

KRUSCHMEISTER



PETER J MURRAY

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ATLANTIS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

**This book is dedicated to the memory of
Harold Mosby - a 'Miller' of the 1950's and a true rock
and foundation of the modern day RUFC.**

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FOREWORD

Having been a football referee for a good many years I have had to face numerous challenges. It is not always easy enforcing rules and regulations to maintain order and discipline within a game.

In Peter's book, the hero, Zak Freeman, has to face the greatest challenge of all; he has to bring a powerful and ruthless law-breaker to justice...the infamous Kruschmeister. I'm truly glad I didn't have *him* to deal with during *my* refereeing career!

Life presents us all with challenges -and not just sporting challenges. Young people need to work hard at school to learn how to read and write for example. Without these abilities life would be almost impossible. However, it is also important to take time out for leisure; there's nothing quite so good as being involved in a great game of football...or sitting back, relaxing and losing yourself in a good book.

So when you've finished your football match, showered all the mud off and handed your dirty kit to Mum...why not sneak up to your room, stretch out on the bed and bury yourself in this gripping spooky football story!

Howard Webb MBE

KRUSCHMEISTER

PART 1:

PAST AND PRESENT



PROLOGUE

A hush fell over the Tivoli Stand. Only one defender stood between the goalkeeper and the best forward in the Football League. With the score at 1-1 in the dying minutes of the game, to concede a goal now would not only mean defeat, but failure to win promotion into Division 1.

...But the home crowd's infamous defender would surely save the day.

His name was Gladstone Krusch...in the eyes of the entire crowd, the toughest and most feared fullback in the game.

The away forward, Matthews, glanced up at the goal, gauged the distance and lined the ball up with his lethal left foot to the far right top corner.

But Krusch was already on him, spotting that Matthew's left sock was down round his ankle, the shin pad missing. With one foot he played the ball and with the other he played the player!

The forward screamed as Krusch's outstretched right boot smashed into his knee and scraped down his left shin, razor-sharp studs peeling off a long strip of skin.

The ruthless defender gathered the ball and hared away, his victim left lying on the ground writhing in agony, the partially-unsighted referee waving play on.

Once again, Rotherstoke Town's day had been saved by the most infamous player of all time... ***The Kruschmeister!***



THE NEW BOY

Autumn Term

‘Zak! I know you’re new here, but you’re really not concentrating!’

Rehan nudged him, and Zak sat up straight and looked at the teacher. ‘Sorry, Miss.’

‘Don’t be sorry, Zak,’ the teacher said sternly. ‘If you find the subject matter boring, at least try and stay awake.’

The rest of the class laughed and Miss Ferguson carried on with the Science lesson.

Zak felt incredibly guilty. Although Science wasn’t his favourite lesson, Miss Ferguson seemed like a nice person and a good teacher. The last thing he wanted to do was upset her.

‘Are you OK?’ Rehan whispered by his side.

Zak nodded. 'Just tired...haven't been sleeping well lately.'

'Still getting used to everything,' Rehan suggested. 'You'll soon settle in and then everything will be fine.'

Zak smiled. Since he'd arrived in Rotherstoke, Rehan had been a good friend to him. The other kids in the class were nice, too - especially Lizzie Morgan; she was so full of life and everybody liked her...you couldn't help but like her!

'So there you have it,' Miss Ferguson said, rounding off the lesson. 'If your calories *in* are greater than your calories *out*, you put on weight. If you exercise and keep yourself active, your calories *in* will be *fewer* than your calories out. Result? You'll stay fit and never get obese!'

Zak couldn't help glancing down at the curve of his stomach. He felt guilty again.

Rehan saw where Zak was looking. 'Why don't you play football with us after school?'

Zak stared back at Rehan; he was smaller than Zak and slim and wiry. He looked super-fit. Maybe Rehan had a point - he needed to be more active.

As the class packed away, Zak stood up and turned to his new friend. 'I'm rubbish at football.'

'No problem!' Rehan grinned, his mouth full of gleaming white teeth. 'We'll teach you.'

'Who's we?' Zak asked.

'Lizzie and me,' Rehan replied, glancing over his shoulder.

Lizzie had already packed away and was heading over towards them.

'Hi, you two!' Lizzie said, as she approached. 'Ready,

Rehan?’

‘Sure am,’ Rehan replied. ‘Zak’s thinking of joining us, aren’t you, Zak?’

Zak finished packing away his things and shrugged his shoulders. ‘If you mean playing football, I’m useless. I’m definitely not in your league.’

Lizzie laughed. She brushed back her straw-blond fringe from her freckled forehead, and her eyes sparkled with energy. ‘So we’ll teach you, won’t we, Rehan?’

Rehan nodded. ‘Sure thing!’

Zak lowered his head and stared down at his desk. ‘I’m...too big. Too slow!’

‘OK, so you can start in goal,’ Lizzie beamed. ‘What time’s your mum expecting you home?’

‘I’m usually back by three-thirty, but I can give her a call.’

‘Have you got any kit?’ Rehan asked.

Zak nodded. ‘I’ve got my tracky bottoms in my bag and I can get my trainers from my PE locker.’

‘That’s all you need, Big Man!’ Lizzie laughed.

Zak frowned at his two classmates. ‘Just one more thing; where are we playing?’

Rehan and Lizzie looked at each other mysteriously. ‘That’s for us to know and you to find out,’ Lizzie smirked.

Zak suddenly felt a little tense. He sensed that things were about to get interesting.

*

Zak, Rehan and Lizzie sprinted out of the school gates, Lizzie at the front, Rehan close on her heels and Zak puffing and panting some way behind.

‘Come on, Big Man!’ Rehan called over his shoulder.

‘This is the first part of your training.’

Zak frowned and pushed on. They reached the end of the road and turned into a side street. Five minutes later they turned into another street paved with cobbles. Zak’s mind immediately went back to 21 School Street - his old address where the Scabbajack events had taken place. He could almost hear the sound of ghostly clogs marching down the cobbles towards the old mill. An image of Jack, the ghost boy, flashed into his mind. Tears welled up in his eyes.

Already it seemed so long ago...*so unreal*. But it *had* really happened.

Since then, Zak had been thrilled when his father announced he’d taken up a new job and they were moving to Rotherstoke. He knew he could no longer be happy living at 21 School Street, surrounded by the memories of all the horrific things that had happened there.

‘Get a move on, Zak,’ Lizzie yelled at him. ‘Stop daydreaming!’

‘Sorry!’ Zak called back. ‘How much further?’

Rehan came up by Zak’s side and pointed ahead...up at the sky!

Zak looked where he was pointing and saw the towering floodlights in the distance, outlined against a darkening sky.

‘It looks like some sort of stadium,’ Zak muttered.

‘It *is*!’ Rehan informed him. ‘It’s the old stadium: Millerbrook.’

‘But are we allowed in there?’ Zak asked nervously, guessing what the answer would be.

‘Course not!’ Rehan answered. ‘But nobody will

know.'

Lizzie dropped back to join them. 'Nobody ever knows,' she added. 'It's our secret - mine and Rehan's.'

Rehan nodded, his eyes wide with excitement. 'Sure thing!' he grinned. 'And now, Zak, it's about to become yours, too.'

*

The old stadium waited patiently.

Daylight was fading fast as a ghostly army of shadows invaded the long-abandoned terraces. A chill wind moaned eerily around the deserted stands, adding to the spooky atmosphere enveloping the empty football ground.

...And yet, from deep within the long-abandoned player's tunnel came a shrill sound! The sound of someone whistling a familiar tune - for those old enough to remember it!

'Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling...'





PRE-MATCH NERVES

Derby Day, 1956
Rotherstoke Town v Sheffield Wanderers
5 hours to kick-off

Tommy Clegg slammed the door of the little terraced house and trotted off down the street. It was more than his life was worth to be late on a big day like today. Gladstone was sure to be waiting for him.

An old man walking up the other side of the street called out to him, 'Morning, Tommy! Big day today.'

'I know,' Tommy called back. 'But I reckon we've got a good chance.'

The old man stopped and shouted across the cobbles, 'More than a good chance! Wanderers haven't lost to us for as long as I can remember, but that was before Gladstone

came along. 'Twould take a brave man to get past his boots!

Tommy nodded and moved on,' See you later, Mr Hardwick. Got to get to the ground.'

'Good luck, Tommy boy,' the old man called over to him. 'Be sure to put a shine on those boots of his.'

Already have, Tommy thought to himself. *Be dead if I hadn't.*

He ran on, past a row of shops. The gorgeous smell of newly-baked bread reached his nostrils. He glanced up at the shop-sign:

HOPKINS BAKERS

An old man's face appeared at the door. It was Joe Hopkins, the owner. 'Hi, Tommy...a fresh cake to bring you good luck. Give Wanderers what for!' He handed Tommy a small package.

'Thanks, Joe. I'll enjoy that.'

He ran on past the newsagent's. Tommy caught sight of the headline scribbled on the billboard outside:

**ROTHERSTOKE BANKING ON KRUSCH TO
TAKE THEM TO VICTORY IN LOCAL DERBY!**

A vision of Gladstone Krusch's cruel face flashed into Tommy's head. He sprinted on, hoping that the Rotherstoke defender might have more on his mind today than the state of his boots. But Tommy knew that if he could at least get to the ground before him, he could give those infamous boots a final buff-up...just to be on the safe side.

He turned into Brickyard Lane.

Almost there!

Five minutes later and Tommy was inside Millerbrook Stadium. He made straight for the boot-rack outside the home players' changing room.

His eyes widened. The tall, broad-shouldered figure of Gladstone Krusch stood by the boot-rack...holding one of his boots and staring at the underside of it.

Tommy saw the expression on the big man's face and his heart skipped a beat. Krusch was scowling...his brow furrowed, his large bulbous eyes almost popping out of his large bony head.

'So you made it then?' Krusch spat out the words, without even looking in Tommy's direction.

'Err...sorry, Gladstone...I mean, Mr Krusch,' Tommy spluttered. 'I didn't mean to be late. The kick-off's not for hours yet.'

'And what do you call this?' He held up the boot to show one of the studs missing from the underside.

'But...but I checked them yesterday and all the studs were there. It must have been loose.'

Krusch twitched his head, flicking several strands of greasy hair back off his face - a sure sign he was angry. He scowled and pointed down at the floor. 'Well you didn't check well enough, did you, lad!'

Tommy rushed over and bent down to pick up the stud.

THUD!

Krusch kicked him hard and sent him sprawling into the boot-rack. The faulty boot followed, striking Tommy on the head. 'Get that stud knocked in. AND TIGHT THIS TIME!' The big man stormed away, muttering

curses under his breath.

Tommy sat forlornly on the floor. Blood trickled down his forehead. *One day...* he thought to himself. *One day...he'll get what's coming!*

He struggled to his feet, dazed and shaken.

'Are you OK, lad?'

Tommy looked up. It was Ben Hopkirk - chief groundsman. He was elderly and kind, and Tommy liked him a lot. 'I'm fine...I tripped. Just cut my head a bit.'

He knew it was more than his life was worth to say what had really happened.

The old man looked hard at him, his big round eyes full of sympathy, 'I've a first-aid kit in my hut. We'd better take a look at that cut. In any case, you'll be on your way to check Danny won't you?'

Tommy nodded. Danny was the club mascot - a beautiful white Irish goat with striking horns crowning his elegant head and a long beard trailing from his chin. One of Tommy's jobs was to look after Danny - a job he really liked; he thought the world of Danny and he knew that the goat thought the world of him.

Tommy followed the old groundsman out from the little network of changing rooms and small offices to the back of the stadium at the Railway End. Ben and his team kept their mowers and other machines inside an enclosure by a big hut. Ben took Tommy inside the hut, sat him down and made him a mug of steaming tea. A few minutes later, the cut was cleaned and dressed with a sticking plaster, and Tommy felt a whole lot better. He thanked Ben and went round the back of the hut to where Danny was housed in a large wire pen.

The goat was nowhere to be seen.

Tommy guessed he was tucked up in his small wooden shelter at the rear of the pen. He began to whistle a tune - a tune that he'd known forever. His gran used to sing it to him when he was a baby:

'Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling...'

A rustling of straw sounded from within the shelter and Danny's head appeared, staring out at his friend.

'From glen to glen and down the mountainside...'

As Tommy continued to whistle, the goat shot out and ran over to him, stretching his impressive horned head over the wire fence to nuzzle against Tommy's arm.

'Hi, Danny!' Tommy said softly. 'Big day today, boy.'

The goat nipped his sleeve and chewed at it a little.

'Just hope we win,' Tommy continued, stroking the goat's head. 'Krusch will be in a foul mood if we don't.'

'And then you'll be for it,' a croaky voice called out from somewhere behind.

Tommy swung round and saw a hunched familiar figure walking towards him. It was Mrs Dawson; she'd taken on the job of keeping the club's strip clean since her husband had died a few years ago. She was about forty years old, but looked and sounded much older. She was kind and well-liked by those who knew her. She'd become known as the Widow Washerwoman, as she was always dressed in black with a dark headscarf knotted tightly around her plump face.

'It'll all be fine,' Tommy smiled, knowing full well she was right.

The Widow Washerwoman folded her arms across her chest and frowned as she approached him, 'You're a bright

young lad and a good one at that, but that man is the Devil's own and you need to watch yourself.'

'Who needs to watch themselves?' a gruff voice interrupted.

Tommy and the Widow Washerwoman swung round to see the big man standing there. The goat stiffened and ran back into the shelter at the back of its enclosure.

'N...n...no one!' Tommy stammered. 'We were just talking about the game.'

'Well stop gassing and get back to the changing room. I've got some more jobs that need doing.'

'See you later, Mrs Dawson,' Tommy said as he ran towards Krusch. The big man landed a slap across the boy's head as he brushed past.

'Take care, lad,' the woman called after Tommy.

The big man glowered at her. 'You'd best keep that big nose of yours out of other people's business...*or else!*'

She stood her ground and stared back into his bulbous eyes. 'You don't scare me, you big bully. You've a heart of stone – anyone can see that. But remember this...what goes around, comes around. There's nowt so sure!'

Krusch's expression turned into a sneer. 'Clear off, you silly cow! And make sure that strip's clean or I'll see to it you're out of a job. And then what'll you do? Starve with a bit of luck.'

As Krusch broke out into an evil deep-throated chuckle, a sound from above caught his and the washerwoman's attention.

CAW...CAW...CAW

They both looked up and saw a number of black birds circling above.

‘Damn birds nesting in the stadium roof again,’
Krusch cursed.

The Widow Washerwoman jumped back as a black feathery object thudded into the ground in front of her. She stooped and gently picked it up.

Krusch sneered as she caressed the dead bird’s body in her hands. ‘Well that’s one less rook to worry about.

The Widow Washerwoman stepped towards him and angled her head up towards his. ‘It’s no rook...it’s a crow. And it’s a sure sign.’

Krusch looked down at the woman’s pale face framed by her plain black headscarf. He saw the intense look in her eyes. He saw the big hooked nose, the wart on her chin and the wrinkles in her furrowed brow. He failed to see the kindness underlying her ugliness. His eyes only saw the witch-like woman...and right now he wished it was her in place of the pathetic bird. ‘What sign?’ he barked with irritation.

The Widow Washerwoman stared back hard, her wild eyes piercing his heart so that it skipped a beat. ‘My mother used to say:

“When *one* crow drops from a darkened sky
It’s never *one*...but *two* that die.”

The big man grunted and walked away.

Mrs Dawson watched him go. She stared down at the dead bird in her hands. Her thoughts went to Tommy.

And tears streamed down her pale, wrinkled cheeks.





HOME ALONE -NOT!

After School

The three mad-keen footballers walked past some boarded-up old houses in Gladys Street and turned into a narrow lane:

MILLERBROOK LANE.

The ancient black asphalt crunched beneath their feet. Zak glanced up at the high weathered brick walls on either side of the lane, shutting out the fading sunlight. The right-hand wall bordered the old stadium; a tree branch sprouted from a crack between the bricks and crowned a shadowy, boarded-up doorway. Letters were just visible beneath the foliage:

HOME SUPPORTERS' TURNSTILE

They moved on - the lane growing darker, the stadium

wall more crumbled, a spiral of barbed wire and shards of glass running along its top. It reminded Zak of a prisoner of war camp he'd seen in a war film. He began to imagine they were POWs and had made their escape, the prison guards close behind with their dogs. He felt his heart begin to beat faster.

Another blocked-off doorway appeared, covered in graffiti, with a different faded sign above it:

VISITING SUPPORTERS' TURNSTILE

Zak wondered why the football supporters had to use different entrances...maybe they *really* hated each other.

Rehan saw where Zak was looking and seemed to read his mind. 'Home crowd and away crowd are best kept apart nowadays.'

Lizzie joined in. 'It's a shame really. Football should be about football. Not fans fighting with each other.'

Zak and Rehan nodded solemnly and the three of them pushed on. A big entrance with heavy iron gates appeared in the wall to their left. An ominous sign hung on the gates:

WARNING

GUARD DOGS ON PATROL

Zak imagined the pursuing prison guards again, their dogs straining at the leash. He peered through the iron gates and saw a crane surrounded by huge piles of scrap metal, but no signs of life. In fact, everywhere around seemed deathly quiet. It was as if he and Rehan and Lizzie were the only living creatures in existence.

When they finally reached the end of the lane, Rehan peered round the corner to the right. 'Railway End,' he whispered to Zak. 'We're at the back of the away

supporters' Railway Stand. Not much further now.'

A ghostly graveyard of old wagons and dilapidated rail coaches sat on rusted rails in front of them.

I can see why it's called the 'Railway End,' Zak mused to himself. He thought he saw a light flickering in the window of an old rail coach. He blinked his eyes and looked again....it was gone. *Probably imagined it.* He shook his head and sighed. He was beginning to think like his parents. They *always* accused him of imagining things.

They crept on through the old sidings, following the high brick wall on their right, bordering the back of the Railway Stand.

Lizzie led now and she was the first to reach the spot where the old wall had partially collapsed, some rough boards hammered across a gap where the bricks had fallen. A small space down beneath the boards was just big enough for a small footballer to crawl through!

Lizzie glanced around and disappeared through the hole. Rehan followed and beckoned Zak to do the same. A moment later, all three of them were standing in a dark passageway inside the old stadium.

Lizzie had already taken a torch from her backpack and was shining it ahead of her. 'We're underneath the Railway Stand,' she whispered to Zak. 'Don't be scared... there's no-one here but us. Just keep close and follow me and Rehan.'

'She's right,' Rehan reassured him. 'It's dark and creepy, but not for long...you'll see.'

Zak felt distinctly uneasy. He glanced nervously around the passage lit up in Lizzie's torch beam and

caught sight of a faded poster clinging to one of the damp, mildew-covered walls:

**ROTHERSTOKE TOWN v DONCASTER
UNITED
23rd NOVEMBER, 1968**

Another poster showed a photograph of a football team, but the names underneath had disappeared. In fact some of the footballers' faces had worn away, giving them a sinister 'zombie-like' appearance.

Definitely creepy! Zak thought to himself, almost clinging to Rehan as they edged onwards.

A moment later, the passage widened into a rectangular area, where natural light flooded in, so that several doorways became visible. Two of the doorways were side by side:

**HOME TEAM CHANGING
AWAY TEAM CHANGING**

Zak breathed a sigh of relief as the light level increased further.

'OK, guys! We're here! My turn to be captain,' Lizzie smiled, switching her torch off.

Rehan grinned and nodded. 'No problem. Zak...get your trainers on.'

Zak hadn't a clue what was going on. As Lizzie took a pair of tracksuit bottoms from her bag along with a pair of trainers and slipped into them, and Rehan did the same, he did as he was told and followed their example.

A few minutes later, Lizzie rooted around under an old bench and found the ball which she and Rehan had left hidden there. She tucked it beneath her arm and looked ready for action. Rehan stood directly behind her.

‘Come on, Zak!’ his two friends teased him. ‘The crowds are waiting. The stadium’s packed!’

Zak shook his head slowly from side to side. ‘What *are* you two talking about?’

‘YEAH!’ Lizzie shouted at the top of her voice, running towards where the daylight seemed strongest.

‘YEAH!’ Rehan called after her, following directly behind.

‘Yeah!’ Zak shouted, but not quite so loudly and feeling a tad silly. He followed cautiously behind his two friends...*wondering what on earth was going to happen next!*

*

At the far end of the ground, directly opposite the Railway End, the Tivoli Stand stood desolate. In its day it had been the main stand for the home crowd and for years, during match days, had been packed with thousands of avid Rotherstoke Town fans.

But now it stood silent and brooding.

As daylight faded, Night’s ghostly army of lengthening shadows once more moved into its abandoned terraces... but this time one shadow stood out from the rest. A shadow of human form – that of a tall, broad-shouldered man - crept slowly up the darkened steps towards the back of the stand, and at the highest point, the shadow stopped, turned and loomed over the deserted ground, watching and waiting... *for those who dared to invade its cursed prison.*

*

As the three friends ran out from the players' tunnel into the vastness of the empty stadium, Zak's imagination kicked into overdrive. In his mind, as in Lizzie's and Rehan's, the stadium wasn't empty anymore!

Thousands of fans lined the terraces and filled the stands, all cheering at the top of their voices. The noise was deafening.

ROTHERSTOKE... ROTHERSTOKE...
ROTHERSTOKE!

FREEMAN...FREEMAN...FREEMAN!

Zak gulped. It was *his* turn. But how could he ever be as good as Lizzie and Rehan? He stopped the ball with his foot and turned to face the distant goal beneath the Tivoli Stand...the home stand! The home crowd roared, beckoning their star player to run towards them.

Zak set off with the ball at his feet, trying desperately to control it. He knew the only thing he could do to look remotely skilful was to run towards the goalposts and fire the ball into the empty net. He had a strong right foot and could sometimes kick the ball hard.

'Go for it, Zak!' Lizzie cheered after him.

'Give it your best shot,' Rehan joined in.

Zak ran forward, stumbling a little, trying desperately to keep balanced and not appear clumsy. The crowd cheered, encouraged him on, giving him confidence... making him feel proud.

FREEMAN...FREEMAN!

