AND THE GLENSTOWN CAPTAIN FOR THIS SEASON IS...

Fitzy wants nothing more than to be the man to lead Glenstown to win the County Championship they lost last year.

Rumour has it that Arnie, a star player from a small club is about to transfer to one of Glenstown’s rival teams, threatening to ruin his dreams. However, will his biggest stumbling block be closer to home?

With obstacles threatening to throw his plans up in the air, can he pull together with his best friends to get his beloved club over the line?

UP IN THE AIR

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ILLUSTRATION BY SAMHIN DUNN
Up In The Air

Paddy Stapleton
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Chapter 1

Johnny’s place wasn’t as large as the Elverys and JD Sports shops in the city, but it has never let me down. It was a square shop about the size of our classroom, but he had it jam-packed with boots, jerseys, tracksuits, runners and even hiking gear. Although we were mostly all about team sports in Glenstown, the hills around us are popular from April to October. As we strolled through the shop floor packed with all sorts of sports products, the sweet smell of brand new leather hit my nostrils strongly. The wall of GAA boots shining at the back of the shop always gave me a buzz of excitement. Johnny had just gotten a new batch.

“Adidas Copa Mundials for me. A Classic.”

“Bones, who are you going to inspire in those yokels?” I said.

“Inspire? I just wanna clip a few scores, Fitzy,” said Bones.

“But they look like something my Dad pulls out for the Junior Z charity game every August bank holiday.”

“Exactly Fitzy! They never get old,” replied Bones happily.

“What player even wears those in this day and age?”

Bones smirked at me and quickly replied, “Aaah, your Dad! You just said it yourself.”

“Ok, suit yourself, but it’s very simple for me – the Adidas Predator get better every year. They’re comfortable, offer great protection and always look the business.”

“I didn’t think the look would bother you that much, Fitzy.”

“Nah, it doesn’t bother me, Bones. I like to keep it low key. I want people to know I look cool, but I don’t really wanna be talking about it.”

Bones looked at me from behind his mop of shaggy curls like I had two heads. Immediately I knew I had gotten carried away.

“Well, I saw Padraig Walsh wearing them last season,” I said quickly.

“Zipping around with the ball and nobody could touch him. When he goes well, Kilkenny go well!”
As I was about to ask Johnny for my size, the door of the shop swung open, crashing against the nearby GAA jersey rack. Bones quickly looked over my shoulder.

**BANG**

“Bones! What's the story, man?”

I recognised Arnie from the U8 and U10 blitzes over the last few years in Ash Park. He always played in the grade below us because his village had such small numbers. They were barely able to field a seven-a-side team, but he was the reason they were in with a chance of winning every game. A serious operator.

“Alright Arnie? How are they all in Cloyna?”

“Same old, same old, Bones,” he said as he drifted through the racks of the shop. “I ran into your aunt at the post office yesterday actually. She was in flying form.”

“Yeah, man? I'm convinced the new hip has a motor in it! She'll nearly beat you in a hundred metre sprint, the way she's moving.”

Arnie laughed loudly with his chest stuck tight to his Cloyna GAA training top.

“All jokes aside, I think she could make the Cloyna Junior team if she went to a few sessions. At least she'd fit into the jersey, unlike some of our chunky lads.”

I tried to laugh along with them but felt like I was behind a glass wall.

“Speaking of Cloyna,” I interrupted. “I hear ye don't have the numbers for an U13 team this year.”

Arnie looked at me like he couldn't make out whether I was from Ireland or Iraq.

“Sorry, what's the name?” he said.

“Oh my bad! Arnie, this is Fitzy. We play on the Glenstown hurling team together – our best player over the last few years.”

“Yeah, we've known each other since we were three,” I said. “Dropped into the childminder on the same day – we've been slagging each other ever since.”

Arnie just turned to Bones with a scowl on his square face as I felt a couple of sweat droplets run down my back.
Paddy Stapleton

He was so convincing I thought he was a salesman for a second, making us feel like we were aliens if we didn’t love them. I was tempted to try them on myself but the thoughts of everyone judging me with red boots on in the warm-up, before I even started playing, had me feeling queasy. Also, the €200 tag was €120 out of my price range.

As all three of us left the shop, each with a bag hanging at our sides, Bones and myself turned to head left while Arnie stopped up for a second.

“Fancy a few pucks, Arnie? Did you bring your hurley?” I asked.

“Hurley? You’re not speaking my language, Fitzo. The real hurlers in Cloyna call it a ‘Hurl!’”

