

RUNAWAY SUCCESS

S.W. Parry's first book was a superb novel enjoyed by my two boys. Her latest book, *Runaway Success*, is an absorbing read and keeps you engaged with the characters all the way through the novel.

Well done and a must read for any young football fan.

Gary Speed

This is a great story that shows the secret life behind being a football mascot. Football Club mascots are a huge part of the match day experience for fans nowadays, and this book captures that passion by showing the sheer dismay fans demonstrate when a mascot goes missing, and the jubilation they feel when he returns!

This is a fantastic football book full of twists and turns, brilliant characters and a plot that's hairier than a real mascot costume!

Marvin The Moose, Cambridge United FC

S. W. Parry has been writing short stories and fiction serials in magazines for many years. She lives in Worcestershire with her football coach husband, three sons and two dogs. This is her second children's novel.

In this series:

Action Replay



RUNAWAY SUCCESS

S.W.PARRY

Dogstar
Publications Ltd

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First published in 2008 by
Dogstar Publications Ltd,
PO Box 164,
Evesham,
WR11 1WZ.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13 978-0-9551765-1-7

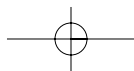
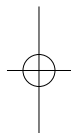
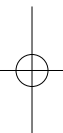
Designed and typeset by
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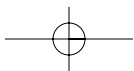
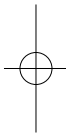
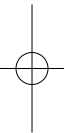
Cover illustrations and illustration on p. x
by Thomas Haskett

Printed and bound by Antony Rowe Ltd,
Chippenham, Wiltshire.

In memory of my stepdad,

Geoff Thornley

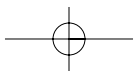
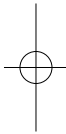
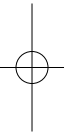




Acknowledgements

My thanks go to the following; first and foremost Jacqui MacCarthy my dear friend and guardian angel, who has believed in me every step of the way, throughout the creation of both *Action Replay* and its younger brother *Runaway Success*. To my friends in the world of football, Ralph Newbrook from the Football Foundation and Premier League Reading Stars, who has been such an enthusiastic supporter of my work, Catherine Barlow from Bolton Wanderers FC, Adam Reed from Fulham FC and last but far from least, Clare Martin from the brilliant Pompey Study Centre, who does such fantastic work for the community in the name of Portsmouth FC. My love and gratitude goes to my family; my husband Simon and sons Dan, Ben and Thom, who always keep my feet firmly on the ground, while encouraging me to go for it and to never give up on a dream, and my mum, my brother Tim and sister Kathryn whom I love dearly, and who have been through so much.

Finally, I'd like to say a special big thank you to the colourful, comic characters that inspired me to write this book, and the men and women behind them who bring a smile to the faces of the football fans every match day – the mascots.



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mascot *n* a person, animal, or object believed to bring good luck, especially one kept as the symbol of an organisation such as a sports team.

— Chapter One —

The Mascot Grand National

Barton Vale FC should have been the luckiest football club in the world.

Their mascot Barty Boar was a legend.

He could execute cartwheels and tumbles like a circus acrobat, perform his trademark dance the Barton Boogie as brilliantly as John Travolta, beat any other mascot at half-time penalty shoot outs and have the most notorious goal celebration in the business, which consisted of picking up the nearest person to him, and swinging them round in circles, almost getting himself arrested once for doing it to a policeman.

The hardest working mascot for the community, he was as busy as the Royal Family when it came to personal appearances, raising thousands of pounds for charity each season. The only thing left for the Barton wonder to achieve was to win the Mascot Grand National for a record sixth time – something no other mascot had ever come close to doing before, and something no other mascot *wanted* Barty Boar to do, if the truth be known.

So plenty of slapstick capers were expected in an effort to nobble the super mascot, as he was about to make this historic attempt, one mild winter lunchtime.

The racecourse was heaving as families lined the rails of the parade ring, waiting for the runners to appear.

‘And it’s a warm welcome to the Mascot Grand National, which promises to be an exciting and fun-filled start to today’s race meeting,’ a young woman’s voice, bright and smiley rang out from the loud speakers. ‘It’s especially exciting this year as

Barton Vale's Barty Boar, hopes to get his name in the record books by winning his sixth Grand National. In honour of the occasion, we have a special guest to start the race, none other than Barton Vale's number one goal scorer, Gavin Carr!

A volley of whooping went off from a large proportion of the female members of the crowd.

'We're lucky Gavin's here, because he's been recovering from an injury, not so lucky for him of course. As well as starting the race, Gavin is also going to present the winner with the trophy. Gavin how are you?' the woman's voice instantly dropped to a rich, inviting purr.

'Not too bad, thanks,' the footballer cheerfully replied.

'Well on the mend then?'

'Yes, nothing much to worry about, just a small strain. At least it means I was able to come here today with my wife and family to support my team mate Barty.'

'Yes, d' you think he can do it?' the woman gushed.

'If anybody can, Barty can – he's like Superman, unbeatable!'

'That wasn't the case last year, Dad wants to get his facts right,' said Archie Carr, Gavin Carr's eleven-year-old son.

He was pressed up against the thick round railing of the parade ring, resting a tiny camcorder on it. His twin sister Rosie was standing next to him with their mother.

'Barty came second,' he continued authoratively. 'Because Reggie and Regina Bulldog from Rovers got in front of him, stopping him from getting a clear run to the finish line. They even tried to trip him up when he finally got past them. But it was too late because *Larry Lizard* dressed in a costume that looked like a thin, green babygro was already miles ahead, especially as he was wearing trainers, not big mascot boots. He said he was running for a children's charity, but it turned out he was really *Baby Bulldog – Reggie and Regina's son*, who decided to cheat by wearing a costume he could run in!'

'How come you know all this rubbish?' Rosie said, arching her eyebrows derisively. 'They're not real, you know. You talk about them as if they are. Reggie and Regina's son!' she snorted.

‘Well, I can’t call them by their real names because I don’t know who they are – do you?’

‘Don’t want to. They’re just funny animals. Barty Boar is Barty Boar, and that’s that.’

‘But you just made fun of *me* for talking like that!’ Archie retorted.

‘That’s because you’ve never liked Barty. When we were mascots that one time, you were really embarrassed about having your picture taken with him.’

‘That’s because I was having it taken with you as well.’

‘Stop it you two,’ their mother chided. ‘I’ve never known such a couple of wind up merchants, always arguing with each other.’

Archie and Rosie looked at each other, their mouths twisting in spite of themselves.

‘Hey, look, they’re coming!’ Kim Carr said, her pretty face suddenly breaking into a huge smile.

Archie and Rosie followed their mother’s gaze to the tall hedge on the other side of the parade ring, from over the top of which could be seen the bizarre spectacle of dozens of multi-coloured animal heads bobbing up and down.

‘If you haven’t yet placed a bet on the Mascot Grand National, and are still undecided, you’ll be able to see all the mascots in the parade ring in just a few seconds,’ the girl on the loudspeaker was now saying. ‘Who will your money be on then, Gavin, or is that a silly question?’

‘Barty Boar of course. Although I don’t know as it’s worth it, with his odds being so short,’ Gavin laughed.

‘That’s never stopped your dad betting before,’ Kim said wryly, for it was well known that football and horseracing went together like cheese and pickle. Aside from golf, most footballers’ other favourite past time was horseracing, many of them even owning their own racehorses.

‘Well, enjoy your day, thanks for talking to us,’ the girl announcer said, hurriedly dismissing Archie and Rosie’s father as the first of the mascots appeared in the gateway that led into the parade ring.

‘And here they come!’ she pronounced enthusiastically as the strangest assortment of creatures since the Muppets began filing into the parade ring, prancing about, picking fights with each other and waving to the crowd.

There were dogs, cats, horses, sheep, tigers, lions, monkeys, dragons, frogs, a pirate in a wheelchair with his leg in plaster, panthers, dinosaurs, several breeds of bird and, even more bizarre, a couple of credit cards.

‘Who’s leading the pack? Why it’s Wally the Weasel!’

A tall, thin figure wearing a brown, furry all-in-one suit with a suspiciously streamline-looking weasel’s head broke away from the rest of the mascots to cartwheel across the grassy centre of the parade ring.

‘Which club does he come from?’ Rosie asked, peering over her brother’s shoulder to look at his race-card.

‘They’re not all from football clubs. As long as you’re running for a charity, I think anyone can pretty much dress up as a mascot and enter.’ Archie narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the weasel. ‘It says he’s running for Woodland Chums, whatever that is.’

‘Not much of a weasel, is he?’ Rosie said. ‘Where’s his tail for a start? And look at his feet – he’s wearing proper football boots!’

‘They can, but it means they start farther back than the ones in the funny mascot boots,’ Archie replied, scouring the parade ring. ‘Has anyone seen the Rover’s bulldogs?’

‘Don’t worry, Archie, they’re all present and correct,’ Kim said, indicating to a trio of fierce, yet cuddly looking, bulldogs who had just entered the arena, arms linked, doing their funny cross-over walk, which always ended with Baby Bulldog being lifted into the air by his arms, and swung forward like a toddler. This time, however, he was swung forward to kick Wally the Weasel’s behind, causing him to fall flat on his face, much to the crowd’s amusement.

‘Serves that weasel right, he’s not a proper mascot anyway,’ Rosie said.

‘Definitely a ringer, I’d say, wouldn’t you, kids?’

Archie and Rosie spun round at the sound of their father's voice.

'What are you doing here?' Kim asked. 'Shouldn't you be down at the start?'

'I'm on my way, I just thought I'd come and see what you lot were doing first.' He glanced at a young girl standing next to Rosie, and smiled.

The girl looked as if she was about to faint at the sight of a famous footballer standing right next to her. Her mother wasn't so shy, thrusting her race-card in Gavin's face for him to autograph.

Suddenly everyone was looking at him, surging forward flapping their race cards like a flock of paper birds. Kim grabbed hold of Archie and Rosie, snatching them back against her, out of the crush.

A couple of stewards wearing hi-vis jackets, and holding walkie-talkies to their mouths, instantly appeared, wading through the fans.

'I'll see you later,' Gavin called, as the stewards whisked him off, with a large group still following.

'We'll find *you*,' Kim said, eyeing her husband reproachfully.

Gavin grinned, his head bobbing up and down from within the scrum as he was swept away as swiftly as a crowd surfer at a rock concert.

'For once, I wish we could go somewhere where that didn't happen,' Archie said crossly, unsure of whom he was more annoyed with – the fans or his dad.

'You can't take him anywhere,' Rosie agreed.

'You don't really mean that,' Kim said. 'If he wasn't famous, it'd mean he wasn't playing football any more, and you know how much that means to him.'

'Yeah, more than us,' Archie replied.

'Oh, Archie, you know that's not true,' his mother scolded. 'Besides, that time will come soon enough, he's already starting to get on a bit in football terms.' She had a sad faraway look on her face. 'Everyone will soon forget about him when he can't play football any more. We'll be able to go anywhere we like

then. No more special treatment. You'll wish your dad was still famous then.'

Archie looked at his mother, knowing she was really talking about herself because, many years ago, Kim Carr had been as famous as their father – a teenage pop sensation with five number one hits under her belt. She gave it all up when she married Gavin and had Archie and Rosie, always telling them she never regretted the decision, despite the twins knowing that deep down a part of her still missed being a star in her own right.

'Nah,' Archie disagreed. 'Old footballers don't disappear, they end up on telly *talking* about football. Dad will anyway, he always gets asked to when he's not playing.'

'Yeah, Mum, I don't know what you're worried about, it's not as if he's just *any old footballer* is it?' Rosie added. 'I reckon he could have his own chat show even. You could do it with him – be the next Richard and Judy.'

'Thanks,' Kim smiled wryly. 'Glad to hear you're thinking of me in my old age too.'

'And here he is, hoping to make history today with his sixth Grand National win – Barty Boar!' the announcer trilled, inciting the crowd to give a big cheer.

Archie grabbed the railing in one hand, his camcorder held ready in the other, feeling a rush of pride as Barton Vale's most famous ambassador ran into the ring.

'Barty! Yay!' Rosie yelled, waving her arms like mad as Barty performed a string of somersaults that made Wally the Weasel's cartwheels look pretty sick.

He landed squarely on his feet only a couple of metres away from them, raising his arms in triumph.

Archie and Rosie looked at each other, and laughed.

There was no other mascot like Barty Boar. Standing at six foot six inches tall, he had a handsome fawn coloured velvety face, with a thick snout that wrinkled kindly above his mouth, which was set in a permanent grin showing off two ivory tusks as big as bananas. Above this, was a pair of huge brown friendly eyes that were framed by large pig's ears ending in dark brown tufts of hair, which matched the thick brown forelock that

flopped rakishly on to his brow. He was wearing the new season red, white and blue Barton Vale strip with Barty 99 emblazoned on the back, finished off with brown velvet mittens made to look like trotters.

Whoever had made the suit was a mascot craftsman, because it was beautiful; by far the best out of all the mascots.

'Barty! Over here!' Archie cried, lifting his camcorder to get a good shot, only to have a giant robin jump in front of him folding his wings in a gangsta rapper pose.

All the mascots were trying to get in on the act, strutting their stuff, stopping to give a thumbs up or wave whenever they saw a camera pointing in their direction, much to the delight of the spectators.

Barty was the most popular photographic subject by far. In fact, it was taking him ages to get round the ring, because virtually everyone wanted to take his picture.

Eventually, he came to Archie and Rosie.

Barty held up both trotters miming that he was pleased to see them. He leaned over the railing and gave Kim, and then Rosie, a hug. He shook trotters with Archie, and pointed at his camcorder, before turning, and launching himself into another string of somersaults just for their benefit.

