderly spymaster gave a deep sigh. “How did you manage it? How did you go from being a kid from one of the roughest parts of Gloucester, to... “He swept his arm across the horizon. “...all this?” One of the finest houses in England, the collection of the world’s rarest vintage cars, the private island in the Caribbean?”

Smirkey shook his head. “You were a good man to have on our team, I’ll grant you. You were brighter than most of the SAS boys who join the Circus - all they were interested in was making bangs and flashes. You had a bit more about you, you were more cunning, more ambitious. But I looked at your file. The last job you had with the firm was pretty low-level - running dead-letter drops in Moscow in the late eighties. Hardly enough to fund a retirement bungalow in Bexhill.”

Baz shrugged “I should have thought it was obvious.” Smirkey raised an eyebrow.

“It was the Wall. When that damn thing came down, everything – and I mean everything - was up for grabs. The Spanish have a saying you know. It goes something along the lines of ‘The time to catch most fish is when the river-bed is most disturbed.’”

Smirkey replaced his spectacles. “So you used your contacts...”

Baz patted him on the shoulder. "Let's just say, that my family never has any problems paying its gas bill any more. Now, shall we go inside? I have something to show you that I think you're going to like."

Baz opened the double doors that led into the billiard room and beckoned Smirkey to enter. The room was dark except for the narrow beam of light that illuminated the table. Through the gloom Smirkey could make out an enormous oil-painting along one wall, depicting the famous attack by Cameron's Highlanders at the Battle of Cleve Hill.

Baz took down a cue from the rack. "Perhaps you would like a game Smirkey? Best of five, twenty quid a frame?"

Smirkey shook his head. "Hardly. The last time we played – the Athaeneum I think it was - you hit three maximums on the trot."

"Beginner's luck." smiled Baz.

As Smirkey's eyes grew accustomed to the light he noticed a figure sitting in the corner. It was wearing a bright orange hoodie and skateboard shorts. His feet, swaddled in Supreme x Nike Air, were resting on one of Baz's gilded 18th century Moncrieff chairs. The youngster had a pair of enormous Beats headphones over his ears and was nodding his head rhythmically as he stared into his laptop screen."

Smirkey looked alarmed. "Baz I hardly think we should be discussing matters like this in front of a..."

Baz held up a hand. "I should introduce you. This is Johnny Halfway." Baz tapped the boy on the shoulder and he reluctantly removed his headphones. "Johnny, this is Mr Smirkey."

Johnny looked up momentarily. "Awright' bro. Haw ya doin'?" Then he put the headphones back on and returned to the latest rap video featuring "Moto'mouth" Matu'u.

Baz felt Smirkey was owed an explanation. "The stewards found Johnny when he was a baby. He'd been left at the back of the Shed in a laundry basket. Everyone else was for calling in Social Services, but I couldn't face the prospect of this little lad going into an orphanage, so I zipped him up in an old kit bag and smuggled him out in the boot of the Bentley. I drove through the night to Hartpury College. Once the head and senior masters had returned from the clubhouse (around two in the morning), I explained the circumstances to them."

Baz leant over the table, chalked his cue and fired the cue-ball into the pack of reds. Five of them shot into the top two pockets. Baz went on. "They were very obliging. They agreed to bring him up as one of their own - so long as I paid for all his expenses, which, as it turned out, included a new artificial training surface and a

bigger cocktail cabinet for the staff room. All of them swore not to tell a living soul (though somehow Philip Pullman appears to have gotten wind of it). I had this hope you see, that, rather like the Jesuits, if the Hartpury people could teach him how to play rugby by the age of five, he would be Gloucester's for life – none of this bugging off to Wales without even a thanks for all the linament."

Baz fired the cue-ball into the black. It bounced off three cushions and ran down the length of the table into the top pocket. "But in the end it didn't matter. It turned out the lad couldn't kick, throw or catch to save his life."

Smirkey blinked. "Did you ever find out who his parents were?"

"There is a woman in the Shed who wails a dreadful lament at every game. We believe she could be the mother, but she doesn't speak a word of English so we can't ask her."

And why did you name him "Halfway?"

"Because that's where he was found. Actually, we did wonder if he had been saving a spot for someone."

"Please do continue. What happened to him at Hartpury?"

Baz skied the cue-ball onto the lampshade. It bounced off onto a red, which cannoned another red and into the middle pocket. "Although he couldn't play rugby for toffee, he was an exceptionally gifted mathematician. At the age of three, for example, he could calculate a nine dart finish from any number – which made him very popular in The Royal Exchange on a Thursday evening."

Baz rifled the cue-ball into the pink, nearly removing the top cushion, from where it rebounded and shot straight into the bottom left pocket. "When he was nine, he received A\* grades in A-level Maths, Further Maths, Statistics, Advanced Computing and Art History. He had taken his first degree in Computing from Cambridge by the age of eleven, completed his PhD at CalTech on his 13th birthday and is now at Imperial, where he works three days a week heading up the main Computing Lab. Keep this under your hat, but he has been tipped for a major international prize in Mathematics next year -we have every expectation that he will turn out to be Hartpury's first ever winner of the Field Medal."

Baz looked meaningfully at Smirkey. "His other two days a week are spent working for Bazsoft."

Baz propped his cue against the table and wandered over to the corner where the boy was sitting and pulled back one of the earphones and let it ping back hard against his ear. The boy gave a yelp. "Ow, easy bro. That hurt!"

Baz pulled the plug from the headphone socket. "Professor Halfway. We are ready for your presentation now."

The teenager got up reluctantly and propped his laptop open on the green baize of the snooker table. Baz turned back to Smirkey. "Professor Halfway specialises in the manufacture of computer viruses. For example, he is the author of "Blowback"."

Smirkey shook his head. "I've not heard of it."

"Oh you will. After 1st January 2019, every bag-less vacuum cleaner and every high-pressure hand-drier manufactured by a certain company since 2015 will suddenly go into reverse."

Smirkey nodded in appreciation. "It's clever, but how will this kind of technology help with our problem with the Russians and the PRL elections?"

Baz smiled. "Professor Halfway – would you like to explain?"

Halfway hitched up the top of his jeans from behind his knees. "Well, s'like this innit. You hit their bots wiv a denial of service bug."

Smirkey looked confused. Baz nodded to his protégé. "Would you like to demonstrate Professor?"

"It's a virus what we've written. It uses a special bit of code called a Recycling Transmission Sequencer. We call it an RTS for short innit. This is version 2."

Halfway launched a programme on his laptop and a browser page appeared. "You just choose the address of the site you want to disrupt." He typed in the address for Come on My Lovers. "Now you hit ALT and F7 at the same time and then just type in the password." Halfway typed in "PHILBURGESS". The little window closed and the COML screen was filled with screeds of posts, including Smirkey noticed, hundreds of names of minor Welsh and Cornish players.

Baz stood back proudly. "In five minutes that site will have been filled with 27 million random posts – no two of which are identical, but all of them utterly meaningless drivel."

Smirkey looked impressed. "Pages and pages of meaningless drivel on COML is nothing new, but 27 million of them is quite something."

Baz nodded. "It will also work on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. As soon as one of the Russians posts something positive about their candidate, you hit them with this. The clever thing is that RTS2 can lie dormant for weeks and, when the user is least expecting it, it suddenly erupts with millions more meaningless comments."

Smirkey placed a hand on Baz's shoulder. "You might just have saved the integrity and standing of the PRL. Of course none of this can ever be made public." Baz just shrugged.

Smirkey continued. "I have little influence over such matters these days, but I could make some discreet representations to the Secretary to the Honours Committee."

Baz shook his head emphatically. "None of that stuff interests me Smirkey. I've turned them down often enough in the past. There is only one honour that I still seek. In fact, it's the one thing that drives me to keep all this up day in, day out. Otherwise I would simply return to Knacker Island and take up the life of a simple billionaire fisherman. It's the first thing I think of when I wake up every morning and it's the last thing at night."

Smirkey gave a gentle nod of acknowledgement. "I know Baz. I know. The European Cup."

Baz's cheeks were quite moist now. He nodded and swallowed hard.

Smirkey patted him on the shoulder. "Come along my friend. Let's see what 2019 brings shall we."

## Episode 6. The Kingsholm Curse

The contestants fidgeted nervously on the fake Le Corbusier chairs, eyeing their cheap plastic carry-ons parked in the corner of the reception area. Trussed up in newly-purchased dark suits, each one a size too small, gaudy ties with over-large knots and painfully pointed black shoes, they picked nervously at imaginary pieces of lint and chewed on small pieces of cuticle, until an efficient-sounding, disembodied female voice broke the awkward silence.

“Lord Bazzar will see you now.”

They shuffled in and took their assigned seats down one side of the long glass boardroom table. At the other end sat Lord Bazzar himself, flanked on one side by Camilla, in a dapper Philippe Saint-André suit and an elegant pair of high Pasquallin heels, and on the other by Vickery in his familiar tailcoat and striped trousers.

Lord Bazzar sat back in his chair, emphasising his proprietorial air. “So the task this week was to score more points than your opponents. I hope you didn’t find the task too TRY-ING.” Everyone in the room laughed obsequiously.”

He turned to Camilla. “So how did the two teams do?”

Camilla pursed her lips disapprovingly. “The Gloucester team scored 24 points.” The Gloucester management team nudged each other like schoolboys. Camilla continued, “But the Pau Team, scored...” There was a lengthy pause. “34 points.” The Pau management team punched the air and gave each other hugs and high-fives.

Lord Bazzar spread his arms expansively. “Well, congratulations to the Pau Team. Your reward this week is a home quarter final in the European Rugby Challenge Cup.” The Pau gang beamed and, slapped each other on the back. They sauntered out of the room, leaving the hapless Gloucester team-members to face the music.

Lord Bazzar’s face switched from genial Mr Fezziwig to grim Mr Gradgrind. “So who was this week’s project manager?”

Humphreys raised a hesitant finger. “It was me Lord Bazzar.”

“So you are taking full responsibility for this fiasco?”

“It wasn’t just me Lord Bazzar.” whined Humphreys, “Ackermann here made the team selection. It was him who put Symonds at 12 and Twelvetrees at 13 and left Polledri on the bench.”

Ackerman span round. “Well you recruited the players.. they were totally.....”

Just as it was about to spin out of control, Vickery interrupted them... "There was also the sub-challenge."

Lord Bazzar went a deeper shade of puce. "Oh yeah. I asked you to come up with a new brand of ethnic-based street food that could be sold to the fans on match, day. 'Oo was in charge of this?"

A chirpy Brummie accent piped up. "That was me Lord Bazzar."