“Oh,” I replied, as my pale cheeks reddened under my faint freckles.

“But no, not today,” said Arnie. “I’m heading up to get the bus out to Cloyna. Bones, I’ll be talking to ya the next time you’re out in our house. Fitzo, nice to meet you. We might bump into each other more regularly from now on,” he said with a huge grin on his face.

Why did he seem so happy about that? Are we playing them soon? Not as far as I knew. Whatever it was, I didn’t feel too good about it. It even made my stomach jump a little. Maybe it was nothing, but he seemed pretty definite to me.

Chapter 2

“Car park, Fitzy?” said Bones.

“Of course, man. Need to keep sharp for Wednesday night.”

As we walked down the main street in the warm afternoon sun, I couldn’t help but think of the way Arnie had looked at me. I tried to distract myself by scanning the front windows of the shops across the wide road, but nothing could hold me back from bringing it up.

“How do you know Arnie, Bones?”

“My aunt Meg married a guy from Cloyna, so my Mam has been bringing me out to the place for years. It’s actually hard to call it a place because there isn’t much there.”

“But Arnie said he met your aunt in the post office,” I said as I tussled my straight fair hair.

“Yeah, in the post office – which is a shop, a pub, plus the local chess club...” said Bones as he counted the different amenities on his long, slender fingers.

“So, how do you know him?” I asked impatiently.

“Alright, alright. I’m getting there. As I said, I’m out in his neck of the woods for years and all the kids go to the small community pitch across from the post office. I got to know him playing ball with my cousins and we’ve been cool ever since. Some animal, isn’t he?”

“Was he? I hadn’t really noticed,” I said casually.

“Ha! It’s hard to miss him, Fitzy. He nearly took the door off the hinges when he came into Johnny’s.”

“Yeah, I suppose he’s a bit bigger than the likes of us,” I said glumly as we ambled closer to the carpark.

“Will you go away! He’s bigger than the both of us put into the one tracksuit!” he said with his arms stretched out like two spaghetti sticks.
We both laughed but I was still wondering how Arnie figured we would see more of each other soon, seeing as I had never met him properly before.

“What was that about Cloynna not having a team for him?” I asked trying to sound like I was concerned about Arnie.

“They’ve been struggling with numbers for years, Fitzy. They were even trying to play a kid in pull-up nappies for their U8 team last year.”

We both chuckled. Bones had a great way of cheering me up. Things just seemed to roll so effortlessly off his tongue. Sometimes I thought he could recite the back of a Tayto bag and still make me laugh.

“I overheard my Aunt Meg chatting to his Mam at the side of the community pitch a couple of weeks back. She was saying Cloynna don’t look like they can get a full U13 hurling team together, that a couple of kids had dropped off since U10. It was hard to hear everything they said with the kids roarin’ and ballin’, but she definitely said they might need to bring Arnie somewhere else to ‘fulfil his potential’, as she put it.”

“Jeez, so he could actually have to leave the club? That’s some disaster, Bones. I couldn’t imagine playing for anyone else.”

“Yeah, that’s a bummer, but I’ve heard him say a couple of times that he wants to play in the biggest games. Cloynna will just never make it to that level. He said he wants to be a cross between Lee Chin and Joe Canning, whatever that means.” Bones’ dark brown mop of curls bobbed up and down slightly as he shrugged his slim shoulders.

I was ok with Arnie being the next man on the moon if he wanted, as long as he wasn’t costing Glenstown the championship by strengthening another team.

“Where do you reckon he could go?” I asked, a little quicker this time.

“Who knows, Fitzy man. There’s no shortage of clubs close by.”

“Would you not think of asking him?”

“Nah man, no need to get heavy with him. That’s his business.”

Bones didn’t really do heavy. Even after we lost the U10 county blitz final, he was straight out of the dressing room looking for his Mam to bring him to Supermacs because he was starving the whole second half. I couldn’t eat for two days after the game, until my mother put a cheese and ham sandwich in front of me and wouldn’t let me get up from the table until I’d finished it – crusts and all.

“Yeah, I suppose it is,” I said quietly as we approached the carpark.

The carpark was our place to hang out all year around. It was right in the middle of town, halfway between the hurling pitch and Johnny’s Sports Shop – a five-minute walk to both. It was about the same size as one of those new-age Astroturf soccer pitches, so you had plenty of room to strike the ball to each other. It had three walls that we used – six feet on either side and then the big twelve-foot wall at the back. All of them were discoloured as a result of young hurlers like us hopping hundreds of slotars off it. It was deadly because the ground was tarmacked, so you didn’t get your runners and socks soaked when it rained. The lights were timed to come on when it got dark, so we didn’t have to go home early in the winter. Plus, you couldn’t see much of what is happening inside the place from the outside, which was ideal when you want to horse around with your friends. It might as well have been Croke Park to us at times.