'It feels like he's a member of the family, doesn't it?' Rosie smiled proudly.

'Yes,' Kim laughed. 'From your father's side!'

'Maybe that's what Dad should do when he retires,' Archie joked. 'Become a mascot. I wonder what sort he'd be?'

'Something stupid like that dog over there, pretending to pee up that dragon's tail,' Rosie laughed.

'I think your dad would be something a bit more dignified than that,' Kim replied.

'Like what?' Archie chortled. 'They're all funny, look at them.'

Kim gave a small laugh. 'You're right, there's nothing dignified about this lot!'

'At least Dad would still be famous if he was a mascot,' Rosie said. 'Look at Gunnersaurus, everyone knows who he

is. I could help out too, going round the pitch with him before kick off, giving out sweets.'

'You? Give away sweets! I'd like to see that!' Archie scoffed.

'Come on,' Kim said, shooting them a warning look before they started arguing again. 'It's nearly time for the race to start, let's go and find a good place to watch.'

* * * * *

A heroic anthem, all trumpets and cymbals, blared out across the racecourse, totally at odds with the comical parade that lined up at the start line.

One furlong in length on the home straight, with hurdles made out of advertising hoardings half a metre in height, it wasn't exactly the Cheltenham Gold Cup, but for someone wearing a thick furry suit with a large head whose only means of visibility was through thick black gauze, it might as well have been the most gruelling of army assault courses.

The Carrs settled themselves at a good vantage point close to the finish. The crowd around them had grown three deep with dads lifting small children on to their shoulders to get a better view. On the opposite side of the track a large screen monitor panned the two lines of runners, the ones with big boots lining up a few metres in front of those wearing football boots or trainers.

'Not long to go now,' the girl on the loudspeaker crowed. 'Who will be crowned this year's Mascot Grand National winner? Will it be Barty Boar? Or what about Hercules the Lion? Or Chaddy the Owl, who's also won it more than once before? Like the real Grand National, it could be anybody's race.'

Archie suddenly noticed she'd come out on to the racecourse with the rest of the officials, paparazzi and television cameras. She was small and pretty with long blonde hair, wearing a stylish raincoat and knee-high brown leather boots. It seemed really odd that the loud, confident voice, which boomed from the grandstand speakers behind them, was in fact coming

from this petite individual holding a radio mike and clipboard just a short distance in front of them.

'I think Gavin's ready at the start!' she informed the spectators.

On the large screen Archie and Rosie's father waved his flag in response.

'And we've got a false start!' the girl exclaimed.

On seeing the flag waving, the pirate in the wheelchair suddenly made a miraculous recovery, throwing his plaster cast aside, and bolting off.

'I thought you'd got a broken leg, you crafty old sea dog!' the girl chuckled, as two stewards escorted a now sprightly pirate back to the start.

'Yes, you can start from the second row for that,' the girl said. 'Are we ready now then?'

Everyone leaned on the rails craning their necks for a better view.

Archie glanced at the large screen waiting for his father to drop the flag. He had to hold his camcorder above his head to get a good shot of the racetrack.

'And they're off!' the girl shouted.

A mad scramble ensued with a hundred comic characters fighting for the lead, pushing each other out of the way, some falling before the first hurdle, tripping over their own outsized feet and then, on reaching the first fence, having to laboriously lift their boots over it, while those in trainers charged past, leaping the advertising hoardings with all the grace of five-year-olds on sports day.

'Come on, Barty!' Rosie yelled, as the Barton Vale mascot galloped ahead of the field. 'Watch out, that weasel's right behind you!'

Wally the Weasel had left the other handicappers behind, and was sprinting after Barty as fast as his thin furry legs could carry him.

The crowd was shrieking Barty on. Everyone wanted him to win, and the closer the weasel came to catching him the more panicked the cries became.

‘And Barty Boar is now just a whisker in the lead,’ the girl announced. ‘Wally the Weasel, who’s looked like a contender from the start, is now neck and neck with him!’

‘Oh no!’ Archie’s hand wobbled on his camcorder as he strained forward to roar, ‘COME ON, BARTY!’ not caring if he lost the shot completely.

Wally was starting to edge past Barty. The last hurdle was coming up on them fast. He was now centimetres in front of Barton Vale’s favourite son, powering onwards, seemingly unstoppable.

‘Come on, Barty!’ Rosie screamed. ‘JUMP!’

Both mascots launched themselves at the fence. Archie held his breath, hardly daring to look.

Barty sailed over it, despite his comedy boots.

But Wally the Weasel clipped his toe on the hoarding, and tumbled on to the grass on all fours.

A cheer shot into the air like a rocket.

Barty picked up his heels, and ran for all he was worth. Wally the Weasel got to his feet and lurched after him.

‘He’s going to do it!’ Rosie clutched the rail, and began jumping up and down in excitement. ‘He’s going to do it!’

‘Look!’ Archie pointed to Wally, his heart hammering as the weasel began to run amazingly fast. It was as if he had pressed a button inside his suit, and gone into turbo drive.

But Barty was still holding on.

There were only four metres left at most.

‘Can he do it? Can Wally catch him?’ the girl cried.

‘No, he can’t!’ Rosie shouted, in amongst the frenzied cheering that surrounded them.

And then something awful happened.

A small child suddenly ran out on to the racetrack right in front of Barty and Wally.

A sharp intake of breath scorched through the crowd as Wally jumped over her.

‘She’s going to get hurt, the others won’t see her, she’s too small!’ Archie shouted, as the rest of the field lumbered towards them.

But Barty had seen her. He spun on his heel, and quick as a flash scooped the toddler up in his arms, carrying her over the finish line – a second after Wally the Weasel.

‘What an amazing finish!’ the girl exclaimed as the rest of the mascots staggered over the line, collapsing in a heap, like the contents of a giant’s toy box. ‘And what a hero Barty Boar is! Well done, that mascot! Three cheers for Barty Boar! Hip! Hip!’

‘What a shame,’ Rosie said, frowning sadly as Barty gave the toddler back to her parents amidst the hooraying.

‘I think that says a lot about the person inside the suit,’ Kim Carr said. ‘He could quite easily have run on like Wally did, especially as it was his record attempt. But he didn’t. He must be a nice man, whoever he is.’

Archie watched as Barty went over to Wally and the ostrich, which had come third.

‘It’s not fair. He should have won,’ Archie muttered, wondering what kind of person would jump over a small child to win a race dressed up as a weasel.

‘Look, there’s Dad, can we go over to him?’ Rosie asked, already ducking under the rails.

‘What a turn up for the books, eh?’ Gavin greeted them. ‘There’s something going on, look. That weasel’s been giving everyone a right ear bashing – I don’t know what he’s got to complain about – he won didn’t he?’

Wally the Weasel did indeed seem to be in a bit of a lather, his head wobbling animatedly as he stood deep in conversation with an official from the racecourse.

‘He’s probably annoyed about that kid getting on the racetrack,’ Archie said.

‘He shouldn’t be talking at all,’ Rosie replied. ‘I told you he wasn’t a proper mascot.’

Another man joined them, and they called the girl announcer over.

Gavin and Kim exchanged a puzzled look.

‘D’ you think you should go over, Dad, seeing as you’re presenting the trophy?’ Archie asked, eager to find out what was going on himself.

‘I don’t know, it looks a bit serious to me,’ Gavin replied. ‘It’s like watching the fourth official and the referee getting together – there’ll be an announcement in a minute, you wait and see. Perhaps I will have a stroll over.’

They watched him go over to the group. The two men and the girl turned to smile at him. The more official looking of the two men started to explain something to Gavin, his hands working in extravagant gestures to illustrate his point. When he finished, he switched his attention back to the girl, his face stern as he spoke.

The girl nodded as if she was being given instructions. Finally she turned to face the grandstand and raised the microphone to her mouth.

‘I have an official announcement to make. Following a stewards’ enquiry, Wally the Weasel has been disqualified from the Mascot Grand National.’ She waited while a shocked murmur rippled through the crowd. ‘Therefore Barty Boar wins his sixth Grand National, with Ozzie Ostrich moving up into second place and Shabby Shamrock third!’

Everyone clapped and cheered their approval.

‘Here he is, everyone, six times winner of the Mascot Grand National, Barty Boar!’ The girl held up Barty’s arm and the crowd cheered once more.

Archie turned to look for Wally the Weasel. He was skulking off down the racetrack, with a couple of reporters in tow. One of them tried to remove his head, and he spun round angrily, swiping at them to leave him alone, but like a couple of flies around a dung heap, they wouldn’t let go.

‘What about that then?’ Gavin came back; eyes alight with glee. ‘Wally the Weasel *was* a ringer! He’s a proper runner, ran in the Olympics a few years back! Somebody set him up to stop Barty winning, a gang of gamblers who left it ‘til the last minute to bet on Wally. But when these large bets started going on, they started to get suspicious. Especially when somebody recognised him in the car park before he got into his weasel outfit.’

‘But it’s only a bit of fun for charity!’ Kim said in amazement.

‘When it comes to gambling, no race is for fun,’ her husband replied.

‘Like there’s no such thing as a friendly football match,’ Archie agreed. ‘Everyone’s out to win, no matter what.’

‘Very astute, my lad.’ Gavin grinned, ruffling his son’s hair. ‘Now, are you lot coming to see me present the trophy to the best mascot in the world, or what?’

Chapter Two

Who is Barty Boar?

Archie and Rosie couldn't wait until the following Saturday, when Barton Vale were playing at home, because Barty Boar was going to be given a hero's welcome after his spectacular win at the Mascot Grand National.

And knowing Barty, as everyone did, he was sure to make his entrance in style. A record crowd was expected and, although it wasn't supposed to be a televised match, the TV cameras were out in force, ready to film the super mascot's victory parade around the pitch.

'This is ridiculous,' Kim Carr muttered as they waited in traffic outside the stadium.

'I told you we should have started out earlier,' Rosie grumbled, casting an impatient eye over the sea of people that weaved in and out of the line of cars. 'D' you think Barty's here yet?'

'Not if he set out the same time as us,' Archie replied, without looking up from watching a DVD of his favourite TV programme, *Scared Stiff*. The intrepid ghost hunters were investigating a haunted library, and a book had just shot off one of the shelves hitting a member of the crew.

'Look, there's Murray over there. Can't you ask him to let us in?' Rosie said.

She pointed to a tall, thin individual wearing a hi-vis steward's jacket that came halfway up his arms, which made him look all the more ganglier by the way he was directing the crowd with large windmill arm movements.

Murray Thompson was the online editor for Barton Vale's website, and was usually secreted away in the bowels of the

stadium chained to his computer. The Carrs knew him because he had come to their house once to interview Gavin.

‘What’s he doing?’ Archie chuckled. ‘It must be really bad if they’ve got Murray to be a steward. Hey, you don’t suppose *he’s* Barty?’

Kim laughed. ‘Hardly! A puff of wind, and he’d fall over!’ She wound down the window, and called out, ‘Hi, Murray! Can you help us?’

Murray came over at once, looking flustered and red-faced.

‘Certainly, Mrs Carr, what can I do for you?’

It was surprising how effective a long pair of flailing arms could be. Within minutes, Murray had managed to manoeuvre both fans and cars over to one side so that Kim could drive past them into the executive car park.

‘Thank goodness for that,’ she said. ‘All we’ve got to do now is find a parking space.’

‘There’s one! You’ve just gone past it!’ Rosie called out.

Kim swivelled to look, and then began reversing the huge four-by-four back down the row just as someone on a motorbike swerved into the space from the opposite direction.

‘Oh no!’ Kim gasped angrily. She wound the window down again. ‘That was my space, you rotten little toe rag!’

The biker removed his helmet, and hopped off the motorbike. He saw Kim glaring at him, and gave her a big cheeky grin.

‘Afternoon, Mrs C,’ he said, unplugging an iPod from his ears. ‘You looking for a space? There’s one down there.’

Kim followed his gaze, and blushed. ‘Thanks, I didn’t see it,’ she said.

‘No probs, see yas,’ he said, moving off at a jaunty pace.

‘Who’s that?’ Archie asked, regarding the biker with interest.

‘I think he’s one of the Club’s community officers; Connor or Callum somebody,’ Kim said. ‘I’m just glad he’d got his ipod on so he didn’t hear me call him a toe rag!’

As soon as they were safely parked, the Carrs hurried inside to pick up their tickets from reception.

‘Hello, Mrs Carr, Archie, Rosie,’ smiled the girl on the desk, Holly Appleby. She handed Kim an envelope marked *Gavin Carr*.

‘Thanks, Holly, how are you?’ Kim smiled.

‘Fine, although ask me again in about half an hour’s time,’ Holly said, rolling her eyes. ‘Connor’s busy today, and can’t help out with the Junior Boars, so I said I’d give them a hand.’ She glanced towards the stairs just as the biker, now wearing a Barton Vale tracksuit, began running up them two at a time.

‘What’s he doing, then?’ Archie asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

‘I don’t know. He’s always on the go that one. It’s probably something to do with Barty, everything’s gone mad here today, because of him.’

Archie’s stomach leapt. ‘Is Connor Barty, then?’

‘No,’ Holly laughed, before stopping suddenly. ‘At least, I don’t think he is. Mind you, nobody knows who Barty is.’

‘What? Nobody?’ Archie raised his eyebrows disbelievingly. ‘That’s impossible.’

‘Well, I think the Chairman knows, but that’s all.’

‘A mystery man, hey?’ Kim smiled.

