

Getting the Team Together...Day 7

That day Freddy and Wil had spent the morning in the house with Clara. She had appeared at the door early that day with a copy of her *Frivolous Book for Girls*, and they had whiled away a few hours trying some of its suggestions. Clara's particular favourite had been the section on *Conkers*, which she had clearly prepared for. The conkers she used seemed to be harder and more robust than the ones she passed to them. They lost game after game, and plenty of skin from their fingers.

Later in the afternoon, they sat back down at the table where it had all started the previous week. Freddy consulted his team sheet.

'Well, we have Michael...'

'YES!', said Hardy, unable to contain his admiration for the young prodigy.

'We have Michael, me, Wil, you Hardy, Jaz, and Clara. That makes six. We need a team of at least seven, plus some substitutes'.

'And JoJo,' said Wil quietly. They ignored him.

'And JoJo,' said Wil slightly louder.

'Yes, well, OK', replied Freddy, *'but I'm not sure we can deal with too many girls in the team'*.

There was a moment's pause, then,

'WHACK!' 'KAPOW!' 'SLAM!'

Freddy reeled back as Clara attacked him.

'What's wrong with girls, eh? You think we're not strong enough eh? You think we're not quick enough, eh? Eh? Eh? EH? You think we can't look after ourselves, eh? Well, you'll see, won't you, eh? Eh? Eh? NO WAY are you going to stop her joining the team. NO WAY!'

She continued slapping him until he said he was very sorry, and yes, there was no reason to not have girls in the team, and yes, JoJo could join, and yes, girls were better than boys, and yes, and yes...

So, thanks to her unlikely friend Clara, JoJo was on the team. She was not present to hear the news.

'There is one other possibility,' continued Freddy when he had recovered from the onslaught of Clara.

Just then, Mr Andrews hobbled past the house, clutching a large brown envelope.

Most of them had been at a party at the weekend. It was Jaz's 10th birthday, and they had gathered at a local sports hall for the usual diet of games, sports, and fun.

The usual diet also usually consisted of chips, beans and jelly, but this party was different. Jaz's grandmother had produced an amazing range of food, including several different types of rice, chicken

dishes in three different sauces, and various snackfoods – onion bhajis, chapathis, and naan breads. Unlike other parties, the food had been the main feature of the event, and they had feasted wonderfully.

But the most unusual thing that had happened (apart from all the kids eating the party food) was when someone had arrived late for the party.

They had been busy eating, when there was a loud creaking noise from the roof of the sports hall where the party was. Almost everyone had looked up to where the noise was coming from. A small skylight window, right in one of the top corners of the hall, was now open, and a pale hand was reaching through it.

The hand was followed by an arm, a shoulder, and a head, as the figure in the roof tried to squeeze through the tiny space available. They watched, open-mouthed, as he moved his lithe body through the window.

'COOL!' yelled Hardy, 'look at that!'

All the children stared up at the event unfolding above them. The figure was now three-quarters of the way through the window.

'But, but...how will he get down,' said Wil, nervously.

The boy was at least fifteen metres (the height of a house) above the floor, and there was nothing around him to offer any support. He was now sitting on the ledge of the window, his legs dangling over the empty space below him. He was smiling. He reached back through the window, and produced two things. The first was a hook, attached to a rope. The second was a large, brightly coloured package. He shut the window behind him.

There were gasps as in what seemed like a split second, he threw the hook over the top of one of the gym apparatus bars, about five metres from where he was perched, and used the rope to swing down from the roof, landing with a skid on the floor, just in front of Jaz.

'Jaz, sorry I'm late, Happy Birthday.' He handed the coloured package to Jaz.

'Alex, how are you? Thanks for coming,' Jaz replied, as if his entry was the most normal thing in the world. The rest of the guests just stared, open-mouthed.

'Jaz, Jaz, come here,' Freddy had said as they were leaving, *'that guy, Alex is it? We need him for the team! We really do. Really!'*

'Sorry Freddy,' Jaz replied, *'I think he's taken. Plays for Butterfield. You're too late'.*

Butterfield was a well-known local football club, very professional, always winning some tournament or another. They were very serious about their football. Freddy had talked to Mr Andrews about it the next day.

'Yes, he sounds like someone we need, lad. Have you talked to him?'

Freddy had not thought to ask Alex directly about joining the team, in fact he had been a bit scared of him following the dramatic entry at the party.

'Tell you what, lad, leave it with me. I believe his parents are no longer around, but I used to go hang-gliding with his granddad, you know, before I crashed into the sea and managed to drown this damn leg of mine. I'll see what I can do. There are always ways of tempting players away from other teams'.

So *that* is what Mr Andrews had been doing with the large brown envelope...

Later that morning,

BOOM!

BANG!

KARRUMPH! Tinkle, tinkle!

'I've had worse!'

'I think he's arrived!' said Freddy, turning to Wil as they finished up their breakfast.

'Yes, good luck, Bro, I hope you make it!'

Freddy had been asked to go to a meeting of the league that morning, to discuss the arrangements for matches. The meeting was to be held at the Springhurst Community Hall, and although they could have got there by bus, Mr Andrews (who had now confirmed himself as their coach and manager) had insisted that they should drive. Nervously, Wil and Freddy opened the front door.

Mr Andrews was standing by the gate examining the damage.