“Ok Bones, a few nice handy pucks before I take all your confidence for Wednesday night.”

“Ha, work away, Fitzy. We both remember who broke their hurlry off the lamp post the day after the school holidays,” he replied sniggering away to himself.

It was impossible to wind Bones up. Any bit of slagging seemed to hit him like a piece of candy floss – light and fluffy, he just gobbled it right up. Things that got to me, like playing well in training or making sure Mam had the right match gear clean the week before the championship, didn’t seem to get him worked up. He just turned up in his sleeveless basketball top and baggy shorts, ready for whatever came his way. Most of the time he wouldn’t even have his own hurley – he would just pick up whatever one he laid his eyes on first in the garage.

As we started playing around, I forgot everything about Arnie. That was the great thing about pucking around, you could just say nothing, think of nothing, let your body go into autopilot. Hundreds of strikes. Whack, whack, whack. Over and back, like a slow game of tennis.
When Mam, Dad and I went to America on holidays, I wouldn't let Dad leave home without both of our hurleys. When we puckered around on the beach, the yanks looked so confused. They asked why we were playing 'catch with sticks'. After ten minutes of describing everything about hurling, down to what hurler style might suit that particular pensioner, Mam finally dragged Dad away by the arm down towards our apartment.

"Alright Bones, time to get serious. Last one to run through all the targets has to wear the other person's sweaty body warmer for tonight's training," I said.

"I still don't understand why you do this to yourself," replied Bones with both eyebrows raised and a slight shake of the head.

"Belief, Bones! You have to have it."

"You'll also have to disinfect yourself after wearing my body warmer!"

Targets was a classic carpark game. No hiding place. You were either accurate enough, or you weren't. The thing about Bones was he loved those types of games. If it was soccer, he loved penalty shoot outs. When we messed around with rugby balls, he loved to try to hit the top of the lamp post with a drop goal. He seemed to enjoy being left alone to master a particular technique without the hassle of an opponent jumping all over him. Even though I'd love the responsibility, it was probably the reason he'd been our free taker since U6. You could watch him take a hundred frees and they would all look identical. Left hand on top, like TJ Reid, he would just stroke the ball between the sticks. Effortless.

"Ok so, same rules as usual," I declared. "First one to hit the four signs on the back wall wins. We start two parking spaces back from the first target and retreat one further space after we hit each sign. No stepping over the line like last week Bones or I'll pull ya."

He smirked with one corner of his mouth and put his hand up to his head, saluting like a soldier and said, "Roger that, Major Fitz."

"You can go first, Fitzy. I need to do some visualisation to get me in the zone," he said while holding back a yawn.

I could feel that there was little or no breeze sliding over my face as I looked up to see the first sign, No Unauthorised Personnel. The sun was still high in the afternoon sky, so visibility was perfect. I was in my element.

When I settled myself, I took one more quick look at the target and on my trusty right side cracked my first ball. Whack. Straight on the 'o' in Unauthorised.

"Yes, nice one!" I thought as I shot a quick look back at Bones.

"Slick one, Fitzy."

Bones then strolled up at a snail's pace, hurley hanging in his left hand and the ball in his right. He casually turned on to his weaker right side and met the target just as accurately as I had. All square.

The pair of us took a few paces back to the next partly erased car space line. I looked at the second sign for a little longer. It was an off-white, square sign that had a washed-out look after years of Irish weather and dirty sliotars, with the words CCTV in Operation plastered on it. I hopped the leather ball off the centre of the sign with a controlled, wristy motion, secretly hoping someone was actually recording my shot. Bones quickly followed up with the same result and the only thing recorded was a snarl on my freckled face. I could feel my heart taking a little flutter now.

One more space back means we were nearly fifteen metres from the third of the four signs. The writing on the placards didn't look as bold all of a sudden.

"Can you smell that, Fitzy?"

"Smell what?" I asked.

"The beautiful aroma of a dirty body warmer up your nostrils! Ha ha!"

"Shut up and stop trying to get in my head. This week is different." I caught my third shot crisply – it was such clean contact that I barely felt the ball hit my stick at all. Yes! It met the big round Keep Clear notice like it was after coming from a cannon.
“Nice one, man,” said Bones. “Bif could be onto you about taking the frees if he hears about that little beauty.”