"Ah yes, And you came up with..." Lord Bazzar put on his most sarcastic voice. "...the Gloucester Burrito."

"That's right Lord Bazzar."

"And this burrito, had in it roast beef, potatoes, carrots and Brussels sprouts and gravy all wrapped in a Yorkshire pudding?!"

Camilla covered a widening smile with her hand. Stephen Vaughan tried to defend his corner. "It's the same as we have when we go over to my Granny's in Stirchley on Sundays. There's never an empty plate."

Lord Bazzar sneered. "And how many units did you sell?"

"Well none, but that's all because Duncan Wood was supposed to get it on social media..."

Wood turned and glared at him, "Well, you never got me any copy..."

Lord Bazzar smashed a fist on the table. "Enough! I've heard enough!"

He pointed at Buxton and Taylor who were smirking at the back. "Sumfink funny?"

They both shook their heads. "Don't fink I haven't noticed how you two are happy just to stand in the background, not taking any responsibility for nuffink. That's it! He pointed directly at Buxton. YOU'RE FIRED!"

Buxton tried to protest, but Lord Bazzar immediately pointed at Taylor." YOU'RE FIRED!"

The famous finger took aim at Wood. "YOU TOO - YOU'RE FIRED!"

It then turned to Bell and Woodman, who had been trying to hide behind Buxton "YOU'RE BOTH FIRED."

He pointed at Vaughan "YOU CAN SLING YER 'OOK '"

Humphrey and Ackerman were next “FIRED.... FIRED. I’M SICK OF THE WHOLE BLOODY LOT OF YOU”

They all filed out of the room muttering to themselves, leaving only the catering manager who was blinking back his tears.

Vickery tugged at Lord Bazzar’s sleeve. “Sir, you can’t just sack everyone like that, we have a season to complete....”

Lord Bazzar sat looking grimly ahead of him

Vickery persisted. “Sir!.... Sir...”

Baz blinked as the morning sun slanted in through the gap in the curtains. Vickery was tugging at his employer’s pyjama sleeve. “Sir, you were dreaming again.”

Baz rubbed his eyes. “Ah Vickery. Yes... Yes.. dreaming.”

Vickery crossed to the windows and threw back the curtains. Across the great lake - designed by Incapability Brown himself - he could see some disturbance at the far water’s edge. Hamilton appeared to be giving OG a swimming lesson, snarling encouragement from the bank.

Vickery had placed a silver salver on a 17th century Narraway side table. “I’ve brought your morning tray sir. Mrs Galarza has prepared, eggs, bacon, sausages, mushrooms, fried tomatoes, fried bread black-pudding with a side-portion of home fries. Then there’s a nice pair of Arbroath kippers and a large basket of mixed toast with Trinder’s organic conserves - all washed down with a nice pot of fresh Assam, your favourite blend from Purdey and Thorley of Piccadilly.”

Baz waved a hand. “You know, I’m not sure I’ve that much of an appetite this morning after the restless night I’ve had.” Baz looked wearily at the breakfast tray. “I think I’ll have to give the toast a miss.”

“Mrs Galarza will be disappointed Sir.”

Baz sighed “Alright, if I must.”

“Very good sir.”

Baz tucked a napkin into the top of his pyjama top. “I’m not sure how many more nights of these dreams I can take Vickery.”

“Would you like me to call Dr Balshaw, sir? Perhaps he might prescribe something...”

“No, I think I know what it is. It’s anxiety. I have this continuing worry that we will never win the European Cup and..and..”

“Yes sir?”

Baz dipped a large slice of bacon into his egg. “Vickery, this is going to sound daft.”

“I am all ears sir.”

“Well, I worry that it might be something to do with me. I mean that there might be some sort of curse on me and while it is in place, the club will never win the Cup.”

Baz thought for a moment and put his knife and fork down on the tray. “Ask OG to stop fooling around in the lake and put some dry clothes on. Then I want him to come and see me right away. There’s something I need him to look up for me.”

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Baz crested the hill, breathless after the steep climb. He turned and saw the Severn glistening below him. To his right he could just make out the outline of the Mira Stand, beyond the cathedral tower. He waited a moment to catch his breath and then plunged down towards the valley. About a quarter of the way down the footpath took a sharp turn to the right. Ahead of him, just where OG said it would be was a large stone. On one side someone had carved something a long time ago. It could have been a rough pentangle, but it was now too faded to tell. Just to the left of the stone was a narrow gap in the brambles. Baz squeezed through.

You could hardly call it a path. It was more a fault in the limestone. It was surrounded by smothering ferns and vicious thorns. Baz fought his way through, beating back the undergrowth with a stick. Until he came to what appeared to be the end of the gully, but he could just make out what appeared to be a crevice in the rock. From inside, he could hear a spine-chilling cackling.

Baz summoned his courage. “Banshee!” he yelled. “Is that you?”

The cackling stopped and at the gap in the rock appeared a woman, a woman with a face so hideous that Baz’s heart near turned to stone. “Who wants to know?”

Baz tried to still the tremor in his voice. “Old crone. Are you the one they call The Banshee?”

The woman cackled loudly. “Some may call me that. I have been known by many names, ‘The Wise Woman, ‘The Seer’, ‘The Sorceress of Slad’....but my friends call me ‘Carol.’”

Baz looked at her disdainfully. “I shall call you ‘Crone’.”

The woman picked a large bogey from her nose. Baz watched as she flicked it into the large black cauldron that was simmering on an open fire. “Suit yourself. I don’t suppose you’ve got any eye of newt have you?” Baz shook his head. “Thought not.

Can't find them anywhere, not since Heston put them in 'Recipe of the Month' in the Waitrose Magazine."

Baz watched in disgust as she tore the wings off a large dead bat and added it to the mixture. The woman muttered to herself. "Slugs... I'm sure they're around here somewhere."

Baz interrupted her. "Crone. I have come here seeking answers."

She tossed a large orange slug into the cauldron. "Oh answers you're after is it? They're expensive they are."

Baz fished in his pocket. "I understand that the usual consideration is a Victorian sovereign." He held out a glittering golden disk in his hand.

The Banshee screwed her nose up. "Well, I generally prefer Bitcoin these days. Less traceable." She took the sovereign from his hand and scratched it against the wall and examined it. "Well it ain't lead. Alright then. This'll do." She popped it in her apron pocket.

Baz was getting impatient. "So, the answer..."

"Oh the sovereign ain't all." She pointed to her black cavern of a mouth. "You 'as to plant a kiss on these rosy red lips."

Baz recoiled, but then gathered his wits, stepped forward and closed his eyes. Baz later remembered fearing that half his face was about to be sucked off by two lugworms struggling to free themselves from a hook. Finally she released him, turned to the cauldron and dipped in a spoon. "Now, you have to have some of this."

The smell turned Baz's stomach to jelly. "What is this foul potion?"

"Oh it ain't a potion. It's my old man's dinner. I just wondered if you thought it needed some more salt."

Baz held up his hand "Enough woman. Just give me the answer to my question."

"Oh, in a tearing hurry are we?"

"Look the question I have for you is..."

The woman gave a toothless grin. "I know what the question is." She prodded him in the chest with a long bony finger. "And you already know the answer in here."

She rammed her finger hard in his chest again. "That poor wronged woman still laments you know. Her suffering is endless." The colour drained from Baz's face. "There she lies alone in that unmarked grave, knowing that it was you who took the

most precious thing from her. You think nobody else knows she is there. But I knows Baz. I knows.”

She returned to stirring her pot and a small globule of something green bubbled to the top briefly, before submerging again. “Are you surprised that there is so much grief and unhappiness above the ground when the source lies just a few feet below?”

Baz gulped and started to stammer. “This is nonsense. I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re an old fraud!”

She threw her next words into his face like a gauntlet. “An old fraud am I? You know it won’t be right till you make it so Baz. You hear me?! It won’t be right till you make it so!”

He turned and found his way back through the narrow crevice. His could hear his own heart beating hard. The crone continued to cackle away behind him. Baz quickened his pace. Mad disjointed utterings continued to spew forth from the crevice. “He’s offside ref! Touch-judge, get them back! ‘Ow much are they paying you?”

Baz ran along the narrow path, not caring as the thorns snagged his expensive Gomershall jacket. Eventually, he reached the top of the hill and bent double to recover his breath. As he stood up again, to the north-east, he could see glowering storm clouds smothering the city and a gloomy shadow spreading below. Suddenly, the clouds broke and a narrow shaft of light shone directly downwards onto the Mira stand.

And Baz knew what he had to do.

## **Episode 7. Spiralling out of Control**

Duncan Wood pressed the “on” switch at the back of the modem. Three little green lights at the front started to flash accompanied by a familiar screeching noise from the little speaker at the back of the box. After a few seconds a pop-up window flashed onto his computer screen “Connected at 14.4 kbs.”

Wood turned to the audience triumphantly, “Ladies and gentleman, we are now live to the world. Welcome to the Official Fans Forum. Could I remind you please, that there is no smoking, no swearing and no heavy petting – at least until the cameras have been switched off.”

Nothing had been left to chance. The slop trays from the previous weekend had been emptied into a large dustbins and was being ladled out into plastic pint glasses to a long line of greedy supplicants. There was an earnest-looking woman in a beige cardigan, standing to one side of the stage, ready to translate the proceedings into sign-language for the benefit of a group of supporters who had hitched over from the Forest. On the stage, members of the management team fidgeted nervously. Johan Ackermann wore a fixed grin as he scanned the sceptical-looking audience in their ancient, moth-eaten replica kit, their dignity sustained only by the strategic placement of rusted safety pins and carefully-tied baler-twine.

Duncan Wood spread his arms wide like an evangelical preacher from Arkansas, ready to prove his faith in the Almighty by wrangling a tangle of rattlesnakes. “So who would like to get us started? Ah... that lady there with the purple hair.”

As the management team's eyes started drooping, the woman came to the climax of her peroration. “... so when I goes to a rugby match, I wants to watch rugby. I don't want some woman tryin' to sell me dresses. If I want a frock, I goes to New York or Paris or Milan... or ...if I'm in a hurry, I'll nip down the King's Road.”

Over at Fumblings, sitting in his study, Baz was staring at the frozen “live” image from Kingsholm on his super-thin, titanium lap-top. He poured himself another glass of McRae's 25 Year Old Speyside Malt and checked his Son of Samsung phone. Still nothing. “Come on” he thought to himself, “According to Smirkey, we've only got a 45 minute window to do this.”