‘Or woman,’ Rosie added significantly, giving Holly a knowing stare.

‘What? Me? You must be joking!’ Holly laughed, turning away to call out. ‘Laura, are you ready to take over on reception?’ A girl came out of the office door behind her. ‘Well, must get on.’ Holly flashed them a stiff smile. ‘Lovely to see you again,’ she said, and hurried off.

‘Did you see her face when you suggested she was Barty?’ Archie said, as soon as Holly was out of earshot.

‘She couldn’t look me in the eye,’ Rosie agreed. ‘I bet it is her.’

‘Are you two mad?’ Kim said. ‘Holly’s a sweet little thing – Barty’s a huge, great hulking brute.’

‘The *suit*’s huge. Doesn’t mean to say the person inside it is,’ Archie said, mentally adding Holly Appleby to his list of prime suspects.

‘She’s not the kind of person to do anything silly like that, anyway,’ Kim replied, just as Holly reappeared, wearing a fancy dress outfit that looked as if she was a jockey riding a horse that was walking on its hind legs.

‘You were saying?’ Archie threw his mother a smug look.

‘She’s not Barty though, is she?’ Kim replied. ‘He’ll be somewhere else in the stadium getting ready for his appearance. Even Barty Boar can’t be in two places at once.’

‘He can if he’s more than one person,’ Rosie said, her face suddenly alight with inspiration. ‘I bet there’s a whole gang of them who take it in turns to be Barty, that’s why no one knows who it is, because it isn’t *any body*.’

‘Don’t be stupid.’ Archie scowled. ‘What kind of gang would that be? A gang of acrobats? Or stuntmen? It’s one person; it’s got to be. I just wish I could find out who, that’s all.’

‘Well, unless you catch him putting his suit on, that isn’t going to happen,’ Kim said, placing her hands on the twins’ shoulders. ‘Come on, we’re late enough as it is, the girls will be wondering where I am.’

* * * * *

‘The girls’ were a group of Kim’s friends who, like her, were very glamorous footballers’ wives. Chief WAG was Sofia Martinez, wife of Barton Vale’s manager, Emilio. Kind, gentle and extremely beautiful, she was also the mother of Lucia, Rosie Carr’s best friend, and the object of Archie’s not so secret affection.

By comparison, Siobhan Kelly, wife of Barton goaly Niall, was as effervescent as a crate of champagne corks going off – and almost as noisy! Always laughing, and bubbling over with enthusiasm for just about anything, it seemed apt that her husband should be the big, brave colossus that guarded the nets so ferociously week in and week out.

Penny Gregg was different again. Wife of Barton Vale powerhouse midfielder Steve Gregg, on the outside she was as pretty and confident as her friends, yet prone to lapses of self-doubt that made her worry about the smallest of things, leaving Kim Carr to be the voice of reason in the pack.

While the four women were the best of friends, the same couldn’t be said of their offspring, mainly due to the evil

influence of Eric Starling, son of Barton Vale's notorious hard man captain, Paul.

Archie and Rosie hated Eric, and the feeling was mutual.

He was a bully of the first order and, because of his high profile father, head of the school 'in' crowd known as 'The Squad'. To make matters worse, he was also captain of the Year Six football team, and because Rosie was as good a footballer as any boy her age, made her life miserable when their PE teacher added her name to the boys' team list.

As Archie hadn't a scrap of talent when it came to football an even deeper wedge was carved out between the twins and Eric, who also hated the fact that Lucia Martinez preferred their company to his.

To be anybody at Barton Hall School you had to be in 'The Squad', and both Siobhan's son Ross and Penny's son Kieran were fully paid up members.

While Kim's friends air-kissed each other hello, Rosie and Archie looked on in dismay at the three empty seats between Kieran Gregg and Lucia.

'Go on, Rosie; you go first,' Archie said, giving his sister a nudge in the back.

'Get off, will you,' Rosie protested. 'You can go first.'

'No, I can't. I won't have such a good view for filming.' He fingered his camcorder bag, and gave her another shove.

'Alright, alright, wouldn't want to split you and your girlfriend up now, would I?' Rosie said, glaring at Kieran as she sat down one seat away from him, only to be shocked rigid when his mouth lifted awkwardly into a shy smile. She hurriedly looked away, her heart hammering angrily.

'Archie!' Kim called. 'Tell Rosie to move down one so I can sit next to Penny.'

Archie raised his eyebrows insinuatingly at his sister, thoroughly enjoying her discomfort. 'Sure,' he said. 'Wouldn't want to split her up from her boyfriend now, would I?'

'Just you wait,' Rosie steamed, getting up to drop heavily into the seat next to Kieran, causing a chorus of whoo-hooing to go off from Eric and Ross.

‘Kieran fancies you, you know that, don’t you?’ Eric said, leaning round Ross with a spiteful grin on his wide, thin lips.

‘Get lost,’ Rosie snapped, aware of Eric’s mother, Trisha, sitting the other side of him, condoning his behaviour with a smirk. She was not one of Kim Carr’s friends, and was just as horrible as her son.

‘Well, he’s the only one who’ll pass to you in our team, isn’t he?’ Eric continued to snipe. ‘You wouldn’t catch me passing to a *girl*.’ His expression collapsed like he’d eaten something nasty at a Bushtucker Trial.

‘No, you poach goals from them instead,’ Archie spoke up, referring to a cup match where Eric claimed Rosie’s goal by sliding in to get a toe to it when it was going in the net anyway.

‘Like you’d know anything about football, *film boy!*’ Eric spat back. ‘You’ve always got that stupid camera with you, filming everyone like a pervert. You’re not Steven Spielberg, you know. Don’t you get bored, Looch, listening to him talking about the hundwed gweatest films of all time?’ His attempt at a Jonathan Ross impression had Ross Kelly in stitches, and Kieran sniggering behind his hand.

‘It beats talking about yourself all the time, now that *is* boring,’ Archie retorted, hating the way Eric always made fun of his ambition to be a famous film director.

‘Well, I think you’re both weird.’ Eric darted Rosie a malicious look. ‘She’s more like a boy anyway.’

‘Shut up, Eric,’ Kieran said quietly.

Eric did a double take. ‘See, I told you he fancies you,’ he crowed. ‘So she *is* your WAG, then?’

‘I am not!’ Rosie cried, glaring furiously at Kieran.

Kieran shifted in his seat and rested his chin moodily on his hand, refusing to look at either of them.

‘My mother doesn’t like being called a WAG, it’s so demeaning,’ Lucia said loftily, in her soft Spanish accent.

Eric snorted with laughter. ‘You can talk, when you’ve got your own WAG – old film boy, here!’

‘Why, you!’ Archie reared up, just as a fanfare of trumpets echoed around the stadium.

Everyone was suddenly on their feet cheering in anticipation.

Two lines of children; members of the Junior Boars fan club, streamed on to the pitch to form a guard of honour on either side of a red carpet that ran up to a raised platform in the centre circle. Leading them out was Holly Appleby in her horse outfit.

‘Here he is, King of the Mascots, record breaking six times winner of the Mascot Grand National – Barty Boar!’ the announcer’s voice rose cheesily above the roar of the crowd.

The fanfare turned into a fast, brassy reggae tune as a gold beach buggy suddenly zoomed out of the tunnel on to the narrow track that surrounded the pitch. Barty Boar was standing in the passenger’s side, one trotter holding on to the top of the windscreen, the other waving his winner’s trophy in the air. He was wearing a red satin, fur trimmed cape over a sparkly red, silver and blue Barton Vale football strip. On his head, sitting over one ear at a rakish angle was a gold crown.

‘Look who’s driving the buggy,’ Rosie pointed out. ‘It’s the girl from the racecourse.’

‘And let’s give a big Barton Vale welcome to Barty’s chauffeur, Nicci Fullerton, here today on behalf of the racecourse, as well as Racing TV.’

‘I knew I’d seen her somewhere before,’ Rosie exclaimed. ‘She interviews the jockeys on the racing channel.’

Nicci had slowed the buggy down to a crawl for the lap of honour. As they cruised the parameter of the pitch, Barty waved to the crowd as regally as a king acknowledging the adoration of his loyal subjects.

Nicci brought the buggy to a halt beside the red carpet. Barty removed his cape and crown, and leapt from the buggy into a series of somersaults. Nicci followed behind carrying a large cardboard cheque.

Waiting for them on the platform were two official looking men, dressed in sober navy blue suits.

Barty ran up the steps and, as he did so a volley of fireworks jettisoned into the air from the rear of the platform, causing the men to jump violently.

While Barty jogged on the spot, holding his trophy high above his head, the crowd roared its delight.

Joe Milligan, Barton Vale's public announcer, suddenly appeared beside Barty, and beckoned Nicci over to him.

'Hi, Nicci, as Barty doesn't speak, you're going to do the interview for him, aren't you?' he said. 'It's a great achievement, isn't it?'

'Brilliant!' Nicci enthused, her own voice professionally loud and mellow. 'Everyone at Barton Vale football club should be so proud of Barty. He's a fantastic ambassador for the club, and the game of football itself.'

The crowd clapped and cheered in response, causing Barty to raise his arms and wave again.

'I see you're carrying a very large cheque, Nicci. Would you like to tell everyone how much Barty has raised for his chosen charity?'

'I certainly would!' Nicci lifted the cheque, offering one end of it for Barty to hold. 'In total, Barty has raised fifty four thousand pounds and sixty five pence to put towards the costs of building the new wing of the children's hospital!'

The crowd roared again.

'And he'd like to thank everyone for sponsoring him. And all the support he's received from everyone at the club.'

The two men in suits, who turned out to be doctors from the hospital, stepped forward to be presented with the cheque. A team of photographers ran up to the platform like a platoon of soldiers creeping up on an enemy outpost, their cameras poised and armed.

A man with a steadicam scurried after them, his footage streaming straight to the stadium's massive TV monitor, where the close up of Barty, Nicci and the two doctors made them look like a family of giants at the top of Jack's beanstalk.

'Once again, let's hear it for Barty Boar!' Joe Milligan shouted.

Barty bowed to the cheering crowd.

And then the introduction to the Barton Boogie suddenly ripped into the air, causing another cacophony of cheering to go off, as Barty froze into his boogieing stance ready to start dancing.

Holly and the Junior Boars lined up on either side of him, and suddenly they were off, gyrating and stomping backwards and forwards to the bouncy, trumpet-laden rock anthem that was Barty's theme tune, until everyone was doing it – the fans, Nicci Fullerton, Joe Milligan, the stewards and even the two doctors.

If Status Quo had invented a line dance, this would have been it.

Archie pumped his arms backwards and forwards, grinning at Lucia, who laughed back at him in return. He glanced at his sister, but Rosie was still wearing a deep frown on her face, stomping away angrily as if she'd like to kick someone's head in – Eric's probably.

She looked really funny, and Archie couldn't help the rush of hilarity that swept up his throat and exploded from his nose and mouth in a snort of laughter.

'Archie, you've snotted all over me!' Rosie shrieked, shooting back in disgust, bumping into Kieran, who lurched into Ross and Eric, who in turn pushed him back into Rosie.

'Sorry,' Kieran said sheepishly.

'You will be,' Rosie snapped, turning to glare at her brother.

The Boogie came to an all singing, all dancing end, with the Junior Boars marching back down the tunnel, only to march straight back out again with the Barton Vale first team.

'At last!' Rosie said, pushing two fingers into her mouth, and whistling shrilly above the noise of the crowd.

Kieran turned, and laughed in surprise. 'I wish I could do that!' he shouted in her ear.

She shrugged dismissively, unable to look at him, her face streaked with crimson in spite of herself.

Barty Boar ran to greet the players.

'Did you see that?' Lucia laughed. 'Barty just gave your dad a high five!'

'I bet he didn't give Paul Starling one,' Archie replied, his chest swelling with pride because the super mascot had singled his father out for special treatment.

'Paul would probably punch him if he did,' Lucia said.

‘Yeah, a right bundle of laughs he is,’ Rosie agreed, settling back into her old, pugnacious self, now that the match was about to begin.

‘I wonder who he is,’ Archie said, his curiosity growing by the minute as he watched Barty reach over the barrier to sign an autograph for a little girl in a wheelchair.

‘Does it matter?’ Rosie said.

‘I suppose not.’

‘Good, then stop going on about it, because the match is about to start. COME ON THE BOARS!’ And she whistled again, so loudly this time, it was enough to de-wax Archie’s ears.

* * * * *

Forty minutes into the first half, and a roar went up from the crowd as Barton went on the attack. Steve Gregg lobbed the ball over the Rovers’ defence and found Gavin Carr in the box and on side.

Gavin swiped the ball past the Rovers’ defender and belted it beneath the goalkeeper’s outstretched arms as he made a dive for it.

‘YES!’ Archie and Rosie were lifted into the air as the crowd sprang up all around them, their own voices dissolving in the huge noise that burst forth from forty thousand home fans.

Archie immediately looked for Barty Boar, who was swinging a ball boy around in triumph at the side of the pitch.

The ball was quickly put back into play, and a sharp intake of breath scorched through the crowd as Matt Warner, Rosie’s great friend and hero, was hacked down just outside the penalty area by a two-footed challenge that didn’t go anywhere near the ball.

Eric, Ross and Kieran gave a raucous cheer when the player was booked, and Eric’s dad walked up to take the free kick. All three boys started chanting his name, until the whole of the stand was chanting it with only Rosie remaining uncharacteristically quiet.

Paul Starling charged at the ball, bending it over the heads of the wall, and into the top left-hand corner of the net.

Even Rosie couldn't remain detached at this, jumping in the air, whistling through her fingers, and then laughing at Kieran when he tried to copy her.

