

Athens Adventure – Day 1

'Good luck, bro!' said Freddy, gazing lovingly at the heap of papers and documents in front of him.

Wil looked miserably at his feet, which were stuffed into the shiniest, most uncomfortable pair of shoes he possessed.

'Look at this! Bus tickets! Air tickets! And...', Freddy almost whispered in awe as he passed his fingers over the white and silver tickets in his hand, *'nine tickets to the Champions League Final itself'*. The tickets were crisp to his touch, almost cardboard. *Quality*. He flexed them slightly, then examined them for the fifty-third time that day.

Row A, pitchside, seats 230-239, entrance D, Gate 10, OACA Spyro Louis Stadium – Athens. May 23rd 2007.

Wil examined his own ticket for the one hundred and fifty-third time that day.

Dear Wil, you are invited to our 'Decorate a Dolly' party, on Saturday 12th May, at 3.00pm. RSVP. Love, Flopsy and Mopsy

'What does RSVP mean anyway?' said Wil, just to say something.

'It stands for Répondez s'il vous plaît', said Freddy, *'it's French. It means 'Reply if you please''*.

'Why did they write it in French? Anyway, I didn't reply, did I? So I don't need to go, do I?'

'Look Bro, we've been through this all week. Mum replied for you, didn't she? And she says if you say yes to an invitation then you've got to go. Unless you're ill'.

'Atishoo!' said Wil.

'Very funny', his brother replied, *'you're fine. You might even enjoy it'*.

'Enjoy it? Decorate a Dolly? Enjoy it? And look at me!'

Their Mum had probably once wanted a daughter.

Wil, from the points of his shiny shoes, to the top of his hair-sprayed head, looked a picture of respectability, and a picture of misery. His perfectly pressed grey trousers. His starched and ironed white shirt. His little flowery bow tie. And his beautiful pink waistcoat.

'Ooooh! Those girls are going to love you!' his mother had said to him.

'And THAT...is the problem!' Wil had replied.

'Come on, I'll walk down with you. It's only be a couple of hours, then we can start planning the trip!' said Freddy. Wil perked up for a few seconds, and they set off.

Flopsy and Mopsy were waiting at the gate of Number 2 Lancaster Road where they lived. Although it was only a few houses down from their house, Freddy and Wil usually went the long way round to avoid the house. F and M always seemed to be outside in the front garden, waiting to trap the unexpected visitor, or to greet them with a cheery welcome. Usually it was something like, *'Oh hi, Freddy, you are looking nice today'*, followed by about five minutes of hysterical giggling. Occasionally it was more specific, perhaps *'Oh Wil, I saw you score that goal on Saturday, you were just great!'* followed by an extravagant fluttering of the eyelashes, and more giggling. Girls often fluttered their eyelashes when Wil was around. Wil's brown skin usually turned a shade of dark purple when that happened.

When they got close, sure enough, they could see Flopsy, Mopsy and five of their friends hanging around in the front garden, waiting for Wil to join the party. Freddy left him outside Number 4, and ran back home.

'Oh Wil...'

'Wil...'

'Erm... Wil...'

The girls seemed uncharacteristically lost for words. Wil could instantly see why. Every one of them, every single one of them. Dressed in jeans and t-shirts. Casual. Scruffy even. A little giggle emerged from someone at the back of the group.

A little titter from someone at the front.

A deep rumble of laughter from the biggest girl.

And eventually...seven girls staring at Wil in his immaculate attire, falling about themselves laughing. Wil smiled nervously at the raucous rabble in front of him, then looked down, willing the ground to open up right there in front of him, and swallow him whole.

But of course it didn't. And of course the girls invited him in. And of course he ripped off his waistcoat, and rubbed his shoes roughly on the ground as he entered. And of course the tie got lost somewhere. And the girls looked after him. And JoJo was there. His special friend.

'Weel, don't worry. I will look after you!' she said in her wonderful mysterious accent, *'we 'ave made something very special for you to work on'*.

Wil started to relax. JoJo always did that to him. Although she had not played that much during the season, she had made some important saves when Hardy had been ill, and she had come on as a sub on a few occasions. And most importantly for the moment, she had made sure that Wil's doll was in fact an action figure and that he could decorate it in football kit.

Which he duly did. He managed to construct a character looking quite a bit like Emile Heskey in Wigan colours, and with JoJo making a beautiful Phil Jagielka, they spent most of the rest of the afternoon replaying the final-day showdown between Wigan and Sheffield United.

Until Flopsy and Mopsy, who had dressed their characters in full army kit, came along and challenged them to a fight. Although Heskey is a good footballer, he's not much good at hand-to-hand combat. So they lost.

The party ended, predictably, with every one of the girls giving Wil a massive, slobbery, juicy wet kiss, and Wil half running, half sprinting out of the door, pausing only to thank F&M's mother very much for the invitation. As he did so, she also bent down and tried to kiss him.

But he escaped.

He arrived home, still damp, to see his brother looking at the tickets for the eighty-seventh time.

'Now Bro, let's plan this trip!' Freddy said.

3