While Baz paced impatiently up and down, over on the southern outskirts of Paris, from the roof of the disused garage Inspector Berthaud could see the flashing red and green lights overhead, pulsing from the last batch of planes from New York, laden with their cargoes of weary tourists and well-sauced businessmen. She took a long draw on her cigarette and fished out the warrant from inside her battered leather jacket. She checked Judge Roban's spidery signature at the bottom one more time. Then she looked back up at the name at the top – it was one she was more accustomed to seeing in the headlines of L'Equipe. The next day those headlines would be about how Berthaud and her team had blown the whole of the FFR apart.

Leaning on the parapet, Sergeant Gilou Escoffier focussed his binoculars on the window of the target's office. Where the hell was the signal from England? It was late, really late – one hour ahead of London time - and Bernard Laporte was about to leave for the night. Gilou lowered his binoculars, tapped a packet of Gauloise on the parapet, took one out and lit it.

Berthaud slipped the search warrant back inside her jacket. She moved her hand round to the back of her blue spray-on jeans to where her service pistol was resting in the holster that had seemingly been tailor-made to fit the perfect curve of her right buttock. "I've had enough of this. I say hit them now."

Gilou shook his head. "If we screw things up with MI6, the Interior Minister will kick our arses all the way down the Champs Elysee. Let's give them another ten minutes."

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Back at Kingsholm another questioner was slurring the last page of his speech. "...and it wasn't even the original version - it was the digitally remastered one, which is a whole six seconds shorter than the original and misses out the important tambourine solo in the middle. I don't pay 400 quid a year to be treated like that."

A hapless Steven Vaughan promised to trawl the flea markets of Gloucestershire in a search for original vinyl to replace the digital playlist the club normally used. The audience gave a resentful grumble of acknowledgement. But for before anyone else could stand up, a perfectly groomed young woman, wearing a tight-fitting crimson Collazo jacket, her auburn ringlets cascading over her shoulders, delivered her impatient question in her crystal-clear Cheltenham Ladies College accent. "Mr St Quentin, How do you now feel about the death of the Altrad deal?" She looked the chairman square in the eye, holding his gaze.

St Quintin tugged at the collar of his shirt and flushed. "I... um....er. Well, if you are going to force my hand...with the benefit of hindsight... it was probably .... erm..for the best, you know as far as the er... long term good of the club is concerned."

The young woman smiled. "Thank you." She sat down and pulled out her phone. She composed the single word text to her employer that would set off a chain of events that would shake French rugby to its roots. "ALLEZ."

Back in his study, Baz's phone vibrated on his desk. He picked it up, tapped the screen and saw the message. "ALLEZ". He clicked the "Forward" button and then looked for a French mobile number in his contact list and pressed 'Send'. Baz sat back in the leather wing arm-chair. Then, turning to the portrait of the Iron Duke that was hanging over the fireplace, he raised his crystal Strokosch whisky glass in tribute. He squinted at the painting and rubbed his chin. The Goya that was hanging in the National Gallery, he reflected, was really a very poor copy.

Back on the garage roof in Paris, Sergeant Gilou was snuffling Berthaud's neck. She could still smell stale Heineken on his breath, Gilou murmured to her softly. "Look, if we can't do this tonight, why don't we just go back to your place..."

In her jacket pocket Berthaud could feel her phone vibrating. She pulled it out and looked at the waiting message. "ALLEZ." She pushed Gilou's head back and fished in her pocket for her orange police arm-band, then put her hand behind her back to the pistol and clasped her fingers around the stock. She ruffled his tousled hair. "Ah Gilou... unfortunately for you, tonight it is Monsieur Laporte who gets screwed." She flicked the safety catch on her pistol.

Gilou gave a Gallic shrug and then smiled. He barked the orders into his walkie-talkie. "Go... go... go!"

\* \* \*

The following day, Baz was striding down the length of the Buxton Gallery surrounded by his treasured Venetian landscapes by the renaissance masters Chistolini, Polledri and Bortolami. He held his phone to his ear.

"Yes, that was a VERY unfortunate turn of events in Paris yesterday.....I told you Martin, if Altrad was no longer going to be in the background, I would pick up the entire cost of the development. And now I am going to step up to the mark... I just have to be happy that the design is the right one for Kingsholm.... Yes, well they should be arriving any minute.... Yes I'm sure I'll be impressed.... Yes if I'm happy, I'll write a cheque for the full amount." There was a longer pause. "I told you I'll pay for anything that he was going to do – just keep my name out of it..... "

Vickery emerged through a green baize door. "Sir, if I may, the gentlemen are ready with their presentation now."

Baz held up an index finger. "Martin look, I've got to go. The architects are already here. Lunch? Well I know February is going to be very tricky, March too. Call Camilla will you and we'll see if we can fix something up closer to the summer.... Yes, you too....Bye now... Bye...Bye."

Baz rolled his eyes at Vickery. "Where have you put them?"

"They are in the billiard room, sir. They have just finished setting things up."

When Baz entered the room a small group of thin young men, dressed in black with identical haircuts round, black-rimmed glasses and black shoulder-bags, were clustered around the billiard table, assembling what looked like a large scale model of the future Castle Grim. From the middle of the huddle an older, bald-headed man, with a tanned leathery complexion, wearing a black polo-neck sweater, looked up and stepped forward. The ensemble looked like an early 'eighties German electronica group.

Hamilton, who has been dozing in the corner, opened a lazy eye and closed it again. Baz shook the older man's hand. "Lord Fester, I presume."

Lord Fester smiled. "Delighted." After introducing his team of identikit assistants he turned to the model that was sitting on the billiard table. "We were just assembling the masterpiece – our vision for Kingsholm 2025. Or, as we like to call it 'The Fruit Bowl'. Please allow us to demonstrate."

One of the assistants picked up a large green melon shaped object and placed it at one end of the miniature rugby pitch. Lord Fester swept his hand over the model. "This is the new Kingsholm Road stand. It can seat 5,000 people. They will be completely sheltered from the elements – and no supporting posts. The roof is entirely suspended from an external gantry."

Another assistant took a long yellow banana-shaped building and set it alongside the melon. Lord Fester tapped the model. "And here is the replacement for the Shed. It will have state of the art extractor fans, being specially developed by Rolls Royce Aerospace, at both ends."

He nodded to another assistant, who took an orange pineapple-shaped building. "Here is the replacement for the Tump. Standing for another 3,000, plus 30 fully serviced hospitality suites."

Fester walked to the side of the model and hovered over the car-park. "Now we come to the piece de resistance - the Mira stand itself. The main building will be a mango-shaped, self-supporting stand, capable of housing all the offices, 60 hospitality seats and unobstructed viewing for 10,000 spectators."

Fester stood back from the side of the table, admiring his work. He was just in time. He heard the whooshing noise as the billiard cue narrowly missed his ear and smashed into the large orange-green buildings, sending thousands of matchsticks flying into the air. Fester turned and looked horrified at Baz, who had shouldered the cue, ready for another assault. Hamilton lumbered to his feet, bared his teeth and snarled.

Baz's voice was quivering with pent-up rage. "You have precisely two minutes to extract yourself and your associates from this house! Otherwise it will be this billiard cue that will have to be extracted from..."

Lord Fester didn't wait for him to finish. They scooped the remains of the model into a large cardboard box and fled from the room. Baz watched out of the second floor window as Lord Fester's silver De Lorean sped down the drive, with his assistants in hot pursuit in a peloton of black Brompton bicycles.

Baz punched the screen of his phone and put it to his ear. "No, they have left..... Yes already. Martin. I think we need to have a little talk."

Baz flipped the phone back into his pocket. Hamilton crossed the room and rubbed his enormous head against his master's leg. Baz ruffled the fur at the back of the dog's neck. "You know what old thing. I think I might need your help to explain things a little more clearly to Mr St Quentin."

## **Episode 8. An Appointment in Archange;**

OG pulled his bobble hat down close over his ears, grateful for the added insulation afforded by the fluffy appendage. He stamped his feet for warmth. Blowing on his gloved hands, he watched the air crystallize at the fringes of his cloudy breath. The only sound was the insistent barking of a distant Alsatian and the scraping of the chain to which it was tethered, as the creature chased after imagined intruders and passing rats, scurrying their way along the waterfront. A few dim sodium streetlights sputtered a yellow cast over the derelict storage units and stacks of rusted chemical drums. OG patted the thick A4 envelope folded into his inside overcoat pocket and looked at his watch. It was seven o'clock local time. At this point on a Saturday most good Russians would be at home watching TV or at the bars – but OG wasn't so sure he was meeting a good Russian. Why some remote dockyard on the edge of Archangel? Why not some restaurant or even a hotel room? "Discretion." That was what Baz had said. "Our contact likes his privacy."

The contact should have been there 15 minutes before. Russians were normally punctual. How much longer was he expected to wait? With each passing minute OG could feel his heart-rate quicken, his chest tighten and little beads of nervous perspiration starting to freeze on his upper lip. His ears were tuned to the slightest sound, the scrape of a boot or the suggestion of a cough, but there was nothing.

Then. "You are OG, yes?"

The gravelly voice had come from a spot just a few paces behind him. OG turned and saw a lean, muscular figure, bundled up in a military-issue combat jacket and a ribbed black commando hat, decorated with an old-style Soviet star.

OG tried to sound nonchalant. "Who wants to know?"

The Russian drawled "Are you OG or not?"

What little confidence OG still possessed suddenly evaporated into the night and he nodded guiltily.

"Then you have the contract?"

OG tried again, this time extending his hand. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure. Mr...?"

The Russian ignored the gesture. "I would like to see the contract now."

OG, affecting nonchalance, shrugged, unbuttoned his overcoat and pulled out the large manila envelope. The Russian snatched it from his hand and ripped open the flap. He riffled through the papers, looked up at OG and threw them in his face. "What is this? Is it some kind of joke? You think you can play games with me my friend?"

OG tried to stammer something, but looked down at the sheets of paper, floating in the large oily puddle at his feet. They were completely blank.

The Russian fished around the back of his combat pants and pulled from the belt a Special Forces issue revolver and a pocket a long silencer, which he started to screw into the barrel of the gun. "You British – you never know when to give up do you. At least, not until it is too late."

OG threw his hands in the air and protested. "Look, I have no idea what is going on here. I'm just simply..."

The Russian levelled the barrel of the gun at OG's forehead. "Let me give you a piece of advice – not that you will ever be able to use it – life is never 'just simply'."

OG closed his eyes and waited for the bang. Would he hear it? He wondered to himself. Would he feel any pain?