He reached the penalty area, looked up and saw the goalposts looming before him. He saw the faded penalty spot and knew it was time to let loose with his right foot.

SHOOT! SHOOT! the imaginary fans screamed at him.

Zak looked up one more time...saw the empty net... *and something beyond...black and ghostlike, edging slowly down the steps of the stand.*

Goosebumps spread through his body.

He stepped onto the ball to steady it, but his foot slipped awkwardly, his leg twisted and he fell backwards. He hit the ground hard and landed in a crumpled heap. He sat up, rubbed his eyes and stared over the goalposts back into the stand.

Lizzie and Rehan ran up to him, half laughing and half wondering why he'd fallen.

'Are you OK?' Lizzie asked him. 'You looked so funny. And now you look like you've seen a ghost!'

Zak said nothing. He just sat and pointed beyond the goalposts.

The goosebumps kicked in again. The black shadowy thing was still there...*drifting slowly down the stand towards them.*





PRE-MATCH PREPARATIONS

**Derby Day, 1956
3 hours to kick-off**

Tommy had just finished getting Danny ready for their big appearance.

Soon after Gladstone had left, the goat had timidly re-appeared from his shelter and allowed Tommy to give him a thorough wash and brush-up. Now the Rotherstoke mascot's white fur and long beard gleamed as white as snow. Tommy felt proud of him.

The fans would be proud of him.

And now it was Tommy's turn to get cleaned up. As the only real 'prentice' at Rotherstoke, he was expected to turn out for the match looking just as immaculate as any of the players, including the captain.

He was making his way to the team's changing room when a voice called out to him. 'Tommy! My office in five minutes. I want a word.'

Tommy looked up. It was Mr Cooper, the club's manager.

I wonder what he wants, Tommy thought nervously. *Must be important. He's never asked me into his office before...least of all on a day like today.* He dashed into the changing room toilet, washed his hands and face, combed his hair - making sure his parting was straight - and headed directly to the manager's office.

'Come on in, lad,' Mr Cooper said kindly, pointing to a chair in front of his desk. 'Sit yourself down'.

Tommy did as he was told. He felt tense. He wondered if he'd done something wrong.

'You've been with us just over a year now, haven't you, lad?'

Tommy nodded. 'Nearly two seasons, Sir.'

'No need for *Sir*,' the manager smiled. 'Just call me *Mr Cooper*, like you usually do. Just because we're sitting in my office doesn't mean I'm any different.'

Tommy tried to force a smile.

'And don't look so worried, son,' the manager continued. 'You're not here because you're in trouble. Far from it. Everyone at the club speaks well of you.'

Tommy sighed inwardly, took a deep breath...and spoke up, 'Even Glad...er, I mean, Mr Krusch?'

The manager leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped firmly behind his head. 'Gladstone Krusch speaks well of no-one, son; it's not in his nature.' He leaned forward and stared at Tommy with a look of real concern.

‘And that’s exactly why you’re here...I’ve reason to believe Krusch’s been giving you a hard time.’

Tommy’s mind flashed back to some of the awful ways Krusch had treated him. Tears welled up in his eyes. He took another deep breath, ‘Part of being a football ‘prentice, Mr Cooper. Mr Krusch said it toughens you up and makes you a better player.’

The manager’s kind expression turned to a frown. ‘My trainer says you’ve got a great deal of talent, son... real potential and a good future in the sport. Character-building is one thing...but bullying is quite another!’

Tommy didn’t really understand what the manager was saying, but it was easy to see that Mr Cooper was annoyed.

‘How did you get that cut on your head, son?’

‘My fault, Mr Cooper. Nobody else’s.’

‘I’ll be the judge of that,’ the manager said firmly. ‘How did you get it?’

Tommy told him the story about Krusch’s loose stud and how the big man had reacted badly.

‘GIVE ME STRENGTH!’ the manager exploded as Tommy finished his story. He banged his fist hard down on his desk so that several papers fell to the floor.

Tommy felt really scared. He’d rarely seen the manager face to face; he was always far too busy...but to see him react like this! He watched in awe as Mr Cooper jumped to his feet and started ranting on.

‘Today of all days! Like I haven’t got a million things on my mind. The Wanderers will be here anytime. But I’m not having anyone in my team treating a young lad like this. It’s criminal.’ He sat down again and looked

kindly into Tommy's tear-filled eyes. 'You be on your way, son, and do whatever you have to do. I'll deal with the big man. Rest assured he'll not be bothering you again... derby match day or no derby match day.' He got up and led Tommy to the door, placing a comforting arm around his shoulder. 'Like I said, leave things to me. Don't you go worrying yourself any more.'

As Tommy headed back down the passageway towards the changing room, the manager's voice boomed out behind him, 'KRUSCH! KRUSCH! SOMEONE GET KRUSCH AND BRING HIM TO MY OFFICE NOW BEFORE I BLOW A GASKET!'

Tommy felt his heart begin to race. Despite the manager's reassurances, he'd never felt so scared in all his life.

*

The Widow Washerwoman had returned to her small terraced house in Gladys Street at the top of Millerbrook Lane. She busied herself in her tiny kitchen, occasionally turning to face the little gilt-edged framed picture of her late husband.

'I've fed your dear old pigeons, Bert. Those birds are as happy as Larry, ' she said to the picture. 'And the Town's strip's all been sorted. Whether they win or lose this afternoon, they'll be well turned out!' She smiled to herself and sat down at the kitchen table. She picked up the pack of cards stacked at the centre, shuffled them and dealt four cards out in a row face down.

She glanced at the framed photo of her husband again. 'OK, Bert. Let's see what the cards have to say. This one's for the boy.' She turned over the first card:

THE FOOL.

‘That fits!’ she said quietly. ‘Though not such a fool. Just a child full of innocence and naivety. I’m really worried about Tommy. I think the lad’s in real danger.’ She turned over the second card:

THE DEVIL.

‘And this one fits even more. It’s Krusch’s card. That man is a monster. He gives out such powers of negativity. But one of these days...’ She turned over the third card with trembling fingers, sure of what it would be:

JUDGEMENT

‘Like I keep saying, Bert. The day of reckoning is coming!’ She paused, reclined back in her chair and looked at her husband’s picture again. ‘I’m so scared, Bert. I know there’s real trouble brewing. I hardly dare look at the fourth card. I hope I’m wrong... I really do.’ She turned over the last card:

DEATH

‘Oh, Bert...’

The door opened. ‘Mam...what’s wrong? Are you talking to Dad again?’

The Widow Washerwoman turned and looked at the tall figure of her son standing in the doorway. She scooped up the cards and slipped them into a large pocket in her apron. ‘You wouldn’t understand, son.’

‘You’re right - I *don’t* understand. And I never *will* understand. Dad’s gone. He died over five years ago. It’s time you let go. Let him rest in peace.’

She watched as he took off his coat and hung it on one of the hooks by the door. ‘It takes one to know one, David,’ the Widow Washerwoman said firmly.

‘Still don’t understand.’

‘It takes a *believer* to know a believer.’

‘Still don’t understand. What’s for dinner?’

Mrs Dawson left the table, put on a pair of oven gloves and lifted a hot plate from the oven. ‘It’s steak and kidney pie and mashed potato - your favourite.’ She placed it on the kitchen table in front of her son. She stepped back and folded her arms as he tucked in. ‘Some of us believe in the spirit world and I, for one, believe that some of us *can* connect. Some of us can even *see* them.’

Her son replied with his mouth full, spitting bits of food as he spoke, ‘Like I said...let it go. Dad’s gone and that’s an end to it. There’re no such things as ghosts. All that spooky stuff is for kids.’

‘Whatever you say, David. I’ll leave you to get on with your dinner in peace. If you don’t mind, I’ll have my cup of tea in the front room.’

Her son nodded and tucked into his food.

The Widow Washerwoman poured herself a cup of steaming tea and took it into the adjoining small sitting room. She walked up to the fireplace and placed the cup and saucer on the mantle piece directly below a big oval mirror. She looked into the glass and winced at her appearance. ‘Never was the prettiest girl in the street, was I, Bert?’

A voice sounded in her head. ‘Maybe not the prettiest, but *my* girl all the same.’

‘Oh, Bert...you say the loveliest things.’

She continued to stare into the mirror, smiling at the pale, ghostly figure of her late husband, standing directly behind her.





ESCAPE FROM MILLERBROOK

Lizzie and Rehan looked to where Zak was pointing. 'Twit!' Lizzie laughed. 'It's just a big, black bin liner.'

'She's right,' Rehan laughed. 'Look! It's stopped and fallen flat on the steps.'

Zak wasn't convinced. His sixth sense - the 'sense of spookiness' as he preferred to call it - was telling him that something unbelievable was about to happen.

Lizzie and Rehan ran off with the ball, passing it between them, but Zak remained sitting on the ground, still staring at the collapsed black shape in the centre of the home stand.

There's no wind....not even a breath of wind...so why would a bin liner be blowing around anyway?

As he continued to stare, the black plastic sheet began to move again. It rose slowly and unnaturally, as if being

drawn upwards with unseen hands. An ice-cold shiver ran down Zak's spine.

Lizzie and Rehan ran back to him. 'Come on! Don't sit there all day!'

Zak said nothing. He was speechless. Lizzie and Rehan followed Zak's gaze into the stand again and saw the 'bin liner' rising up, contorting and twisting into some sort of hideous shape.

'OMG!' Lizzie gasped.

'That's d...d...deffo no bin liner!' Rehan stammered.

The black shape stretched upwards, its top becoming rounded like a man's head, its lower part branching out into crude, leg-like structures...looking more and more grotesque...like some weird black bog-monster.

Zak wanted to run...to get out of the stadium...get home and feel safe and sound. But he couldn't move. He was frozen...like a statue. Only one thought raced into his head: *we've got to get out of here!*

But he couldn't get the words out. Even his mouth seemed frozen.

His two friends seemed to read his mind. Lizzie grabbed one of his arms and Rehan the other. They pulled him to his feet and turned to run.

The hideous black figure had now moved down the stand and had reached the back of the goalposts. It slid over the wall like some sort of oozing oil-slick and crept towards them.

'IT'S COMING!' Lizzie screamed.

The three friends sprinted towards the players' tunnel.

'Please don't tell me we've got to go back in there... along that dark passageway,' Zak sighed.

‘It’s the only way out!’ Rehan gasped.

Zak hardly dared glance over his shoulder. But he did...and saw the imposing black figure starting to give chase. It was tall and broad with a big round head and thick-set arms and legs...

BUZZZ....

A searing bright light made the three friends jump backwards.

BUZZZ...BUZZZ...BUZZZ

More bright lights. Even though it hadn’t got fully dark yet, the four stadium floodlights turned night into day.

‘Look!’ Lizzie yelled, glancing over her shoulder. ‘It’s gone!’

Zak turned...and sighed a huge sigh of relief. Sure enough, the terrifying figure had disappeared.

‘It must have been the floodlights,’ Rehan suggested. ‘Whatever it was, it didn’t like them.’

Zak shook his head in disbelief. ‘Let’s just get out of here. We can discuss all this later.’

No one was in a mood to disagree. Lizzie rooted in her bag and took out the torch. They entered the players’ tunnel and quickly made their way down the dark passageway - *much more quickly than when they’d come in* - and reached the hole where they’d crept through.

Rehan almost jumped for joy when they were back outside the ground, standing in the disused railway sidings. ‘I’m not sure I’m ever going in there again!’ he sighed.

Lizzie nodded. ‘That was like some real-life nightmare.’

They walked on, heading back to the narrow lane,

knowing that there wasn't too much daylight left, though the four stadium floodlights seemed to light up the whole town.

'Don't say anything about this to anyone,' Zak said to them. 'Best we talk about this tomorrow, when we've had time to sleep on it.'

'Not sure any of us *will* sleep on it,' Lizzie said sadly. 'I think I'm going to have nightmares.'

'Just keep thinking about football,' Zak suggested.

'Yeah...keep your mind on good things,' Rehan added.

As they turned into Millerbrook Lane, the towering floodlights switched off, one by one. Everything turned gloomy and dark again.

'That's it!' Lizzie said. 'I'm running the rest of the way home.'

'Me, too!' Rehan said. 'Come on, Zak. Let's get away from here!'

Zak took one final glance over his shoulder. He caught sight of a light...a distant light in the window of one of the old railway carriages. It was a flickering light - like a candle - just where he'd thought he'd seen the light earlier, on the way in. He stared harder and managed to make out a face in the light...staring out of the window straight towards him.

A distinct chill rattled down his spine.

'COME ON, ZAK! LET'S GO!'

Rehan pulled on his arm, and the two of them set off running, just managing to catch up with Lizzie and keep up with her, as they sprinted the rest of the way home.

*

Darkness fell over the Millerbrook Stadium. It was just

after eight o'clock when two security men arrived, each with a large Alsatian dog, to take a quick look around. It was always a *quick* look around because no-one at the security firm wanted to be there. For some time there had been reports of security men seeing strange ghostly shadows in the darkest corners of the stadium, of hearing mysterious creaks and groans in the old offices and changing rooms under the stands. Even the bold guard dogs whimpered and whined, and the fur on the backs of their necks stood on end until they were back outside the ground.

It was almost midnight now. The security men had long gone. A large rat crawled through the hole in the wall from the railway sidings. It made its way down the dark passageway, sniffing the air and seeking out food. It stopped suddenly, sat up on its haunches and its ears pricked up. A distant whistling sound had caught its attention.

'Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling...'

It scurried on more quickly, encouraged...hopeful. Where there were humans, there was usually food to be found!

'Oh Danny Boy...the...'

The whistling stopped. Then there came a different sound. The sound of a young boy crying...sobbing.

The rat stopped...froze...crouched in terror...sensing danger behind it.

CRUNCH!

A heavy boot stamped down hard on the hungry rodent crushing it to a pulp. Ghostly footsteps rang on through the blackness of the passageway - and the sobbing of the young boy started up again.





DERBY DAY BUILD-UP

**Derby Day, 1956
1 hour to kick-off**

The fans were arriving in droves. The away town, Sheffield, was on the doorstep, so more away fans than normal thronged down Millerbrook Lane heading for the turnstiles. Trains arrived at the Westgate Station packed with Wanderers fans, and dozens of motor coaches pulled up on the waste ground down by the railway sidings. The Railway Stand was already three quarters full, with one hour still to go to the kick-off.

Tommy was standing by the goat pen, feeding Danny a last snack of fresh hay to make sure he was happy. It wouldn't be too long now before the Rotherstoke club mascot made his grand appearance!

Old Ben was in his hut by the side of Danny's enclosure, and his radio was turned up to nearly full volume. Tommy smiled to himself - like everyone else, he knew the old groundsman was almost stone deaf.

...And now for the local news at two o' clock.

The big talking point today is the local derby match at the Millerbrook Stadium. Over to our reporter at the ground, Sam Broadbent:

'Yes, Michael, the Millerbrook Stadium is already buzzing as the atmosphere for this crucial match builds up. A record crowd is anticipated, as the Wanderers try to deny Rotherstoke the win they need to guarantee promotion in this end-of-season battle. Interest is focused on the clash between Don Matthews, the Wanderers ace forward, and Gladstone

Krusch, Rotherstoke's infamous defender, who has almost single-handedly kept the tally of goals scored against the club this season to a record minimum.

Of course, there are those who say that Krusch shouldn't even be playing football.

This season the brutal defender has brought serious injury to at least six attacking forwards and yet miraculously escaped the attention of the referee. He has not acquired his nickname of 'The Kruschmeister' for nothing. One can almost feel the tension building as the two teams ready themselves and, of course, all eyes will be on Krusch and Matthews.

...Back to the studio.'

Tommy finished feeding Danny and gave him a last brush over to remove any bits of straw from his gleaming white fur. 'I really hope we win, Danny,' he said quietly. '...And without Krusch breaking anyone's legs!'

A tap on his shoulder made him jump round.

‘Sorry, Tommy. Didn’t mean to startle you. Just wanted you to know I’ll be by your side today.’

Tommy stared at the Widow Washerwoman. She wore her usual black headscarf wrapped tightly around her head and had a worried look on her face. ‘You don’t usually come to the match,’ he said to her.

‘No, but today is a special day so I thought I’d do my bit and be here.’ She looked up at the sky. Ominous dark clouds were rolling in. ‘In any case, they’ve forecast rain, and you can bet your life all the kit will be covered in mud by the end of the match. It’ll be good to get it away and straight into the wash.’

‘Fair point, Mrs Dawson,’ Tommy said. ‘I’m glad you’re here; you can keep me and Danny company down by the dugout. You’ll be able to see the match close up from there.’

‘Good!’ was all she said. And she walked away, looking thoughtful.

*

The home team milled around in the changing room, transferring things in and out of their lockers and chatting among themselves. No one spoke about the match. It was an unwritten rule at Rotherstoke that any pre-match banter only started *after* the manager had delivered his official pre-match talk. Until then, any conversation would only be social chit-chat.

One player sat on his own, speaking to no-one.

Gladstone Krusch was in a vile mood. His brow was deeply furrowed and his lips curled into a twisted snarl. He held a boot in one of his big hands and his bulbous eyes stared down at the shiny metal studs.

‘They look better when they’re not blood-stained, don’t they, Krusch?’ one of the players laughed.

‘He’s not worried about that,’ someone else joined in. ‘He’ll just get the lad to clean them up again!’

Some of the other players joined in, teasing the big man. Some players chose to keep out of it, knowing only too well the defender’s vile temper.

Sammy Williams, the club’s captain, was afraid of no-one. He walked over and stared down at Krusch’s balding head; the long strands of greasy slick-backed hair revolted him. ‘Not so much the big man when in the manager’s office though,’ he said, loud enough for everyone in the changing room to hear. ‘Seems the boss gave you a right dressing down, and no more than you deserve, you big bully!’

Krusch went red in the face and jumped to his feet. He was almost a foot taller than the club captain; he stooped and thrust his face forwards so that his and Williams’ noses almost touched.

Despite Krusch’s foul breath and glowering eyes, the captain never flinched. ‘What’re you going to do... *Kruschmeister*? You can’t kick me...you haven’t got your big boots on yet!’

Laughter broke out in the changing room. Krusch snarled, grabbed Williams by the throat and lifted him clean off the floor.

‘THAT’S ENOUGH! PUT HIM DOWN!’

Everyone swung round and saw the club manager, Mr Cooper, standing in the changing room doorway, Tommy standing nervously beside him.

Krusch grunted and let go of the captain.

Williams straightened his crumpled collar and cursed Krusch under his breath.

The players sat down on the benches beneath the lockers and the manager beckoned Tommy to do the same; he made sure Tommy was sitting well away from Krusch!

‘So much for working as a team!’ the manager started firmly. This is one of the most crucial matches in the club’s history. We need to stay calm and focused. DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?’

The entire team, including Tommy, nodded their heads in agreement.

‘Yes, Boss,’ the captain said, acting as spokesman. ‘You’re right. We’ll give it our best shot and work as a team...and that means *all* of us!’

Everyone turned to face Krusch. He was looking towards the manager with a stern expression.

The manager stared back at the big defender. ‘Yes, Krusch. That includes you! You’re a skilful defender, despite what anyone says. But we want to win this match fair and square. I don’t want to see the St John’s Ambulance dashing onto the pitch, no ambulances carting players off to hospital with broken legs...and most of all, I don’t want to see any sendings off. We need eleven men playing as a team today...a *good* team...the *best* team. IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?’

‘Yes, Boss,’ the players replied in unison.

All except Krusch. He said nothing.

Tommy hardly dared look across at him, but as the manager and the players began to discuss tactics, he took a deep breath and glanced over to the big man.

He swallowed hard and his heart skipped a beat.

Krusch was staring back at him with the most ferocious scowl he'd ever seen on a human face. In that moment Tommy knew that if looks could kill...*he would already be dead!*

*

The Widow Washerwoman sat in the little room where her cleaning things were stored. She sat at the little table placed against the wall and sipped her tea. She took the Tarot cards from her coat pocket, shuffled them and placed the pack face down on the brightly-patterned plastic tablecloth. She took the top card from the pack, hesitated...and turned it over:

DEATH

With trembling hands she replaced the card and shuffled the pack again. She took a long sip of tea, reached for the top card again...and turned it over:

DEATH

'By all the Saints...' she muttered under her breath. She replaced the card, shuffled the pack again, but this time more thoroughly. She uttered a little prayer to herself, reached for the top card and placed it face down on the table. She took another swig of tea, reached out for the card and turned it over:

DEATH

Tears streamed down her face. She cleared the cup away, put the cards back in her pocket and started heading off towards the players' tunnel. The roar of the crowd was already deafening and caused her to stiffen in surprise.

KRUSCHMEISTER! KRUSCHMEISTER!

And then her mind went back to the cards again...

and back to the time when the crow had dropped from the sky:

‘When one crow drops from a darkened sky

It’s never *one*, but *two* that die.’

She found herself wishing that if *two* people had to die, then Gladstone Krusch would at least be one of them. And then she started crying again.

She had no doubt in her mind who the other one would be!





A CRY FOR HELP

A still, drizzly autumn night

Zak lay wide awake, his mind whirling with the evening's spooky events.

Why do these things always happen to me?

He looked at the bedside clock. The little red figures stood out in the dark: 02.45

He heard his father snoring loudly and his mother snoring softly from their room across the landing.

His father's new job had led them to this new house in Rotherstoke. Except the house *wasn't* new. It was old, like the one they'd left behind in School Street. But this street, Masbrough Terrace, wasn't cobbled. And there was no spooky Victorian school opposite, though the area still had an old-fashioned feel...like going back in time a hundred years. But the greatest thing of all was that *this*

house didn't appear to be haunted. Well...not yet, anyway!

The gaudy floral-patterned bedroom curtains in Zak's bedroom fluttered a little. It would be a good job when Mum had replaced them. Like a lot of things in the house, they were in urgent need of updating. It appeared an old lady had lived in the house before them and hadn't replaced anything for years.

...But why had the curtains moved?

There was no breeze. The night was perfectly still. Zak's mind went back to the creepy old stadium and the drifting black shape that had morphed into a hideous chasing figure.