The fourth official lifted the board with a red number three lit up on it. The announcer confirmed there would be three minutes of added time and, with Barton leading, the crowd began to sing *two nil, two-oo-oo nil, two nil, two nil*. Barty turned to face them, swaying from side to side, waving his trotters in the air.

The whole of the Tommy Blackwell Stand started mirroring him like a bizarre aerobics workout with a big, brown furry boar as an instructor.

The whistle finally went, and the rush for the loos and to buy a pie was on.

The players trailed from the pitch with Barty following them.

Archie stretched his neck to see where he was going. Barty often had some half-time capers lined up for the crowd's entertainment, but after such a spectacular pre-match celebration, there would be no further antics that day.

An idea suddenly occurred to Archie.

He leapt from his seat, and began making his way hurriedly along the row.

His mother looked up from her conversation. 'D' you want some money, Archie?'

'It's okay, I've got some,' he replied, not even bothering to look back.

He ran down the stairs to reception, crept past the counter, and through the double doors that led to a concourse from which several corridors branched off leading to treatment rooms, dressing rooms and, ultimately, the pitch. The last of the players had just clattered into the away dressing room, and the door to the home one was tightly shut. Archie could see a couple of stewards guarding the tunnel entrance in the distance, but of Barty there was no sign.

A large shadow suddenly loomed in front of the two stewards. 'All right, Barty, mate?' one of them asked, slapping the mascot on the back as he walked by.

Archie's heart leapt in to his mouth, and he ducked out of sight.

The mascot came to the top of the concourse, furtively looked both ways, and then disappeared around a corner.

Archie gave chase at once.

He found himself in a long deserted corridor he hadn't known existed before. It was illuminated by fluorescent strip lighting, which gave the linoleum and gloss painted walls a stark, hospital-like sheen. Most of the doors that led off it were either marked 'Private' or 'Staff only', and it was the very end one that Barty unlocked, and went inside.

Archie scuttled softly after him, finding that this door had a frightening red plaque with 'Danger Keep Out' inscribed on it. He put his ear to it and listened hard.

He could hear the faint murmur of the Barton Boogie being hummed by a man's voice.

Archie took hold of the door handle. He was sure whoever it was, hadn't locked the door behind them. It was now or never, he realised with a rush of adrenalin that sent his heart pounding like a runaway racehorse.

He pushed down firmly and the door swung open.

The first thing Archie saw was Barty's giant head sitting on a table by the wall. His gaze shot up to the mascot's thick padded body with the peculiar spectacle of a small human head poking up from its shoulders.

The body and head spun round in alarm.

Archie's heart leapt.

'It's *you!*' he cried.

— Chapter Three —

Who'd have thought?

'Get out! No! Stay where you are!'

The sparkly, red, white and blue figure streaked past Archie, slamming and locking the door shut.

'Did anyone see you come in?' Murray Thompson's red, sweaty face glared furiously at him over the neck of Barty Boar's suit.

For the first time Archie wondered if he had done the right thing. No one else knew where he was and, as friendly and cheerful as Barton Vale's Webmaster normally was, this was a side to him Archie would never have guessed. What if Murray was so fanatical about his alter ego, he would do *anything* to keep Barty's true identity a secret?

Archie could picture the news headlines.

STAR STRIKER'S SON FOUND MURDERED. Police are looking for a tall furry suspect.

He could picture the scene.

Grissom off *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* stooping over his crumpled body, suddenly spotting the evidence – a couple of strands of brown nylon fur clenched between Archie's stiffened fingers, which he would point out triumphantly – case closed.

'What the hell d' you think you're playing at?' Murray demanded, snatching Archie back from his daydreams.

'I just wanted to find out who Barty Boar is, that's all,' Archie said, hoping if he acted dumb and innocent enough Murray might take pity on him, and let him go without a fight.

'Nobody knows who Barty is,' Murray ground out.

'Nobody?'

‘Well, apart from the Chairman of course,’ Murray snapped impatiently. ‘I wouldn’t just take it on myself to become Barty Boar now, would I? You can’t just walk into a place like this, and appoint yourself mascot. It’s more than just a job, you know. Barty’s real to the fans, and that’s the way it’s going to stay.’

Archie’s stomach rolled over, flipping his heart into his mouth. ‘Are you threatening me, or something?’

‘No. I’m telling you.’ Murray lifted his trotter, and waggled it in Archie’s face. ‘You dare tell anyone who I am, that’s all. You just dare.’ He swallowed dryly, his large Adam’s apple bobbing up and down like mercury in a thermometer.

It suddenly occurred to Archie that Murray was just as terrified as he was.

A glimmer of an idea began to smoulder in his head. ‘I won’t tell anyone on one condition,’ he said.

‘Oh no,’ Murray replied. ‘You’re not going to blackmail me, Archie Carr! Just wait ‘til I tell your dad.’

‘But if you tell my dad, then he’ll know who you are. Then he’ll tell my mum, and she’ll tell my sister, and then *everyone* will know, because there’s no way Rosie’ll keep quiet about it.’

‘So what makes you think I can trust *you* then?’ Murray flicked his chin out militantly, trying to hide a nervous tick that had started to make one of his eyelids twitch.

‘Because I don’t want anyone else to know who you are either.’ Archie smiled mysteriously. ‘You remember the documentary me and my sister made about Dad, which was shown on telly last year? Well, I’d like to make a film about Barty Boar for Barton TV.’

‘But I thought you said you wanted to keep my identity a secret.’

‘But it would be. If it was about *Barty. Just Barty.*’

‘Not me?’ Murray narrowed his eyes into a shrewd look, his own brain now slipping into gear.

‘Like you said, everyone thinks Barty Boar’s real,’ Archie replied. ‘So the film will be all about him – his pre-match preparations, how he works out his routines, the work he does for charity – all the stuff the fans don’t see. Of course we’ll have to

spoof it up a bit. Have some shots of Barty unwinding at home, which will make him seem even more real. I've seen how much the fans love him. I'm sure they'd really like to see a film about him. It's about time Barty was given some of the credit he deserves.'

Murray smiled slowly. 'You're a crafty little beggar, aren't you?'

'So you'll do it?'

'Yeah, I'll do it,' Murray answered, shaking his head in spite of himself. 'But only if the Chairman says so.'

'It's a deal!' Archie grinned, holding his hand out. 'Let's shake on it.'

Murray hesitated. He stared at Archie's hand, and slowly lifted his trotter, folding it around Archie's fingers.

'It's a deal,' he agreed.

* * * * *

The players' lounge was heaving after the match, and spirits were high following what turned out to be a three, two, home win thriller.

Paul Starling had scored again in the second half, and his wife Trisha was on top form, priming and preening herself as captain's wife and therefore top WAG. She was working the room as if she owned it, and didn't take kindly to seeing a new face among the throng, especially as the new face was sitting with Kim Carr and her friends.

'Who have we got here, then?' Trisha smiled coldly at Nicci Fullerton.

'Trisha, I can't believe you didn't notice Nicci before the match,' Kim laughed. 'She drove the buggy with Barty in it, and did an interview with Joe Milligan.'

Trisha gazed blankly at her. 'Sorry, Thierry hasn't been well, and I wasn't taking a lot of notice.'

Eric's little brother Thierry was at that moment zooming across the room pretending to be an aeroplane and bursting with good health.

Kim glanced apologetically at Nicci, who gave a small smile in return.

'Oh, come on, Trisha,' Siobhan Kelly said. 'Paul must watch Racing TV. Nicci's always on that!'

'Oh no, he can't stand horseracing; says it's a complete waste of time and money, and only for idiots!' Trisha sneered.

'I know what you mean,' Nicci smiled. 'I feel just the same about football.'

'Well, really!' Trisha harrumphed, and stormed off.

'She deserved that!' Kim laughed.

The door opened, and Archie came charging in.

'Where have *you* been?' Kim asked.

His gaze skimmed right over her, so she called again, 'Archie!'

'Hi, Mum,' he said, with a passing smile.

'What on earth is he up to now?' Kim said, watching Archie stride over to the Barton Vale Chairman, Sam Diamond, who was sitting at a corner table with his wife and Barton legend Tommy Blackwell.

'Who knows with Archie?' Siobhan chuckled.

'Lucia's always coming home from school with stories about him,' Sofia Martinez said.

'Oh, don't,' Kim cringed. 'He's into ghosts at the moment – totally obsessed with that *Scared Stiff* programme. He keeps writing to them with suggestions about where they could do the show. He's probably asking Sam if the stadium's haunted. Nothing would surprise me with Archie.'

Archie had been invited to sit down with the Diamonds and Tommy Blackwell, and had his head thrust forward in conversation.

'He's not like his father, that's for sure,' Siobhan said.

'Or his sister,' Penny added.

They followed Penny's gaze to another table where Rosie and Lucia were helping Penny's six-year-old daughter Zoe with a sticker book.

'Yes, at least Gavin's got one footballer in the family,' Siobhan said.

‘Doesn’t Archie play football then?’ Nicci Fullerton asked in surprise.

‘He’s like you, can’t stand it,’ Kim grinned.

‘I’m never going to live that down, am I?’ Nicci winced sheepishly.

The growing sound of men’s voices in the corridor outside the players’ lounge suddenly made every female in the room sit up and watch the door attentively.

It burst open and Matt Warner, Justin Blake and Lucas Cooke tumbled in, laughing and joking, dealing out kisses and high-fives as they crossed the room like a trio of rock stars.

Matt saw Kim and made a beeline for her, swooping down to kiss her cheek.

‘Oh, Matt, what on earth is that?’ She shrank back, wrinkling her nose at the gallon of aftershave he was wearing.

‘Don’t you like it?’ He grinned. ‘They’re my new sponsors.’

Kim held the back of her hand against her mouth, protecting it from the fumes, and shook her head.

‘Didn’t they send you a tester before you agreed to the deal?’ Penny asked, covering her own mouth to cough. ‘Steve never agrees to endorse anything, he wouldn’t use himself.’

‘I’m using it, aren’t I?’

‘Overusing it, if you ask me.’ Siobhan grimaced.

‘What are you talking about? It’s expensive stuff this. I thought you ladies liked us blokes to smell nice. What about the Lynx effect?’

‘Yes, but this is more like the *extinct* effect,’ Kim replied, causing the other women to laugh.

‘Yes, the girls won’t be swooning in his arms from his looks, that’s for sure!’ Sofia chuckled.

‘Oh, I don’t know, once they find out he’s a footballer it won’t matter what he smells like,’ Kim said. ‘What do you think, Nicci?’

‘Don’t ask me, I don’t even like football, remember?’ Nicci laughed, causing Matt to look at her with interest.

‘Sorry, Matt, have you met Nicci?’ Kim asked.

‘No, I haven’t,’ Matt said. ‘Although I’ve seen you loads on

WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT?

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Racing TV. I just love the gee gees, in fact I'm thinking of buying a couple myself, maybe you could give me some pointers in that direction?'

'Sure,' Nicci dimpled prettily. 'I know some people who could help.'

'Sweet,' Matt grinned, his eyes holding hers long enough for the other women to swap intrigued looks.

'I've never heard you say you wanted to buy a racehorse before,' Rosie's voice rose up accusingly from behind him.

'Maybe because I haven't told anyone before,' Matt swung round and pulled a face at her. 'I suppose you've come to tell me I played rubbish.' He turned back to Nicci. 'Did you know Rosie's my biggest critic?'

'And biggest fan,' Kim said. 'You should see her bedroom – her wall's covered in Mr Warner's posters, and not long been decorated either.'

'So, go on then, tell me.' Matt regarded Rosie archly.

'I thought Dad played a blinder,' Rosie replied, pursing her lips in an effort not to laugh.

'Oh, yeah. What about me?' Matt instantly had her head in an arm lock, playfully holding his fist up to her jaw.

'Pooh! What's that smell?' Rosie squirmed out of his grasp, and pinched her nose with her fingers.

'It's my new sponsor's aftershave, don't you like it?' Matt's face fell.

'Yes, it's nice.' Rosie instantly backtracked, eager to please her hero.

'What did I tell you?' Kim said to her friends.

'I've got a school match on Tuesday, can you come and watch?' Rosie asked, craning her neck to look up at him.

'Girls' or boys' team?'

'Boys.'

'Eric hasn't managed to get rid of you then?'

'Not yet.' Rosie grinned.

'Good on yer.' Matt ruffled Rosie's hair, and turned once more to Nicci. 'Rosie's one of the best footballers I know, much better than her old man.'

‘She must be good then,’ Nicci smiled.

‘Why don’t you come and see for yourself? Are you doing anything Tuesday?’

Rosie’s head shot round. ‘It’s normally only parents who come to watch,’ she quickly spoke up.

‘What about me?’ Matt retorted. ‘I’m not a parent. I’d have thought you’d have loved showing off your silky skills to Nicci, here.’

‘Of course she would,’ Kim said. ‘And you’re more than welcome to join us, Nicci. You can come back for dinner afterwards, it’ll be fun, won’t it, Rosie?’

By the flinty eyed look her mother gave her, it wasn’t a question, but a command.

‘I suppose so,’ Rosie mumbled, at that moment hating Nicci Fullerton with all her heart.

Chapter Four

The Battle with Jericho

'I used to enjoy playing football,' Rosie grumbled, as she laced up her football boots.

'You still would if you came back and played for us,' Lucia replied in an, I-told-you-so voice. 'I don't know why you want to play for the boys anyway; it's not as if they want you to play for them.'

'The girls don't want me either.'

'That's because they say you think you're better than them by playing for the boys.'