The sound when it came was not of a gunshot but a sudden loud sizzling, as if someone had cracked eggs into a pan that was too hot. Then he heard a crump – the sound of a body hitting the floor. When OG opened his eyes the Russian was lying on the ground. Standing over him was a lithe figure, dressed in black motorcycle leathers and a black crash helmet, pointing what looked like a high-powered cattle prod at the prone figure. His rescuer (if that's who he was) grabbed the Russian's arm and indicated to OG that he should take the other. Together they dragged the unconscious Russian to the water's edge. At the bottom of a derelict landing stage a small open clinker-built boat was waiting. The motorcyclist gestured to OG that he should manhandle the body into the bottom. The boat rocked dangerously. The leather-clad figure indicated OG to get aboard himself and then climbed in and proceeded to the back of the boat. OG heard the starter cord being yanked. At the third attempt the outboard motor roared into life.

Ten minutes later they were out of the harbour, and fast approaching the silhouette of a large, rust-encrusted industrial trawler. OG's heart sank as he made out a Russian flag at flying at the back. Where the hell were they taking him? To the gulag? To a watery grave? He knew he would cave in at the first sight of the electrodes. But what could he tell them anyway. He wanted to cry.

As they drifted to the side of the larger vessel, a door opened in its side and four muscly arms in orange overalls grabbed the unconscious Russian and hauled him unceremoniously into the trawler, cracking his head on the bulkhead as they did so. Another arm pulled OG unceremoniously into the craft. He was followed by the motorcyclist who gave him a shove in the back for good measure.

The motorcyclist pushed OG further down the corridor and into a small mess-cabin. On an oval Formica table in front of them was a bottle of Perrier Jouet Belle Epoque and three champagne flutes. OG summoned up a small measure of courage. "Look

here," he said to no one in particular, "I want to see someone from the British Embassy. Right now. I mean it! There's going to be trouble.."

The motorcyclist bent over, lifted the crash-helmet onto the table and placed a hand at the back of the head. Long copper-coloured curls fell about slender, athletic shoulders. A voice called out towards a doorway at the other side of the cabin. The accent was crystal clear Cheltenham Ladies College. "Mission accomplished sir!"

Baz stepped through the doorway, followed by a slightly portly figure who was polishing his spectacles with his tie. Baz looked pleased with himself. "Ah Camilla, well done. A few minutes behind schedule, but not bad." He poured three glasses of champagne and offered one to Camilla and the other to Smirkey who was standing by his side. He turned to OG. "You look like you've had a bit of an ordeal. Would you like a nice cup of tea?"

OG began to come to his senses. He glared at Smirkey and then pointed accusingly at Baz. "What the hell is going on?" The angry edge to his voice was tinted with self-pity.

Smirkey stepped between them and spoke with his usual, unflappable calm. "You have just played a part, albeit a minor one, in the capture of the infamous Karla."

OG shook his head. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"We have been after Karla for years. Top Soviet intelligence officer and a really nasty piece of work. He's the one who put a bullet in Baz's shoulder."

Smirkey took his glass and raised it to Camilla and Baz. "Mission almost accomplished. My congratulations to you both."

Baz took a sip of his champagne and then turned to face OG. "I suppose I should fill you in. You see Karla has been working at the heart of the Russian Rugby Federation to undermine the English game." He took a longer sip. "Their plan was to flood the English clubs with Russian money and blow the salary cap sky high as a result. They have a number of agents already in place at a number of clubs who are already well embarked on this project. You know, those guys will do anything for money or kinky sex or plans to the latest Russian vacuum cleaner technology."

OG was confused. "But what possible advantage could that be to the Russians?"

Baz waved his glass. "By flooding the clubs with money, the EQP system would become irrelevant. The domestic game would attract all the very best players from the southern hemisphere. The national team would slide into insignificance, causing yet further damage to England's standing in the world. We would end up like France." Baz gave an involuntary shudder.

OG was unconvinced. "But why me?"

Baz shrugged. "Well it's simple. You were expen...."

Smirkey cut in quickly. "Expensively educated. We knew you would be convincing as a top London lawyer, acting for Baz in a supposed reverse takeover of Gloucester Rugby."

OG looked sceptical. Smirkey continued. "I need to explain further. You see for years, these Russian agents embedded at other clubs have been communicating in code though messages on Shedweb. Have you never noticed messages with strange spellings or curious syntax?" OG shook his head. "Well they are there if you look closely enough. We were tipped off by our friends in Cheltenham, but even they couldn't crack the code they are using. Now we have Karla in our hands we should be able to interrogate him and identify not only who the sleepers are on the management boards of the other clubs, but which Shedweb posters are working for the other side."

The wind had been taken out of OG's sails. "But, I could have been shot. Killed."

Smirkey gave a sympathetic smile. ""In such an eventuality, preparations had been made to award you The Order of Larkin. It's a posthumous honour conferred by Her Majesty on librarians and archivists who have been killed in the line of duty. Actually, you would have been the first member."

At that moment an oily-faced seamen in orange overalls poked his head into the cabin. "Begging' pardon Sir. Captain says that the ice is starting to close in and we are due to make our rendezvous in just under four hours."

Smirkey looked concerned. "Are we at risk of being iced in?"

The rating beamed proudly. "Not once we are aboard HMS Polledri Sir. She's our latest ice-breaker. Nothing stops her. And she can top 35 knots in open water."

The old spymaster smiled. "Very good. Please ask Captain Ackermann to get us underway."

Smirkey then turned to Baz. "Time to lay down some smoke I think."

Baz nodded and started tapping a message into his phone. "In mid-Atlantic about 4 days from Barbados, so I would appreciate the updates..."

Baz looked up and grinned. "Try for Matt Scott – we are 24-14 up against the cheaters. Looks like we are going to get the W"

Smirkey nodded. "It has been a good day my friend. If we can get this old tub moving and make our rendezvous, we should be able to get back in time for the Worcester game."

OG watched the two men clink their glasses, congratulating each other. Suddenly he felt deeply unimportant. Camilla caught his eye and slinked over to his side. She slipped a leather-clad arm around his shoulder. OG caught a heady draught of her exclusive perfume - Nocturne by Gomarsall. He could feel her warm breath on his neck. Her soft, downy cheek touched his. She whispered in softly into his ear and squeezed his hand. "Well I thought you were very brave." The room began to spin and OG's could feel his knees started to weaken.

Smirkey was behind him in a flash. "Quickly, let's get him onto the couch! I think he's going into shock."

## **Episode 9. The Mrs Kalamfoni Affair**

Baz laid back and looked up at the gilded bedroom ceiling. Pudgy cherubs were intertwined with cavorting nymphs. It is said that this masterpiece of the Renaissance was painted by the Italian master, Bortolomi. Baz's attention was caught by a movement in one corner, just by Leda's left buttock. He watched as a spider slowly entombed her hapless prey in gossamer. He looked back down to where the slender-hipped, dusky woman was writhing rhythmically on his pelvis, thrusting this way and that, her hands on his shoulders. She was moaning gently, her head down, long dark locks covering her face, the ends gently brushing his chest. Beads of sweat were forming all over her body, giving her skin a red-brown translucent sheen. Her deep musky scent, something you might find in a Lebanese coffee-house, seemed to infuse every corner of the room. Every few minutes she would give out a dreamy satisfied sigh.

Baz looked across at the alarm clock by the side of the bed. Four and a half hours they had been at it. This tantric sex stuff might be alright for ageing, rain-forest-hugging rock-stars, but he had things to do and Glaws were kicking off at 2.30. He'd only been able to keep going all this time because, Mrs Kalamafoni, had sent up a plate of ham sandwiches and a tray of home-made pickles. He'd already finished the Telegraph crossword and was starting to wish he hadn't left his Sudoku book in the back of the Bentley.

All of a sudden, he felt it coming on. He couldn't help it. He felt his body tense, his neck stiffen and he gave it up with a groan - a long noisy yawn. The woman stopped moving. "Uh-oh, she's not going to be happy," Baz thought to himself.

He heard her give a long vengeful hiss, like a spitting cobra. The woman slowly lifted her head. Baz knew he was in for it now. And then he saw her properly in the shaft of dusty daylight light that was coming through the window. He would never forget that face. Sallow skin surrounding bloodshot eyes, a gnarled warty nose and yellow stumps in a great black hollow of a mouth. He recognised her immediately from the soothsayer's cave, he could smell that same dank, festering stench. It was The Banshee.

"You!" she screamed. "It was you. You took it! You took it from 'er. She ain't going to rest. You're cursed. The whole bloody town is cursed. Give it back! Give it back! Give it back I say!"

Baz tried to wriggle from underneath her, but her now pale, leathery flanks had him clasped tight. "Help!" He cried. "Help me! Please God, help me!"

When he opened his eyes Vickery was standing above him. The Banshee was nowhere to be seen. Vickery, looking concerned, coughed politely into the back of his hand. "I believe you were having another of your dreams sir."

Baz struggled to catch his breath. "Is that you Vickery? Oh thank God!"

Later that morning, as the winter sun streamed in from the knot-garden, Baz threw his napkin down onto the long mahogany dining room table and sighed deeply. Mrs Kalamafoni, had prepared a light brunch of devilled kidneys, bacon, black sausage, a pork chop, eggs, mushrooms, grilled tomatoes and sautéed potatoes. Vickery reached for Baz's plate and spotted two mushrooms and a piece of fried bread sitting on the side. "Is everything alright sir?"

Baz shook his head. "I seem to have lost my appetite altogether."

"You do seem rather out of sorts sir."

"We've got Wasps at home this afternoon. I'm worried – really worried. I think there might be a curse on the club."

Vickery raised a doubtful eyebrow. "Really Sir?"

Baz ignored the note of scepticism. "Is OG here? "

"I believe Hamilton has taken him for his morning walk sir."

"Alright, when he has cleaned the blood off himself, tell him to come and see me."

\* \* \*

OG found eventually Baz hurrying through the kitchens on his way to the scullery. He stepped into his path. "Sir, you were looking for me?"

Baz could not hide his irritation. "You were supposed to be back two hours ago? Where have you been?"

"Following a fox to the other side of Winchcombe. Luckily for him he managed to outsmart us."

Baz smiled ruefully. "Well it doesn't take much to outsmart Hamilton. Now you can make yourself useful, hold this lantern, we're going down to the cellar."

Baz slipped the heavy iron bolt on the oak door and stepped onto the worn stone steps that led into the darkness below. OG could hear water dripping from somewhere. As he put his hand to the wall to steady himself, he felt slime under his finger-tips. Baz took the lantern from OG. "All this was built in the Reformation. It was designed to conceal Catholic priests." OG could feel his heartbeat quicken.