'Nothing to worry about, lad, just a few scratches. I've had worse!'

The brick wall outside their house was now missing several bricks. The car had a large dent on the left-hand side front wing. It matched the one that was already there on the right-hand side. And the one at the back. And the broken window. And the dents in the roof. (The roof! How did they get there?).

'I've had a few problems with the brakes, lad. Nothing to worry about'.

Freddy looked worried. Even Wil, who was not travelling with them, looked a bit worried. Even Mr Andrews, despite saying there was nothing to worry about, looked worried.

Nevertheless, Freddy climbed into the little car.

'BOOM! BANG! HUP!'

They stopped.

'Ah, nothing to worry about, lad, won't be a minute!'

Mr Andrews went to fetch something out of the boot. It was a large handle, which he then inserted somewhere in the front of the vehicle, and turned vigorously. The car shook violently, coughed several times, and lurched back into life. Mr Andrews waved the handle triumphantly.

They set off.

Despite the lurching and the banging and the wobbling, the car actually had a good turn of speed. The problem was more that it appeared that Mr Andrews had never taken a driving test.

On straight roads they were alright, it was when the time came to turn that the problems occurred.

They came to a junction. Mr Andrews made a perfectly reasonable right turn, but was surprised when the drivers coming in the other direction started hooting their horns, and waving their fists at him. Freddy crouched low in the front seat as a succession of vehicles swerved out of their way.

'Friendly lot this morning, aren't they, lad?' said Mr Andrews cheerfully, waving back at the oncoming traffic, and sounding his own horn in reply.

'Mr Andrews, you're on the wrong side of the road,' Freddy tried to sound calm despite the chaos erupting around him.

'Goodness gracious me, you could be right there, lad. Well spotted.'

Three cars ploughed into each other behind them. Mr Andrews, in his own time, pulled over to the correct side of the highway. Freddy relaxed in his seat a little, after looking round for any flashing blue lights which would signify they had been spotted.

Roundabouts were a particular speciality. Mr Andrews seemed not to realise that roundabouts had an entry point (easy enough), but that you also needed to get off them in order to go the way you wanted to go. At several roundabouts they had simply carried on going round them, in one instance, seven times. Mr Andrews had simply smiled, hummed happily to himself, and muttered,

'Damn twisty road, this one, isn't it, lad?'

But eventually they had arrived at the meeting place. Freddy almost fell out of the car in relief.

'Pretty motley collection, here, lad. We could do well in this league', said Mr Andrews as he surveyed the scene in front of them in the Hall. There were chairs arranged facing a table at one end of the room, where the organisers were sitting. There were about twenty people gathered in little groups, chatting nervously with each other. Most were dressed in normal clothes (like Freddy, who was wearing his England football shirt, jeans, and his favourite trainers), although two groups stood out.

In one corner, was a group of three adults and three kids. They all wore identical red and white striped shirts, and each had a training jacket slung elegantly over their shoulders, or on the back of the chair on which they were sitting. On the back of the jackets was written '*Butterfield FC*' then under that '*Going Places!*'. They huddled together discussing something very earnestly.

'Look at them, Mr Andrews', said Freddy nervously watching the Butterfield group, 'they seem very professional'.

'Don't worry about that, lad, you have the makings of a very good team, y'know. We'll get you into shape and just because you don't have the kit or the organisation, it doesn't mean you won't succeed. And you've done a great job getting that team together. One or two stars there, lad.'

'I know', said Freddy smiling, 'that Michael is something else'.

'You're not so bad yourself, Freddy, remember that. You just be proud of being the captain'.

The other group was in complete contrast to the professional Butterfield outfit.

There were three of them, a young girl and two elderly women, whispering to each other in another corner of the room. Occasionally a mighty cackle of laughter would come from them, and then they would go back to their earnest discussions. In contrast to the bright colours and stripes of some of the other teams, this group were dressed entirely in black.

The meeting passed without incident, and it was agreed that the first matches should be this coming Saturday. There were to be eight teams in the league. The final task at the meeting was to register the teams. Mr Andrews and Freddy queued up patiently as the teams gave their details to the organiser behind the desk.

They got to the front of the line, and the man behind the desk asked them to fill in some details. The most difficult question was the first one.

'Team name?' he said briskly.

Freddy turned to Mr Andrews. Mr Andrews turned to Freddy. They both looked up to the ceiling. They both looked at the floor.

'What's the name of your team?' said the man again.

'The Croaking Mr Andrewss', croaked Mr Andrews.

Freddy looked at him as if, this time, he had really flipped.

'How are you spelling that?', said the man, without batting an eyelid.

'I smell and I'm fat? How dare you, young man? Just get the name down and be done with it! I don't know, young people these days...'

Freddy decided not to push it. They could always change it later. They left the meeting.

As they emerged from the building into the October sunshine, the group of black-clad ladies were still in a huddle just outside the door. Freddy strained to hear what they were saying as he went past. A cackle. More whispering. Then, indistinctly, he thought he heard one of them say '*bagunited*' or '*bagsunited*', or perhaps '*hagsunited*'.

As they approached the car, Freddy turned once again to look at the group. One of the older ones was somehow familiar. Yes, that was it! But why? Clearly, definitely now, he recognised her. Her black coat. Her dark eyes. Her long straggly hair. Yes! Then, OH NO!

It was the lady from number twenty-three.