'But I am,' Rosie said candidly.

'Ssh!' Lucia hissed. 'D' you want them to hear you?'

They both glanced at the other side of the changing room, where the girls' football team was getting changed for their match.

One or two of them shot dirty looks in Rosie's direction and whispered among themselves, giggling nastily.

'I feel like a freak,' Rosie complained.

'Then don't play for the boys.' Lucia stood up, and smoothed down her own football kit. Rosie knew that deep down her friend was just as annoyed with her as the rest of the girls' team.

She was beginning to wonder if it really was worth the hassle.

'Rosie Carr!' a deep, frightening man's voice boomed through a narrow opening in the changing room door. 'Outside now, please!'

Rosie shot to her feet and clattered hurriedly out of the changing room, too scared to notice the flurry of barbed looks that darted after her.

Mr Lamb, the boys' team coach stood impatiently in the corridor, his mean glaring eyes burning into Rosie as she emerged nervously. He was the most feared teacher in the school, and didn't have a kind bone in his body.

'Come on, you're not playing for the girls' team now,' he barked, marching off. 'The boys are out there already warming up. And you need to be on your toes today, I'm short of players due to this sickness bug that's going around, and I've only got one sub.'

Rosie's heart lifted in spite of everything.

'Am I going to start then, Mr Lamb?'

Mr Lamb shot Rosie a searing look. 'You *are* the sub.'

A handful of parents were already hovering apprehensively on the touchline. Among these were Rosie's mum and dad, Archie and Matt Warner, who to Rosie's dismay was standing next to Nicci Fullerton, laughing and joking with her.

'Right, Rosie Carr, seeing as you're late, once round the pitch,' Mr Lamb ordered.

'Great,' Rosie muttered, as she trotted off, heat streaking up her face as she passed the rest of her team mates, who were well into their warm up doing shuttle runs.

'There's your girlfriend, Greggo,' Eric shouted, causing everyone to laugh. 'It's your fault we're still lumbered with her. She just can't keep away from you.'

Rosie blinked away hot angry tears. Sniffing hard, she wiped her nose on her sleeve. What was it her dad always said? Sometimes all the team talk you needed was someone winding you up before a match.

'Hey look, they've got a girl!' One of the opposition team from Jericho Juniors crowed, as she ran by.

'You're on the wrong pitch; the girlies are playing over there!' another one called, while a third joker gave a fruity wolf-whistle, making them all laugh, until their teacher told them to stop it.

Well, she'd show them – all of them. Her dad was right; by this time, Rosie had had all the team talk she'd needed.

That's if she could get off the bench of course.

* * * * *

The match that followed was scrappy.

Although both teams fielded good players, neither displayed good sportsmanship. Tackles were coming in hard and fast, resulting in players crumpling to the floor like extras in a war movie. With each man down, Rosie leapt to her feet, waiting to be called on to the pitch, but every casualty somehow made a miraculous recovery leaving her stranded in the dugout.

She couldn't believe how badly everyone was playing, especially Eric who spent most of the time goal hanging and moaning at the midfield for not getting the ball to him. To make matters worse one of Barton Hall's players who had fallen victim to the sickness bug was goalkeeper Ross Kelly, and Mr Lamb had done what nearly every other junior football coach would have done in similar circumstances – put the biggest, least agile player between the sticks in his place.

The result being that by half time, Barton Hall were losing eight, nil.

The home side strode moodily from the pitch, blaming each other for the catastrophe.

'We're rubbish,' Eric sniped. 'You might as well put her on for all the good it would do.' He cut Rosie a scathing look.

'Keep on like that, Mr Starling, and I might just do that, at your expense! You're not exactly in line for the golden boot, yourself!' Mr Lamb countered.

'But I'm getting no service,' Eric whined. 'How can I score if I'm not getting any service? They're just not getting the ball to me. They're not trying. It's not my fault.'

'I know, lad,' Mr Lamb said, patting his head.

Rosie couldn't believe it. If she had spoken to Mr Lamb like that, he would have bitten *her head* off, let alone pat it as if she was his pet pit bull.

'Your captain's right.' Mr Lamb swung round, sweeping his eyes across the team like a pair of searchlights. 'How can we score if you don't get the ball to him? Where's the midfield?' He glared accusingly at Kieran, who reddened furiously. 'More importantly, where's the defence? And as for *you* Duncan Gladwin...'

The goalkeeper hung his head in shame.

'I haven't seen you come off your line once,' Mr Lamb ranted. 'Get stuck in there. I want you coming out to meet them. It's no good cowering in the back of the net!'

Barton Hall returned to the pitch determined to put up a fight.

Duncan Gladwin had taken Mr Lamb's pep talk especially to heart, and was charging like an angry rhino at Jericho's strikers as soon as they went on the attack.

'He's coming out too much now,' Rosie said, horrified, as the Barton goalie forgot what position he was playing in, and tried to tackle one of Jericho's players near the halfway line.

'Get back, you idiot!' Mr Lamb shouted, as the Jericho player swept the ball from Duncan's feet straight up the pitch and into the goal.

'*What are you playing at, coach?*' Matt Warner yelled from the other side of the pitch.

'Put Rosie on! You've got nothing to lose now!'

Rosie glanced at Mr Lamb, her heart sinking, as she knew he wouldn't be told what to do by anyone, even a famous Premiership footballer.

In the end, the matter was taken out of Mr Lamb's hands.

Jericho's large, pacy striker raced through the pack challenging Duncan one on one. The keeper danced about, waving his arms wildly. The striker toyed with him, tapping the ball from one foot to the other, slowing down to give the ball a cheeky punt straight through Duncan's legs and into the goal.

Jericho went wild, whooping and taunting Barton Hall, as they all clamoured around their striker.

Barton Hall clamoured around their player too, but not to congratulate him. Practically everyone launched into a vicious rant, demanding to know what Duncan was playing at, and informing him how useless he was, including Mr Lamb, who voiced his opinion from the side of the pitch.

The goalkeeper responded by ripping his gloves off and throwing them on the floor.

‘Stay where you are!’ Mr Lamb ordered as Duncan stalked from the pitch, dragging the number one shirt over his head.

‘COME BACK, BOY!’

The goalie headed for the changing rooms without looking back once.

Mr Lamb looked as if his head was about to explode.

Barton Hall stared fearfully at their coach, while Jericho were already back in position waiting to get started again.

The referee looked at his watch, and made a signal to Mr Lamb.

Mr Lamb snatched the goalie shirt off the floor and, holding it in front of him as if it was contaminated, strode towards Rosie.

‘But I can’t go in goal, Mr Lamb,’ she stuttered.

‘You want to play so much, you’ll play anywhere I tell you to.’

‘Hey, you can’t do that!’ Rosie heard Matt shout.

She glanced at her father who was standing on the touchline, both hands dug deep in his coat pockets, a deep frown lining his face, but unlike Matt, refusing to say anything. She knew that for the sake of his team, he would play in any position.

Mr Lamb glared at her expectantly. Rosie’s stomach churned as she took the shirt from him.

‘I’ll do it. I’ll go in goal,’ someone else spoke up.

It was Kieran Gregg.

‘We need you in midfield, don’t be stupid,’ Mr Lamb replied.

‘Yes, but Rosie’s good out, and I can play in goal.’ Kieran swallowed hard, his face turning beetroot under Mr Lamb’s hardened scrutiny.

‘Mr Lamb,’ the referee called, pointing to his watch again.

‘All right, all right,’ Mr Lamb snapped, snatching the goalie shirt from Rosie, and thrusting it at Kieran.

‘You better not let me down,’ he warned. ‘Both of you.’

Kieran hurriedly dragged the shirt over his head.

‘Thanks,’ Rosie said, unable to look Kieran in the eye.

‘S’okay,’ he replied, turning to run on to the pitch.

‘Go on, then,’ Mr Lamb said.

Rosie blushed, and ran after Kieran.

Eric’s mouth twisted spitefully as Rosie took up her position.

'You make one mistake...' he threatened, just as the referee blew the whistle.

Jericho were flying with confidence. Playing lightning-quick, two-touch-football, they began passing the ball like human pins on a giant pinball machine.

Suddenly Jericho's number eight was all alone one on one with Kieran, racing towards him, getting ready to slot goal number eleven into the back of the net.

Rosie ran as fast as her legs could carry her, shrieking at Paul Darroway to get back and defend Kieran.

The Jericho striker seemed unstoppable.

Kieran held his arms wide and started to come forward.

The number eight began to slow down, deciding which way to strike. He drew back his foot and sent the ball soaring towards the top right-hand corner of the goal.

Rosie held her breath, hardly daring to look, but out of nowhere Kieran suddenly leapt up and snatched the ball from the air, hugging it to his chest as the home fans gave a loud cheer of delight.

'Get back!' he shouted to his team mates.

They glanced at each other uncertainly.

'GET BACK, WILL YOU!' Kieran roared, as his team mates continued to dither, turning to Eric for guidance, who shook his head, unable to trust anyone's judgement, but his own.

Kieran shook his head angrily.

'Kieran!' Rosie shouted, standing alone and unmarked in a wide-open space.

He saw her and threw the ball in a wide arc that landed at her feet. She spun on her heel and dribbled the ball hard and fast through the field.

Jericho didn't know what had hit them.

Now it was her turn to be one on one with their goalkeeper, but unlike the Jericho striker, she sent the ball low and wide, wrong-footing the goalie so he had no chance of stopping the shot.

The cheer that went up from the touchline was deafening. Matt Warner ran on to the pitch and lifted Rosie into the air, only to be sent packing by the referee.

‘Great goal,’ Darius Carling said.

‘No it wasn’t, it was a fluke. Next time, pass it to me, you could have really messed things up for us,’ Eric retorted, stalking back to the centre. ‘COME ON, BARTON, THEY’RE NOT THAT GOOD!’

‘At least we don’t need a girl to score for us,’ a Jericho player answered.

Rosie looked up and saw Kieran grinning at her. She turned away, trying not to laugh.

Jericho immediately went on the attack, once more passing the ball between them as if it was a hot potato, leaving the home side’s defence stumbling in their wake.

Even Rosie couldn’t do much about it, finding herself shadowed by a tall, menacing boy, who grunted insults at her, while shoving her in the back every time the referee wasn’t looking.

‘For God’s sake!’ Eric shouted, as yet again the Jericho forwards lined up to shoot at the Barton goal.

But once more Kieran came off his line, and leapt into the air, grabbing the ball like a lizard snapping a fly.

The onslaught continued, and with it Kieran’s amazing performance. It was as if his hands were two magnets and the ball lined with metal. He seemed to have springs in his legs and could jump higher than anyone else.

Jericho pounded ball after ball at him, but he stopped each and every one. Even the ones he couldn’t catch, he managed to punch away or tip over the crossbar with his fingers.

Rosie couldn’t believe her eyes.

She could see Kieran’s mum and dad on the touchline staring in amazement too. Steve Gregg was shaking his head, while Rosie’s dad had his arm around his shoulders laughing.

‘Come on, we can do this!’ Darius shouted.

‘Rosie, move it!’ Eric snapped, as Kieran’s goal kick came flying in her direction.

Rosie sprinted forward with the big Jericho defender hot on her heels. She was quicker than him, but his stride was longer than hers, and suddenly they were side by side jostling each other. Rosie felt a sharp pain in her ribs, and fell flat on her face.

'Play on!' the referee ordered, as shouts of protest came from the touchline.

Rosie lifted her head to see the big defender smirking at her. She staggered to her feet, fuming.

Jericho had possession now.

Clutching her side, Rosie ran as fast as she could towards the Barton goal.

'You want some more?' the defender jeered, lifting his elbow threateningly.

'Get lost, creep!' Rosie retorted, her anger fuelling a burst of energy that jet-propelled her away from him.

The Jericho number eight was now in front of her, running at Paul Darroway who, in turn, was shielding Kieran.

'I'm going to take you out,' the defender promised, hard on Rosie's heels. 'You shouldn't be here. I'm going to get you, girlie.'

Paul Darroway successfully tackled the number eight, sending the ball to Rosie.

'Give me that,' the defender grunted, shoving her out of the way.

'No!' Rosie cried, racing after him, as he swept towards the goal.

She could see Kieran coming out, but *she* wanted to stop the defender from scoring, desperate to get her own back on him.

The rest of the Jericho team were falling about laughing.

'Go, Dazzer!' they began to shout. 'Run, or she'll get ya!'

Rosie was incensed, flying up the field until she was neck and neck with Dazzer.

He gave her a sideways look, his face red and sweaty.

Rosie saw her chance and pushed her toe out, clipping the ball so it spun off to the side.

Dazzer stumbled, rolling about on the floor clutching his shin with both hands.

The referee blew his whistle and pointed to the penalty spot.

'But I didn't touch him!' Rosie cried.

'NO WAY!' Matt Warner bellowed. 'HE DIVED!'

Even Eric was up in arms. 'She got the ball, she didn't touch him,' he protested in the referee's face.

The Jericho coach ran on to the pitch with a first aid bag. Dazzer continued to roll around in agony as the debate continued.

'Penalty,' the referee confirmed.

Rosie looked at Kieran. 'Sorry,' she said, her eyes hot with tears.

'It's okay,' Kieran smiled bravely. 'It wasn't your fault.'

'UNBELIEVABLE!' Matt Warner shouted as the number eight placed the ball on the penalty spot.

'I said we shouldn't have a girl on the team,' Eric moaned, as he walked past her.

She glanced over her shoulder to see Dazzer now bouncing up and down on both feet, grinning at her.