The stairs suddenly ended and they found themselves in a long passage. About ten yards down on the left hand side a yellow light glowed from a side chamber. The chamber itself was barred by an iron gate. Baz took a large key from his pocket, unlocked it and beckoned OG to enter. As his eyes became accustomed to the

gloom, OG spotted a wretched human form, chained to the wall in the corner. Baz lifted the lamp, revealing the remains of a man, covered in bruises and whip-marks and dressed in nothing more than a leather thong. Large crocodile clips were attached to his nipples and these led to some sort of ancient control box sitting on the steel table. On the table sat various instruments of torture – thumbscrews, pliers and, something that sent a chill down OG’s spine, two pieces of polystyrene that could be rubbed together.

OG was shocked. “How on earth could you? Isn’t this kind of thing against every sort of international convention?”

At that moment the manacled figure lifted his head. “Oh wotcha Baz. Hope you don’t mind. Vickery let me in. I was just having forty winks before kick-off. Stick the telly on would you. As you can see, I’m a bit tied up.”

Baz picked up the remote from the steel table and pressed the on button. In the opposite corner a screen flickered into life and OG recognised the picture of Lansdowne Road. Baz pointed to the figure in the corner. “This is Lewi, he’s our Shedweb masochist – I suppose that goes without saying as he follows Wales. But he likes to watch the internationals down here where we are suitably equipped for a complete match-day experience. This week it should be particularly painful as it’s on ITV.”

Lewi interrupted him. “I say Baz, you couldn’t give me a quick jolt could you? They’re just singing the anthems. Take it up to 300 volts this time if you wouldn’t mind.”

Baz flicked a switch on the control box and Lewi’s body went into spasm. Lewi smiled, “Bloody marvellous. Now could you just give me a swig of that Brain’s Bitter over there...” Baz tipped a little of the disgusting brown liquid into Lewi’s mouth. He shuddered. “Bloody hell, that was horrible. Fantastic. Thanks Baz.”

Baz shook his head sadly. “Come on OG. We’d better take a look at our other guest.”

Baz’s heavy brogues slapped on the flagstones as he led the way down the long passage to a solid steel door. He placed his palm on the glass pad on the adjacent wall and the door slid open noiselessly. Behind a bullet-proof glass screen sitting on a plastic chair, under bright fluorescent lights sat Karla. Defiant. Inscrutable.

On Baz’s side of the glass, Smirkey was in conversation with an assistant – a lean man in his mid 30’s with swept-back jet-black hair wearing a black Harrington jacket, a black polo neck sweater and black gloves. Smirkey turned to Baz. “Ah Baz, I’m pleased to say our American friends have decided to allow us to use their latest truth-drug”.

The man in the dark glasses nodded and spoke in a mid-Western accent. “Greeting gentlemen. I bring you our famous Langley cocktail.” He held up a syringe containing

a clear liquid. "Almost no-one has been unable to hold-out against this." He squirted a couple of millilitres into the air for effect.

Baz raised an eyebrow. "Almost no one?"

"Yeah, well there was that dude, one of your guys... what was his name? Ah yes Rob Andrew. It had absolutely no effect on him."

Smirkey, shook his head. "Well, for some there is no truth-drug powerful enough."

They turned when they heard a tap on the glass. Karla was smiling at them and pointing at a salt-beef sandwich that was in his hand. He gave them the thumbs up, took a bite of the sandwich and then gave them a small wave of farewell.

"Good Lord!" cried Smirkey, "Get in there quick!" The American punched a button on the wall and a go next to the glass screen clicked open. It was too late. Karla was lying lifeless on the floor.

Baz looked stunned . "How...?"

An ashen-faced Smirkey started to polish his spectacles on his tie. "I'm afraid it was my fault. Mrs Kalamafoni brought him the sandwich just before you arrived. I thought nothing of it. I assumed you had ordered it for him."

Baz shook his head. "OG get all the staff together, all of them. Search everywhere for Mrs Kalamfoni. Hurry!"

Thirsty minutes later, OG entered Baz's study. Baz and Smirkey were cradling half-empty glasses of McCrae's 25 year old Speyside malt. Baz looked expectantly at OG. "Well?"

OG shook his head. "Nothing. We looked everywhere. The only thing we found was this." OG fished something out of his pocket. "We found it trapped on a length of barbed wire on the other side of the lake." He handed the blue, white and black bobble-hat to Baz.

Baz's legs wobbled and he reached behind him for the refuge of the old leather armchair by the fire. "All these years.... Under my roof. A rat. A charlatan. I always thought the mulligatawny tasted a bit odd." He gave an involuntary shudder.

Smirkey coughed. "Look I'm going to get in touch with the Circus – get them to put a watch on all the ports and airports, and we'll station someone on Pulteney Bridge."

Baz suddenly remembered something. Hang-on what was the final score? We were 18-6 up."

Smirkey looked at his phone and hissed through his teeth. "Twenty five apiece. We drew."

Baz smacked the arm of the chair. "OG I need to speak to you privately. Smirkey, you'd better get on with your arrangements."

Smirkey nodded and left the room. "OG I need to show you something. You are not to tell another living soul about it."

OG nodded and Baz crossed the room to the marble bust of Mike Tindall. He took hold of the nose and gave it a sharp quarter turn to the left. Something clicked and one of the oak panels slid silently open, revealing a large safe. Baz stood in front of the tumbler and rotated it back and forth until there was a faint click. Baz turned the handle, opened the door and reached inside to retrieve a small brown envelope. He handed it to OG. "What do you think this is?"

OG lifted the flap and slid the contents into the palm of his hand. To his astonishment it was an oval-shaped, enamelled jewel about two inches long. The gold mount was covered with garnets and amethysts. The enamelled part contained a primitive-looking portrait of what appeared to be a long dark-haired woman, finely-dressed, holding some sort of staff of office. Around the edge of the mount there was an inscription. "'AETHELFLAED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN".

Baz looked expectantly at OG. "So, what do you make of it."

OG whistled softly. "I think you should call the British Museum, that's what I think."

Baz shook his head. "I can't do that."

"Where did you find it?"

"It was when they were putting up the Mira Stand, when they were digging the foundations. Tom had invited me to come over and take a look. I saw this just lying there on a heap of spoil, so I picked it up and brought it home."

OG appeared to be transfixed by the object. He was quiet for a moment and then spoke softly. "I don't know if you know this, but this lady – King Alfred's own daughter as it happens - was once the joint-ruler of Mercia. She was the one who built the defences of the Saxon burghs and saw off the Viking invaders. The odd thing is that she was supposed to have been buried at St Oswald's Priory." Baz looked at OG expectantly.

OG was lost in his thoughts. After a few moments he rubbed his chin. "But then again, the Mira stand is halfway between the remains of the Priory and the site of Kingsholm Palace – so right next to the old Dean's Walk that used to connect the two sites. They've never found her remains. I am guessing – and this is only a guess – that this jewel is part of her grave goods."

Baz interjected. "So she could be buried under the Mira, or perhaps even the car-park."

OG shrugged "She wouldn't be the first." He handed the jewel back to Baz. "So what are you going to do with this?"

## **Episode 10. Baz's Todger**

OG blew gently onto the curly thatch above Baz's groin. Baz gave a bored sigh, "Can we get on with this, I'm getting cramp in my lower leg and if I don't get my clothes back on pretty soon, I'm pretty sure I'm going to get frostbite or something."

"This is the trickiest bit. I need you to stay absolutely still." OG dabbed away the marble dust with an old paintbrush and picked up his mallet and chisel.

On the other side of the orangery Baz was naked, half crouching with his right arm extended above his shoulder and his hand clutching his rare original pressing of Chris Farlowe's hit-single, "Handbags and Gladrags."

"I should never have allowed you to talk me into this," grumbled Baz.

OG waved his chisel dismissively, "Look, if we are going to do this properly I do need you to co-operate. And this bit here is all there is left to do. Then we'll be able to fill the empty plinth in the South Atrium."

"Well, hurry up will you. I've got to call Bob Harris to give him the bad news."

OG cocked his head, "What bad news?"

"Stephen has listened to his demo tape. But he says that even if the club bought the Grateful Dead's old PA stack, he still wouldn't be loud enough to hear over the rustling of sweet-wrappers in the Mira."

At that moment Baz's interior designer, Stephanie, tapped on the door and walked breezily in. She appeared not to notice Baz's state of undress. She smiled sweetly. She was wearing a tiny Bortolami micro-skirt and a white silk Collazo shirt with plunging neckline. "Baz, I've been looking at your bedroom ceiling again. I think we could have a bit of fun up there."

Baz flushed. OG looked at the piece of the statue he was working on and then back up at his subject. He put his mallet to one side. "Baz, I thought I told you to stay absolutely still. There's not enough marble left to..."

Crimson-faced, Baz grabbed his Hugh Heffner silk dressing-gown and wrapped it around himself as quickly as he could. "You'll just have to finish it from memory", he said brusquely.

Then he turned to Stephanie. "I'm sorry my dear, OG is just trying to capture my essential nature. He envisages me as a Greek discus-thrower." Unconsciously, Baz sucked in his stomach and puffed out his chest.

Stephanie crossed the room and stood in front of the life-size statue. She cast her gaze below the midriff, where OG was continuing to chisel. "My word," she gasped, "Are you sure that's in proportion?"

Baz interrupted them. "If it was in proportion, the statue would have to be twelve feet tall. Now, how can I help you my dear?"

Stephanie could not lift her eyes from the marble torso, "Erm, I err...."

At that moment, a portly spectacled figure in a gabardine mackintosh tapped on the door and entered. He looked Baz up and down in the dressing-gown and raised an eyebrow. "I wonder if Miss Stephanie might leave us for a moment. I'm afraid have some rather serious news."

Reluctantly, Stephanie drew herself away from the statue. She gave a final glance to OG, held her hands apart as if measuring a family loaf, and winked. She finally turned and nodded to Baz. "I've decided to rework my sketches for the bedroom ceiling. OG has given me some ideas."

Smirkey raised his Homberg politely as Stephanie left the room. Once he was sure she was out of earshot, he turned to Baz. "It's about Mrs Kalamofoni."

There was a deathly silence in the room. Silence except for the gentle regular tapping of OG's chisel on marble. Smirkey cleared his throat. "We've had two of our very best people on her tail. They followed her down to Salisbury, but I'm afraid things went rather wrong. She's now disappeared altogether."

Baz was grim-faced. "Go on. What else?"

Smirkey pursed his lips. "Well, thanks to a reliable source in Berlin we believe we now know who she really was." Smirkey pressed the fingers of both hands together as if in supplication. "There's no easy way to say this. I'm afraid that the person who has been adding the customary schnapps to your porridge for the last four years is none other than..." Smirkey looked to the ceiling as if summoning divine assistance... "The Black Widow'."