Bones took a deep breath this time. His belly moving in and out, with a little more concentration in his face. Yes, again! He totally topped the ball and it flew five yards over the sign. Oh Jeepers, I was finally going to beat him. It was my time. All I had to do was hit the last sign from a couple more paces back, and I had him.

“Unlucky, lad,” I offered insincerely.

“Not my finest effort. The door is wide open for you now, Fitzy. Just ask yourself, what would Padraig Walsh do right about now?”

The answer is that he would hit the target without even thinking about it, but unfortunately, I am not him... not just yet.

“Ha, I know he’s played in lots of big games, Bones, but I’m not sure he’d be able for this pressure,” I said, trying to sound like I was chilled out.

Back I stepped to my mark. I had one last look at the yellow and black No Turning slogan, breathing hard like I was about to get a tooth pulled out. I took one last long inhale and tossed the ball into the air. As I struck the stick, I exhaled heavily, immediately looking up to see its direction. It was not as precise as my last effort and was travelling a little higher than I wanted.

DUDDDD

And that sound informed me that the ball hit the thick wall the signs were secured to. I grimaced in disappointment but tried to keep my game face on because I knew I still had at least one more chance to win this thing.

“Unlucky, my man. A game of inches they say,” remarked Bones with a quick wink.

“Centimetres more like,” I said under my breath as I turn away to look over the side wall into the nearby housing estate.

Predictably, Bones drove his next shot right down the centre of the third sign. Game on. Pressure on now.

“Not trying to put the heat on, Fitzy, but this shot is a big one.”

“Chill man, sure it’s only a game,” I said as I felt my smile quiver.

“Of course, man,” he enthused.

A game? A game was what you played with little pieces of plastic on a board at Christmas with your annoying cousins. This was real. Very real. I was feeling positive though. My first three shots had been sweet, with that last one only an inch or two from hitting the target. I knew I was going to do it this time. I could feel it. I took a controlled, deep breath and regripped my sweaty fingers around the handle of the hurley. I took one last, long look at the target and threw the ball up to my eye level. I rotated my hips and shoulders away from the target as controlled as I ever have and started to swing at the ball. Just as I was about to make contact and win the game, my ears were pierced by a screeching sound from the back of the carpark.

“Eeeech! Is that Padraig Walsh?”

And the ball flew three metres above its intended target. Who the hell was that?

“Well chaps, how’s it cutting?”

“Lizzy, how the hell are ya?” beamed Bones loudly.

“I’m great, Bones. Just back from my holidays in Dublin. Hope I wasn’t disturbing ye.”

“Not at all, girl. Fitzy and myself were only having a few pucks.”

A few pucks? He knows how close he was to losing.

“And it looks like it’s my shot and all,” said Bones smugly.

Oh, he was loving this.

“Oh, ye were playing Targets, were ye?”

“Yep,” I said glumly.

“Who’s winning?”

“Draw game, Lizzy. My go next for the win though.”

Just as Bones grabbed the ball, I turned to head for the carpark exit with my stick over my shoulder. He hasn’t ever missed twice in the one session.

PINGGGG

Game over.
Chapter 3

"Finish it up, pet," Mam said as she glided through the kitchen with another mountain of washing.

"Yeah, yeah. I know, Mam."

"Good man! I'll put hair on your chest."

"Hair doesn't grow on steel the last time I checked, Mam," I said casually while listening to the Cork and Waterford game that was played earlier today on TV.

She smiled and said, "When did my little sunshine become a smarty pants?"

"Well, I am a whole inch taller than you now, and most of that went to my brain."

"Bet you'd still struggle with the arm-wrestling though. Come on..." she said with a smug grin.

"Will you give it over, Mam! We haven't tried that in years and how would I explain to Dad that I broke your wrist?"

She swiped my plate sharply from under my nose and left it on the countertop, pulled a chair right up to the corner of the table, looked me in the eye and planted her elbow firmly down with a thud.

"Aah will you stop, Mam? You've work in the morning and they can't do with you being out of action."

By this time, the noise of the game in the next room was only a fillier. I couldn't concentrate on what was happening. Mam was slim, like me, but deceptively strong.

"Don't! Will you stop Mam' me! I've won more arm-wrestling matches than you've had nappy changes. There's no shame in being beaten by your little old mammy, Alexander."