Kieran watched the striker intently as he prepared to make his run up. Rosie crossed her fingers and prayed that he'd sky it.

But his aim was on target. The ball rocketed towards the top left-hand corner of the goal.

Kieran shot after it, his arms like Inspector Gadget's seeming to telescope from their sockets, smacking the ball to the floor with his fingers. The number eight sprinted for the rebound, but Kieran pounced on the ball like a cat, tucking it under his body safely out of reach.

The home crowd went wild as Kieran got to his feet, and started re-organising his defence.

He'd just taken the goal kick when the final whistle went.

'Well, done, Kieran. Well, done!' Mr Lamb was the first to congratulate him. 'We did better in the second half because of you.'

'And Rosie.' Kieran frowned.

'Yes, and Rosie.' Mr Lamb threw Rosie a cursory glance. 'I'll know where to come next time we need a keeper. You were absolutely brilliant!'

Rosie turned away, pulling a face.

'You should have seen Eric's face when you scored!' Archie grinned, coming to meet her.

'Yes, fancy you scoring,' her mother laughed.

‘Great goal,’ Rosie’s father agreed, giving her a hug.

‘You wouldn’t think so,’ Rosie replied. ‘Mr Lamb didn’t even mention it. He reckons we did better in the second half because of Kieran.’

‘The man’s an idiot!’ Matt declared. ‘Mind you, Greggo, it does look like your son’s playing in the wrong position.’

‘Yeah, right,’ Steve Gregg scoffed. ‘As if I’d let a son of mine be a keeper. They’re all off their heads. Stark raving bonkers.’

‘Brave, I think the correct term is,’ Kim said.

‘All right, *brave*, then,’ Steve said mockingly.

‘Well, he was pretty brave saving that penalty,’ Matt said, just as Kieran walked up. ‘Well done, keeps.’ He made an attempt to ruffle Kieran’s gelled hair, only to draw his hand back in disgust.

‘Kieran’s got good hand-eye co-ordination.’ Steve smiled indulgently. ‘You should see him play golf, isn’t that right, Penny?’

Kieran’s mum nodded in agreement.

‘Mind you, it’s easy to pull off a few stunts in a Mickey Mouse school match,’ Steve added.

‘Aw, credit where credit’s due,’ Gavin protested. ‘They were being thrashed until your lad came on.’

‘I’m not saying Kieran wouldn’t be any good between the sticks,’ Steve retorted. ‘But this isn’t exactly academy standard, is it?’

Rosie glanced at Kieran who looked more than a little crestfallen by his father’s lack of enthusiasm for his goalkeeping skills, especially when Steve changed the subject back to golf, making arrangements to play a round the next day with her own father and Matt.

‘Sorry, mate, I can’t,’ Matt replied, smiling crookedly at Nicci. ‘I’m off to see a man about a horse.’

‘You’re serious about buying a racehorse, then?’ Kim asked.

‘I’m taking Matt to meet a trainer,’ Nicci explained.

‘Oh, yeah, we believe you,’ Gavin laughed.

Everyone started pulling Matt’s leg about buying a racehorse, and how he was only doing it to impress Nicci.

THE BATTLE WITH JERICHO

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Rosie turned away, her insides curdling with jealousy as she made her way back to the changing rooms.

‘Mum reckons Matt’s really keen on her,’ Archie said, catching his sister up.

‘As if!’ Rosie sneered. ‘Nicci Fullerton is just one of a hundred. You know how many girlfriends Matt’s had. She’s way too grown up for him anyway. It won’t last a month, you’ll see!’ And she marched off, head held high, leaving her brother wondering who she was trying to kid the most – him or her.

— Chapter Five —

Life with Barty

‘Now, you’re sure that thing’s not on,’ Murray said, looking sharply at Archie’s camcorder.

Archie turned it around so that Murray could see the paused screen. Murray nodded grimly. It was the first day of filming for the documentary and he didn’t look at all happy.

‘Because, you know if there’s any of me without my head on, I won’t have anything more to do with it.’ He picked up the large brown boar’s head and dropped it on to his shoulders.

‘Yes, I know,’ Archie sighed, lifting his eyes to the ceiling, as this had to be the twentieth time Murray had said this already.

The match was due to kick off in about half an hour’s time and Murray was going through his last-minute preparations. To say that he was on edge was putting it mildly; what with his ritual stretches, breathing exercises that would put an opera singer to shame, and a strange ten-minute meditation workout he performed on his head.

‘Right, are we ready then?’ Murray’s muffled voice came from the depths of Barty’s slightly startled-looking face.

‘Ready,’ Archie affirmed, checking his camera.

Murray strode to the door and unlocked it. Archie scurried out in front of him, ready to record Barty’s moment of departure.

Barty hesitated, and then crossed himself dramatically, before marching off down the corridor, brown furry arms swinging backwards and forwards in time to the clatter of his boots on the shiny linoleum surface.

Archie soft-shoe-shuffled after him in an effort to alleviate camera shake. The knowledge that he probably looked as stupid

as he felt was compounded by the sniggers of the stewards as they crossed the concourse that led to the tunnel.

‘Does this mean we finally get to find out who that daft beggar is?’ one of them asked.

Barty stopped dead in his tracks. He turned very slowly on his heel in the direction of the steward and, if it was at all possible for an expressionless face to give somebody a death stare, that was exactly what he did.

The steward coloured up and laughed uncomfortably. ‘All right, Barty. No offence, mate.’

Barty turned back, and continued on his way.

‘Talk about Donnie Darko,’ the steward muttered to his compatriot with a shudder.

It was at this point that Archie realised all trace of Murray Thompson mild-mannered Webmaster had gone, morphed into his alter ego Barty Boar.

Archie didn’t know whether to find this funny or frightening. He knew lots of people who took their jobs seriously, but this was bordering on the extreme. Barty Boar was, after all, only a man in an animal suit.

And then they walked out on to the pitch.

The ground was only half full, yet a deafening cheer of delight rang out at the sight of the club mascot.

Barty didn’t disappoint, waving at each stand in turn, before executing a string of tumbles across the centre circle, which only pleased the crowd even more.

He stood up and turned to the public announcer’s box, raising his arm in the air. Right on cue the familiar Barton Boogie fanfare erupted all around them. Barty began swaggering backwards and forwards in his animated line dance, the hem of his silky red and white shorts swinging like two mini hula skirts. Cheers and whistles of encouragement from the growing crowd threatened to drown out the music.

Archie zoomed in for a close up of Barty’s feet going through the surprisingly intricate dance steps as deftly as a cour de ballet star, particularly as he was wearing the biggest pair of football boots Archie had ever seen.

The home and away teams began to filter out in their warm-up sweatshirts and shorts.

Barty immediately went over to the away captain and held out his trotter.

When the big midfielder went to shake it, Barty lifted it to his nose and waggled it cheekily at him.

The crowd loved it.

* * * * *

Sam Diamond was entertaining some very important guests in his magnificent boardroom that overlooked the pitch. Barton Vale's present sponsorship deal was due to finish at the end of the season, so he was attempting to soft-soap the owner of a famous pet food company into being next season's kit sponsors.

'So, Cornel, do you like what you see?' Sam asked, handing the pet food magnate a flute of finest champagne.

Cornel Coxcroft, the brains behind Old Ma Hubbard's Complete, raised his navy blue button eyes and gave a half-moon smile from within the flabby jowls of his large red face. Sam half-suspected there was a bulldog waiting at home that looked just like him.

'We're not unimpressed, are we, love?' Cornel replied, looking over his shoulder to the window, where his pretty young wife and son were standing with James McGregor, Sam's whiz kid Chief Executive, who had just presented the young boy with a Barton Vale shirt with his name on it.

'It's soo-pah,' Tina Coxcroft trilled happily, as she yanked the shirt over the boy's head. 'Peregrine's loving it, aren't you, cherub?'

Peregrine, who couldn't have been more than four years old, pulled away from his mother to continue staring goggle-eyed out of the window.

He suddenly leaned his head back and gave the loudest, dirtiest laugh possible for a child of such tender years, making everyone else in the room burst out laughing too.

‘What’s so funny, son?’ Cornel chuckled, going over to the window to investigate.

Peregrine pointed to the pitch where Barty Boar was copying the players’ warm-up stretches; falling over most times in the process.

‘Hee, hee, he’s a right laugh, isn’t he?’ his father agreed, as Barty crept up behind Paul Starling and began mimicking him.

Paul spun round unexpectedly, and the mascot turned tail and ran, lifting his knees up in an exaggerated cartoon-style gait.

Peregrine Coxcroft doubled up with laughter.

‘You should get him under contract,’ Cornel chuckled, watching the mascot hide behind Pete Squires, Barton Vale’s assistant coach. ‘He’s priceless. Who is it?’

‘Can’t say, I’m afraid.’ The corners of Sam’s mouth curled smugly. He always enjoyed the fact that, like Batman’s butler Alfred, only he knew Barty Boar’s true identity.

‘He’s much better than the Rovers’ mascots,’ Tina Coxcroft put in, causing her husband to shoot her a lightning look.

Unlike Barty’s true identity, it was common knowledge that the Coxcrofts had been doing the rounds of several Premiership clubs in order to decide whom to bestow their sponsorship on. Barton Vale was seventh on a list of eight, and Sam was under no illusion that he was going to have to pull out all the stops to persuade them that his club was *the* club to throw in their allegiance with.

‘Well, it’s true,’ Tina Coxcroft continued, ignoring another sharp look from her husband. ‘Your mascot’s much funnier, and he’s doing it all on his own. They’ve got three mascots at the Rovers, and all they do is stand about waving to the crowd and signing autographs.’

‘Barty signs autographs too,’ Sam said. ‘We’ll get him to sign a few for young Peregrine here, at half time. Get his photograph taken with him too. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, young man?’

The little boy regarded Sam with the same navy blue button eyes as his father, nodding his head laboriously, as if he hadn’t noticed Sam’s existence until then and couldn’t work out who he was.

Sam straightened up and looked out of the large plate-glass window. The players had just gone back into the tunnel, and Barty was going through another chorus of the Barton Boogie to while away the time before they reappeared for the match.

‘He must be worn out by the time he’s finished,’ Tina Coxcroft said. ‘Perhaps you ought to get him some help, you know, like the Rovers. A *lady* mascot – that would *really* liven him up.’ Her eyes widened flirtatiously and Sam couldn’t help but smile in return.

‘You don’t think he’s lively enough already, then?’

Tina drew in her chin and giggled. ‘Well, that all depends on the lady mascot, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes, I suppose it does,’ Sam replied, letting his gaze drift back to Barty.

* * * * *

A few rows beneath the boardroom, sitting in the executive seats with their mothers, were Rosie and Lucia.

‘I don’t understand my brother,’ Rosie said, as she watched Archie running around after Barty Boar. ‘He’s down on the pitch in amongst all those famous footballers, yet he’s filming a stupid man in a pig suit.’

‘It is Barty Boar, though.’ Lucia laughed.

Rosie looked at her friend in disbelief. ‘Are you telling me *you’d* prefer that stupid mascot to Matt Warner, or Justin Blake?’

‘No, but Archie’s not really into football, is he?’

‘Neither is my mum.’ Rosie shot a deprecating look at Kim, who was poring through a home furnishings magazine with Sofia, discussing interior designers as if they were old friends – which many of them were.

‘I sometimes wonder why they bother coming to the matches,’ Rosie grumbled.

‘They should go shopping instead,’ Lucia agreed.

‘They could drop us off at the ground and then pick us up when the match finishes. We’d be alright on our own, and at

least we wouldn't have to listen to what's hot and what's not.' She screwed up her face in disgust. 'Hey, Mum, Lucia and I think you and Sofia should go shopping instead of coming to home games.'

'Why's that then?' Kim laughed.

'Because you only come to see your friends. You could go somewhere else to do that, like the Bullring.'

'You've thought of everything, haven't you?' Kim's eyes twinkled with amusement. 'What do you think, Sofia?'

'I can't do enough shopping,' Sofia admitted guiltily. 'Perhaps we should do that next time. It would be nice to escape for an afternoon.'

'But who would look after the kids?' Kim replied.

A movement along the row made them both look up.

'Nicci!' They both laughed as the TV presenter made her way towards the empty seat next to Sofia.

Rosie's stomach dropped like a stone.

'Is that right what a little bird's told me?' Kim asked, exchanging a sly look with Sofia. 'You've changed jobs so that you can get to all of Matt's matches?'

'I wouldn't say that exactly,' Nicci said, unbuttoning her coat and sitting down.

Rosie leaned forward slightly, keeping both eyes on the match, and one ear on what Nicci was saying.

'The job on the daily lunchtime sports news came up and it seemed like too good an opportunity to miss. Of course, it does also mean I now get Saturdays off. Ooh, Matt!' She sucked in her breath as Matt made a late tackle on his opposite number, bringing them both down in the process.

'He'll get booked for that,' Rosie said, her own heart thumping as the referee marched towards the tall Australian, fingering his shirt pocket ready to produce his notebook and cards.

'Silly boy,' Nicci said, the small v between her perfectly plucked eyebrows deepening worriedly. She shook her head, and turned to find Kim and Penny regarding her with amusement.

'I thought you didn't like football,' Kim said.

‘Let’s say I’ve acquired a taste for it,’ Nicci grinned.

‘See, I told you she was going out with him,’ Lucia whispered in Rosie’s ear.

‘Doesn’t mean anything.’

‘My dad says Matt’s changed. He’s better behaved.’

‘Oh, yeah?’

Some sections of the home crowd jeered as the yellow card was finally produced, and Matt skulked back into position.