There was a loud crack from over by the statue. OG looked horrified as a large cylindrical piece of marble fell heavily to the orangery floor and rolled into a dusty corner. Baz seemed not to notice. "The Black Widow? The last remaining member of the Baader-Strokosh gang, went on to help found Black September, Grey January and the slightly less deadly, Autumn Primrose?"

Smirkey nodded grimly. "The very same. She's been on Interpol's most-wanted list since 1975."

Baz raised an eyebrow. "She can't have much of an occupational pension if she's still having to freelance."

“I think the chances of us ever finding her again are slim. But you must realise that every secret that has ever been discussed here - player transfers, line-out calls, the locations of the Polaris fleet - has probably been transmitted on the hot-line between the Kremlin and Farleigh House.”

Smirkey placed a comforting arm around Baz’s shoulder. Baz slumped against the orangery wall. “The Black Widow. My God.”

That evening Baz was staring out of the study window across the knot-garden and down to the South Lawn. The sun was starting to sink behind the hills beyond. He was toying absent-mindedly with a glass of McCrae’s 25 year old Speyside malt. He was lost in his thoughts when there was a gentle knock on the door. OG poked his head hesitantly around the oak door. “I’m sorry Baz, do you have a moment? Please.”

Baz nodded and OG shuffled in, holding a tattered orange supermarket bag. He fished inside and retrieved the detached piece of marble. “I’ve tried every sort of glue, but it seems that there is nothing strong enough to hold it.” He brightened for a moment and tried to inject a note of optimism. “If you go around all the great museums and look at the Greek statues, that bit is invariably missing. So it kind of looks more authentic now. If um... you see what I mean.”

Baz looked downcast. “If you say so OG. What will you do with this piece?”

“Well, Miss Stephanie might want to use it as a door-stop... or..” He coughed. “... er.. something.” Baz did not look impressed. OG stumbled on. “Or... and I don’t know what you will think about this, but I have a little exhibition at Appleton Village Hall on 19th and 20th May – it’s about seven miles west of Oxford. I could display it there as the centre-piece? I think there would be a lot of interest from Shedweb readers.”

Baz gave a long sigh, “I really don’t care what you do with it OG. Put it in your bloody exhibition if you like.”

OG gave a smile. “Thanks!”

Baz returned to the window. As OG turned to leave, Baz spoke absently, “Just one thing. What the hell are you going to call it?”

OG scratched his head. “Oh I don’t know. How about ‘1873 Member’?”

## Episode 10. A Sticky End

Though he was sitting in the middle of a nondescript retail park a short distance from the M4, if Baz closed his eyes he could imagine it was market day in Dun Laoghaire. Around him, he could hear burbling voices, in rich regional brogues, discussing the issues of the day or catching up on family news. Some were bemoaning the rising price of peat and the prospect of being unable to heat their cottages next winter. There was a proud grandmother telling her neighbour (for the umpteenth time) how young Seamus had risen from picking a living as a street-kid in the Bowery to dizzy heights Chief of Police for the 90th precinct. An old man in the next row was gently tapping the head of his shillelagh against his friend's knee, eager for a slug of poteen from the leathern flask that his companion was steadily emptying down his throat. Next to him a pale, threadbare student from Trinity College was annotating verses from a battered volume of W.B. Yeats' collected poems, wrapping his scholar's gown around him for warmth.

It wasn't going well for Glaws. Half time and they were just 17-19 up against the lowliest club in the Premiership. Baz reached in his pocket for his Son of Samsung Graphene phone. Smirkey, who was in the adjacent seat, sighed. "For goodness sake, Baz, can't we just sit here and watch the half-time entertainment, without you having to spend every moment posting on Shedweb?"

On the opposite side of the pitch a troupe of young girls, decked out in emerald green were dancing up and down to an Irish jig, their hands held rigidly at their sides. Baz waved the phone. "I just want to make one comment on the ref..."

Smirkey made a lunge for the Son of Samsung, but as Baz tried to snatch it away it fell from his grasp and tumbled to the ground. Baz bent down to pick it up. "Dammit, Smirkey, that had better not be broken, there are only three models like that in the world."

As he sat up again he brushed a smear of dirt from the screen. "You're lucky, it's not damaged." Smirkey was not listening but staring at the troupe of dancing girls. Baz poked him in the arm. "I said you're lucky..."

Smirkey was pointing to the other side of the pitch. At the end of the line of bobbing heads, one of the ball-boys was dancing up and down on one leg. "Do you see that?"

"A bit disrespectful if you ask me. But you know these kids..."

Smirkey shoved him on the shoulder. "Grab your coat. We've got to get out of here quick!"

Baz found himself in Smkirkey's wake, weaving his way out of the stands and rapidly through the labyrinth of anonymous corridors and stairways of the Madjetski Stadium. Smirkey was flashing an important-looking identity card at a sequence of bemused stewards, until finally they came to a door marked 'Announcer – Strictly No

Entry'. Baz stood to one side of the door while Smirkey gently turned the handle. There was silence. As Baz stepped into the room, he could see the crumpled figure of a young man, slumped over a table in front of the window. His microphone had tumbled to the floor and sheaves of player-notes were strewn around the room.

Smirky lifted the announcer's shoulders from the desk, and examined the back of his head. "It appears he was slugged. No blood. A sock-full of ball-bearings would be my guess. Very professional."

Baz wandered over to the open window and his foot kicked away something metallic. He bent down and picked it up. "Sniper-bullet case. Russian by the looks of it."

Smirkey was wafting something under the announcer's nose. The young man was coming slowly to his senses. He rubbed the back of his head. "What... what happened?"

"Ah Cartwright. It looks like you were caught somewhat off-guard."

To Baz's ear, Smirkey sounded unnecessarily brusque. Baz scratched his chin "Cartwright? Not 'O'Mally' or 'Flannaghan' or something?"

The announcer was about to reply, but Smirkey interrupted him. "Cartwright is one of ours Baz. We put him here to keep look-out for you. As far as we can tell, the Black Widow (aka Mrs Kalamafoni) has not quit the country. We think she has orders to eliminate you. This must be because you are getting too close to uncovering a Farleigh House-Moscow connection."

Baz leaned against the desk. "So just now, when the ball-boy started jumping up and down, he wasn't dancing..."

"No, Mrs Kalamafoni must have pulled the trigger just as you were bending down to pick up your phone. The bullet must have grazed the boy's foot, otherwise a ballistic of that kind would have taken his foot off." He turned to Cartwright and handed him his microphone. "Are you up to continuing with the commentary? We must try not to let the crowd know that something is up."

Cartwright cleared his throat "I'll give it a go, but I might be concussed. Come.... On ... you...Irish!" It was no good. His Etonian vowels were now unmistakable.

Smirkey rubbed the lenses of his spectacles on his tie. "Baz, I'm afraid you'll have to do it."

He handed Baz the microphone and Baz flicked on the switch. "Michael Flatley, Jonathan Swift, Peter O'Toole, Mary Robinson.... Your boys are taking one hell of a beating!" The Kilkenny accent carried a strong Matson burr. Smirkey glared at him.

Baz tried again in a higher pitched voice. "Will you not have another cup of tea father? Oh go on, go on, go on."

Smirkey reached for the microphone. Baz held his free hand up and crossed his fingers. "Let's hear you get behind the boys! Come on you Oirish." Baz's announcement was greeted by a desultory cheer from the crowd. "And there's free Guinness in the bar afterwards." There was a resounding roar from the massed ranks of Gloucester supporters.

Baz gave Smirkey a wink. Smirkey shook his head disapprovingly.

\* \* \*

Black clouds were glowering over Fumblings, where the rain hadn't let up for three days. Baz was sitting in the breakfast room, gazing out at the forlorn aspect of the south lawn, the puddles growing by the hour. His statue stood just above the haha, shorn of its masculinity by a wayward stroke of the sculptor's chisel. "There's a metaphor, if any was needed", he sighed to himself.

He attacked the top of his boiled egg with his butter knife and on the third blow it finally succumbed. Inside was a solid lump of yolk, surrounded by something that was more dark grey than white. Vickery was trying his hardest, but the man was clueless when it came to cooking. Mrs Kalamfoni may have been one of the deadliest assassins on the planet, but she could also rustle up a damn' fine breakfast. Four and a half minutes, that's how he liked his eggs; these looked like they had been boiled for four and a half hours. Even the Banshee could do better with her battered old cauldron Baz reflected to himself.

Smirkey's people had advised him not to travel overseas while Mrs Kalamafoni was at large, meaning that he had been unable to fly to Galway for the European game later that day and this had only served to darken his mood. Vickery had set up the big screen in the private viewing room, but it wouldn't be the same.

As he tried to stab his spoon into the solid yolk, there was an urgent knock at the door. Camilla came bouncing in breathlessly, the strain on her sheer Phillippe St Andre blouse all too evident. "There's been a call from the golf club. It's OG...or rather, it's Hamilton. There's been an incident."

Baz tore round the lanes of the North Cotswolds in his second-best Bugatti. Camilla, sitting in the passenger seat, held her breath but took comfort that her driver had been trained by the very best to elude East German agents (Baz's lap time on the Nürburgring had only been bettered once and then by the famous motor ace, Ryan Walkinshaw). Once they reached the Golf Club, they switched into Baz's private buggy – a specially supercharged edition of the Sharples Turbo. As they sped down the length of the fifteenth, Baz could see OG out on the fairway, looking down into the depths of a vast hole, shouting something that he couldn't quite make out.

As they got closer, great scoops of earth came flying out of the pit. Baz and Camilla jumped out of the buggy and hurried over to the hollow. Baz wondered, perhaps, if a small meteorite had hit the fifteenth fairway during the night. There was a strange panting sound coming from the bottom of the pit. With childhood memories of Quatermass crowding in, Baz crept warily to the edge of the hole.

OG was beside himself. "I've tried everything I can, but he just won't give up."

Baz looked over the edge. There was his faithful hound, seemingly well on his way to Australia.

"I suppose it's my fault, moaned OG, "I was reading up on local history and it said this place was built on a medieval plague pit. I just wanted to come over and see for myself, but I guess Hamilton must still be able to smell the bones. He has an incredible sense of smell."

Baz picked up a large divot and threw it at the dog, striking him firmly on the behind. "Hamilton, pack it up!" The dog turned and growled revealing its ghastly fangs. "OG get down there and drag him out."

"Not for all the bloody tea in Cheltenham!"