He closed his eyes and tried to shut it out of his mind.

A moment later, he opened his eyes and peered over the top of his duvet...saw the bedroom curtains move again. But this time there was more movement – like some unseen force had disturbed them.

'Oh, Lord! Something's behind those curtains.'

He really didn't want to investigate, but he just knew he had to. He slid quietly out of bed and crept over to the window. The curtains had stopped moving.

Taking a deep breath, he thrust the curtains open. Something flapped loudly and flew up in his face. Zak shrieked in terror...*as a bird landed at his feet on the bedroom carpet.* Zak recognised it as a pigeon...and it had something attached to a ring on one of its legs. He watched in fascination as the bird hopped around. He picked the creature up and it cooed affectionately. He removed the small rolled-up piece of paper from its leg, unrolled it and read the clearly printed letters:

PLEASE COME AS SOON AS YOU CAN.

RAILWAY SIDINGS. FIRST CLASS.

Zak placed the bird back on the window ledge and watched it fly away into the night. He climbed back into bed, clutching the piece of paper. He'd no idea what the message meant, but at least he knew where the old railway sidings were...and the carriages. He recalled the light he'd seen in one of the windows - possibly a face staring out at him. Maybe whoever the face belonged to was the person who'd sent this message. Perhaps it was a cry for help.

Maybe this is what I'm meant to do, Zak thought to himself. Maybe I'm some sort of Ghostbuster!

He definitely had a strong sixth sense and perhaps helping Jack, the Scabbajack boy, had only been the start of it. He turned over, feeling much more relaxed.

Tomorrow he would sneak down Millerbrook Lane by himself and have a quick look around the railway sidings... but straight after school when it was still light. And no way was he going inside the old stadium, whatever happened.

With these thoughts slowly subsiding inside his head, he turned over one more time, snuggled into his pillow... and fell asleep.

*

Zak was second downstairs the next morning; Mum was always first.

'Morning, Zak,' she called out cheerily. 'Did you sleep well?'

'Not bad,' Zak replied. 'Just a slice of toast please, Mum. I don't want any cereal.'

Mrs Freeman shrugged her shoulders. 'OK. It's not like you though. You can outeat me and Dad together most of the time.'

Mr Freeman entered the kitchen and joined them at the table. ‘What’s that? Did I hear right? Zak refusing food? Whatever next? I still can’t get over him playing football last night. How did it go?’

‘Interesting!’ was all Zak replied. He watched as Mum popped a slice of bread in the toaster, and his father poured himself a cup of tea.

‘Well, I never saw you as the football type if I’m honest,’ Mr Freeman went on. ‘We should go to the match on Saturday. Rotherstoke are at home and I’ve heard their new stadium is state-of-the-art.’

Zak shook his head. ‘I’m not *that* interested, Dad. In any case, the new stadium’s not *that* new. Rehan told me they built it just over ten years ago.’

The toaster popped up; Mrs Freeman removed the slice of toast, buttered it and handed it on a plate to Zak. ‘Well me and Dad are just pleased that you’re doing something active. Playing football is much healthier than watching others do it, no matter who you are.’

Mr Freeman nodded and sipped his tea. ‘Your mum’s right - as usual!’

‘I might link up with Rehan and Lizzie again after school. They’re helping me practise my ball control.’

‘Sounds great,’ Mr Freeman said enthusiastically. ‘I’ll give you some more coaching at the weekend if you like. I wasn’t captain of my school’s 1st X1 for nothing.’

Zak nodded, took a bite from his toast and chewed thoughtfully. He hated lying to Mum and Dad, but if they guessed where he was really going straight after school and the reason why, he knew they’d never even let him out of the house.





KICKING OFF

Derby Day, 1956
10 minutes to kick-off

Tommy held Danny tightly on his short leash. The time had almost arrived. The players were lined up inside the tunnel ready to make their entrance.

A huge buzz of anticipation echoed around the packed stadium. The stands were full. Some fans who'd failed to get into the ground had climbed up to high vantage points outside so they could see in. There were even reports of someone having climbed the jib of a crane in the neighbouring scrapyard.

The referee and his two linesmen paced around nervously, constantly glancing at their watches. Both captains moved to the front of their respective lines, each

chewing gum and nodding respectfully to each other.

Tommy had taken up his position at the back of the Rotherstoke line, speaking quietly to Danny, trying to keep the animal calm.

The Rotherstoke manager appeared, 'OK, lads... just do your best. I can't ask for anything more,' he said enthusiastically. 'See you at half-time.' And saying this, he headed out of the tunnel along with the Wanderers manager, both heading for their dugouts. The teams' trainers followed.

'OK, LADS. THIS IS IT,' the referee shouted. 'LET'S GET OUT THERE!'

'Tommy felt a surge of excitement well up inside. This was the moment he had always dreamt about. Only in *his* dreams he was the *captain* of the team...not the club 'prentice' leading out the mascot.

The two teams jogged out into the packed stadium. The noise level from the crowd erupted into a deafening roar. As Tommy and Danny appeared behind the last Rotherstoke player, the Tivoli Stand erupted again, but this time Tommy knew that the cheering and clapping were for him and Danny. Holding the goat's leash tightly with one hand, he waved at the cheering crowd with the other. Never had he seen the stadium packed with so many fans...he felt so proud!

The players ran further onto the pitch and began their warming-up routine, passing the ball around and showing off their skills. Tommy made his way over to the Tivoli Stand and walked Danny down the side of the pitch in front of the vast crowd. The sea of spectators waved and clapped, showing their appreciation. Once again Tommy

felt really good about everything. But inwardly he yearned for the day when *he* would be out on the pitch warming up with the players; he loved football so much and desperately wanted to play for Rotherstoke.

The referee gave a loud blast on his whistle and beckoned the two captains to the centre spot. They tossed a coin and the Rotherstoke captain won the toss. He elected to play the first half kicking towards the Railway End, where most of the away crowd were congregated. He knew it was always best to face the home crowd in the second half, when his team were tiring and needed more support in the goal area.

Tommy led Danny over to the little wooden bench by the side of the dugout. The Widow Washerwoman was already sitting there, smiling at Tommy and congratulating him on how smart both he and Danny looked.

‘You’ve done a good job, Tommy,’ she said to him. ‘Mr Cooper and the lads should be proud of you.’

‘Thanks, Mrs Dawson. It’s brilliant today, isn’t it? I’ve never seen so many people out there.’

Another loud blast of the referee’s whistle drew Tommy’s attention to the centre spot. Wanderers had taken the kick-off and the big game had started.

Tommy patted Danny affectionately on the head. ‘This is it then, Danny,’ he said quietly. ‘I hope we win. It’ll be a disaster if we lose and stay down.’

Somewhere above the roar of the crowd a different sound reached his ears. He looked up and saw a huge circle of black birds hovering high above the pitch. He knew at once they were crows. Earlier in the year they had nested in the roof of the stands and had caused lots

of damage.

Mrs Dawson was gazing up at them, too. As they both watched, the birds descended onto the front edge of the Tivoli Stand roof. They sat in a long line, silent and brooding. They looked frozen...unreal.

The crowd erupted again as the Rotherstoke captain led his men in an attack on the Wanderers goal and Tommy's attention went back to the match. He joined in with the crowd, cheering and shouting words of encouragement.

But the Widow Washerwoman seemed more intent on the line of crows nestled on the stand roof.

'A *murder* of crows!' she muttered loudly enough for those around her to hear. 'That's what they call them when they all gets together...a *murder* of crows!'

Some of the nearby fans laughed and looked at her as if she was crazy.

But she didn't notice. She just stared up at the line of birds. She couldn't take her eyes off them; to her they were harbingers of doom...a sure sign that something terrible was about to happen.

*

Half-time arrived and the score was 0-0.

Though goal-less, the play had been exciting end-to-end stuff. Rotherstoke had looked the more dangerous, and Williams had twice struck the crossbar with lethal shots at goal, one from inside the area and the other an amazing left-footed shot from well outside.

Wanderers had also built up some admirable attacks from midfield, but so far their forwards had not managed to get through the Rotherstoke defence, and this included their ace forward, Matthews.

This was largely down to Krusch.

The big man had played a clinical first half, constantly sweeping up any loose ball and distributing it cleanly to midfield. Not one Wanderers player had got past him.

But the Rotherstoke manager, and the rest of the team, knew the *real* reason why Krusch appeared so invincible.

The Wanderers forwards were afraid of him.

Krusch's infamous reputation was only too well-known, and neither Matthews nor any of the other away forwards relished the idea of their game ending with a badly broken leg.

'OK, guys,' the Rotherstoke manager began during his half-time pep talk in the changing room. 'It's going well and we could easily be 2-0 up. But now we've got to really go for it! We all know we've got to win if we want promotion, so let's put everything into our attack. I want the defence to push up more to midfield. Krusch...you've got the hardest kick in the team; I want you hoofing long balls up into the goal area.'

Krusch sat with his long muscular arms folded across his chest and a solemn look on his face. He grunted and nodded his head.

'And PLEASE...' the manager continued, still staring at Krusch, '...no sendings off! We need all eleven players on the pitch right up to the final whistle. SO KEEP IT CLEAN!'

Krusch grunted again.

'Right! Let's get out there and give it to them! You *can* win this...and you deserve to.'

Sure thing, Boss!' the captain replied on behalf of his team. 'Come on, lads! Let's do it!'

*

‘Danny cheered, the Widow Washerwoman cheered and the crowd erupted again as the players reappeared from the tunnel.

It was Rotherstoke’s turn to kick off, but within seconds the Wanderers had taken the ball off them and were mounting an attack. The ball reached Matthews. He beat one player, sprinted ten yards and beat another.

The away crowd roared. The home fans fell quiet.

Matthews found himself facing Krusch...*and backed off.*

Krusch took the ball away from the away forward easily, looked up and did as the manager told him... he hoofed the ball hard up the pitch and landed it at Williams’ feet.

The club captain beat the one remaining defender standing between him and the Wanderers goal...and fired a shot into the top left-hand corner of the net.

Tommy put his hands to his ears as the home crowd roared and cheered louder than he’d ever heard them before.

Rotherstoke Town 1 - Sheffield Wanderers 0

Tommy cheered and beamed at the Widow Washerwoman. She smiled back, but Tommy saw the troubled look on her face. She glanced up again at the line of crows perched on the roof of the stand.

Why is she so interested in them?

As Tommy followed her gaze, one of the crows cawed loudly and took off up into the air. A second crow did

the same...and a third. One by one the remaining crows launched themselves into the darkening sky until the whole flock was in flight again, circling around directly above the pitch and making enough racket to be heard above the noise of the crowd of spectators below.

Tommy tried to concentrate on the game. 'I can't believe we're one up,' he said cheerily.

Mrs Dawson never even looked back at him. She continued to gaze up at the circling birds. She muttered something quietly, but loud enough for Tommy to hear:

*'When one crow drops from a darkened sky
It's never one but two that die
When black crows circle in a darkened sky
There's nowt so sure that three will die.'*

Tommy had no idea what the Widow Washerwoman was on about, but he didn't like the sound of it, especially as the entire flock of crows was circling high above them...
right now!





THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

School Library, Autumn Term

‘How did that pigeon find its way to your house?’ Rehan asked.

‘Don’t you know anything about pigeons?’ Lizzie scoffed. ‘It was a *homing* pigeon. They know how to find places.’

‘Course I know that,’ Rehan sighed. ‘But that’s their *own* home. Unless they’ve been trained, they wouldn’t know how to find somebody else’s home, like Zak’s.’

‘Shush...’ the school librarian whispered. ‘This is a quiet area for study only. If you three want to chat, go outside.’

‘Sorry, Miss,’ Zak replied.

They continued to talk quietly; nobody wanted to go

outside...it was cold and damp and there were only ten minutes of the school lunch break left.

‘Well, in any case, I’m going to the railway sidings after school. It’s something I’ve got to do.’

‘And we’re going with you,’ Lizzie said adamantly, ‘... aren’t we, Rehan?’

Rehan nodded, ‘Sure thing! But we’ll have to get word to our folks.’

‘You don’t have to come,’ Zak said bravely, but inwardly he felt *really* glad that his two friends wanted to go with him.

‘You didn’t *have* to play football with us when we asked you,’ Lizzie reminded him.

‘Too true,’ Rehan joined in. ‘But you gave it your best shot...until you stood on the ball and fell over!’

The three of them laughed and the librarian had to tell them to be quiet again.

Then all three of them fell quiet as they recalled the spooky events that followed in the old stadium.

‘There’s no way we should ever go into the stadium again,’ Rehan said quietly, but firmly. ‘There’s something really scary going on in there.’

‘Can’t disagree with that,’ Lizzie said.

‘We won’t need to go in,’ Zak joined in. ‘I’ve got a good idea where our contact will be waiting.’

‘Where?’ Lizzie and Rehan asked in unison.

‘That’s for me to know and you to find out later,’ Zak replied mysteriously. ‘Trust me!’

‘OK. That’s settled then,’ Lizzie said. ‘We’ll go to the school office now and get word home that we’re staying on for some football coaching. Meet up at the school gates

and we'll get straight down there.'

'Agreed!' Rehan replied.

'Agreed!' Zak added.

The three of them left the library, and Zak noted the librarian glowering at them as they left!

*

A thin drizzle began to fall as Zak, Rehan and Lizzie jogged down Gladys Street, heading towards Millerbrook Lane.

'That's all we need,' Lizzie grumbled. 'I can't believe how dark it is.'

Zak looked up at the black clouds scurrying overhead. 'You're right...there's hardly enough daylight left as it is. We'd better get a move on.'

Rehan responded by sprinting on ahead, Lizzie quickly on his heels. Zak puffed and panted behind, beginning to wish he hadn't said anything.

If the streets were dark, Millbrook Lane was even more so. As their feet turned onto the crunchy black asphalt, the way ahead was shrouded in gloom and shadow.

A dog howled from not too far away.

'Probably coming from the scrapyard,' Zak whispered. He looked up at the sky...still clouded over. 'Well at least if it's a werewolf, we should be safe. There's no full moon.'

Rehan turned and looked at him with wide eyes. 'You *are* joking?'

'Of course he's joking!' Lizzie quipped. 'Overactive imagination!'

'You're beginning to sound like my mum and dad,' Zak sighed.

They moved quickly on and soon passed the scrapyard

gates on the left. A dog barked loudly from somewhere inside. The three friends moved on more quickly, nobody saying a word.

They passed the old turnstiles within their shadowy boarded-up recesses in the crumbling stadium wall. Zak kept wondering who or what might be on the other side of that wall!

Rehan was the first to reach the end of the lane and turn into the abandoned railway sidings. He crouched by the corner of the high brick wall. 'Now where?'

Zak and Lizzie peered over Rehan's shoulder.

'Follow me,' Zak instructed them.

He brushed past to the front and led them towards a railway carriage in the distance, heading to where he thought he'd seen the face in the lighted window. They crept past a number of old wagons and coaches. A carriage on their left looked completely derelict, but still had the words 'Second Class' painted on its side. They moved on, gazing ahead, until all three of them saw the shimmering light at the same time.

'There!' Zak exclaimed. 'Told you I'd seen a light.'

They moved cautiously on, closing in on the carriage with the lighted windows. This rail coach looked in much better condition than the others. Zak noted the letters painted along its side:

FIRST CLASS

'Just as I thought,' he said quietly. 'This is where we're meant to be...I'm sure of it!'

'We...we...believe you!' Lizzie stammered, pointing up at one of the windows.

Zak looked up and saw why Lizzie was suddenly

unnerved. A face stared out at them. It was the face of an old lady...a *very* old face...wrinkled and pointed and looking distinctly witch-like.

The old lady tapped on the window and screeched at them through the glass:

‘DON’T BE SCARED! I WON’T HURT YOU. COME ON ROUND TO THE DOOR. I’LL PUT THE KETTLE ON.’

*

Inside the stadium, any remaining daylight had filtered out and all was in shadow. A formless black shape drifted across the deserted pitch towards the players’ tunnel. A high-pitched sound came from deep within... the whistling of a familiar tune:

‘Oh Danny Boy...the pipes...the pipes...are calling...’

The drifting shadow reached the tunnel and began to take form...rounded head...long outstretched arms... sturdy legs...tall and imposing!

I’m on my way, sonny boy, and when I find you I’m going to break every bone in your scrawny little body!

...And the whistling stopped...replaced by a soft moaning sound...which turned into a cry...and into a sob...until the sound of a child sobbing swept relentlessly around the entire stadium.





THE ULTIMATE PENALTY

**Derby Day, 1956
Second half continued**

The game restarted and Rotherstoke continued to push up as their manager had instructed. The home crowd roared, desperate for a second goal, but a Wanderers fullback tackled well, took the ball from a Rotherstoke attacker and cleared the ball with a long kick to the centre of the pitch.

Matthews was lurking there!

The Wanderers ace forward glanced up and saw that he had a clear run at goal. He sprinted up the pitch, with Krusch and the other Rotherstoke fullback haring after him. But even Krusch's long legs were no match for Matthews' speed and control.

Matthews reached the penalty spot and Skidmore, the Rotherstoke goalkeeper, ran straight out at him. Matthews side-stepped the keeper and slotted the ball into the back of the Rotherstoke net.

Along with thousands of other Rotherstoke supporters, Tommy felt his heart sink. The Tivoli End fell quiet.

Rotherstoke Town 1 - Sheffield Wanderers 1

The Rotherstoke manager's voice boomed out as he rallied his team.

'COME ON, LADS. JUST A MINOR SETBACK. YOU'RE EASILY THE BEST TEAM. YOU CAN DO IT. KEEP PUSHING FORWARD. WE'VE GOT TO ATTACK.

KRUSCH...YOU DROP BACK...DON'T LEAVE THE GOAL UNDEFENDED!'

Krusch muttered under his breath, dropped his head and jogged backwards, positioning himself on the edge of the Rotherstoke penalty area.

Tommy rose to his feet. The goat seemed restless; he paced Danny up and down a little. The match continued with lots of exciting end-to-end stuff, but neither team threatened to score, until...

With ten minutes to go, a fabulous long ball from a Wanderers defender reached the feet of their ace forward. Once again, Matthews raced up the pitch. But this time there was one player standing between him and the Rotherstoke goalkeeper...*Krusch!*

KRUSCHMEISTER...KRUSCHMEISTER! The home crowd chanted. The Rotherstoke fans knew the

infamous defender was their only chance of saving the day.

Matthews had no choice but to follow his instincts. He ran to the edge of the Rotherstoke penalty area, glanced up at the goal, gauged the distance and lined up his lethal left foot with the far right top corner.

But Krusch was already on him, and had spotted that Matthews' left sock was down round his ankle, the shin pad missing. With one foot the big man played the ball and with the other he played the player!

Matthews screamed as Krusch's outstretched right boot smashed into his knee and scraped down his left shin, razor-sharp studs peeling off a long strip of skin.

The ruthless defender hared away with the ball, his victim left lying on the ground writhing in agony, the partially-unsighted referee waving play on...

Once again, Rotherstoke Town's day had been saved by the most infamous player of all time... *The Kruschmeister!*

Despite the deafening boos from the away fans, the big defender kept his cool and passed the ball forward to Williams... *who sportingly kicked the ball out of play.* Krusch was furious and spat on the ground.

The referee nodded respectfully to the Rotherstoke captain and blew his whistle. He beckoned the Wanderers trainer onto the pitch...the St John's Ambulance standing ready on the touchline. A moment later the St John's Ambulance workers were summoned and Matthews was carried off on a stretcher, clutching a badly damaged kneecap and grimacing in pain.

The game restarted and Rotherstoke quickly attacked. This time the ball went out for a corner. The Rotherstoke

right-winger floated in a beautiful ball and Williams rose majestically into the air with perfect timing ready to head it into the net...

...Until the Wanderers centre half grabbed hold of the Rotherstoke captain's shirt and pulled him violently downwards!

Williams screamed at the referee. The entire Rotherstoke team screamed at the referee.

Thousands of Rotherstoke fans screamed at the referee!

PHEEP! The referee pointed to the penalty spot.

'Yeah! Penalty!' Tommy yelled enthusiastically from his place by the dugout. The Rotherstoke manager jumped to his feet excitedly and clapped his hands.

As the game drew to a close, it seemed Rotherstoke's prayers had been answered. The big question was...*who was going to take the most vital penalty in the club's history?*

*

With a look of determination on his face, Krusch ran over to the ball and picked it up, 'I'm taking it!'

'You never take penalties,' Williams said sharply. 'You're a fullback!'

'LET HIM TAKE IT,' the manager's voice boomed out from the touchline. 'HE'S GOT THE HARDEST KICK IN THE TEAM.'

As soon as the crowd realised what was happening and who was going to take the penalty, the home fans erupted in cheers:

KRUSCHMEISTER...KRUSCHMEISTER...
KRUSCHMEISTER! they chanted.

The away supporters sent out a different message:
BOO...DIRTY FOULER!...SEND HIM OFF!

As the vast home crowd hushed and tensed, Krusch headed over to the penalty spot directly in front of them.

The manager called out to him, 'JUST HIT IT AS HARD AS YOU CAN. IF THE GOALKEEPER GETS IN THE WAY, I WANT HIM AND THE BALL IN THE BACK OF THE NET!'

Krusch nodded, muttered something and spat on the ground.

The crowd fell even more silent. The tension was unbearable. Some of the home fans covered their eyes.

The flock of crows, still circling high above the pitch, cawed ominously.

Tommy was totally absorbed in the events unfolding on the pitch, when a loud CAW almost gave him a heart-attack. A huge crow flew down and settled on the ground in front of Danny.

The goat bolted in panic, pulled free from Tommy and charged out onto the pitch.

Krusch had just reached the penalty spot and was bending over to place the ball. The stricken goat looked up, saw the defender's huge backside, put his head down... and accelerated.

THUD!

Danny's impressive horns smacked into Krusch's equally impressive rump, catching the big defender completely unawares and flooring him face-down into the churned-up mud.

The crowd roared.

Every fan in the packed stadium - home or away - burst into uncontrollable laughter as the big defender scrambled to his feet.