‘In the changing room, that is,’ Lucia said.

‘He must be ill, then.’

‘Or in love.’ Lucia smirked as Rosie shot her a cutting look.

‘I’m glad that Matt’s stopped wearing that awful aftershave,’ Kim was now saying.

‘It wasn’t worth the deal,’ Nicci replied. ‘I told him, it was the aftershave or me.’

‘No contest,’ Sofia laughed.

‘I should hope not,’ Nicci replied.

Lucia leaned into Rosie. ‘You know the players are taking bets on when they’re going to name the day,’ she said.

‘Just because he’s given up the aftershave deal for her, doesn’t mean to say they’re going to get married,’ Rosie hissed angrily.

‘He’s not playing as much golf either,’ Lucia said knowingly.

‘Shut up, will you!’

An indignant shout rang out from the crowd. Rosie looked up to see Matt getting up from the floor again.

He marched towards the referee making furious arm movements to indicate he had been elbowed down. The defender responsible for Matt’s tumble responded with a rude gesture, which resulted in Matt having to be held back by Chris Pike. The partisan crowd erupted angrily in support of their beloved midfielder.

‘And there was I, only the other day, saying what a good influence you are on him,’ Kim laughed.

‘As long as he behaves himself off the pitch, that’s all that matters to me,’ Nicci replied. ‘I mean, I wouldn’t expect him to tell me how to do my job, so I’d never dare tell him how to do his.’

'Aw, listen to her defending him,' Kim chuckled. 'Sweet, isn't it?'

'Very.' Sofia smiled fondly. 'I hope it lasts.'

'So do I.' Nicci blushed. 'My dad likes him anyway, and he's always hard to please where my boyfriends are concerned.'

Rosie's stomach pitched. *Matt had met Nicci's dad.* She couldn't ever remember him meeting any of his other girlfriends' parents before – he'd never been out with anyone long enough.

'Wow,' Kim murmured in admiration. 'You've managed to get Matt to meet your dad?'

'And Mum. She thinks he's pretty special too.' Nicci smiled coyly.

'He'll be taking you to Australia to meet his folks next,' Sofia said.

'Well, actually, they're coming over here next month, so he won't have to.'

'*Matt's parents are coming to visit?*' Kim laughed in astonishment. 'Nicci, it must be serious!'

'Oh, but they're not coming to meet me.'

Kim and Sofia looked at each other.

'They're not,' Nicci insisted. 'It's not like that at all.'

'Yes, but they've never been over here before,' Sofia replied. 'So something or shall we say *someone's* made them do it.'

'No.' Nicci laughed doubtfully. 'D' you think so?'

Kim and Sofia nodded in unison, their shiny, glossed lips twisting as enigmatically as two Mona Lisas.

'Ohmigod.' Nicci put her hands to her face in shock. 'Ohmigod!' she said again more loudly, when a flurry of activity on the pitch caused the stand to erupt excitedly all around them. '*Matt's going to score!*' she yelled leaping to her feet.

'Matt Warner lobbed the keeper in a textbook display of perfect finishing' – the back pages of the tabloids were to report the next day.

In spite of this, his biggest fan remained in her seat and missed it all.

Chapter Six

The Spook Wagon

At school the following Monday morning Archie was trying hard not to fall asleep in science, when his best friend Henry Beddows burst through the classroom door.

‘You want to see what I’ve just seen!’ he gasped, his pale face covered in pink blotches of excitement.

Miss Shepherd lifted her head momentarily from fixing electrodes to Marco Parmenter’s temples in an attempt to record his thought patterns – on the quiet she was still looking for a way to win a Nobel Prize for science – before dropping it again, disinterested in anything outside of her experiment.

‘If you don’t mind, Henry,’ she said in her deceptively musical voice. ‘Unless it’s a close encounter of the third kind, with translucent aliens in a giant seed pod spaceship, I think we can all wait until break to find out what it is that’s got you so excited. Have you got the sticking plaster?’

A ripple of laughter ran through the class as Henry handed her a roll of tape he had just fetched from Sick Bay.

‘She’s been watching the *Abyss* again,’ he muttered, ducking into his seat next to Archie.

‘So what was it, then?’ Archie whispered.

‘The *Scared Stiff* van’s parked outside,’ Henry hissed in reply.

‘*What? The Scared Stiff* van – off the TV? They must have got my letters!’

‘The Spook Wagon itself!’ Henry nodded. ‘It’s really cool! There’s this life-size picture of Barnard Quincy on the side of it with that weird staring look he gets when he’s about to be

possessed. It's really scary, like he's going to walk right out of the side of the van! I bet he's in Mr Griffith's office right now.'

'Barnard Quincy won't be here today,' Archie replied, his own heart thumping at the prospect. 'It'll be some researchers receiving the joint to see if it's worth making a programme here.'

'They're bound to though, aren't they? I mean, what about the ghost of the mad science teacher?'

Archie stared at his friend incredulously. 'Aren't you forgetting something?'

For someone who, like Archie, was supposed to be one of the most intelligent pupils in the school, Henry could be a real dur brain at times. It had clearly escaped his mind in the excitement of seeing the Spook Wagon, that *he* was the ghostly mad science teacher, having been spotted on the school roof the previous autumn by one of the school cleaners, when he had been acting the part of arch villain Simon Ravenhead for Archie's disastrous spy film, *Ray of Doom*.

'No, I know the science teacher's me,' Henry said cuttingly. 'But you didn't tell them that, did you?'

'No, because I had to get them here somehow. I'm sure there are real ghosts here, you've only got to look at the place. I just used our ghost as bait, that's all.'

'Henry Beddows! Archie Carr!' Miss Shepherd's melodious voice hit a duff note. 'Stand up at once!'

The two boys rose shiftily to their feet.

'Right; you next to Daisy, and you, down here next to me. I need absolute silence to conduct such an important experiment, and I can't concentrate with a couple of rude boys chattering in the background.'

'But I feel ill, Miss Shepherd.' Archie sagged pathetically, shooting Henry an urgent look.

'Yes, and I'm Princess Leia. Change seats at once.'

'But it's true, honestly.' Archie crossed his fingers behind his back to counteract the lie. 'I feel really sick. Like my breakfast's bubbling up inside me and is about to rush up my throat and come shooting out in an enormous spray of upchuck. Scrambled eggs and tomato ketchup too.'

‘Urgh,’ everyone groaned.

Archie covered his mouth with his hand, pretending to retch, while watching Miss Shepherd out of the corner of his eye, because it is a well-known fact that just one mention of the magic word vomit, usually sends teachers running. And Miss Shepherd was no exception to the rule, despite her cast-iron stomach when it came to animal dissection.

‘Right, Henry, take Archie down to Sick Bay at once!’ she squeaked, scurrying to the classroom door to hold it open.

Clutching her throat, she stood well back for the two boys to pass, her eyes stretched with dread as if they were carriers of a highly-infectious tropical disease.

The door slammed shut the moment they were through it. Archie and Henry grinned at each other and broke into a run.

* * * * *

The midnight blue transit van was parked outside the front of the school, at the bottom of the steps leading up to the main entrance hall. With images of pale grey headless horsemen, faceless monks and crinoline ladies as backdrop to a full-length photograph of psychic medium Barnard Quincy in a black frock coat outlined by a ghostly white light; it could only have been paranormal TV’s famed Spook Wagon that carried the presenters and crew to each location of *Scared Stiff*.

The back doors of the wagon were open and a young man with cropped fair hair, wearing large earphones connected to something that looked like a car battery with dials on it, was sitting on the bed of the van, one leg hooked over the edge, the other on the ground.

‘That’s Terry Yeomans!’ Archie exclaimed, picking up speed.

Terry Yeomans was *Scared Stiff*’s paranormal investigator. He was the person who set up baseline tests at each haunted house before the crew arrived, and kept watch on a TV monitor during the programme as *Scared Stiff* presenter Sherrill Tandy and Barnard Quincy carried out the ghost hunt. When things got interesting he would join them using an EMF meter – a

contraption that looked a bit like a TV remote control, which he pointed at cold spots and invisible people from the spirit world whom Barnard purported to be in contact with. This was to see if the electro-magnetic field had been disturbed by anything, which nine times out of ten usually hadn't.

'Hi, Terry,' Archie said boldly. 'Found anything interesting?'

'He can't hear you,' Henry replied, when Terry didn't look up from the dials on the car battery.

'Terry,' Archie said more loudly. 'Terry!' He tapped him on the shoulder.

'WHAT THE...?' Terry yelled, shooting from the bed of the van, his eyes casting about in terror.

He saw the two boys and pulled the earphones from his head. 'Crikey, you scared me,' he exhaled in relief.

'I thought nothing was ever supposed to scare you,' Archie replied, glancing at Henry who looked equally unimpressed.

'If you'd spent as much time as I have hanging around haunted houses, you'd jump a mile every time someone crept up on you unannounced. What do you want, anyway?'

'I'm Archie Carr. It was me who wrote to you about this place.'

'Was it really? Pleased to meet you,' Terry smiled, shaking Archie's hand.

'And this is my friend, Henry Beddows.'

'Howdy, Henry,' Terry grinned.

'So do you think Barton Hall's haunted?' Archie asked.

'Roger likes the place. He's with the Head now, trying to persuade him to let us include it in the next series. And he's the producer so he should know.'

'You're not sure though?' Henry asked.

Terry shrugged. 'We've had a bit of a wander around the library and kitchens. There wasn't anything that stood out in either place – a couple of cold spots here and there. The girls' dormitory had a bit of an atmosphere, but that could have been because of the door to the roof hidden behind that tapestry. We registered more cold spots coming from that direction, but it was probably a draft from the door.'

‘So why does Roger like this place?’ Archie asked.

‘The sighting last year of the ghost on the roof. We’ve had a chat with the eyewitness, Mrs Campion, and she was very convincing. She thought it must have been a kid mucking about to begin with, but there was only a couple of girls in the dormitory at the time, and the door to the roof was locked. Besides which, the apparition was so peculiar looking, white hair, white face, white clothes, that she knew it couldn’t have been anyone from the school.’ He glanced at Henry’s pale complexion and laughed. ‘Mind you, you’re not exactly Mr Perma-tan. It wasn’t you, was it?’

‘So how are you going to find out who it was?’ Archie hastily spoke up, distracting Terry from the guilty stain that began to sweep up Henry’s throat.

‘I need to look at the school’s employment records, see if there was ever a teacher employed here matching the description. Most old schools keep a logbook, which records day-to-day life in the school. If something tragic happened to a teacher, it’s bound to be in there. Then there’s the local library and old copies of newspapers, that sort of thing.’

‘There’s a lot of work goes into making a programme, isn’t there?’ Archie said, trying to impress on Terry that he knew a thing or two about filmmaking.

‘Much more than people realise.’ Terry hitched himself up on to the bed of the van again, both legs dangling over the edge this time. Behind him Archie could see all sorts of tantalising equipment and *Scared Stiff* paraphernalia that he itched to get his hands on. In particular, a black fleece with the programme logo in fluorescent lime green embroidered across the back of it, which only the crew and presenters wore.

‘It may only be an hour’s worth of telly, but it takes weeks of planning and preparation to make just one episode.’ Growing more comfortable with his audience, Terry began to savour the attention. ‘Finding a suitable location is the first step. The most active places are well documented, but it’s better sometimes to find a place like this that isn’t so well known for its hauntings. Sometimes the least likely place is the most active when the lights go down.’

‘Like Fairwater Manor?’ Archie asked, referring to the most notorious programme ever recorded for *Scared Stiff*. Tables had shook during a séance, children’s laughter was heard, a glass flew across the room hitting Barnard Quincy’s shoulder, and Terry claimed to have seen a full manifestation of a roundhead pointing accusingly to a hidden door in the wall where a cavalier soldier had been caught hiding on the run.

Unfortunately, the batteries in Terry’s camcorder decided to conk out at that moment, so the incident was not recorded.

‘Yeah, like Fairwater Manor.’ Terry grinned, impressed by Archie’s knowledge.

‘Did you really see that ghost?’ Henry asked.

‘As clearly as I’m seeing you.’

‘What did it look like?’ Both Archie and Henry were agog.

‘A bit like a paused video image. You know, when the tape’s old. A bit fuzzy, can’t explain it really.’

‘And then it just disappeared?’ Archie asked.

Terry nodded. ‘Evaporated like mist.’ He spread his fingers out to demonstrate.

‘Wow,’ Henry breathed.

‘And you didn’t pick anything up on the EMF meter?’ Archie quizzed further.

‘I wasn’t looking at it. I was too scared.’ Terry laughed.

‘It’s a pity you didn’t have a baseline test set up on that spot.’

‘Or a trigger object,’ Henry offered, eager to demonstrate his own knowledge of the show.

Terry’s mouth twitched with amusement. ‘You’re obviously fans, then?’

‘Watch it all the time. I’m a member of the official fan club.’ Archie folded back his blazer lapel to reveal his *Scared Stiff* badge pinned beneath.

‘And me,’ Henry said, doing the same.

Archie looked at his friend in surprise. ‘I thought your dad wouldn’t pay to let you join.’

‘My mum did instead.’

‘I’ve even got my own EMF meter,’ Archie said, cutting Henry a triumphant look, because he knew neither Sir

Geoffrey nor Lady Helen would entertain buying Henry one of those.

‘Found anything interesting with it?’ Terry asked.

‘Has he ever!’ Henry hooted. ‘He’s only just ordered it off the Internet!’

Archie scowled.

‘Would you like to have a look at one of mine, then?’ Terry asked, leaning back into the van to retrieve one of the famed ghost detecting gadgets.