Baz pointed to the bottom of the hole. "Well we've got to stop him somehow. If he starts exhuming plague-ridden corpses, this place will start to resemble the Rec on a Saturday afternoon."

Camilla squatted next to the hole, her original black Polledri mini-skirt rising up tantalisingly over her shapely thighs. She fished into her large leather Tomasso D'Apice bag and pulled out a large butcher's bone. "Here Hamilton", she cooed, "Look what mummy's got for you."

The great beast in the hole turned and looked upwards and with two enormous bounds was up on ground level and licking Camilla's face.

Baz scratched his chin. "I'd heard around the village that the butcher was giving Camilla the occasional bone, but I had no idea they meant it literally."

Two hours later Baz was emerged from the Club Secretary's office with a grin on his face. "All sorted. Everyone's happy."

OG was dumfounded. "How on earth did you get away with that?"

Baz grinned. "Apparently, they've been thinking about turning the fifteenth into a par five for some time now and so they're going to turn the pit into a new bunker. It's going to be known as Hamilton's Hollow (best not tell Jim though). Plus I gave the secretary a couple of Bitcoins for his trouble."

OG was agape. "I don't know how... That is unbelievable...And I've never seen a Bitcoin by the way."

Baz looked surprised. "Have you not?" Baz dug into his pocket and pulled out a couple of dull copper discs. He handed one to OG. "Here you go."

OG turned the coin over in his hand. "But it says on here 'A souvenir from Weston Super Mare'."

"No time for minor quibbles now. We need to get to Kingsholm in time for kick off."

"But it's an away match. Why do we need.... Aren't we going to watch it on the telly?"

For a few precious moments, the rain stopped and a brilliant shaft of sunlight broke through the crowds, bathing Baz in a gentle golden aura. He looked upwards to the heavens. "You need to understand just one thing OG. We're on a mission from God."

Baz and Camilla led the way down Kingsholm Road. OG followed in their wake, with Hamilton's lead in his hand and the dog snapping playfully at his groin. Biffo was in his usual place, opposite the Mermaid Fish Bar, standing on soapbox in front of a large banner proclaiming his membership of the Gloucester Rationalist Society. Parents were scuttling past, hurrying their tearful children onwards, as Biffo declaimed through his bullhorn, "There is no such thing as the Easter Bunny. It's all a conspiracy by the capitalist chocolate makers..."

Baz and the others scuttled by, OG shaking his head sadly. Camilla took him by the arm. "Don't look. You'll only upset yourself."

Baz took out his phone. "Bugger, they're just kicking off. Come on. We need to get to work."

Baz flashed his unique Polonium 1873 Membership Card to the steward on the gate. The man bowed and they scurried through the Shogun bar and out onto the pitch. "Whatever you do don't let him off his lead."

Hamilton started sniffing around the dead-ball zone. Camilla urged him on, ruffling his neck. "Come on boy, you can do it."

The hound then covered all of the twenty-two, sniffing at every blade of grass. Baz flipped open his phone to check the score. He slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Jesus wept! Twenty minutes gone and we've conceded five bloody penalties! The whole thing is going to pot. And Romain Poite is threatening to convene a special tribunal at the Hague. Come on Hamilton, hurry up for God's sake."

Suddenly Hamilton gave an excited yelp and ran beyond the ten metre line and straight for the centre-spot. He started pawing urgently at the ground. Baz shouted to OG and Camilla, "Quickly tether him to the railing, otherwise he'll add another three foot to the Kingsholm Slope. I think we've found Aethelflaed's grave."

Baz knelt in front of the centre-spot and took something from his pocket. He placed the golden jewel on the ground, exactly on the centre-spot. He closed his eyes for a minute, opened them again and checked his phone. He leapt to his feet. "Oh yes. He's only gone and given us a bloody penalty!"

Later that evening Baz, Camilla and OG were coming to the end of their victory celebrations. Several empty bottles of Chateau Bastareaud '83 were standing on the table. Hamilton was sleeping in front of the fire, dreaming doggy dreams, snarling and whimpering in equal measure.

Baz waggled his glass at OG. "The Banshee was right. I did bring a curse down on the club when I took Aethelflaed's jewel." He picked up the small piece of gold from the table. "I know you said I should take it to the British Museum, but, if I do, then the curse will never be lifted."

Camilla snatched the jewel from his hand and chastised them. "You are fretting about this old relic, when Mrs Kalamafoni is out there looking to put a bullet through your head. You need to get your priorities right sir."

Baz slurred a helpless rebuke. "You would never understand. Some things are more important than life itself. The European Cup is one of them." He raised his refilled glass to her, "Bastareaud '83 is another."

Camilla drew herself up primly. "I've had enough. I'm off to bed." With that she marched across the room and through the door, calling back at them, "And make sure you lock your doors."

OG smiled through wine-stained lips. "I guess that's told us."

Baz waved dismissively. She worries too much. I guess it's because she cares. But I can't spend my days worrying about another assassination attempt, not while I am responsible for lifting this curse on the club."

OG drained his glass. "I don't see how you can reunite the jewel with its owner, when she is right under the centre-spot. Or so it seems."

Baz poured him another glass from the dusty bottle. "Where there's a will OG, where there's a will."

A few hours after the last glass of claret had been drained, Baz was snoring loudly in his luxurious Queen bed, with its detailed carvings of Freddie Mercury in exotic Greek poses. OG, on his rough straw pallet in the Old Dairy, was dreaming about

finding the lost tomb of Aethelflaed, curating the resulting exhibition at the British Museum and being awarded freedom of the City of Gloucester (free swimming, first Friday in the month only). Vickery was in his little iron bed in the North Tower, dozing dreamlessly, a copy of 'Delia Smith's Basic Cookery' lying open on his heaving chest.

Suddenly, violently, everyone was awake. Someone was tolling the Johnny Bell. Its deep, sonorous boom resonated throughout the house and beyond to the grounds. The ancient Johnny Bell had been installed in the west tower during the Civil War to warn of the approach of hostile forces. Baz rushed onto the upper landing. Vickery stumbled out of the North Tower staircase and OG rushed up the main staircase.

Baz was the first to speak. "Good Lord!"

Vickery spoke next, "Bloody hell!"

Followed by OG. "Well I never. Uh oh, I'm not sure I feel very well!"

Outside Camilla's bedroom, in an ever-spreading pool of blood, lay the prone figure of Mrs Kalamafoni. Instead of her customary plastic apron with comedy bra and pants, she was wearing a black polo top, black combat trousers, matching utility belt and combat boots. Standing above her, wearing only a long, white t-shirt, was Camilla. Baz's secretary had a large roughly cylindrical-shaped piece of carved Carrera marble in her hand, which she was pointing at the body of Mrs Kalamafoni. She bent down and picked up the Russian-made Makarov pistol with, its silencer already screwed into the barrel. "See, I told you."

Baz was staring at the piece of marble. "Isn't that my... you know. The missing bit from my statue?"

Camilla nodded.

OG was feeling even more nauseous. "Is she... you know... dead?"

Baz looked at the indentation on his former cook's head. "Well given the piece of marble was life-size, I'd say she is not going to recover anytime soon."

Camilla bent down to take a closer look at the body. "She's definitely gone. You were very lucky that I heard a floorboard squeak outside my door."

Baz, ignoring the body on the floor, allowed his curiosity got the better of him. "But what were you doing with that bit of the statue...?"

At that very moment there was a small squeak from Camilla's bedroom. Stephanie, Baz's interior designer, her exquisite silhouette visible through her translucent silk Chistolini dressing gown, stepped out onto the landing. She pointed at the corpse on the bloody antique carpet that Baz had personally imported from Galarza in Northern Afghanistan. "Oh my... oh my."

Camilla stroked her gently on the arm. "There's nothing to worry about now. She's gone."

Baz turned his attention to a rather dishevelled looking Stephanie. "Tell me to mind my own business, but what were you doing..."

"Camilla...um... just wanted me to advise on the positioning of a piece of statuary."

Camilla stared at Baz, slapping the piece of marble in her palm, daring him to continue his line of questioning. Baz shrugged his shoulders and stared down at the prone figure of Mrs Kalamafoni. "Somebody had better call Smirkey I suppose and get his boys to clean this mess up. I expect there will be a dozen or more Interpol cases closed by this time tomorrow."

Baz furrowed his brow, as if he had suddenly thought of something else. "Camilla, can you get onto the agency tomorrow please. We need a new cook. Starting as soon as possible. And let's run them past Smirkey's people this time."

Camilla nodded. "No problem."

No one noticed as Vickery removed himself from the huddle and shuffled slowly up the stairs to his lonely little room in the North Tower.

## **Episode 12. The Spanish Job**

The Mute passed along the prison gangway, nodding appreciatively at those inmates who were calling out their sycophantic greetings. He followed the chief prison officer down the staircase, his Gucci loafers making barely a sound on the cold iron steps. The Mute pulled his satin dressing gown tight across his Savile Row-tailored prison uniform and he smoothed a wayward hair from his forehead. The guard turned the handle on the door to the visiting room. "Is there anything I can get you Mr Mute? A nice cup of your favourite Lapsang Suchoung perhaps?" Mute smiled graciously and shook his head.

Mute entered the drab room, with its grey painted walls, steel tables and chairs bolted to the floor. His visitor - the only other person in the place - was sitting at a table to one side, flicking at the screen on his Son of Samsung phone. The Mute sat down opposite and waved a lazy hand at the guard to indicate that privacy was required. Baz could feel his pulse quicken as he embarked upon what would be his first and last audience with The Mute - the man who had for thirty years been at the head of Gloucestershire's crime syndicates; the man who had never spoken; the man who had at one time controlled half of the world's illegal elver trade.

Baz slipped his phone into the inside pocket of his expensive Polledri jacket and finally caught The Mute's gaze in those steely grey eyes. "I'm not here to parley Mute. We just need to know, do we have your blessing for our little enterprise?" The Mute's expression didn't change. He sat unmoving for a long, uncomfortable minute and then gave a barely discernible nod. Baz finally allowed himself to breathe. "Okay then. We're on."

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Inside the Old Dairy, on the edge of the Fumblings Estate, which today was serving as a briefing room, Baz was standing in front of a white-board covered in hastily-scrawled arrows and haphazard drawings of something that looked vaguely like a street-map. Sitting around him in a semi-circle were Stephanie, Camilla, OG and the butler, Vickery. At the end of the row, nodding in time to the rap music that was pulsing from his Beats, was Johnny Halfway, the young programming genius from Bazsoft and author of the pernicious RTS2 virus.