Tommy was speechless and terror-stricken. He sprinted onto the pitch and chased Danny in a huge circle before finally catching him and leading him away.

‘GET THAT GOAT OUT OF MY SIGHT,’ the manager yelled at Tommy.

If Tommy’s face glowed bright red as he led Danny back down the player’s tunnel, Krusch’s face glowed even redder! The big man swung around. His eyes bulged angrily from his bony head as a look of real hatred spread across his contorted face. He wiped the mud from his sweaty forehead onto a shirt sleeve and picked up the ball.

The crowd slowly settled.

The Widow Washerwoman watched Krusch in horror.

She saw the fierce hatred in his expression...for Tommy...for the goat...and for anyone else who dared to get in his way. She also noted he’d been visibly shaken. His big hands trembled slightly as he replaced the ball on the penalty spot.

‘REMEMBER, KRUSCH...’ the manager called out again. ‘HIT IT HARD!’

The crowd’s laughter and ensuing hubbub subsided. A hush spread through the stadium as tension built up again.

The Wanderers goalkeeper positioned himself on the goal line, Krusch stepped back a few paces...the referee blew his whistle.

PHEEP!

Krusch charged forward and let loose with his lethal right foot. He kicked the ball with tremendous force, aiming high towards the roof of the net...

...smashing the ball into the crossbar.

A Wanderers fullback hoofed the rebounded ball away as the referee glanced at his watch and blew the final whistle.

RESULT:

Rotherstoke Town 1 - Sheffield Wanderers 1

The home crowd gasped in disbelief. The big man had *missed!* Their chance of promotion to Division 1 had gone. Jeers and boos echoed around the stadium...and no-one had any doubt which player they were meant for!

As the referee gathered the ball and headed off the pitch, the players gathered together, the Wanderers players shaking the hands of the Rotherstoke players and offering their commiserations. Some of the players exchanged shirts.

But not Krusch!

The big defender cursed loudly and stormed off towards the players' tunnel. The manager called him back, but Krusch was having none of it. He disappeared down the tunnel with a murderous look on his face.

Tommy had put Danny back in his pen and had just returned to his place by the dugout. He couldn't believe he'd missed the final action.

'It's not only you that missed out,' the Widow Washerwoman said sadly. 'Gladstone Krusch missed, too.' She described how Krusch had missed the penalty.

Tommy glanced around at the sea of miserable faces filing out of the stands. He saw the manager, Mr Cooper, rounding up his players on the pitch, forcing a smile and patting them sympathetically on the shoulder.

'Krusch missed!' Tommy gasped. 'He'll blame me!' An

expression of terror spread across his face. 'Where is he?'

'He stormed off,' the widow said nervously. 'You'd better stay close to me, Tommy. In fact, I'll walk home with you.'

A loud voice from the players' tunnel attracted their attention. It was the groundsman, Ben Hopkirk, 'YOU'D BETTER GET OVER HERE NOW, TOMMY LAD!'

Tommy swallowed hard. He knew by the tone of the groundsman's voice that something bad had happened.

The Widow Washerwoman stood up, threaded her arm through his and held him tight. 'Come on, Tommy. We'll go and face whatever's happened together.'

Tommy gulped again. She was clinging to him so tightly that he sensed that this was *really* bad news!





WIDOW WASHERWOMAN'S STORY

Railway Sidings

The idea of an old lady putting the kettle on in a disused first-class railway coach seemed weird to Zak to say the least. But 'weird' was a word that didn't phase him anymore.

'Come on...let's find out what she wants,' he said calmly to his two friends.

A moment later they were inside the old carriage and gazing around in wonder.

'It's so warm and cosy in here,' Lizzie gasped. 'It's like being in someone's house.'

'Sure is!' Rehan agreed with wide eyes.

The old lady smiled at them. 'It is someone's house... mine!'

Zak took in the decor. There was a small sofa to one side - the old lady beckoned them to sit on it. An old sideboard stood against another wall with lots of framed pictures standing on it, mostly black and white pictures of a man. The walls of the carriage had been wallpapered with an old-fashioned flowery pattern, and an ornate mirror hung on one of the walls above a wooden mantle bridging an electric fire. There was even a soft brightly-patterned carpet on the floor.

‘I’ve got myself a little kitchen next door,’ she informed them. ‘Our David fitted it out for me – he’s my son. He can turn his hand to anything.’

‘I’m impressed,’ Zak said kindly. Lizzie and Rehan nodded in agreement.

‘It must have been you who sent the pigeon.’ Zak informed rather than asked her.

She nodded. ‘One of Bert’s most reliable. In fact he calls it Homer,’ she smiled.

‘But how did it find Zak’s house?’ Lizzie asked impatiently. ‘Don’t homing pigeons only find their *own* home?’

‘Clever girl!’ the old lady replied. ‘It was Bert who guided it there. He’s good at that sort of thing since he passed...moved...on!’

‘Don’t understand!’ Lizzie frowned.

The old lady sat to one end of a small table and swivelled around to face them. She smiled a toothless smile. ‘You don’t need to. There’s much more to talk about than pigeons...*crows* for instance.’

Zak fidgeted between Lizzie and Rehan on the sofa. ‘What about crows?’

‘My mother always said that crows are straight from the devil. “Wherever you find wickedness, you’ll find crows,” she used to say. And the story I have to tell you was foretold by them.’

‘What story?’ Zak asked her.

‘The story I need to tell you. That’s why I brought you here. So you can help.’

Zak glanced nervously at Rehan and Lizzie. They glanced nervously back.

‘Go on, Mrs...’

‘...Dawson,’ the old lady interrupted. ‘But in my story, folk knew me as the Widow Washerwoman.’

An old-fashioned aluminium kettle on the stove in the corner started whistling. She got up and began making them a cup of tea. ‘*He* used to whistle,’ she said mysteriously.

‘He whistled to get the goat to come out. Always the same tune: *Danny Boy*. It was the goat’s name, see: *Danny!*’

‘Who used to whistle?’ Zak said, glancing at his two friends again.

‘Tommy,’ the old lady answered, pouring three mugs of steaming tea.

‘The dead boy...the one inside the old stadium...where you’ve been practising your football.’

Lizzie and Rehan fell very quiet.

Zak looked at their dumbfounded expressions. They’d sensed, same as he had...that things were about to get *very* scary!

*

As they sipped their tea, Mrs Dawson got on with her story. She told them about Tommy, how he was a

promising young footballer and a 'prentice' at the club. She told them how much Tommy loved and cared for the club mascot, Danny, the beautiful Irish white goat.

She told them about The Kruschmeister!

'Gladstone Krusch was his real name,' she said with a frown. 'Nasty piece of work he was. I'd known him since he was a boy living with his mum in Claremont Street. She married his father at the end of the First World War...a POW working over here. Even *she* couldn't stand him...her own son! He was a tearaway, a loud mouth and a bully.'

'But good at football?' Lizzie suggested.

The old woman nodded solemnly. 'Didn't have any friends, see. So he spent all his time kicking a ball around. No wonder he got good at it. It's all he ever did.'

She went on to tell them how Krusch gave Tommy a bad time at the club, leading up to the unbelievable events during the critical match against Sheffield Wanderers in 1956.

When she described how the goat had put its head down and charged at Krusch's huge backside, the three friends burst out laughing.

The old lady frowned again. 'I wish I could laugh with you...but it all ended in tears and tragedy...and I knew it was coming!' She looked up towards the ceiling of the carriage, her eyes gazing sightlessly:

*'When black crows circle in a darkened sky
There's nowt so sure that three will die.'*

'Why? What happened?' Zak asked, hardly daring to hear the reply.

'Rotherstoke failed to win...and Krusch lost his

temper...like never before!

‘OMG!’ Lizzie gasped. ‘What did he do?’

The widow told them how the groundsman had looked for Tommy after the match.

How he’d taken Tommy over to the goat’s enclosure.

‘Was Danny all right?’ Lizzie asked, her voice trembling.

‘No! The poor creature was lying dead on the ground... its neck broken.’

Zak and Rehan gasped. Lizzie almost burst into tears. ‘The Kruschmeister!’ they said together.

‘Like I said, he was a nasty piece of work.’

‘And what happened to Tommy?’ Zak asked.

‘He ran back into the stadium. I found him later outside the changing rooms, sobbing his heart out. I still hear those sobs. It breaks my heart.’

‘And then what happened?’ Rehan asked, his eyes wide in awe.

‘I walked him home. I wanted to protect him...in case Krusch was waiting for him. I loved Tommy like my own, and I was afraid for him.’

She went on to tell them how she’d led Tommy out of the stadium still sobbing, constantly keeping an eye out for Krusch.

‘We were just about to cross Morley Street in the town centre...when we saw him, leaning on the wall outside the bank. He knew the route the boy walked home and was waiting for him. Tommy was always afraid of the big man...but *not* on this occasion.’

‘Blimey! What did Tommy do?’

‘He screamed at him. ‘MURDERER!’ I couldn’t hold

him back. He set off across the road with his fists clenched tight. Small as he was, he was in a mood to pay Krusch back for what he'd done to poor Danny.'

'But Krusch was huge,' Zak started.

'And nasty!' Rehan added.

The widow nodded. 'Krusch set off towards Tommy like a raging bull. If he'd got to him, he would have killed him.'

'So he *didn't* get to him.' Lizzie said, relief in her voice.

'Worse!' Mrs Dawson replied. 'They clashed in the middle of the road just as Joe Hopkins came hurtling around the corner in his baker's van. Joe was old and his eyesight wasn't what it used to be. Some folks said he should never have been driving.'

'He didn't hit them?' Zak gasped, guessing what the answer would be.

'Head on! Poor Joe went straight through the windscreen, but *he* survived. Krusch and Tommy were killed outright. And there you have it! The crows foretold the three deaths. First the goat, followed by Krusch and poor Tommy.'

Zak, Rehan and Lizzie sat stunned, with glazed looks on their faces.

'And that's why I asked you here, Zak,' the widow stated, breaking the shocked silence.

'Why?' he asked, looking her straight in the face.

'I've been waiting for you, Zak. I knew you were coming...*to redress the balance!*

Zak fidgeted uncomfortably. 'What does that mean... and why me?'

He held his breath. Lizzie and Rehan held their breath.

A heavy silence seeped into the old railway carriage and enveloped everything, as they waited patiently for the old woman's reply.





ZAK'S MISSION

Mrs Dawson rose slowly to her feet. She went over to the window and lit some sort of scented candle. Zak guessed it was the same one he'd seen flickering the evening before.

'I guessed that the time had arrived – when they said a family with a boy called Zak had moved into the house in Masbrough Terrace - news travels fast in these parts. Zak's got three letters, see...things always come in threes in this business...the three deaths - Danny, Tommy and Krusch - and then you three turn up...always in threes!'

'And what exactly does Zak have to do?' Lizzie asked a little impatiently.

'Like I said, redress the balance.' She took out a pack of cards from a drawer in the old sideboard and placed them on the table. She looked across at Zak and beckoned

him to sit at the table.

He did as she asked and Rehan and Lizzie came over and stood by his side.

‘Shuffle the cards,’ she instructed him.

‘*I’ll* do it,’ Lizzie said enthusiastically. ‘I’m good at cards.’ She picked up the pack.

‘They look bigger than playing cards.’

‘That’s because they’re *not* playing cards,’ Mrs Dawson informed her. ‘They’re Tarot cards...mystical cards of fortune.’

Lizzie shrugged her shoulders and shuffled them effortlessly. She placed the pack face down on the table.

‘Take one, Zak,’ the widow instructed. ‘Any one you like.’

Zak picked one from the centre.

‘Now turn it over and let’s see what it is.’

Again, Zak did as she instructed.

JUSTICE

‘What does it mean?’ Zak asked her.

‘It’s all about the need for fairness, see: harmony and balance in the world. Sometimes, people like you, Zak, are chosen to deal with the actions of others who upset the balance.’

‘Like The Kruschmeister!’ Zak said.

The old widow nodded. ‘Put the card back and let Lizzie re-shuffle them...and then pick a card again.’

Lizzie did as she said. Zak turned over a second card.

‘Another one like the last one!’ Zak gasped.

‘Not another one...the same one!’ she said calmly. ‘No matter how many times you have a go, you’ll keep choosing that same card. It’s a sure sign you’re the chosen

one, Zak.

You've got some sort of special gift.'

'My sixth sense!' Zak said proudly.

'Some folk would call it 'intuition', Zak. But you've got much more than that.'

Lizzie and Rehan were speechless. Lizzie insisted on Zak having one more go. She shuffled the pack again, more thoroughly than ever. She placed the cards on the table and Zak chose another one. He went right to the bottom of the pack this time. He turned it over:

JUSTICE

'OK!' Zak sighed. 'I believe you. So what do I do next?'

'Things will happen. They have a way of working out. But at some stage you'll have to go back into the old stadium and face your demons.'

'We've seen some weird things in there already,' Rehan said.

'Yeah!' Lizzie joined in. 'Like some *really* weird things.'

The widow woman sat on the sofa; she looked tired. 'That's why folk don't go in there. After that terrible day all those years ago, things got bad for the club. They rarely won a match. It was like they were cursed. Strange things started happening in the stadium...shadows and sounds that shouldn't have been there. More than one person heard the sound of someone whistling *Danny Boy*.'

'So do you think that the Kruschmeister and Tommy are still in there...haunting the stadium?'

'You're getting the idea, Zak,' the widow said to him. 'And those two are destined to stay there until things are sorted once and for all. And it's up to you, Zak, to do the

sorting.'

Like when I sorted things out between poor Jack and that murderous bully, Murdoch!

Zak thought to himself.

'We'll help him,' Lizzie said firmly. 'Won't we, Rehan?'

Rehan didn't look so sure. 'When you say Krusch and Tommy...you do mean their *ghosts*, don't you?'

The widow nodded gravely. 'That's about the measure of it. But don't underestimate the power of ghosts. Krusch's spirit is an evil force to be reckoned with.'

'Just one thing,' Zak asked. 'Are they *trapped* inside the stadium?' His mind went back to when the Scabbajack and Murdoch ghosts had got into his house in School Street and terrified the life out of him.

Mrs Dawson shuffled the pack of Tarot cards, placed them face down on the table and

drew one at random. She turned it over and beckoned Zak to look closely at it.

THE HIGH PRIESTESS

Zak studied the image on the card - a lady in a cloak sat between two pillars, one black and one white. She wore a large cross around her neck and a crescent moon lay at her feet.

'This is *my* card, Zak,' the widow informed him. 'The pillars represent the forces of good and evil, and the High Priestess represents me, sitting firmly between them. My job is to be mediator.'

Lizzie brushed back her blonde fringe and turned to the widow. 'What's a mediator?'

It was Zak who answered. 'I'm guessing it's like some sort of referee.'

The widow smiled at him. 'You guess right, Zak. My job is to oversee the redress of balance. You could say that I'm a bit like a football referee - there to see that the rules aren't broken...that Krusch doesn't use his supernatural powers of evil to crush you in one blow.

Something he would surely do if I wasn't around.'

Zak gulped. Rehan and Lizzie gulped.

'So back to...to...to my question,' Zak stammered. 'Are they *trapped* inside the stadium?'

'While ever I'm around you need have no fear, Zak. As High Priestess, I am also your protector. Krusch can't ever come out of the stadium. I've set up an aura of goodness around it and Krusch can't penetrate it.'

'How about, Tommy?' Lizzie asked.

'Tommy *does* leave the stadium occasionally. I feel his presence. He knows I'm here and that I still watch out for him. He is goodness itself. But his spirit will never rest until Krusch has been dealt with.'

Zak sighed with relief. It was reassuring to know that Krusch couldn't creep out of Millerbrook and visit him!

The woman seemed to sense his relief. She smiled warmly at him. 'It's down to the magic number *three* again. Me, Tommy and Krusch are like the eternal triangle. As I've said, while I'm around, Krusch won't be seeking you out, Zak.'

Zak breathed another sigh of relief. The old woman's words were more than reassuring. 'Just one more thing,' Zak added. 'How long exactly have you been around?'

The widow got up and walked with some difficulty over to the sideboard. She took something from the top drawer, made her way back to Zak and handed it to him.

‘Wow!’ Zak gasped. ‘A message from the Queen...for your 100th birthday.’

Lizzie and Rehan leant over Zak’s shoulder to look at it.

‘Impressive!’ Rehan said.

‘Fab!’ Lizzie added.

The old woman’s expression turned to one of sadness, ‘Tommy, Krusch and Danny died in 1956. I was 42 at the time. I’ll leave you to do the maths.’

‘That was 60 years ago,’ Rehan said proudly. ‘I’m good at maths. Is that how long you’ve been waiting for Zak?’

‘And that makes you 102 years old?’ Lizzie interrupted with wide eyes.

‘Yes, though it all seems like yesterday. And now I’m hoping that Zak can put things right. It’s long past the time when Tommy’s spirit should be at peace...up in heaven where he belongs!’

‘And Krusch in that *other* place!’ Lizzie said gruffly.

The old woman nodded.

‘I’ll do my best,’ Zak said. ‘But I will need all the help I can get!’ He looked thoughtfully towards his two friends. They looked thoughtful, too. They nodded without saying anything.

‘I can see you three are good-natured and determined, and, together, you’ll be strong – the strength of *three!*’ Mrs Dawson said. ‘I’m old and weak now, but I’ll be there for you.’

‘Things will begin to happen. Be sure of it. And keep in touch. Call in anytime.’

The three friends said their goodbyes and left the old lady standing by the candle-lit window. Zak glanced back

and saw her wizened face staring after them.

‘That’s it then,’ he said to his two friends.

‘OMG! What have we let ourselves in for?’ Lizzie sighed. ‘I only ever wanted to play football.’

Rehan looked thoughtful. ‘I know...*but so did Tommy!*’ he said sadly.

Zak and Lizzie put their arms around Rehan’s shoulders...and the three of them walked home in stunned silence.



KRUSCHMEISTER

PART 2:

THE PRESENT



WIDOW WARNING

The day after their meeting with old Mrs Dawson, Zak, Rehan and Lizzie could hardly get to school quickly enough to meet up and discuss their plans. They met by the school gates ten minutes before the bell and stood in the drizzle under a slate-grey sky.

‘I know it’s the last place you probably want to go, but we’ve got to get back in the stadium. The place is drawing me...I can feel it!’ Zak said.

‘We can’t go back to the stadium tonight,’ Rehan said thoughtfully. ‘Our parents are going to get suspicious if we have too many practices.’

‘Mine wouldn’t!’ Lizzie shrugged. ‘They know how much I love football.’

Zak shivered, partly from the rain and partly from the thought of what might be waiting inside the old

football ground. ‘No! Rehan’s right! Your mum and dad might be cool with it, Lizzie, but mine would definitely be suspicious. They know I’m not really the sporting type and never will be.’

‘No! It seems you’re more of a ghost hunter!’ Rehan said, half smiling and half looking serious.

‘What about old Mrs Dawson?’ Lizzie asked, jumping up and down to keep warm.

‘When we do we see her again?’

‘I’ve been thinking about that, too,’ Zak replied. ‘How about we leave everything until the weekend?’

‘Suits me,’ Rehan replied. ‘We’ve got lots going on at the mosque nearly every night this week.’

Zak nodded. ‘OK. How about we call and see her before lunch on Saturday and maybe sneak into the stadium during the afternoon?’

‘Sure thing’, Rehan replied with a worried frown. ‘Just make sure it’s *early* afternoon – well before it starts to get dark!’

‘Sorry to spoil your plans, you guys,’ Lizzie frowned. ‘But I’m playing football on Saturday morning for Masbrough Juniors. But I can still make it in the afternoon.’

‘No problem!’ Zak said. ‘Rehan and me, we’ll go down to the railway sidings on Saturday morning and hopefully meet up with the old woman, and you can meet us later.

What time do you think?’

Lizzie looked thoughtful. ‘Match kicks off at ten... over by eleven...I could be down at Millerbrook by twelve.’

‘Perfect! Rehan – I’ll meet you on the corner of Millerbrook Lane at eleven. Lizzie – we’ll meet you at the

railway coach at twelve.’

‘GET IN HERE, YOU THREE!’ one of the teachers shouted across the yard.

‘YOU’LL CATCH YOUR DEATH!’

The three friends stared at each other with big eyes; the idea of ‘catching one’s death’ suddenly seemed a very real possibility!

They ran towards the school building, skipping over the puddles, each of them wondering what on earth might happen to them at the weekend.

*

After an uneventful day at school and a ‘normal’ evening doing homework and watching TV, Zak felt strangely relaxed as he climbed into bed. He lay back on his pillow with his hands behind his head and wondered why he felt so calm.

...And then it hit him.

The ghosts are in the stadium and I’m safe in my house. Old Mrs Dawson said that as long as she’s around the ghosts are trapped. I don’t even have to go back there if I don’t want to.

Zak sighed contentedly and turned over. It was good to have a choice in the matter...totally different from the Scabbajack events, when the ghosts had sought him out... *no matter what!*

He yawned, snuggled deeper into his pillow and began to fall into a nice sleep...

CRASH! TINKLE!

The ear-shattering sound of breaking glass!

Zak sat bolt upright, his heart racing.

What’s happened? It sounds like the bedroom window’s

come through.

He rubbed his eyes and looked across to the window. The curtains were flapping. He strained harder to make things out in the semi-darkness and thought he saw something round on the floor. Swinging his legs to the side of the bed, he reached over and switched on his bedside lamp. Now he could see what looked like a ball under the window, surrounded by broken glass.

What is it with bedroom windows and me?

He crept carefully over towards the round object and picked it up. It *was* a ball...some sort of football, but not like one Zak had ever handled before. It looked very old-fashioned. It was heavy, smelt of leather and had some sort of lacing on it.

OUCH!

He'd stood on a shard of glass. He examined the underside of his left foot. There was a trickle of blood from a small cut and it hurt. He made his way round to the other side of the bed, retrieved his slippers, and carefully returned to the window.

The curtains were still flapping. He flung them back and saw the gaping hole where the ball had smashed through.

Who could have thrown it? ...And why?

He leaned forward and peered down into the street. It was completely deserted. No sign of life anywhere. The cool night breeze rushed in through the hole in the glass and chilled his face.