‘Wow.’ Archie waved the little black box backwards and forwards in the air. The needle on the dial suddenly shot across the gauge.

‘Did you see that?’ He waved the box in the same direction again, sending the needle off the scale. ‘Look, look!’

Henry leaned over his shoulder. ‘It’s registering a huge change,’ he confirmed, both boys looking eagerly to Terry, who gave them an indulgent smile in return.

‘It’s a power line,’ Terry said. ‘We’ve checked. Runs right the way along here from a box further on down the drive.’

‘Oh.’ Archie and Henry slumped disappointedly as Terry took back the EMF meter and packed it away.

‘As I said,’ he smiled. ‘There’s a lot of preparation goes into these programmes.’

‘Could we help?’ Archie asked. ‘With the baseline tests? Setting them up? The school’s massive, you’re going to need loads of them.’

‘Sorry, but as much as I’d like to say yes, I’m afraid I can’t. It’s quite a technical business only an expert can carry out.’ Seeing the crestfallen looks on their faces, Terry took pity on them.

‘I’ll tell you what. Seeing as you’re both such big fans of the show, how would you like a souvenir?’ He leaned back into the van, stretching his arm towards the fleece.

Archie craned his neck in anticipation, but Terry threw the fleece to one side and dragged forward a cardboard box instead, inside of which were dozens of *Scared Stiff* pens and cardboard coasters.

'How about that, then?' Terry grinned, handing them one of each as if he were giving them the keys to the city of Birmingham.

'Thanks,' Archie mumbled dejectedly.

'Can I take a couple for my friends?' Henry asked.

'Sure, why not? In fact, we've got loads back at the office, take the lot. Share them out with as many as you like.'

'Cool!' Henry beamed, hugging the box to him.

A bell rang in the distance.

Terry looked at his watch. 'Well, it was nice meeting you both. Sounds like your dinner bell.'

Having done his bit of PR for the programme, it was obvious he didn't want them around any more.

'Thanks, Terry,' Henry said.

'Yeah, thanks,' Archie echoed, as they turned and walked away.

'What a nice bloke,' Henry said. 'And look at all these.' He indicated to the contents of the cardboard box.

'Yeah, look at them,' Archie replied unenthusiastically, dropping his own pen and coaster back in with the others.

'Don't you want yours?'

'I wanted to get in on the baseline tests, not get fobbed off with a naff pen and coaster,' Archie said, his heart aching longingly for the *Scared Stiff* fleece.

'You might have guessed they wouldn't let you. You heard what Terry said about it being technical stuff only an expert can carry out.'

'Huh, like he's one! According to his profile on the website, he's a former music TV presenter who was a contestant on an obscure reality TV dating show before that.'

'I thought you liked him.'

'I do. I just don't respect him.'

'You don't respect anyone.' Henry laughed.

'I respect talent,' Archie said arrogantly, causing his friend to laugh even harder.

'Like you're so talented.'

'I know I'm as capable as Terry Yeomans at setting up a few baseline tests. In fact, I bet I could think of some better ones than

putting a couple of marbles in a pile of sand and drawing around the legs of a table.'

'I'm sure you could,' Henry said heavily, sensing what was coming next.

'I know I could!' Archie replied. 'I'll do my own baseline tests. We'll show him!'

Chapter Seven

The Reluctant Popstar

‘Rosie, you’re not listening!’ Thomasina Patrick stood with her hands on her hips, fixing Rosie with a hard stare.

Rosie couldn’t deny it; she hadn’t been listening.

She wasn’t interested in forming a girl band. Just because her mother used to be a teenage popstar didn’t mean to say that she wanted to be one too.

Besides which, Rosie knew that the only reason she and Lucia had been asked to form a band by two of the most popular girls in school – as Thomasina and her best friend Annabel Franklin were – wasn’t because Rosie had inherited her mother’s vocal chords, but the opportunity to use Kim’s contacts in the business.

‘Right, shall we take it from the top?’ Thomasina said, standing back to back with Annabel ready to start the routine again.

Rosie wrinkled her nose and lined up next to Lucia.

‘Think Beyoncé, remember,’ Thomasina ordered, dropping her chin to gaze up through her lashes like the great long-legged one.

Annabel and Lucia adopted the same aggressive/alluring stance, which, however hard Rosie tried, she just could not manage convincingly.

It seemed so silly. She couldn’t even treat it as a laugh like she normally would. Didn’t they realise there were starving children in Africa, people struggling to survive in war-torn countries and, worse still, Man U had got through to the next round of the Cup?

Yet, here they were singing a stupid song about the ‘shape of my heart’, which at that moment felt like a lump of lead. Rosie

looked at Lucia who disappointingly seemed on the verge of crossing over to the dark side – vamping it up as good as Christina Aguilera in a Moulin Rouge video.

Didn't they realise her whole world was falling apart? Rosie's heart rolled over in a rush of pique and self-pity.

It was in all the news headlines – Nicci Fullerton was now officially Matt Warner's WAG.

'Rosie, you've done it wrong again!' Thomasina stamped her foot in temper. 'You must have learnt the words by now, we've been singing them long enough.'

'I'm afraid not,' Rosie replied, irritated more than anything by the disapproving look Lucia gave her.

'Don't you want to be in this band?'

'No, not really.'

'Yes, she does,' Lucia spoke up desperately, widening her eyes at Rosie. 'She's just having a moody, that's all.'

'Ah.' The other two girls' faces folded in understanding.

'No, I am not!' Rosie blushed hotly.

'See what I mean,' Lucia said.

'It's okay, Rosie. We're all the same,' Annabel sympathised.

'My mum puts everything down to puberty,' Thomasina agreed.

'But I'm nowhere near puberty yet,' Rosie retorted, causing all three of them to look at her with a mixture of pity and disdain, like she was some kind of subhuman girl mutation.

'Haven't you started using deodorant yet?' Annabel asked, barely concealing her horror at the thought.

'What's that got to do with anything?' Rosie snapped, just as Archie and Henry came swerving round the corner with half the playground in pursuit.

'Out of the way, out of the way!' Archie cried, pushing Rosie into Thomasina.

'Watch it, numbnuts!' Rosie shouted after him. 'What on earth is that freak up to now?'

Archie and Henry clambered up on to a picnic table nearby. Henry was clutching a cardboard box to his chest, out of which Archie began to hand out pens and fluorescent green cardboard circles.

‘What’ve you got?’ Rosie asked, putting her arm out to stop a small boy racing past her with his spoils.

He held up a *Scared Stiff* pen and coaster.

‘They’re giving them away for free!’ he lisped through a large gap in his front teeth.

By this time, virtually the whole of the school was crowding around Archie and Henry, each child grabbing a pen and coaster before haring back up the playground arms spread wide, shrieking and howling, pretending to be ghosts.

‘Come on,’ Thomasina said, striding forward. ‘I want one.’

‘It’s only a stupid pen and coaster,’ Rosie said, as Lucia dutifully followed the other two girls as they pushed their way to the front of the queue.

In the midst of the chaos, Rosie had never felt so alone. She turned and walked off towards the playing fields.

Reaching the track that led down through a thicket of trees to the cricket pavilion, she broke into a run. The dark-stained wooden building stood at the foot of a shallow incline, hidden from view of the main school, an oval pool of smoothly shaved grass that formed the cricket pitch lying beyond it.

Out of bounds during lunch and break times, Rosie didn’t care that she was breaking the rules – all she wanted was to get away from everyone and everything.

But as she slowed to a walk, she could hear a loud banging noise coming from the pavilion. A slow repetitive noise that sounded familiar, yet confusing.

Treading cautiously, she followed the noise to the far end of the pavilion.

As she grew closer, she realised it was a football being kicked against the wooden wall.

Only it wasn’t being kicked, but thrown – by Kieran Gregg of all people. He was sitting on the floor a short distance from the wall, throwing the ball against it and then flinging his body out sideways to catch it on the rebound. He was wearing his games kit and a pair of goalkeeping gloves, and was concentrating so hard on what he was doing, he didn’t notice Rosie watching him.

He threw the ball wide and it came off the wooden boarding at the wrong angle. Rosie stuck out her foot to stop it.

Kieran saw her and quickly scrambled to his feet, his face beetroot with embarrassment.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked, hiding his hands behind his back.

‘What are *you* doing?’ Rosie replied, throwing the ball to him.

Kieran’s gloved hands sprang from their hiding place, catching the ball with the speed of a gunslinger.

‘Nice gloves.’ Rosie smirked.

Kieran dropped the ball to the floor and ripped open the Velcro wrist fastenings.

‘I was only messing about,’ he said, tearing the gloves from his hands. ‘They’re not mine.’

‘Then why do they have your name printed on them?’

Kieran’s face deepened to an even darker red. He smoothed his thumb over the black lettering that spelt out Greggo on one of the wristbands, glancing nervously at Rosie.

‘You won’t tell anyone, will you?’

‘What about? Your gloves?’ Rosie laughed.

‘No, about seeing me practising.’ He regarded her anxiously.

‘Are you worried your mates are going to laugh at you, then?’

‘Partly.’ He shrugged. ‘But they’d also tell my dad. Eric would, anyway.’

‘Yeah, he would. But would your dad be that annoyed if he found out?’

‘He’d go mental.’ Kieran stared glumly at his gloves. ‘He was bad enough after the school match. He said he didn’t want me showing him up like that ever again.’

‘But you were brilliant!’

‘I embarrassed my dad.’

‘Embarrassed him! He should have been proud of you. You were much better than Ross, and he *plays* in goal!’

Kieran smiled modestly. ‘It was only a school match. Put me against an academy side and I’d be rubbish.’

‘*You* sound like your dad now.’

‘He’s right though.’

Their eyes met. Despite Kieran's loyalty to his father, he didn't look as if he really believed this.

'Well, I think it's a shame to let a talent like that go to waste,' Rosie said stoically.

'I'm good at other things too, you know.'

'Yeah, well I'm good at singing, but that doesn't mean to say I want to be a popstar – far from it, in fact.'

Kieran smiled. 'I saw you practising with the others.'

'That's why I know I don't want to be a popstar.' Rosie struck her Beyoncé pose for an instant and they both laughed.

She gave him a sideways look. 'Saying that, though, I think you'd like to be a goalkeeper.'

Kieran dropped his head, frowning slightly. 'My best position is centre midfield – the holding position.' He flexed his eyebrows mockingly. 'I can read the game better than anyone, and my distribution is creative and makes things happen...'

'Without it Eric wouldn't have scored so many goals,' Rosie interrupted.

'You'd never get him to admit that.' Kieran grinned before going on, 'I can play with both feet and have the kind of speed and agility that will take me to the top – according to my coach, that is.'

'At the Academy?'

'At the Academy.'

'Yet, you still want to play in goal?'

'I'd like to give it a try,' he admitted ruefully.

'Then why don't you?'

'Haven't you heard anything I've said?'

'You're dad's being a bit tight, but I'm sure if you...'

Kieran shook his head. 'Even if I was the best goalkeeper in the world, he wouldn't let me do it. He still thinks like they used to. You know? Let's put the useless kid in goal. Goalies don't do anything much, anyway. Besides which, it's dangerous.'

'But that's rubbish! And your dad of all people should know better,' Rosie said.

'But he doesn't, that's the trouble. All he understands is midfield – the engine of the team; the most important position

to play in – according to my dad. Except a lot of the best keepers started as outfield players.’

‘So what are you going to do about it?’

‘Keep practising, I suppose – in secret.’ He narrowed his eyes warningly at her.

‘Don’t worry; I’m not going to tell anyone.’

Rosie thought of Lucia and the way she was creeping round Thomasina and Annabel, like a girl in a really bad American teen movie.

She felt sorry for Kieran. Like her, he was totally at odds with everyone else – even his own friends, who she knew would never entertain the idea of him going in goal, he was far too valuable out, and he’d also be in competition with Ross Kelly.

An idea suddenly came to her.

‘I know. What if I helped you practise?’

Kieran looked at her warily. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Yes.’ She nodded, surprising herself by how much she wanted to help.

‘Well, yeah, great then.’ He laughed.

‘We’ll start tomorrow. I’ll meet you here at one o’clock,’ Rosie replied, turning on her heel and hurrying off before Kieran could say anything to change her mind.

Chapter Eight

Barty's Surprise

Two weeks into filming the documentary, Barty Boar was summoned to see the Chairman and asked to bring Archie with him.

'So what exactly are you doing with Barty?' Gavin said, swinging the jeep into the players' car park. He pulled up in a space by the gate that led to a side entrance to Vale Stadium.

'I don't know,' Archie replied, pulling his bag on to his lap ready to get out. 'The Chairman wouldn't say. Barty was asked to bring me along so I could film it for the documentary.'

'So it was Barty himself who rang you this morning?' Gavin's mouth twitched with amusement. 'What did he phone you on? A giant red telephone, on a blue and white table in the hallway of his red and white cottage, in the middle of an enchanted forest in the mythical land of Mascot?'

'Very funny.' Archie scowled.

He opened the car door and jumped out.

'What time do you want me to pick you up?' Gavin grinned. 'Or is Barty giving you a lift home in his red, white and blue mascotmobile? That's an idea – your mum and I could get you a matching suit – you could be his sidekick. *Come on, Archie, to the mascotmobile – we've a match to go to!*' he crowed in an American accent, while holding his fist out Superman style, before collapsing into fits of laughter.

'Barty doesn't need a sidekick. I'll call you when I'm ready,' Archie retorted, wondering if his father would ever grow up.

By this time, the security men had got used to Archie and his camcorder and waved him inside without a second glance. A