Baz tapped at the whiteboard with the tip of the snooker cue he was using as a pointer. "This building is the main target - The Basque National Bank in Bilbao. As you know, our friends in Cheltenham have intercepted a message from the bank to Bruce Craig to confirm that his entire stash of gold bullion - worth £30m at today's price - was transferred there last month. Ladies and gentlemen, if we can relieve the Coiffed Crusader of this heavy burden, the long-term future of Gloucester Rugby will be guaranteed and our rivals at the Rec will be driven into well-deserved penury."

There was a buzz of approval around the room. Baz held up his hand to command silence. "This will require a great sacrifice in the short-term, but over the years it will result in Gloucester becoming the powerhouse of world rugby that I... we.. have

always dreamed of.” He pointed to Johnny, indicating that it was time to remove his headphones. “Johnny, would you like to tell us how we are going to get into the bank, and, more importantly, get out again.”

The unlikely-looking expert, resplendent in his bright orange surfer hoodie, shuffled to the front of the room. He wiped his nose on the back of his hand. “S’like this ‘innit. I am gonna re-route all the internet traffic generated from the Shedweb site through the main server in Bilbao. This server controls all the traffic lights in the city as well as all the security systems in the bank. If it works, we should be able to simply walk in and walk out again.”

Baz interrupted him. “But this is all dependent on generating enough traffic on Shedweb. So what we need is some kind of controversy –something that will get everyone posting at once. Vickery, you are working on that right?”

“OG is our transportation ready?”

OG nodded “It’s outside.”

Baz grinned. “Good, let’s go and take a look then shall we?”

On the gravel driveway in front of the house stood a battered old coach, with the legend “KSM Fun Bus” painted in large red letters down the side. OG took what looked like a TV remote and pressed a button. The rear of the bus started to open like some giant hatch-back. “It’s all been specially adapted for the job. The gold will be loaded in through the rear. Now the thing that is going to be critical is the load balance. The gold will be at the rear of the bus, so we will need plenty of ballast at the front. This is to prevent some sort of unlikely disaster, like the rear wheels of the bus slipping and going over the edge of the road on some narrow Pyrenean pass. Fortunately, we have recruited a specialist team of guys whose job will be to provide ballast at the front of the bus. To reinforce this, we’ve installed a special extra-large tank for toilet waste under the front half of the bus. Essentially, the more our people drink, the more stable the vehicle will become.”

Baz stroked his chin. “Very good, but what about our own getaway vehicles?”

“They’re round the other side of the house. “

They ambled past the knot garden round the Laidlaw tower over to the south lawn. There standing in a neat row were three brand new Special Works Mini Coopers, in cherry, white and black. OG stood next to the black one. “These should do the job, 0-60 in 6.3 seconds, top speed 153mph.”

Baz nodded. “What about boot capacity?”

“Good question. Between they each have room for a couple of suitcases, or a child’s buggy or, say ... I dunno,.... £10m in gold.”

Baz stood next to the white one. "I'm having this one. Camilla, you and OG can fight it out over the other two."

Baz's second-best Bentley Continental GT convertible was speeding along the narrow pass road beyond Biarritz, slicking its way round the hair-pin bends like a viper. The driver had one arm resting on the door, enjoying feeling the wind buffeting his flowing locks. He was only a few yards round the next bend when he spotted ahead three suited figures straddling the highway. Their machine guns were pointing directly at his windshield. He braked hard and came to a halt just in front of them. More armed figures appeared on the rocks above the road. A middle-aged figure with slicked back hair, wearing a pair of expensive St Andre sunglasses emerged from behind the three men with machine guns.

He flashed a mouthful of brilliant white teeth. "Senor Baz? At last we meet."

The driver nodded. "And you might be?"

"Someone who has an interest in the integrity of the Spanish banking system. What you are proposing to do would not be good for Spanish national pride. We would prefer if you and your friends did not cross the border."

"Or else?"

"Or else we may have to take matters into our own hands." At that moment there was a deep rumbling sound of metal on tarmac and from around the other side of the bend and a large excavator appeared. "Permit me to demonstrate."

The excavator started heading straight for the Bentley. The driver only just had time to get out before the car was shoved through the crash barrier, over the edge of the road and down into the deep ravine.

The Spaniard smiled. "Ah now you have a nice walk home in the sunshine." He pointed down the north down the highway. "I think it is only 1200 kilometres – no more."

As quickly as they had appeared, the Spaniard and his men vanished into the landscape. Their victim turned and started to trudge down the highway, the hot sun burning into the back of his neck. After 500 metres or so, he spotted a powerful-looking, convertible silver Porsche parked up in a layby. In the driver's seat was a young woman in a headscarf and dark glasses. He took off his own sunglasses and strolled over to Porsche. "Hello Stephanie."

Stephanie looked up from her copy of French Vogue and flashed a smile. "Ah Vickery. So they bought it then?"

Vickery climbed into the passenger seat and checked his watch. "The KSM Fun-bus should be through anytime soon." At that very moment they heard a loud crunching of gears as a large vehicle made its way up the mountain pass. Over the roaring of the engine they could hear a familiar refrain. "We're all going on a Summer Holiday..."

Vickery nodded to Stephanie. "Bang on time!"

\* \* \*

Baz watched from behind the wheel of his white Mini as Stephanie, crossed the square in front of the bank. The lone security guard standing at the bottom of the front steps eyed her as she sashayed her way down the street towards him in her impossibly tight mini-dress. As she reached the bottom of the steps, she appeared to momentarily lose her footing and stumbled. Fortunately, the guard was alert enough to catch her. She threw her arms around guard's neck pressing herself close to him. After a few moments, breathing in her heady Locko-tui perfume, he asked solicitously if she was okay. Stephanie nodded and tried to put the weight back on her left foot, but immediately cried out in pain. She pointed to a hotel a couple of hundred metres down the street, indicating that was where she was staying. The guard put her arm around his shoulder and helped her to limp towards the hotel.

Baz picked up his phone and looked at the browser. He shook his head. Shedweb was as quiet as a Harlequins-supporting mouse tonight. This was not going to work. He pressed speed-dial. In the stadium Vickery picked up his phone. Vickery could hear the strain in Baz's voice. "You need to take action. Now!"

Vickery pulled his ref-mic from his inside pocket, the one that Johnny had prepared specially. Down on the pitch Hohnneck had just made a stunning offload to Ludlow - it was going to be the try of the season, no doubt about it. Vickery pressed a button on the side of the mic and in a very dubious French accent said calmly, "Forward pass!" Garces duly put his whistle to his lips and blew. Anscombe gave up the chase and the ref indicated a scrum down. There was a collective groan, followed by angry shouts from the Glaws supporters.

Back in the town square, Baz looked to the heavens and closed his eyes. "Forgive me Father." He then looked down at his phone. Just as he had hoped, Shedweb was starting to go into meltdown. Suddenly, all the traffic lights in the square turned red and the little blue light on the electronic lock by the bank entrance stopped blinking. Johnny had done his job.

Baz picked up the walkie-talkie from the seat next to him and shouted "Go.... Go.... Go!"

From their parking spots in a dark corner in the square the three little minis, tyres screeching, raced to an alleyway behind the bank. Baz got out as the two other minis pulled up behind him. Camilla and OG, wearing their smart cherry and white overalls

with jumped out and removed their racing helmets. Baz pulled open the door to the staff entrance and they were in.

Twenty minutes later the three little minis were screaming through the streets of Bilbao, every traffic light on their route turned green as they headed for the main storm drain that led to the coast. They flicked their headlights on and entered the cavernous tunnel, rolling up and down the sides of the walls as they struggled to keep their vehicles level.

Once they emerged at the waterfront, they saw the KSM bus waiting for them. Baz took the remote from his pocket, pressed the button and watched as the rear of the bus lifted up. Out of the coach stumbled Tufty, Number 8, LambPie and Rhino – four of the hardest and strongest men west of Cirencester. Scooping up gold bars from the rear of the minis as if they were Lego bricks, they piled them in the back of the bus.

Baz, Camilla and OG released the brakes and pushed their minis to the edge of the waterside and into the sea below. They high-fived each other and followed the others back onto the bus. As they headed down the autoroute towards the Pyrenees, Baz ripped open a case of Perrier Jouet Belle Epoque and started to pass the bottles round. A few kilometres and several glasses of champagne further on, they were overtaken by Stephanie in her Porsche, waving and hooting her horn in celebration as she sped past. In reply, the group started singing at the tops of their voices, “We are the self-medication society...”

In a small dark passageway at the side of a hotel in Bilbao a tipsy Leinster fan stumbled over the security guard, naked, bound by cable-ties to a drain-pipe with a cherry and white scarf tied over his mouth. “Jeez, typical Gloucester supporters. Ye never could take yer Guinness!”

\* \* \*

In his office high above Kingsholm, Martin St Quentin was sitting behind his vast gilded Louis XIV desk. He opened a drawer and pulled out a shiny gold ingot and, with a smile, handed it to his visitor. “There you are Danny. Welcome to Kingsholm. Here is your signing-on bonus. Keep it just between us though.”

The player glanced nervously towards Baz who was sitting in the corner of the room. St Quentin reassured him. “Don’t worry about Baz, he can keep a confidence. You won’t be reading about any of this on Shedweb.”

The player glanced at the strong-room door behind St Quentin’s desk. “Thanks very much. I hope we’ll be putting a bit of silverware in there by the season.”

St Quentin gave an embarrassed laugh, “We might need to make a bit of room first.”

As Danny left the office, St Quentin turned to Baz. "Look I don't know how we can thank you."

Baz looked serious for a moment. "There is one thing..."

St Quentin spread his arms wide. "Anything"

"Could I have a square of the old turf before it's torn up. I'd like to put it in the south lawn by my statue?"

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As The Mute stepped along the gantry and down the iron steps, the rest of the prisoners started banging their steel mugs against the railings "Rat-tat... rat-tat... rat-at-tat..ratatatatatat GLOUCESTER!" The Mute, waved to his audience and then put a finger to the corner of his eye and gently wiped away a tear.

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With the groundsman having a crafty smoke by the Shed, Baz carefully lifted a small square of the hallowed turf on the centre circle. Then, while the groundsman was looking the other way, he carefully excavated another twelve inches of soil. Retrieving a small velvet bag from inside his jacket, he tipped the small golden jewel into the palm of his hand and placed it carefully at the bottom of the hole. He replaced the loose soil, stood up and gazed across to the Lion's Den.

Quietly, he started singing to himself. It was the chorus from his favourite Sam Cooke song, "It's been a long, a long time coming, But I know a change gon' come, oh yes it will."