'I'm here, Zak!'

Zak almost jumped out of his skin. The words sounded in his head...but he couldn't see anyone.

‘Look into the top of the window, where the glass isn’t broken.’

Zak did as instructed and stepped back in amazement at the sight of the old woman’s face staring back at him. It wasn’t too clear in the darkened glass and it shimmered slightly, but it was *her* all right...Mrs Dawson...the Widow Washerwoman!

Zak glanced down at the carpet; there was glass everywhere. Standing quite still, he looked back at the ghostly image. He saw the worried look on the old wrinkled face. ‘So what’s happening? Why can I see your face?’

‘I’ve passed on,’ the image replied.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that I’m not around any more. Not in the physical sense, anyway.’

Zak gulped.

‘And that’s why I felt I had to see you,’ the old lady went on: ‘...to warn you that now I’ve gone, the spirits are no longer bound within the stadium. Tommy is sure to seek you out.

But don’t ever be afraid of him. He’s only an angel needing help.’

Zak nodded. He thought back to Jack, the Scabbajack ghost boy. He had most likely been an angel needing help, too.

He stared back at the old lady’s face. ‘Why did you break the window?’

The Widow Washerwoman shook her head solemnly. ‘It wasn’t me, Zak. I’m guessing it was Tommy. I’m sure he didn’t mean to break the glass, but the boy’s desperate,

and I suspect he's already seeking your attention.'

'I'll help him if I can...be sure of it,' Zak reassured her.

'I *am* sure of it, Zak. I know you won't let me or him down. But you must also beware...'

Zak watched as the caring expression on the old face contorted into one of frightened sadness.

'You must beware the ghost of the big man, Zak. He is truly a demon and will do anything and everything to destroy you and anyone else who dares to interfere.'

Zak's mind went back to the big black 'bin-liner thing' in the stadium. A chill rattled down his spine. 'So...so... what should I do?'

'When Tommy finds you, he will tell you what needs to be done. And then it's up to you...and your two friends. Remember what I said before...strength in threes...stick together!'

'But what if they don't want to...'

Zak never finished his question. A terrific gust of wind almost blew the curtains off their runners and the image of the face disappeared.

The bedroom door sprang open. 'Who are you talking to, Zak?'

Zak swung round and saw his mother standing in the doorway in her dressing gown and slippers.

'...And why are you standing by the window with the curtains open? It's two o'clock in the morning for heaven's sake.'

Zak looked back at her with wide eyes. How was he going to explain what had just happened...the ball on the carpet...the broken window...the glass everywhere?

‘Well...it’s like this...’ he stammered.

‘You’d better tell me in the morning, Zak,’ his mother said firmly. ‘Get back into bed.’

You’ve probably had one of those over-imaginative dreams of yours.’

She put an arm around his shoulder and ushered him back into bed.

But the glass...the ball...why doesn’t she...?

She tucked him into bed and he watched with bated breath as she walked over to the window and closed the curtains. And that’s when he realised...the ball had gone and the broken glass had disappeared. As soon as his mother left the room and closed the door, Zak got out of bed, crept over to the window and peered through the curtains.

Sure enough, the window wasn’t broken any more.

He sat down heavily on the bed and sighed. He began to doubt himself. He wondered if the recent events surrounding the stadium were quite so sinister after all. *Were they really supernatural? Or was his mother right? His over-active imagination was simply getting the better of him! But what about Rehan and Lizzie? Did they have over-active imaginations, too? And what about old Mrs Dawson? Their meeting with her was real enough! And what about...?*

...And that’s when his left foot started to throb. He quickly kicked off his slipper and examined the underside of his left foot; there was the small cut with a fresh trickle of blood...not imaginary...but as *real* as the pain he could feel right now!





FOLLOW ME, FOLLOW

It was Friday morning and Zak had overslept. His mother had already roused him once, but he'd hardly slept a wink since the 'window incident' and had only dropped into a deep sleep just before it was time to get up.

'ZAK...YOU'RE GOING TO BE LATE FOR SCHOOL. GET A MOVE ON!'

It was his dad's voice...so much louder than Mum's! He dragged himself out of bed and headed straight to the bedroom window. He flung back the curtains...no holes or broken glass. The night-time events seemed like a distant dream already.

He got himself dressed, dashed down into the kitchen and nibbled a slice of toast that

Mum had already prepared for him.

'If you get a move on, you might just make it,' Mrs

Freeman said, with a frown on her face. 'It's not like you to be late. I suppose you didn't sleep well with those over-active dreams of yours.'

Zak nodded, but didn't speak...his mouth was stuffed with soggy toast. He sipped some tea to wash it down. 'See you after school, Mum,' he said, slipping into his coat and picking up his backpack. 'I'll be straight home.'

'No football practice then?' his father said, walking into the kitchen and glancing at his watch. 'You're not getting bored already are you?'

'No way!' Zak replied, heading for the back door. 'I'm meeting Rehan and Lizzie tomorrow and we're spending pretty much the whole day practising.'

Mr Freeman smiled, 'Would you believe it! Our Zak hooked on football!'

'Bye!' Zak said, heading quickly out of the door. A moment later he was running down Masbrough Terrace heading for school.

He's right! Who would believe it...me hooked on football! Zak thought to himself as he jogged on down the street. But if I told them the real reason I'm getting hooked on football, they'd never believe it in a million years!

He glanced at his watch – five minutes to the school bell. If he went a bit faster, he might just make it. He still regarded himself as the 'new boy' at the school and hated the idea of having his name in the 'late book'.

He glanced over his shoulder and butterflies suddenly fluttered in his stomach. He wondered if he was being followed.

The ghosts are out... Tommy's might be trying to find me!

He jogged on. A final burst of speed and he reached

the school gates just as the bell sounded.

Rehan and Lizzie were waiting for him...both looked very excited!

‘Come on...you’re late!’ Lizzie frowned.

‘And you’ve missed all the action!’ Rehan added.

Zak tried to catch his breath. That last burst had taken it out of him. ‘What action?’

As they walked towards the school building, Rehan and Lizzie took turns to tell Zak what had happened.

‘We were kicking a tennis ball around as usual, and we were four goals down,’ Rehan began.

‘I scored three of them,’ Lizzie said proudly. ‘But Rehan’s team was a man short,’ she added.

Rehan continued, ‘And then this guy appeared at the railings. His face was so white.

He had staring eyes and reminded me of a zombie.’

‘And you should have seen his clothes,’ Lizzie went on. ‘They were, like, old-fashioned: baggy trousers, short-sleeved jumper with holes everywhere and a grubby shirt.’

‘...without a collar!’ Rehan added.

The hairs on the back of Zak’s neck stood on end. ‘Did he say his name?’

‘No,’ Rehan replied. ‘Just wanted to know if he could join in with us. Said he was mad on football.’

‘But you didn’t invite him into the yard, did you?’ Zak gasped. ‘You know what the teachers would say about that?’

‘We didn’t have to,’ Lizzie went on. ‘The next thing anyone knew, he was in with us, playing for Rehan’s team. It was like he knew us all. He even shouted our names

when he passed the ball.'

Zak gulped again. 'Was he any good?'

Lizzie was walking just in front of Zak. She stopped dead in her tracks and turned to face him. She was one of the smallest Year 6s and Zak one of the tallest. She angled her head up towards his with her eyes wide. 'Absolutely brilliant!' she said with a sigh of admiration.

'Absolutely brilliant!'

'She's right,' Rehan nodded, pushing them both on towards the school entrance. 'He swung the match round in five minutes. He laid on two great goals and scored a hat-trick. We won 5-4.'

'So where is he?' Zak asked, glancing nervously around.

'Well that's the strangest thing of all,' Lizzie sighed. 'Just before the bell went, he wasn't there any more...at least not in the yard. We all stopped and looked around, and then someone spotted him...back at the railings...staring through with those big round eyes.'

'We shouted to him. Asked his name,' Rehan added. 'But he just walked away, headed off up the street and disappeared.'

'Well, I've got something to tell you two,' Zak said in a serious tone. 'But it'll have to wait until break.'

The three friends climbed the steps into the main school entrance, but Zak felt a sudden impulse to glance back over his shoulder.

...And there, across the playground, he saw the boy with the white face...standing

quite still...staring across at him through the school railings.

*

Zak spent most of the first two lessons gazing out of the classroom window, looking across the yard or across the sports fields in case a certain boy might be spying on him. But he saw nothing untoward and began to relax a little more. He looked forward to mid-morning break when he could fill Lizzie and Rehan in with the night-time events that had suddenly changed everything.

Just lesson three to get through, but unfortunately it was with the Geography teacher, Mr Little - the teacher with the 'small' name, but easily the biggest bore on the staff. The kids all joked that if Mr Little was a newsreader, he would easily make the world's biggest disaster sound boring!

'...And so the growth in population in New Guinea is easily explained by recent economic developments,' Mr Little droned on.

'This is going to be one *long* lesson,' Rehan whispered.

Zak nodded, but he sat up straight and tried to look interested. He didn't want to create a bad impression.

The class watched with bored expressions on their faces as the teacher made bullet points on the smart board.

'Don't watch *me* do all the work,' Mr Little said cheerily. 'Get your books out. Start a clean page and copy these points.'

A low collective groan issued from the class as they rifled through their bags for their

Geography notebooks. Zak followed suit. A moment later he was copying from the board and glancing frequently at the clock above the classroom door.

Five minutes before the end of what Zak decided

was the longest lesson in the history of schools since time began, Mr Little turned to face the class:

‘Once you’ve copied all the data into your books, you can pack away. Zak Freeman...I need your help. I’ll be waiting for you at Millerbrook. I’m standing in the middle of your school football pitch right now, staring at you through your classroom window.’

Zak’s heart almost stopped. A hush fell over the class and everyone gawped at Mr Little.

‘What are you all staring at?’ Mr Little asked, with a bewildered look on his face. ‘Like I said, pack away when you’re ready and you can go as soon as the bell sounds.’

Zak felt his face go bright red. Everyone seemed to be staring at *him* now. And then everyone was staring out of the classroom window.

Zak followed their gaze and his heart almost stopped again.

There in the distance, standing in the middle of the football pitch, was a figure. It was hard to make it out - more of a silhouette really - like a distant scarecrow, but with its arms by its sides. But by far the most alarming thing was that it was easy to see that the figure was focused on Mr Little’s classroom window and gazing in on them.

‘Sir! What did you mean when you said you needed Zak’s help and all that stuff about

Millerbrook and standing in the middle of the football field?’ a boy at the back shouted out.

The teacher continued to pack away and looked up at the boy in surprise. ‘I don’t know what you’re referring to or what you’re up to, George Henley, but whatever it is I suggest you concentrate on the job in hand.’

RINGGGGGGGGG...

The bell sounded and most of the class made a quick exit (as always from Mr Little's lessons), but Zak noticed the exodus wasn't quite as fast as usual. Most of the pupils were staring at Zak with bemused looks on their faces and whispering to each other. Some went over to the window and looked out...but the strange figure had already disappeared. One thing was for sure, though - Mr Little, for the first time ever, had said something *interesting!*

Zak, Rehan and Lizzie made straight for the playground and found a quiet corner to discuss and catch up on everything.

'So it's got to be Tommy!' Zak said, after telling his two friends everything that had happened.

'Which is why he's so good at football,' Lizzie suggested, brushing back her boyish blonde hair with both hands.

Rehan was half-watching a football game that had started up in the yard. He watched and spoke to Zak at the same time, 'He just wanted to get a message to you, like Mrs Dawson said he would.' He suddenly turned away from the game and looked at Zak with huge eyes.

'Do you really think she's dead?'

Zak nodded solemnly. 'Sure of it.'

'So...so...are we still on for tomorrow?' Lizzie asked, her voice slightly shaky. 'Shall we try to find him?'

Zak gulped. Hearing Lizzie's nervousness made him feel *really* uneasy. Lizzie hadn't showed the slightest fear of anything until now. He tried to sound calm. 'I'm still on, if you two are. But there's no point in me and Rehan meeting earlier at the railway coach now. I suggest we all

meet up on the corner of Millerbrook Lane at twelve.'

Zak watched as his two friends glanced at each other and then back to him. They nodded. 'That's it then,' he said. 'We're on! Strength in *threes*...like the old woman said.'

'Like the Three Musketeers!' Lizzie joked, trying to break the tension.

'If only we *were* Musketeers,' Rehan sighed. 'Much safer than being three ghost hunters!'





HEAD TO HEAD

That night the wind howled around Zak's house. It rattled the roof tiles and made a strange moaning sound as it funnelled down the old chimney.

It took Zak a long time to get to sleep. He tossed and turned restlessly and soon found himself dreaming about football. He was playing in a big match at the Millerbrook stadium, and it was packed with fans. Rehan and Lizzie were there, playing alongside him...*and the boy, too!* He was amazing, dribbling the ball past everyone and passing it with fantastic skill and accuracy. Zak sprinted up the pitch (much faster than he could in real life) and shouted to Tommy to pass the ball to him. Tommy looked up and kicked a long ball to land straight at Zak's feet.

Just one player stood between Zak and the goalkeeper now... the imposing figure of *The Kruschmeister!*

As Zak controlled the ball perfectly (again, much more expertly than he could in real life) and ran towards the big man, Tommy ran to his left and called for a return pass. 'To me! To me!'

Zak did just that and made a perfect pass back to him. But the big figure of The Kruschmeister had already veered towards Tommy and struck out with his boot. Zak heard a sickening crack from Tommy's leg as he screamed in pain and hit the floor in a crumpled heap.

The referee blew the whistle and stopped the game, but Tommy was finished. Zak felt his heart sink as the poor boy was carried off on a stretcher by the St John's Ambulance.

'YOU BIG BULLY!' Zak found himself roaring at Krusch. The referee told Zak to calm down and approached Krusch.

'IT WASN'T ME...IT WAS HIM!' Krusch snapped at the referee.

Zak and the referee looked to where the big man was pointing - to another player...*exactly the same as The Kruschmeister!*

'Naw...it was 'im that did it!' the other player said sharply, pointing to yet another member of the opposing team. Again Zak and the referee looked to where the player was pointing...*and saw another Kruschmeister.*

Lizzie and Rehan joined Zak and gazed around in awe at each of the opposing players...they were all identical to The Kruschmeister, even the goalkeeper.

'OMG!' Lizzie cried out. 'They'll kill us!'

The Kruschmeister started laughing - an evil deep-throated laugh. Another Kruschmeister joined in,

until the whole team of Kruschmeisters was roaring with laughter.

And then the stadium erupted into laughter and Zak looked into the packed stands and saw that all the spectators were Kruschmeisters, too!

‘NO...NO...NO! THIS CAN’T BE HAPPENING!’ Zak cried out helplessly. He put his hands to his ears as the volume of laughter increased. ‘PLEASE TELL ME THIS IS A NIGHTMARE...AND LET ME WAKE UP.’ He leaned forward and put his hands more tightly over his ears.

‘WATCH OUT!’ Lizzie screamed.

But it was too late. Danny the goat charged out of nowhere and struck Zak hard in his rear, projecting him high into the air. He felt himself whirling around in a somersault

...spinning...spinning...spinning...

CRASH! TINKLE!

Zak woke up with a jolt. He sat bolt upright in bed. It *had* been a nightmare! But the crash? His bedroom curtains flapped violently and drew his attention to the window.

Oh no...not again!

His eyes went to the carpet beneath the window, half-expecting to see a ball. Sure enough, something glowing and round and about the size of a football caught his eye. Though it glowed only faintly, it stood out in the semi-darkness like an orb-shaped light bulb.

Zak didn’t like the look of it and dived beneath his sheets. He peered anxiously over the top of his duvet and wondered what would happen next. As he lay there, his

heart racing, a gruff voice reached his ears.

‘I thought I’d pay you a visit, lad! See what I’m up against.’ The glowing orb floated up from the floor and hovered close to the ceiling at the end of Zak’s bed.

Zak could hardly believe his eyes. The glowing orb was actually a *head*...a grotesque human head...and he guessed at once who it belonged to. ‘You’re The Kruschmeister!’ he gasped.

The head sneered at him. ‘You could say that, lad. That’s what some folk liked to call me...just because I went in ‘ard. You ‘ad to go in ‘ard, see...football’s a man’s game!’

Zak continued to peer over his duvet at the frightening spectacle of Krusch’s hovering head. It was a big head with hollow cheeks and bulbous eyes. As it spoke, it twitched to one side, flicking back the greasy hair struggling to cover its balding crown.

‘What do you want?’ Zak demanded, trying his best to hide the fear welling up inside.

The head stared back at him, the mouth curling into a snarl. ‘What I want is to see the back of you. I knew you were coming one day. She said so...the silly old cow that used to wash the team strip.’

Zak took a deep breath and forced out the words. ‘So how do you plan to get rid of me?’

The head glowed more brightly, the brow became more furrowed, the eyes more intense. ‘If you’re as brave as they say you are, you’ll come down to the stadium and find out.’

‘I’ll be there,’ Zak said with as much confidence as he could muster. ‘I’m not scared of bullies like you.’ He remembered what the Widow Washerwoman had said

and repeated it.

‘It’s all about the need for fairness, see: harmony and balance in the world. And I’m going to get justice...for Tommy *and* Danny.’

A huge gust of wind roared in from the broken window, almost tearing the curtains from their runners. At the same time, the light fitting on the ceiling swung violently and the entire room began to shake. Zak watched in horror as Krusch’s hovering face turned into a seething cauldron of anger. The bulbous eyes almost sprang out of their sockets; tight lips curled back to show tightly clenched teeth...so tight that they began to crack and splinter. The horrific head cursed and spat onto the bottom of Zak’s bed. Zak was repulsed! He’d seen footballers spit onto the pitch many times, but never imagined that anyone would ever spit onto his bed.

The bedroom door opened, the light came on, the room filled with brightness, and in the same instant Krusch’s revolting head disappeared...*and all went back to normal!*

‘Not another dream!’ Zak’s mother sighed from the open doorway.

Zak hauled himself up onto his elbows and sighed. ‘Sort of!’ He glanced over to the window, knowing that the broken glass would be gone. He was right...no glass, no flapping curtains...all as it should be.

‘Sorry if I woke you, Mum,’ Zak said calmly. ‘But I’m OK now. Goodnight.’

He watched as she reached to switch off the bedroom light and hesitated. ‘Zak!

Whatever’s that nasty stain on the bottom of your

duvet?’

He watched as she approached the bottom of his bed and peered closer. ‘Ugh...looks like you’ve spilt something slimy and horrible.’

Zak felt an ice-cold chill down his spine. ‘No idea, Mum!’

He hated lying, especially to Mum, but how could he tell her that the horrible stain was spat straight from the mouth of a monster...from a monster that he and his friends were going to have to face in the very near future?





SCARY SATURDAY

Saturday had arrived! Zak decided to spend the morning trying to do 'normal' things...anything to keep his feet firmly on the ground. The Scabbajack events had given him valuable experience in dealing with the paranormal, and he now knew that 'keeping one's feet firmly on the ground' was essential in coping with spooky goings-on.

He decided to go to the supermarket with Mum - nothing could be more normal than that. But as soon as they got inside the Foodfare store, Zak saw a small boy in football kit being dragged around by a woman who was obviously his mum.

'Keep up!' the lady said to the boy. 'We need to get a move on or you'll be late for the kick-off.'

Zak sighed and moved away, helping his mum to put

together their shopping list.

When they got to the check-out, a man and a girl in football kit offered to do their packing. 'We're raising money for the Maltby Girls' Football Club,' the man said. 'This is my daughter...she plays striker.'

Zak's mum smiled and put a pound coin into the plastic bucket. Zak sighed again. It seemed that football was haunting him wherever he went!

After they'd done their shopping, Mrs Freeman suggested they have a coffee and a cake in the cafe just by the side of the supermarket. 'Great idea, Mum!' Zak said. 'I'm hungry.'

Zak picked out a table whilst his mum got the coffee and cakes. When she arrived at the table, she had a tray laden with 'goodies' and a newspaper from a rack on the wall. As Zak tucked into his cake and sipped his coffee he looked up and found himself staring at the headline on the back page of the newspaper his mum was reading.

DERBY MATCH TODAY AT BRAMALL LANE.
UNITED HOLDING OUT FOR A WIN!

I just can't get away from football, Zak sighed inwardly. It's haunting me and no mistake!

...And so the morning went on. Wherever Zak went or whatever he did, football seemed to crop up and stare him in the face. By the time 11.30 arrived, he was almost relieved to get on his way and meet up with Rehan and Lizzie on the corner of Millerbrook Lane.

*

When Zak got there, Rehan was waiting.

'Hi, Zak,' Rehan called out to him. 'Good timing...I've just got here.'

‘No sign of Lizzie yet?’ Zak said, glancing over his shoulder.

‘Nope! She shouldn’t be long.’

Zak glanced nervously down Millerbrook Lane - it looked dark and eerie, even in the daylight. He looked up. The sky was grey, with some darker clouds moving in from the distance. It looked like rain.

‘Hi, guys!’ Lizzie appeared from round the corner. ‘What gives?’

‘Nothing...*yet!*’ Zak replied.

‘How did your match go?’ Rehan asked her.

Lizzie beamed. ‘We won 3-0 - and guess who got the goals?’

‘You didn’t get all three?’ Zak gasped, guessing the answer to his question.

‘Yep!’ Lizzie said proudly. ‘All three -.a hat-trick.’

‘Brilliant!’ Rehan said.

‘You’re amazing!’ Zak agreed. ‘Just hope your luck holds out this afternoon.’

All three friends fell silent as Zak’s words brought them back to the reality of why they were here. He quickly told Rehan and Lizzie about his nocturnal visit, about Krusch’s ghostly head that had threatened him. When he told them about the disgusting thing Krusch had done to his duvet, Lizzie put her hands to her mouth and was almost physically sick.

Rehan said nothing; he put his hands deep in his pockets and set off down the lane.

Zak and Lizzie followed. No one spoke again until they reached the turning into the railway sidings.

Rehan was still at the front. He peered round the

corner. 'I can see a police car,' he called over his shoulder. 'It's parked by the old woman's railway carriage.'

'Well, don't let them see us,' Zak said. 'They'll think we're up to no good!'

'We *are* up to no good!' Lizzie sighed. 'I've got a bad feeling about this!' Zak edged past them and led them deeper into the railway sidings. They dodged between old wagons and coaches, continually staring ahead to try and see what was happening.

'The old railway coach...it's got police tape around it,' Zak said.

'Like a murder scene,' Rehan added dramatically.

A low growl sounded from behind them. 'What's all this then?'

The three friends jumped round to see a man in a dark uniform with a big wolf-like dog. Zak spotted the label on the man's breast pocket: SECURITY.

'We...we...weren't doing anything...,' Rehan began.

Lizzie looked at the man with her big blue eyes and nodded. 'He's right. We were just having a look round.'

The dog growled and the man pulled it back on its short leash. 'Well take my advice and find somewhere else to look round. There's nowt round 'ere for you kids.'

Zak approached the man and stood to attention with his arms by his sides. He looked straight up at him. 'What's happened to the old lady?'

The security man had a small moustache; it twitched as he glanced beyond Zak to the police car parked by the rail coach. 'You knew her?'

Zak nodded. 'She spoke to us once.'

The man looked back at him. 'Old Mrs Dawson. She'd

been around here forever. Though why she wanted to live in this god-forsaken place heaven only knows. She was a bit of a strange one. She used to chat to us sometimes... make us a cup of tea...that sort of thing. She reckoned she was waiting for someone...though she would never say who it was.'

Rehan and Lizzie stared at Zak.

'...Anyway, the old dear died. Peacefully in her sleep by all accounts. That's why the police are there. The ambulance took her away earlier.'

'She obviously liked being close to the old stadium,' Zak said, hoping the man might tell more.

'Folk say she used to work there. A laundry woman I think I heard someone say.'

The dog growled again. It appeared restless.

'HECTOR! SIT!' The dog did as the security man instructed and sat obediently, but it kept on glancing around as if agitated. He patted the dog's head and looked sternly from Zak to Rehan to Lizzie. 'Now listen to me. This place is no good. Don't come here again.'

Zak tried another ploy, 'Well, before we go, is there any chance you could show us inside the old stadium. We'd love to have a look around, wouldn't we, guys?'

Rehan and Lizzie nodded enthusiastically.

The man gave a nervous laugh. 'You must be joking. You wouldn't get me in there.

And as for him...' He looked down at the dog. It seemed to know what was being said. It jumped to its feet, turned towards the crumbling stadium wall and let out an unearthly howl.

'See what I mean! There's bad stuff inside those old

walls.'

Zak gulped. Rehan and Lizzie's faces took on frightened expressions.

'What sort of bad stuff?' Zak asked.

The security man glanced around and ushered the dog back into a seated position.

'Let's just say there's things in there that move that shouldn't be moving. And weird sounds...that sort of stuff. I was in the old players' tunnel once and I heard what sounded like someone crying...sobbing, like. The dog nearly pulled my arm off to get out of there. That was the last time I went in. I only ever patrol the outside now. My old mate, Tony, he does the inside. He's deaf as a post and his eyesight's not what it used to be, so it doesn't bother him too much. Mind you, he still doesn't like to hang about in there!'

'OMG! That sounds so scary!' Lizzie sighed.

'It is scary!' the man nodded. 'And the only reason I'm telling you kids all this stuff is so that you stay away. Best if you go and play in the park.'

'OK,' Zak said calmly. 'Thanks. We're going.'

The man nodded and walked off in the direction of the police car. The dog pulled to his left, keeping as far away from the stadium wall as possible.

'Wow! Don't like the sound of that,' Rehan said.

Lizzie looked back with her arms folded. 'Neither do I. But I've got a feeling you still want us to go in there. Am I right, Zak?'

Zak stood stiff to attention again, his arms firmly by his sides - there was no wonder some of the kids at school called him 'soldier boy', as they did at his last school.

‘You’re right, Lizzie. We’ve got to go in. Tommy needs our help and I’m definitely still up for it. If you two want out, then that’s fine.’

Before anyone could say anything, the police car started up. The security man had been chatting to the driver and, as the car moved slowly away, he was left alone with his dog.

He quickly disappeared around the far side of the railway sidings.

‘That’s it!’ Zak said. ‘The coast’s clear. I’m going in!’ He walked on towards the gap in the wall where they’d crept in before. Rehan and Lizzie ran up by his side. ‘We’re still with you,’ they said together. Zak felt his spirits rise. It was scary enough the *three* of them going in ... but he would have been terrified going in on his own! Then again, if trained security men and Alsatians were frightened of whatever was in there, *what real chance did they have?*





INTO THE VOID

Zak insisted on taking the torch from Lizzie and leading them through the gap in the stadium wall. As they entered the passageway, he shone the torch ahead, lighting up the dusty walls adorned with faded team photographs. Otherwise, there was nothing to see or hear.

The three friends moved on quickly, eager to reach the daylight from the players' tunnel. Zak stopped suddenly. Rehan and Lizzie crashed into each other directly behind.

'What's up?' Rehan whispered.

Zak put a finger to his lips. 'Sssh! I think I can hear something.'

The three of them crouched in the near total darkness, listening for whatever had caught Zak's attention.

'Yes! I can hear it,' Rehan whispered.

'Me, too,' Lizzie said. 'Something moving about up

ahead of us.’

‘Couldn’t be a rat, could it?’ Rehan suggested. ‘It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve come across one. This place is full of them.’

‘Ughhh! Don’t say that!’ Lizzie groaned. ‘Rats are my worst nightmare!’

Zak turned to Rehan and shook his head. ‘Whatever it is, it’s too big for a rat. Listen!’

They crouched in the darkness, straining to hear what was ahead of them. Distant footfalls reached their ears, but much louder now and definitely heading towards them.

Goosebumps spread through Zak’s body. His thoughts went to ghosts...of Tommy...the Widow Washerwoman maybe... *The Kruschmeister!*

The footfalls echoed distinctly around the passage, growing heavier by the second.

Zak braced himself and pointed the torch directly ahead into the darkness. Rehan and Lizzie stiffened behind him. They gawped in horror as two angry eyes appeared in the torch beam. Zak froze as the frightening image became clearer...a big white head with horns and a beard.

‘IT’S THE GOAT!’ Lizzie screamed.

The creature charged, its hooves rattling on the hard floor of the passageway. It snorted in anger, lowered its head and ran straight at them. Zak lurched backwards, dropped the torch and fell on top of Rehan and Lizzie. The three intrepid explorers finished up in a crumpled heap in the darkness. For the next few seconds, no one spoke as they tried to come to terms with what had just happened.

‘It must have been Danny’s ghost!’ Zak finally said in a shocked tone. ‘I can’t believe it.’

‘Where did it go?’ Rehan gasped. ‘I thought we’d had it!’

‘It vanished at the very last second,’ Zak replied. ‘Are you OK, Lizzie?’ he called back.

‘I...I think so,’ she spluttered. ‘Rehan fell on my leg. But I think I’m OK.’

‘Where’s the torch?’ Rehan asked. ‘It’s so black in here.’

Zak rooted around on the floor trying to feel for it. ‘It’s probably bust, otherwise it would still be lit and we’d see it.’

‘OMG! That’s all we need,’ Lizzie sighed from behind them. ‘We can’t see a thing and heaven only knows what might still be ahead of us.’

‘Hang on. Have you got your phones?’ Rehan asked. ‘Use the phone’s torch beam, if you know how.’

‘Haven’t got my phone with me,’ Lizzie sighed.

‘And my phone’s almost flat,’ Zak added.

‘Well mine isn’t,’ Rehan informed them. He rummaged in his pocket and a moment later a thin beam of light was shining into the darkness ahead of them.

‘Brilliant!’ Zak said, struggling to his feet. ‘Rehan – you take the lead. Lizzie – grab my arm. Let’s push on towards the players’ tunnel...and daylight.’

Rehan and Lizzie did as Zak instructed and a moment later the three of them were edging on down the passageway.

‘OUCH!’ Zak exclaimed, knocking his foot against some big lumps of rubble on the passage floor. ‘It’s still

hard to see. It's like the blind leading the blind.'

'Hang on!' Lizzie whispered from behind him. 'Can't you hear it?'

They all fell silent and strained their ears. A faint whistling sound resounded down the passageway:

'Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling...'

'I can hear it,' Zak said. 'Sounds like someone whistling a tune. Remember what the security man said...how he'd heard someone whistling and it had freaked his dog out.'

'Well now it's freaking me out!' Rehan whispered from Zak's side.

'It could be Tommy,' Zak suggested. 'We should head towards it.'

'Good idea!' Lizzie said. 'I'm all for getting out of here!'

'OK!' Zak said. 'Keep quiet. Stick together.'

They crept on, the whistling becoming louder and more distinct:

'Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling...'

'From glen to glen and down the mountainside...'

'Faint daylight ahead,' Zak said quietly. 'Can you see it?'

Rehan and Lizzie confirmed that they could. All three felt greatly relieved, but still apprehensive as the eerie whistling grew louder.

'It's got to be Tommy,' Zak said.

They edged on a little further, the natural light growing stronger with every step.

'Look! Doors!' Rehan said excitedly. 'We've reached the changing rooms.'

'And that one's open...and the whistling seems to be

coming from inside,' Lizzie informed them.

It was light enough now to see the crumbling doorway where Lizzie was pointing.

And just light enough to see the faded paintwork on the door:

HOME TEAM CHANGING

The whistling was definitely coming from inside...and then it stopped! A pathetic sobbing replaced it. The sound was so heart-wrenching it caused the three friends to back away.

'I...I...don't like it!' Lizzie stammered. 'Sounds like someone's suffering big-time in there.'

Zak said nothing. He took a deep breath, strode towards the open doorway and barged in.

*

It was quite dark in the changing room, the only light coming from the open doorway through which Zak had just entered. But it was easy to see the boy sitting on the wooden bench by the right-hand wall. He sat with his head in his hands, sobbing uncontrollably. His entire body glowed white in the semi-darkness.

'You must be Tommy!' Zak gasped.

The boy looked up and Zak saw his face close up for the first time. It reminded him so much of Scabbajack's ghostly face. The eyes were pitiful - so full of sorrow: the expression - frightened and vulnerable - that of someone who had suffered at the hands of another!

The boy stopped crying. 'You must be Zak. I've been waiting for you. The Widow Washerwoman said you would come here.'

Before Zak had a chance to reply, Rehan and Lizzie

crept up behind him.

‘That’s him!’ Lizzie whispered excitedly. ‘He’s an amazing footballer.’

‘Only he wasn’t glowing like a ghost when he played football with us,’ Rehan added.

The boy stood up and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. ‘Sorry about the crying. It’s what I do most of the time - except time is meaningless when you’re a ghost.’

‘So why do you cry?’ Zak asked.

‘For Danny. The big man killed him through spite... broke his neck! The memory haunts me just like I haunt Millerbrook. It makes me cry every time I think of it. And then it makes me angry!’

Zak watched in awe as Tommy’s eyes emptied of sorrow and filled with hate.

‘Krusch!’ Zak uttered.

Tommy nodded. ‘He’s trapped here with me and Danny, until things have been sorted out. And I think that’s why you’ve come here...to sort things.’

Zak took in Tommy’s retro appearance - a well-worn woollen jumper over a grey flannel shirt with no collar, long baggy trousers (again, well-worn) with big boots. And the haircut - short back and sides with thick black hair on top, slicked back with hair cream.

Pretty much back in fashion again, Zak thought to himself.

‘We’ve just seen Danny,’ Zak said. ‘He scared the wits out of us...charged straight towards us and then disappeared.’

Tommy nodded solemnly. ‘He’s looking for Krusch. He’d never hurt you. One day he’ll get revenge on the big

man.'

'Just tell us one thing,' Zak said, trying his best to sound calm. 'Krusch can't hurt you and Danny, because you're ghosts. But can he hurt us?'

Tommy's spectral figure sat down on the bench again. He stared up at them and his bottom lip trembled as he spoke. 'Krusch can hurt anyone. It's what he does best! He feeds off other people's grief and misery...like he feeds off mine...even now.'

Zak braced himself and asked the inevitable question, 'So where is he?'

'Waiting!' Tommy replied, with real sadness in his voice.

'Waiting for what?' Rehan asked, before Zak had the chance to ask the same question.

Tommy rose to his feet and Zak noted that, although the boy looked older than him, he looked a good six inches shorter. *'Waiting for you.'*

The three friends felt a surge of terror at Tommy's words. He took a step closer and continued. 'He knows you've come here to put things right and he'll be out to get you. So like I said, he'll be out there, waiting for you. You may as well go and face up to him...find out exactly what's what.' Tommy managed a faint ghostly smile. 'As the boss used to say before a match, "*there's everything to play for.*"'

'OK!' Lizzie said confidently. 'Count me in!'

'Yeah!' Rehan joined in. 'Let's get out there.'

'I'll come with you,' Tommy said. 'We need to stick together - all of us.'

So this is it! Zak thought to himself. *Time to face the real demon. Well...bring it on!*

Without another word, Zak stormed out of the changing room and led his brave friends towards the players' tunnel.





KRUSCH ENCOUNTER

Zak charged out from the players' tunnel into the empty stadium.

But was it empty!

His sixth sense told him immediately that they were being watched. Rehan, Lizzie and the ghostly Tommy came up behind him.

'He's definitely out there, isn't he?' Zak stated more than asked.

'You can bet your life on it,' Tommy replied. 'He likes to lurk around the Tivoli Stand, where the home crowd used to roar at him.'

Four sets of eyes scanned the terraces of the Tivoli Stand.

'I can't see anything,' Rehan said nervously.

'I can!' Lizzie exclaimed. 'There's a cat on top of that

wall, right up at the back of the stand.'

'You're right, Lizzie. You've got good eyes. But I suppose there's loads of cats around,' Zak suggested. 'Loads of rats for them to hunt.'

Tommy nodded. 'You're right. Though I should warn you, Krusch can turn into almost anything...though I think a rat would be more up his street.'

'Or maybe a big black bin-liner,' Zak muttered, thinking back to earlier events.

'Even so,' Lizzie went on, '...that cat looks pretty big and it's definitely staring at us.'

They all agreed as they looked back towards the distant feline. Suddenly, it curled up into a ball and dropped from the wall onto the top step of the terraces...and bounced.

'OMG! What's happening?' Lizzie gasped. 'It's turned into a ball.'

The four of them watched open-mouthed as the cat-turned-ball bounced down the steps of the stand, almost as if in slow motion. The ball finally reached the bottom of the stand, bounced over the low wall bordering the pitch and rolled out onto the grassy turf. It came to rest by the penalty spot.

'It's *him!*' Zak gasped. 'I've already seen Krusch do the ball thing...*in my bedroom!*'

Nobody even questioned what Zak meant - they were all too focused on the stationary ball.

'Well, there's only one thing to do with a ball,' Lizzie yelled excitedly. 'And I'm gonna do it!'

Before anyone could stop her, Lizzie charged out onto the pitch and sprinted towards the penalty area. She still had her trainers and tracksuit bottoms on from her football

match, and it wasn't difficult to guess her intentions.

'She's going to hammer that ball into the back of the net!' Rehan gasped. 'GO FOR IT, LIZ!' he yelled after her.

'Stop her!' Tommy screamed at Zak. 'She's no idea what she's dealing with!'

As Lizzie closed in on the ball she saw Krusch's fearsome features encased in it. In fact, it looked more like a grotesque head than a ball. She took a deep breath, clenched her teeth and put all her energy into booting the monstrosity into the net.

Zak watched in awe as her right foot struck it...*and she screamed!*

'The ball's stuck to her!' Rehan gasped.

Lizzie dropped to the ground, rolled on her back, desperately trying to shake the ball-thing from her foot. 'HELP ME!' she screamed. 'IT'S BITING ME!'

Zak realised to his horror that Lizzie's foot was gripped in Krusch's vile mouth.

'WE'VE GOT TO HELP HER!' Rehan shrieked.

Zak, Rehan and Tommy sprinted towards Lizzie, determined to rescue her. But as they approached, Krusch's ball-like head was already drawing itself up into a different shape...a huge black winged creature...a giant crow. And it held on to Lizzie's foot with its giant beak.

'I told you!' Tommy shrieked out. 'Krusch can morph into just about anything.'

They watched in horror as the huge bird shot up into the air, Lizzie screaming and dangling helplessly from its clamped beak. It soared high over the goal posts, up above the roof of the Tivoli Stand and hovered there.

‘IT’S GOING TO DROP ME!’ Lizzie screamed from her upside-down position.

Zak, Rehan and Tommy watched helplessly as it did exactly that. Lizzie screamed again as she plummeted downwards...and landed heavily in the tangle of decaying netting just behind the cross bar.

‘Thank God!’ Zak exclaimed. ‘The netting’s saved her.’

‘CAW...CAW...CAW!’ The giant crow soared higher and higher into the air and disappeared over the roof of the Tivoli Stand. Tommy stood there, frozen, like a statue, staring with spectral eyes up at the sky.

Zak and Rehan sprinted towards Lizzie to rescue her from the netting.

‘Are you OK?’ Zak called up to her as she struggled to free herself.

‘I’m fine,’ she called back. ‘Shaken...but fine!’ She climbed down and the three of them made their way over to Tommy standing by the penalty spot.

‘Any sign of him?’ Rehan asked, following Tommy’s gaze over the top of the stand.

‘Naw! But he’ll be back. He’s been waiting for this moment for a very long time.’

‘IN FACT...WE’VE BOTH BEEN WAITING, HAVEN’T WE, LAD!’ a voice boomed out from behind them.

The four of them wheeled round to see the imposing figure of the big football player, standing at the centre spot with one foot resting on the ball.

‘Krusch!’ Tommy gasped. ‘I said he’d be back.’

‘I’M WAITING!’ Krusch called out to them.

‘He wants to speak to *you*, Zak,’ Tommy said quietly.

‘I know,’ was all Zak said.

‘About what?’ Lizzie asked.

‘That’s for him to know and Zak to find out,’ Tommy replied. ‘It’s why you’re here, isn’t it...to find out what’s at stake?’

‘Don’t really understand any of this,’ Lizzie sighed. ‘You make it sound like it’s just some sort of normal challenge.’

Tommy stared back at Lizzie with real sadness in his eyes. ‘It is a challenge. But it’s far from normal. And Zak needs to talk to Krusch to find out exactly what the challenge is.’

Zak said nothing, but he knew Tommy was right. He looked back to the tall figure of

Krusch...still standing on the penalty spot and glowering in their direction.

‘ARE YOU COMING OVER HERE OR NOT? I’D LIKE TO SAY I’VE NOT GOT ALL DAY, BUT THE TRUTH IS...I HAVE! I CAN WAIT HERE FOR ALL ETERNITY IF NEED BE!’ He began to roar with laughter; it echoed around the stadium in sinister fashion.

‘Wish me luck,’ Zak said quietly to his friends. He took a deep breath and set off towards the centre spot.

*

As Zak approached, he took in the stature of Rotherstoke’s most infamous player.

He’d already been acquainted with Krusch’s frightening head, and here it was again, but this time where it should be, perched on top of Krusch’s six and half-foot muscular, broad-shouldered body.

‘Don’t be afraid, lad,’ Krusch said to Zak as he

approached. 'Not yet, anyway. We'll just have a little chat for now.' Krusch smiled, but it was a smile that didn't fool Zak; it was a sly and sinister smile that spoke of bad things to come.

Zak edged warily to within arm's reach of the big man. 'So start chatting!'

Krusch smirked and spat on the ground. 'You've got courage, lad. I'll give you that!'

Zak said nothing, but took in more of Krusch's appearance. His 1950s Rotherstoke Town kit was impressive. The short-sleeved shirt was red with white sleeves. The red colour was intense and blood-like. *Just right for a 'football warrior'* Zak thought to himself.

He also noted Krusch's big bulky arms, the right forearm carrying a tattoo of a skull and crossbones... *again appropriate for someone known as The Kruschmeister!* His eyes went to Krusch's lower half - big baggy shorts - definitely retro! Big legs and bony knees extending down to impressive, muscular calves...*and then the boots!*

Zak gasped at the sight of Krusch's boots.

'You're staring at my boots, lad,' Krusch laughed. 'Impressive aren't they? Spick and span - as they should be before a game. You can thank young Tommy for that. Hours he spends on these boots, he does. Loads of elbow grease and loads of smacks around the head - always gets the job done. Ha ha...'

Zak found himself staring at the sole of Krusch's boot as it rested on the ball. He saw the gleaming metal studs and suddenly realised the awful resemblance of the boot to a lethal weapon! No wonder strikers sometimes chose to back off from the infamous defender!

Krusch glowered across at Zak with his big arms folded across his broad chest. 'So you've come for justice, lad?'

'Seems so!' Zak replied, trying hard to sound confident. Inwardly, he was shaking like a leaf!

'She said you'd come...the sad old washerwoman. Seems she was right.'

Zak sensed Krusch's scorn for the old lady and it made him feel angry. 'I'm here to get

justice, one way or another, for Tommy, for his poor goat, for old Mrs Dawson. I don't know

how I'm going to get it, but me and my mates are ready to take you on, Krusch. We're not scared of you!'

Krusch roared with deep belly laughs. 'You should be! You haven't got a clue what you're up against.'

Zak swallowed hard. 'So b...b... bring it on!'

Krusch stooped down and picked up the ball. He spun it expertly on his right index finger. 'We'll settle our differences with a match...*what else?* Kick-off at three next Saturday.

Don't be late, son...or it'll be over before it's even started!'

Zak saw the threatening look in Krusch's bulbous eyes. 'Who's playing against who?'

Krusch roared with laughter again. 'I'd have thought that would be obvious to a bright lad like you. You and your pals against me and mine.'

'But there's only four of us,' Zak replied, 'That's if Tommy can play for us.'

Krusch's expression turned to a sneer, 'And there'll be four of us...bank on it!' He replaced the ball on the centre

spot, put his foot on it and folded his arms across his chest again. 'So there you have it, lad. Next Saturday, three o' clock, four against four. We'll play for 30 minutes...*to sudden death!*'

A chill rattled down Zak's spine. He knew what 'sudden death' usually meant in a match...the first team to score wins...but the words sounded much more sinister coming from Krusch's twisted mouth.

He took a deep breath, stood in his soldier-like stance with his arms rigid by his sides and blurted out his final question, 'What do you mean by 'sudden death' exactly? I mean...what happens to the winners and losers?'

Krusch frowned. His fake smile turned into a snarl. He took a big stride, reached down and clamped each of Zak's rigid arms in his giant hands. He hoisted Zak slowly off the ground until their faces were level and their noses were only centimetres apart. Zak felt Krusch's breath on his face...icy cold.

'Like I said, lad...sudden death! The winning team lives, the losers die! If you win...which, let us say, is VERY unlikely...you and your pals get to walk out of this stadium, and the 'prentice and his damned goat go to wherever they want to go.'

'And where would you go?' Zak asked bravely.

'Put it this way, son. You nor nobody else would ever be bothered by the likes of me again. And now...I suppose you want to know what happens if my team wins?'

Zak swallowed hard and nodded solemnly. His arms were hurting...Krusch's hands were like vices. One thing was for sure, ghost or no ghost, Krusch felt *very* real.

'If we win...then it's sudden death for you and your

pals. Your folks will never see you again...none of you. You'll be trapped inside this god-forsaken stadium forever...but at least you'll be able to practise your football...just like your pals have been doing these last few months. I've been watching them, see...I know just how good they are and all about their strengths and weaknesses. The girl's *very* good...she's got real talent. Pity she's so small...and I'm so big! Ha ha...'

Rehan's voice called out from somewhere behind. 'PUT HIM DOWN!'

'You'd better get back to you pathetic little friends,' Krusch snarled. 'See you next

Saturday...and remember...*don't be late!*'

Krusch vanished into thin air, dropping Zak heavily to the ground. He landed awkwardly and finished up on his bottom. 'OUCH!'

Rehan, Lizzie and Tommy ran over to join him.

'Well...what happened?' Lizzie asked first.

'What did he say?' Rehan joined in. 'And how did he just disappear like that?'

Tommy just stared with sad eyes and said nothing.

Zak gawped at them. 'Well...let's just say that next Saturday we've got a match to play and everything to play for.'

'Really?' Lizzie gasped. 'Tell us more.'

'It's starting to get dark,' Tommy interrupted. 'I think you should leave here and Zak can tell you on your way home. I've got to go and feed Danny.'

Zak looked at Tommy's sad expression. 'But...don't you want to know?'

'I know already. Everything he said came into my

mind. I know about the match, the rules...the sudden death...and the stakes!

Lizzie and Rehan fell very quiet.

Lizzie finally broke the tense silence. 'Tell me this is all just a stupid nightmare. None of this is happening is it...it's not for real?'

Rehan pinched his arm hard. 'OUCH! It's no nightmare. It's all for real...you can bet your life on it.'

Zak rubbed the sides of his bruised arms. 'Oh...it's for real all right. And as for 'betting your lives on it'...that's the problem...*we just have!*





BIG MATCH PREPARATIONS

‘So how was yesterday?’ Zak asked Rehan and Lizzie.

Lizzie answered first. ‘Pretty normal for a Sunday, really. Got up late, got my homework out of the way and went over to Gran’s in the afternoon. Didn’t sleep well, though.’

‘I couldn’t stop going over and over all that stuff that happened on Saturday.’

‘The school bell rang out for first lesson.’

‘Me, too!’ Rehan sighed as they moved on quickly down the busy corridor. ‘I didn’t sleep a wink.’ He yawned and rubbed his eyes. ‘I still can’t get my head around things.’

‘And it’s only Monday morning,’ Zak reminded them. ‘By the time it gets to next Saturday you really won’t believe what we’ve let ourselves in for. We need to keep

focused and get some plans in place.'

'So what are you saying?' Lizzie asked, as she pushed an older boy to one side about to bump into her.

Zak and Rehan smirked at one another...Lizzie was so tough!

'I'm saying we should meet up at my house after school on Friday. We'll discuss everything and make plans for the big match the following day.'

'Agreed!' Lizzie said.

Rehan nodded...though he looked distinctly nervous. 'Agreed!' he said, with wide eyes.

'Otherwise...let's just try and enjoy a normal week while we can,' Zak added.

'I'm all for that,' Rehan said. 'It might be the last *normal* week we ever have.'

Nobody could argue with that, so they headed into lesson one without another word on the subject.

*

The week passed slowly...*but normally*.

Zak had no more night-time visits - not that he expected any, and Rehan and Lizzie only ever mentioned football during Games lessons. In fact the three friends worked on some set moves and even enlisted the help of Mr Jones, the PE teacher. He was more than impressed by their enthusiasm and especially with Zak's progress. Though still slow on the ball, Zak was big for his age and strong. He was showing real improvement in kicking the ball hard and with accuracy.

'You kids are so keen,' Mr Jones said to them at the end of the Wednesday afternoon Games lesson. 'You practise like your lives depend on it!'

Zak, Rehan and Lizzie glanced at one another...but no one said a word!

*

Friday evening finally arrived and Rehan and Lizzie arrived at Zak's house in Masbrough Terrace. The three friends sat in the kitchen pretending to work together on a school project. Zak's parents gladly left them to it and retired to the sitting room to watch TV.

'OK...so let's make plans,' Lizzie said.

'Well, firstly, we can sit and make plans all night, but none of us really knows what sort of tricks Krusch is going to get up to,' Rehan said quietly. 'In fact...maybe making plans is just a waste of time.'

'Fat lot of help you are!' Lizzie snapped at him.

Zak looked thoughtful. 'No! Rehan's right! You can hardly make *normal* plans when you're dealing with *paranormal* goings-on.'

Rehan nodded, 'Exactly!'

'But Krusch's a footballer...or *was* a footballer...and he suggested a football match.

And if he and his team, whoever they are, play *normally* for some of the time, then we should at least have some normal plans.'

'That is good, sound common sense,' a different voice joined in. 'But it depends what you mean by *normal* football.'

The three friends swung round and almost fell out of their seats. It was the ghost boy, Tommy, standing in the corner of the kitchen by the fridge. His pallor matched the colour of the fridge...*pure white!*

'Wow...I'm so glad you're here,' Zak gasped. 'If anyone

knows how Krusch's brain works, it has to be you.'

'And that's *why* I'm here,' Tommy said almost in a whisper. 'I *do* know how his brain works...and it's *not* in a nice way. What you've got to do in that match is to keep yourselves and the ball as far away from him as possible. If you take the ball anywhere near him, he'll kick you into the middle of next week!'

'Nice!' Lizzie sighed.

'Like I said,' Tommy went on. '*Not* nice! He's not called *The Kruschmeister* for nothing.'

'But is he *fast*?' Rehan asked. 'Can we outrun him?'

'Yes, and that's your only chance. You're smaller and nippier than he is. He may be big and strong, but he's not known for his speed.'

'And what about his other three players?' Zak asked. 'Do you know who they happen to be?'

Tommy shook his head. 'No idea. As far as I know, Krusch didn't have a friend in the world. Everyone was scared stiff of him.'

Zak scratched his head. 'If only we can catch him off guard and score one quick goal. Then it'll all be over... done!'

Tommy drifted ghost-like over to the table. 'Let's have a quick team-talk. What are your strengths?'

Lizzie sat up straight and ran her fingers back through her hair. 'Rehan is a good all-round player,' she said. 'He's great on the ball, passes accurately and can move fast.'

'Any weaknesses?' Tommy asked.

Rehan answered, 'I'm not very strong at tackling or shooting. That's why I usually play midfield.'

'What about you, Zak?' Tommy asked.

Zak scratched his head. 'Well...I've only really got interested in football since I moved here a few months ago and met Lizzie and Rehan. I'm slow and a bit clumsy, but I'm getting better.'

'He's definitely getting better,' Lizzie agreed. 'He's a good tackler because he's big and strong.'

'And he can kick the ball hard and long. Well...most of the time,' Rehan added.

Zak felt awkward and nodded coyly. 'Lizzie's amazing,' he said, keen to move the subject onto someone else.

'So I've heard,' Tommy replied. 'A fast little all-rounder with real talent.'

'Hey! Not so *little!*' Lizzie quipped.

'How about you, Tommy? What are your strengths?' Zak asked.

'They said I would have made captain of Rotherstoke one day,' he answered sadly. 'Krusch knew it, too...and he was jealous. That's why he took it out on me. He made my life hell.'

Zak watched the ghostly tears well up in Tommy's ghostly eyes. 'Well...now's your chance to get your own back. We'll give him what for on Saturday. Make no mistake!'

Tommy forced a smile and nodded. 'Fighting talk! I like it!' Well, here's what I think we should do. The rule is that anyone can play in goal at anytime, so, Zak, you start off at the back and cover the goal. If you get the ball, kick it hard and long into midfield. Rehan, you stay midfield and try to get the ball to the strikers...me and Lizzie. If it's OK with everyone, I'll act as team captain and shout instructions...but we all need to talk to each other. As Mr

Cooper, the Rotherstoke manager, used to say, ‘A good team is a *talking* team!’”

‘Sounds like a good plan,’ Lizzie said.

‘But don’t forget,’ Tommy said in a serious tone, ‘Krusch will try every dirty tactic in the book and maybe a few that aren’t even in the book. We’ll need to be ready for anything...and I mean *anything!*’

With Tommy’s final words ringing in their ears, they called the pre-match meeting to a close. Tommy told them to meet him the next day by the old changing rooms at 2.30 pm and to tell no-one about what was taking place.

‘Even if we did tell anyone, they’d think we’d gone completely mad!’ Rehan said, forcing a smile.

No one laughed. Everyone fell silent. Rehan and Lizzie left by the back door. Tommy walked straight through the wall! Zak joined his parents in front of the TV.

‘Good homework session?’ his mum asked.

‘It was definitely interesting,’ Zak said mysteriously. *‘Definitely!’*

His mum and dad gave him a strange look and went back to watching TV.





MATCH DAY

As soon as Zak left the house he was aware of lots of bird noise. He looked up and saw a huge number of crows circling high above the roof tops. Some perched in long lines on the ridge tiles cawing loudly. It was as if they knew the 'special day' had arrived and were announcing it to all and sundry.

He moved on down Masbrough Terrace, his heart racing in expectation. He glanced at his watch - 1.50pm - still plenty of time. He'd arranged to meet Rehan and Lizzie on the corner of Gladys Street at 2.15pm

He passed a few shoppers and people out for a walk - mothers with babies in prams, a man heading into the betting shop with a rolled-up newspaper under his arm, two ladies chatting as they came out of the baker's. Everything seemed so normal! If only these people knew

where he was heading and what he and his friends were going to do at three o' clock!

Then again - as Rehan had said - even if they *did* know, they'd probably think they were all mad and cart them off to the nearest psychiatric hospital!

He looked up at the sky and gauged the weather - anything to keep his mind off the three o' clock kick-off! The sky was bright and blue, just a few fluffy white clouds scurrying across the sun and blotting it out now and then. However, a line of dark clouds stood out on the horizon. Zak wondered if they would close in.

'Hi, Zak!' a voice called to him from across the road. He looked up and saw one of his teachers. It was Mr Noble, the English teacher. He was with his wife and two young children.

'Hope you have a good weekend...and *don't* do anything I wouldn't do,' Mr Noble laughed.

'No, Sir! Thanks!' Zak called back. *It's a good job he doesn't know what I'm really going to do*, he thought to himself.

By the time he got to the corner of Gladys Street, Rehan and Lizzie were already there and waiting for him. Like him, they had backpacks on containing football kit and other bits and pieces ready for the big game. Zak had suggested they bring high-energy glucose drinks - they'd need all the energy they could get, and no-one had disagreed with that.

'That's it then!' Rehan said as Zak approached. 'Apart from Tommy, we're all here.'

Let's get a move on and get on with it. I still can't believe what's happening. Everything still seems so normal.'

Lizzie agreed, and Zak told them he'd felt exactly the same on his way to meet them.

He even told them about seeing Mr Noble and his family.

'Mind you!' Lizzie said. 'Earlier on, those crows were doing my head in!'

'She's right...very weird!' Rehan nodded. 'They were everywhere. Don't know where they've disappeared to.'

Zak had forgotten about the birds. He looked up again, but the darkening sky was empty. The roofs of the houses were also completely devoid of birds of any kind. Not a single crow to be seen anywhere.

The three friends moved on until they reached the corner of Millerbrook Lane. They glanced back for the last time at 'normality' and turned into the dark, eerie lane.

CAW...CAW...CAW

Zak's eyes almost popped out of his head. Down the lane, as far as the eye could see, the old stadium wall was capped with crows. They perched like sentries, shuffling restlessly as if waiting for Zak and his two friends to pass by.

'OMG!' Lizzie gasped. 'I don't like it!'

'They can't hurt us,' Zak said confidently. 'Just keep going and ignore them.'

'Zak's right!' Rehan added. 'They're only birds.'

They all agreed, but kept well over to their left as they headed on down the lane.

CAW...CAW...CAW

The din from so many crows was unbelievable. It was like the birds were cursing Zak and his two friends. They

put their hands over their ears and jogged on. When they reached the end of the lane, they looked back and saw that the crows had left the top of the wall and flown up into the sky. They circled high, and the sight of them made Zak feel uneasy.

‘Phew! Well at least we made it this far!’ Zak sighed. ‘Those birds give me the creeps.’

Rehan and Lizzie agreed.

They turned into the railway sidings and pushed on towards the gap in the wall. They noted the old woman’s railway coach, still with police-tape surrounding it.

‘It’s a pity she’s not there anymore,’ Zak whispered as they passed by.

They reached the gap in the wall and Zak led them through - he’d made sure his mobile was fully-charged and used its torch function to light the way. A short while later they were through the tunnel and standing outside the old changing rooms.

Everything was shrouded in gloomy silence. No sign of anyone, least of all Tommy – just fusty smells and grime and rubble everywhere.

Zak glanced at his watch: 2.35 pm.

‘There’s no one here,’ Rehan said, with a huge amount of relief in his voice.

‘He’s right!’ Lizzie added enthusiastically. ‘There’s no-one. Maybe we should just go home.’

Zak didn’t want to disagree. To leave this place and never come back and forget any of this had ever happened seemed like more than a good idea.

‘OMG!’ Lizzie gasped, breaking his train of thought. She pointed past Zak’s left shoulder towards the wall.

They all turned and saw the old boot-rack placed against the crumbling plaster...*with four pairs of gleaming boots on it!* One pair was loads bigger than the others. Zak guessed at once that those boots belonged to Krusch.

Before anyone had a chance to say anything, one of the changing room doors, marked

AWAY TEAM CHANGING, creaked open and Tommy's ghostly face stared at them from within.

'Come on. Get in here. There's not much time.'

Zak and his two friends fell silent. Once again normality had suddenly evaporated.

It seemed the match *was* going ahead after all!

*

Tommy handed each of them a yellow vest. 'Here...get your kit on. Lizzie, there's a cubicle over there for you to use - and put one of these vests on.'

'Why yellow?' Rehan asked.

'Away colours,' Tommy replied. 'We're classed as the away team. Krusch's idea.'

'Guessed it might be something to do with *him!*' Lizzie moaned.

Tommy nodded gravely. 'Not worth arguing. Best just to get on with it.' He rubbed his head as he spoke.

Zak spotted the red mark standing out from his ghostly white skin. 'How did you get that?'

Tommy looked back at Zak with frightened eyes. 'Said his boots weren't clean enough and fetched me one with the back of his hand.'

Zak felt the anger well up inside. He couldn't help clenching his fists as he spoke. 'I've just seen his boots. They're gleaming...like new!'

‘I know,’ Tommy sighed. ‘They were like that before he smacked me.’

Lizzie appeared from her cubicle, dressed for action. ‘OK, guys. Ready when you are.’

She looked towards the changing room door. ‘What’s all that noise out there?’

They all listened. Sure enough, loud voices sounded from outside - a sort of general hubbub. There was also some more general noise from the distance, but difficult to make out.

‘Tensions building and crowds getting restless,’ Tommy said mysteriously.

Zak, Rehan and Lizzie looked at one another with puzzled expressions.

‘What crowd?’ Zak asked.

Tommy didn’t answer. He’d just finished getting himself ready. It was easy to see he was behaving differently. They watched in silence as he went to an old locker, opened it and took out an immaculately-clean, big old-fashioned football. He turned to face them and smiled, spinning the ball on his index finger as Krusch had done.

‘OK...you guys ready? We need to get out there!’

Zak glanced at his watch: 2.53pm. He glanced back at Tommy’s face...and saw straight through his forced smile. For the first time he saw real terror in the ghost boy’s eyes.

The enormity of what was about to happen suddenly registered and sent a chill like no other down Zak’s spine. He looked away from Tommy to Rehan and Lizzie. Like him, they, too, seemed gripped by fear.

‘OK. Let’s go for it!’ Zak said, as bravely as he could. He made for the door, pulled it open and jumped back as the sound of a huge crowd filled his ears.





KICK OFF

Outside in the corridor, the first thing Zak noticed was that four pairs of boots had disappeared from the boot-rack. But more incredibly, the whole place looked tidy - no more piles of rubble, grime or fusty smells. All seemed clean, with a fresh antiseptic smell about the place.

A few men brushed past with their heads down so that Zak couldn't see their faces.

'Who are they?'

'Officials,' Tommy answered. 'They won't bother us.'

Zak's mind began to whirl. He felt sure Rehan and Lizzie felt the same.

'Is it OK if I carry the ball out, ' Tommy asked, '...as I'm acting captain?'

Nobody objected. They followed him into the player's tunnel. Daylight and a loud roar burst in on them. 'OK.

Here we go. God bless us all!’ He broke into a gentle jog, Zak directly behind, Lizzie behind him and Rehan taking up the rear.

As they ran out of the tunnel the stadium erupted. A deafening roar filled their ears. Zak stopped dumbstruck in his tracks. The stands were filled with thousands and thousands of people.

‘But...but...*how*...’ he stammered.

Lizzie and Rehan stood beside him, staring around with stunned looks on their faces.

‘COME ON!’ Tommy shouted to them. ‘WE NEED TO PASS THE BALL AROUND...LOOSEN UP.’

‘Zak...the crowd...they look so spooky,’ Rehan stuttered, looking towards the spectators closest to them.

Zak and Lizzie followed his gaze. Rehan was right. The crowd was made up of all manner of men, women, boys and girls, all shapes and sizes...*but all with deathly grey faces and staring zombie-like eyes.*

‘They look so scary!’ Lizzie gasped.

‘They are the fans of yesteryear,’ Tommy said to them. ‘They’re here to support justice.

They’re on our side...all of them!’

The crowd roared again, and that, coupled with Tommy’s words, made the three friends suddenly feel more reassured.

‘Come on! Let’s do what we came here to do and play football,’ Lizzie said firmly.

Tommy nodded and passed her the ball. She took it perfectly, flipped it up onto her head and headed it to Rehan. Rehan controlled it beautifully and passed it to

Zak.

A moment later, the four of them were kicking the ball around freely, feeling a little more relaxed. They could just as easily have been knocking the ball around in the school playground. The crowd cheered them on.

‘GOOD LUCK, YOUNG TOMMY!’ someone shouted really loudly.

Zak glanced at his watch: 2.55pm.

CAW...CAW...CAW

The crowd fell silent. All heads angled upwards, including Zak’s. The crows were back, lining the entire edge of the Tivoli Stand roof. In the same instant, the grey-faced crowd turned back towards the Players’ Entrance.

And there was Krusch...charging out with a ball tucked beneath his arm. He was followed by three other players, all easily over six feet tall and, like Krusch, in immaculate Rotherstoke Town kit.

But, unlike Krusch, they were skeletons!

The nightmare was back and Zak instinctively pinched his arm. ‘OUCH!’ They were still there. *No nightmare!*

The crowd erupted again, but this time in a chorus of BOOS and HISSES. It seemed Tommy was right; the crowd, at least, were on Zak’s side.

As Krusch and his skeleton team passed the ball around, a referee and two linesmen appeared from the tunnel; they jogged out to the centre spot. Like the crowd, they were grey and of a deathly pallor.

‘Well at least we’ve got some officials to keep the rules’ Zak said to Tommy.

Tommy shook his head. ‘There’ll be no fair refereeing

from them. They're only here to make the numbers up and make it look a bit more official. All three of them were struck off.'

'Why?' Zak asked.

'Let's just say they took money to bend the rules.'

'Blimey!' Zak gasped. The odds seemed to be stacking up against them again!

The referee gave a loud blast on his whistle.

'I'm going to the centre spot to find out who's got the kick-off and which way we're facing. You can come with me if you like,' Tommy said.

Zak sensed that Tommy *wanted* them to go with him. Who wouldn't with Krusch waiting out there?

The four of them jogged to the centre spot. Krusch jogged from the opposite end to join them. 'Glad you could make it,' he sneered.

The referee took a coin from his pocket and flipped it.

'Heads,' Tommy shouted first.

'It's tails,' Krusch snarled. 'We'll kick off. Which way do you want to face?'

'Towards the Tivoli End,' Tommy said.

'Suits me!' Krusch snapped. 'Let's get on with it.'

'Just one thing!' Zak chipped in. 'Who are those other three players? How do we know they're entitled to play for you?'

Krusch put his hands on his hips and roared with laughter. 'Oh, they're entitled all right. They're all ex-Rotherstoke players. Jed Armstrong was banned in '52 for breaking a goalkeeper's arm. Dave Kyle was banned in '53 for attacking a spectator...and Lewis Brickman... well you don't want to know. Let's just say the ref gave a

decision against him that made him lose his temper.'

'I know what happened,' Tommy said quietly. 'He broke the referee's neck. He went straight to prison.'

Krusch roared with laughter again. 'Oh yeah...that's about it. He broke the referee's neck and went to prison... and I broke your stupid goat's neck and got away with it.'

'Only you haven't got away with it,' Zak said angrily. 'Not yet anyway.'

'Oh yeah,' Krusch sneered again. 'I keep forgetting. That's why you're here. Well, let's get on with it. My 'skeleton team' are getting a bit rattled. HA HA!'

'OK!' Tommy said, turning to face his team. 'Let's get into position and give it all we've got. We can't do any more.'

The teams of four swapped ends, with Zak, Rehan and Lizzie giving the hideous Krusch and his skeletons as wide a berth as possible.

Zak took his position back on the goal line and glanced one last time at his watch. 3.00pm.

Krusch looked horrified as the referee blew loudly on the whistle:

PHEEP!

The skeleton by Krusch's side passed him the ball, and the big man roared at the top of his voice, 'OK, LADS. LET'S TRAMPLE THESE KIDS INTO THE GROUND!'





THE NOT-SO BEAUTIFUL GAME

Zak may have been the least able of the eight players on the pitch, but he was definitely the most perceptive. He sensed immediately that Krusch's plan was to hurtle down the pitch, flatten anyone who got in his way and hammer the ball into the net. *Game over!*

But Krusch had never played against anyone like Lizzie before. She was small, fast and incredibly light on her feet. She burst forward, whipped the ball away from his big feet and hared off up the pitch towards the two defending skeletons.

The big man spat on the ground and cursed. 'STOP HER,' he screamed back at his defenders.

Lizzie sprinted towards the first defender, Tommy keeping abreast of her on her right.

'HERE, LIZZIE...TO ME!'

As she reached the first skeleton she passed the ball perfectly to Tommy. But as he collected it, the second skeleton was on him. As he tried to get round it, it crashed in with a lethal sliding tackle, taking Tommy's legs from beneath him and crunching him into the ground.

'FOUL, REF!' Lizzie yelled at the top of her voice. But the nearby ref just grinned and ran away down the pitch as if nothing had happened. The attacking skeleton seemed to lose a bone from its foot and it ran on with a slight limp, but still controlling the ball beautifully.

...Until it came face to face with Rehan!

'TRAMPLE HIM!' Krusch's voice boomed across the pitch.

But like Lizzie, Rehan was fast. He decided to give the skeleton as good as it had just given Tommy. He slid in hard and low and took the surprised skeleton's legs from under it.

Bones rattled around him as he jumped back to his feet and claimed the ball. He looked up. Lizzie was still marked by the midfield skeleton, but Tommy stood unmarked with a clear run at goal.

'YES! YES!' Tommy screamed at him.

Rehan lined up the pass...*as a bony hand grabbed his ankle.* 'REF! REF!' he yelled helplessly, but the ref was miles away, unsighted and uninterested. The linesmen seemed to have disappeared altogether!

The stadium erupted in BOOS and HISSES, enraged at Krusch's team's dirty tactics.

The collapsed skeleton let go of Rehan's ankle, jumped to its feet and pushed him brutally to the ground. It tore off with the ball, Krusch on its right and only Zak standing

between them and the goal.

‘DROP BACK, ZAK!’ Tommy yelled down the pitch. ‘WE’RE ON OUR WAY!’

Zak froze. He’d hardly moved off the goal line since the kick-off, and now Krusch was bearing down on him with one of his skeleton team hurtling down the wing to Zak’s right. Tommy was sprinting back to help, Rehan was still shaken from his rough treatment, and Lizzie was doing what any good striker would do and waiting to see if anyone could get the ball up the pitch to her.

‘PASS! PASS!’ Krusch roared at his skeletal team mate.

The skeleton threaded the ball beautifully across to the big man.

Zak backed towards the goal line and stared ahead in terror as Krusch bore down on him like a charging bull.

‘OK, LADDIE. LET’S SEE WHAT YOU’RE MADE OF!’

As Tommy sprinted back in desperation to help, he screamed his instructions. ‘RUN OUT, ZAK. IT’S YOUR ONLY CHANCE. NARROW THE ANGLE.’

Zak gazed at Krusch’s charging figure again. This was it: the moment he’d always dreaded. *Himself against The Kruschmeister!*

*

Zak knew his only chance was to do what Krusch least expected him to do...to run out and throw himself at the big man’s feet! No way would Krusch think him foolish enough to do that! And so with Tommy still screaming at him, he did exactly that. He ran straight at Krusch and threw himself at his feet, grabbing for the ball in true goalkeeper-fashion at the same time.

Krusch cursed and lashed out with his right foot, kicking Zak hard on his right thigh.

Zak screamed in pain as the big man's lethal metal studs tore into his flesh. But at least he had plenty of meat on his bones, as his dad often said, and right now that meat cushioned the blow and put paid to any broken bones.

Ignoring the pain, Zak gathered the ball, jumped to his feet and hurled it out towards Tommy, who was now well within throwing distance.

'BRILLIANT, ZAK! WELL DONE!' Tommy called back to him; he turned and set off up the pitch again, Rehan fully recovered on his right, and Lizzie waiting well up ahead.

The crowd cheered like never before.

'TOMMY! TOMMY!' they yelled.

'BRING THEM DOWN!' Krusch roared at his defenders.

Tommy made a long high pass that landed accurately at Lizzie's feet. She brought it down under perfect control and set off towards Krusch's goalmouth. Just one skeleton stood between her and the empty net, and the bony defender was well off the line. She looked up, gauged the distance and lobbed the ball high over the defender's scowling skeleton face towards the goal. The lob caught the skeleton completely off guard. It could only turn and watch helplessly as Lizzie's shot dropped into the goalmouth, rolled onwards towards the goal line...*and struck the upright!*

The crowd groaned, Lizzie groaned, Tommy, Rehan and Zak groaned. Lizzie had got within a whisker of

scoring the 'sudden death' goal! It seemed luck was on Krusch's side!

The skeletal defender gathered the ball and set off back towards Lizzie. She ran up to make a tackle, but the skeleton crashed straight into her, knocking her ruthlessly to the ground. Nobody bothered appealing to the referee for a foul. The skeleton continued its run, and the grey crowd fell silent again as Krusch's team rallied for another attack.

Meanwhile, Zak was now back on the goal line, trying to ignore the searing pain in his right thigh.

Krusch lingered in the penalty area waiting for a cross. 'TO ME! TO ME!' he roared.

The skeleton with the ball stopped abruptly, rested a bony foot casually on the ball and gauged Krusch's position and distance.

CRUNCH!

Nobody saw Lizzie coming, least of all, the unsuspecting skeleton! She slammed both feet into the back of its legs sending it sprawling to the floor. 'Two can play at your game,' she shrieked. In the same instant, she kicked the skeleton's head with her strong right foot, detaching the skull and projecting it high into the air. It landed almost at Rehan's feet. Still positioned in mid-field, Rehan controlled the skull beautifully, turned and made a long pass to Tommy.

'Great football, you guys!' Tommy shrieked out. 'But it's time we concentrated on the real ball.' And saying this, he jumped high into the air and came down with all his weight on the skull, smashing it into a thousand pieces.

The crowd roared and cheered.

‘BRILLIANT!’ Zak roared up the pitch. ‘THEY’RE A MAN DOWN!’

Lizzie had already seized on the situation, grabbed the proper ball and was haring back towards the goal with the intention of firing the winner into the net.

Krusch spat and cursed, jumping up and down and waving his arms in anger. ‘SO YOU WANT TO PLAY DIRTY!’ He ranted and raved some more and began shouting strange words that neither Zak nor anyone else understood. Lizzie hurtled towards the open goal, the two other skeletons sprinting desperately after her...but too far down the pitch to catch her.

‘SHOOT, LIZZIE! SHOOT!’ Zak and his team mates shouted together.

But as Krusch’s strange words echoed around the stadium, and Lizzie ran on towards goal, the ground began to shake and tremble.

‘WHAT’S HAPPENING?’ she screamed, struggling to stay on her feet.

‘YOUR WORST NIGHTMARE...THAT’S WHAT’S HAPPENING!’ Krusch bellowed up the pitch.

‘RATS!’ she screamed back at him.

The ground trembled more violently. Several huge rats appeared from behind the goalposts. More rats followed...until a growing army of rats charged towards her.

Zak watched in horror as Tommy’s earlier words echoed in his head:

‘Krusch will try every dirty tactic in the book and maybe a few that aren’t even in the book. We’ll need to be ready for anything...and I mean *anything!*’





END-TO-END STUFF

Lizzie lost her footing and fell onto her back. At the same time the sea of rats flowed towards her, washed over her...and carried the ball down towards the Railway End where Krusch was waiting.

‘RATS!’ she screamed again. ‘UGHHH!’

Zak watched in horror as the vermin tide flowed towards him. The stench was unbearable - the stink of sewers, drains, slime and other forms of foulness that the rats had brought with them. He looked around helplessly, not having a clue what to do.

Krusch stood with his hands on his hips and bellowed with laughter as the ball bobbed and weaved on the grey sea of whiskery rodents and was carried towards him. He seemed totally unaware of the crowd’s disapproval of his dirty tactics, oblivious to the BOOS and HISSES ringing

out across the stadium.

Heaven help us! Zak thought to himself. *We're finished!*

'DIRTY PLAY!' a familiar voice called out from somewhere nearby. It was the shrill voice of a woman and was still audible above the general hubbub.

Zak whipped round and saw the woman in black standing on the edge of the pitch.

Krusch saw her, too. 'CLEAR OFF, YOU OLD SOW!' he roared at her.

But old Mrs Dawson stood her ground and shouted back:

'CROWS THAT GATHER
CROWS THAT THRONG
CAN PUT TO RIGHT
A DREADFUL WRONG!'

And saying this she pointed up at the hundreds of crows still lining the roof of the Tivoli Stand.

CAW...CAW...CAW

The entire stadium fell silent as, one by one, the army of crows launched itself into the air and began circling the pitch below. The swirling black mass began to attack. One after the other the crows swooped down like bombarding Spitfire planes, attacking the rats, pecking frantically at the rodents' heads and ears.

Zak and the other players, Krusch included, watched in awe as the sea of rats broke into confusion, screaming and squeaking and fleeing the open pitch for the nearest escape hole. Within minutes, the rats had gone almost as quickly as they'd appeared, the ball coming to rest not more than a few metres from Rehan's feet.

'THAT ABOUT BALANCES THINGS UP!' the

Widow Washerwoman called to Krusch. She turned towards Zak and smiled, waving a playing card high above her head.

Zak knew exactly which card she was waving: The *High Priestess*. Her ghost was here to see that fair play was enforced - or at least that Krusch couldn't draw too much on his supernatural powers!

'NOW GET ON WITH SOME FOOTBALL!' she yelled at the big man.

Rehan took control of the ball as the two remaining skeleton players sprinted towards him.

'GO FOR IT!' Zak shouted to his friend. 'GET THE BALL BACK TO LIZZIE.'

But surprisingly, Rehan never moved. He stood still, with one foot resting on the ball.

'HE'S FLIPPED!' Krusch roared. 'HA, HA!'

Still Rehan refused to move as the two six-foot skeletons homed in on him, one from his left and one from his right. Zak covered his eyes and peered through his fingers as Rehan stood his ground. But at the last second, Rehan jumped back and pulled the ball smartly back with his foot.

CRASH!

The two skeletons smacked into each other, falling to the ground in a tangled heap of fractured bones.

'BRILLIANT!' Lizzie and Tommy shouted together.

'PASS...TO ME!' Tommy shouted. 'LET'S GET THAT GOAL!'

The crowd cheered Rehan like never before. 'REHAN...REHAN...REHAN!' they roared.

Rehan gauged a perfect pass to Tommy and watched as

their team captain sprinted forward and readied himself to hoof the ball into the empty net...only to see the imposing figure of Krusch standing on the penalty spot.

But how had he got there so quickly?

'HE'S UP TO HIS TRICKS AGAIN!' Zak called up the pitch. He looked at his watch.

Just two minutes left. 'HANG ON, TOMMY! I'M ON MY WAY!'

Krusch stood on the penalty spot with his feet apart and his fists clenched, like a huge gorilla. The look on his face was one of pure hatred.

Tommy controlled the ball and raced on towards him, Lizzie and Rehan sprinting behind and trying to catch him up.

The stadium erupted again in anticipation of the winning goal.

Tommy stopped a few metres from Krusch. Lizzie stood to his left, Rehan to his right.

Zak puffed and panted up behind them.

'Try to get past me and I'll break every bone in your body!' Krusch bellowed at them.

'I'm not called The Kruschmeister for nothing!'

Tommy laughed. 'You don't scare me any more, Big Man. You and your team of freaks have been beaten...*by four kids!*'

'Not beaten yet, Tommy lad. You haven't scored,' Krusch called back.

Tommy gauged the shot and hit it high above Krusch's head...on course to dip below the crossbar into the roof of the net. The crowd roared...but Krusch jumped an 'impossible' six feet into the air and headed the ball

straight back to Tommy's feet.

'Ha, ha! You'll have to do better than that, lad.'

'You're cheating again!' Zak bellowed at him. He turned and looked over to the old washerwoman. But she only shook her head in despair. It seemed there was nothing else she could do.

'All's fair in love and war, as they say, lad!' Krusch sneered.

Zak glanced at his watch again...one minute left. 'WE NEED TO SCORE NOW!'

'OK. You know what to do. It's four against one. Just run at him and we'll pass the ball round him,' Tommy instructed.

Krusch roared like a lion as Tommy ran straight towards him. The big man lunged out with a boot, but Tommy kept well clear and passed the ball to Lizzie moving out on his left.

Krusch made straight for her, but she'd already given it to Rehan further to the left.

Krusch dropped back and tried to block Rehan, but Rehan fired in a beautiful cross over the big man's surprised head, to land the ball back in the goalmouth straight at Zak's feet.

It was a simple job for Zak to slot the ball into the empty net...but he slipped and miskicked it...so that it trickled ever so slowly towards the goal...and stopped dead on the goal line!

The stadium fell to a hush as Krusch sprinted to the line and picked up the ball.

'GOALKEEPER'S BALL,' he yelled triumphantly. 'IT'S ALL OVER, GUYS!'

Zak looked helplessly towards Rehan and Lizzie. They stared helplessly back.

The silence around the stadium was so intense you could hear a pin drop.

Tommy sauntered up by Zak's side. 'It is over, Zak. I guess you couldn't help after all.

But thanks for trying.'

Zak stared hard into Tommy's eyes. He saw the sadness, but more clearly he saw the fear. He looked over to the Widow Washerwoman and remembered her words:

'Justice! It's a sure sign you're the chosen one, Zak. You've got some sort of special gift.'

'YOU DON'T NEED ME ANY MORE, ZAK,' she called across to him. 'YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO!'

At first, Zak was confused...and then it dawned on him. 'We need to sing!' he said suddenly.

'Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling...'

Tommy stared back at Zak as if he was crazy. But he joined in.

'From glen to glen...and down the mountainside...'

Zak waved his arms as if he was conducting an orchestra...first at Rehan and Lizzie, and then at the sea of grey faces in the crowd. In a matter of seconds, the entire stadium had joined in the rousing chorus:

*'Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling
From glen to glen...and down the mountainside
The summer's gone...and all the flowers are dying...'*

Krusch stood dumbfounded on the goal line, still clutching the ball.

'HE'S HERE!' Zak yelled at the top of his voice.

Every pair of eyes in the stadium went towards where

Zak was staring...towards the players' tunnel...and there he was...*Danny!*

The phantom goat lowered its head, snorted angrily, and readied to charge!





JUSTICE

Zak glanced at his watch. Just seconds of the match left. The stadium had grown very dark. The distant bank of black clouds that Zak had spotted earlier in the day had moved in.

He glanced back at Krusch. He looked supremely confident...seemingly revelling in the increasing darkness – of the sky and Zak's situation.

Until he saw the goat!

Zak couldn't believe how angry Krusch appeared on seeing Danny. 'DON'T LET THAT BEAST NEAR ME!' he yelled at Tommy. 'OR I'LL BREAK ITS NECK AGAIN.'

The goat reacted to Krusch's voice aggressively. It stamped on the ground - and charged.

The entire stadium watched in awe as Danny gathered

pace, charged across the pitch into the goalmouth and butted Krusch square on. The big man stood his ground, still clutching the ball, but the goat's strength and momentum were too much for him. Danny charged The Kruschmeister, ball and all, straight into the back of the net.

The crowd roared like never before, 'GOAL!'

The referee appeared from nowhere, gave a loud blast on his whistle and pointed to the centre spot.

Zak's Team 1 - Krusch's Team 0

Immediately the referee looked at his watch and gave another blast on his whistle.

PHEEP!

The match was over!

As Krusch rolled on the ground, cursing and trying to get to his feet, Zak, Rehan and Lizzie jumped up and down in glee, cheering and hugging each other. The match was over.

They had won 1-0. They turned to Tommy...*but where was he?*

The stadium fell silent again. Zak whirled round, looking into the deserted stands - the grey army of fans had disappeared!

BUZZ.

One of the powerful floodlights switched on, its brightness momentarily startling the three friends.

'Zak! Look at Krusch!' Rehan and Lizzie called out together.

Zak stared into the back of the net. Krusch was

groaning and shrivelling up like something from a horror film. Danny was nowhere to be seen.

BUZZ...BUZZ...BUZZ

The other three floodlights sprang to life, bathing the entire pitch in bright light.

Krusch screamed and made strange gurgling sounds. Lizzie covered her eyes, and Rehan turned away. A moment later, the big man was nothing more than a crumbling skeleton, turning to blackened dust before their eyes, drifting away on a chill wind into the hurthermost corners of the old football ground.

‘You did it,’ a voice sounded from behind. ‘I knew you would.’

Zak swung round and saw the old washerwoman standing there. ‘The floodlights seemed to finish him off,’ Zak said to her. ‘Maybe it was Tommy that switched them on.’

She smiled back at him. ‘Maybe. But it was you that finished him off, Zak. You saw that he got what he deserved...justice! The bright lights were just the final nail in his coffin.’

‘Creatures like Krusch thrive in darkness and detest light. But it was your courage and good nature that proved the brightest light of all.’

Zak nodded proudly and turned back to the goalmouth. Only the ball remained. He glanced at his watch: 3.35 pm. He looked back to the old washerwoman – she was gone.

Vanished like the others.

It seemed that Zak and his two friends were the only ones left in the entire Millerbrook Stadium. It *really* was all

over. Krusch had been taken on and defeated. Zak knew that justice *had* been served, and Tommy and Danny were finally at rest.

There was nothing more to do.

Zak, Rehan and Lizzie glanced around the deserted stands for the last time. They made their way out of the old Millerbrook stadium, knowing for sure that they would never return.





Half Term

Zak was in a joyous mood. Along with Rehan, he had joined Lizzie's team, Masbrough Juniors, and they'd just beaten Kimberworth Colts in an exciting 2-0 match. Zak had established himself as a goalkeeper and had pulled off some thrilling saves. Of course,

Lizzie had scored both goals!

And now they were browsing in a town-centre store on their way home when a familiar voice caught their attention:

'How are you kids doing?'

They turned and Zak recognised the security man they'd met at the railway sidings.

'Fine, thanks,' Zak replied with a smile.

'Well, I'm glad I've not seen you down at the old stadium since we had our little chat,' he said.

Zak looked thoughtful. 'Is it still haunted?' he asked, curious to know what the answer would be.

Rehan and Lizzie stared at the tall security man with wide eyes.

'Funny thing, but there've not been any spooky

reports for some time. In fact, the dog doesn't mind going in there now. I did a late shift recently. Apart from an old bin liner blowing around the stands, we never saw anything.'

'A bin liner!' Zak exclaimed.

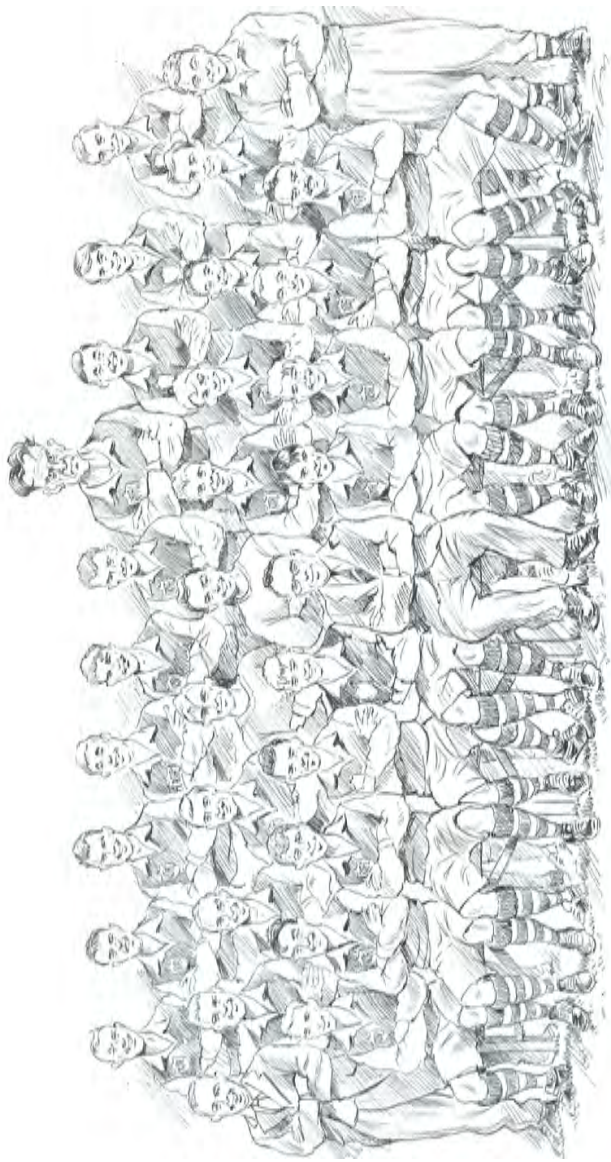
The man laughed. 'Yes. It gave Hector a bit of a scare. You should have heard him barking at it. Going a bit soft that dog is. I think it's high time he retired. Well...must get on.

Bye!'

In that instant, Zak knew for certain that Tommy and Danny were no longer there.

They were at peace...at last!

But as for The Kruschmeister, justice *had* been served. He was still there...*alone and forever.*



Rotherstone Town FC.
1956-57

KRUSCHMEISTER

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PJM