She knew I hated being called that. I was going to beat her just for weighing me down in life with such a ridiculous name. I didn't care how brave Dad's uncle was fighting the English; it was out of order subjecting me to that embarrassment in every class roll call.

"Ok, if you insist," I eventually said with a knowing grin.

We both knew the rules. I had been trying to beat her all my life until I stopped about three years ago - I was sick of losing. As a thirteen-year-old, I would beat her easily. Young lads like me were just stronger than girls.

We clasped hands, my thumb wrapped around hers, and our fingers went white at the tips.

"Who'll count us in?" I said.

"I will," replied Mam. "I always did before and it never failed."

"Never failed for you now that I think of it. I know - the next time Ger Canning calls out that there has been a score in his commentary, will be our cue to start."

"Sounds good to me... Alexander."

I wanted to crush her now. It shouldn't be too long. With Pat Horgan, Austin Gleeson, Alan Cadogan and Darragh Fitzgibbon - Cork and Waterford had some of the smoothest forwards in the game.

As thirty seconds ran by, it felt like thirty minutes. We were still staring at each other, trying not to blink.

"Fantastic pick-up by Pat Horgan," said Ger in the other room. "Quick as you like, he twists and turns from both sides."

Come on, Ger, say it.

"The Waterford backs give him too much latitude, and he strikes it high."

You're killing me, Ger. My hands were starting to sweat now. "Aaaand it's... straight over the bar!"

"Grrrrrr..."

A collective groan erupted from Mam and myself. It was like two heavyweight sumo wrestlers bound together, trying to force the other one back.

That was until - WHACK - two seconds later the back of my right hand was stuck firmly to the kitchen table. How the heck did that happen?
"Don't worry, pet, maybe after a few more of Mammy's dinners," she said while flicking her blonde hair behind her ear.

Damn. That was two losses in the one day. I blew it against Bones earlier, and this embarrassment. I hoped it wasn’t an omen for training later that night. I could do with some good luck.

"Fair play, Mam. You still have it," I said cheerfully as I trudged out of the kitchen and up the stairs towards my room.

"You nearly had me that time," she shouted as I began to move out of earshot. "I have your training jersey left on your chair upstairs, by the way."

I was disappointed with the loss to Bones as it was in my own hands, but my God, Mam was still as strong as a horse. I literally had no chance against her, she must have been some beast on the ladies’ football field in her day.

As I got my gear ready for training, I started to think about the game on Wednesday night. I couldn't wait for it, but part of me was feeling uneasy. The horrible nerves I get since I was younger, wouldn't disappear. I thought by the time I was thirteen, I'd have lost all of that, be able to enjoy it a bit more. Dad said that nerves were a good thing, that the minute he lost them he knew it was the end of his Glenstal hurling days. I suppose he was right. He was a lot of the time, but I'd still prefer to relax a bit.

Our last hurling session shouldn't be too long, but there were still things that our manager Bif hadn't decided on. I was worried.

"New boots – check. Limerick socks – check. Tipperary shorts – check. Galway jersey – check. Cork style hurley – check. Body Warmer – unfortunately, won’t be needed," I said to myself, feeling a little bit funny in my tummy. I was sorted though. Head-to-toe, I was ready to go. As I descended quickly and loudly down the wooden stairs, there was no sign of Mam in the kitchen or living room.

"MAAAAM, WHERE ARE YA?" I shouted in no particular direction in the house.

"I'm just changing my clothes, pet," she called out from upstairs.

"Ah Lord Almighty! You know this is an important training for me! Will you come on, or I'll be late," I roared up to her.

"Alex, we've an hour to get there and it's only two kilometres away. Relax," she said in a slightly irritated tone.

"Mam, we've to pick up Lizzy on the way and I've told you millions of times, I like to get my pre-warm-up, warm-up done before the session starts."

"Pre-warm-up, warm-up?" she said walking into the kitchen as she puffed the air from her cheeks. "Of course, how could I forget?"

As Mam started the car engine, she kept glancing at me.

"What?" I said seriously.

"Are you ok, Fitzy?"

"Yeah."

Mam took another look at me and then looked ahead at the road.

"Well, I'm grand like... but... Ah, I'm grand."

"Come on, pet. I won't tell anyone, not even the twins," she smiled.

We both had a little laugh. If it was a topic to do with Sponge Bob Square Pants, the twins might have some interest in what's on my mind, but not hurling. Not yet.

"Ok, it's just that tonight is a really important night for me, you know? I feel like I've played well in training all year. I think I'm one of the better players, not being cocky or anything. We were told that the captain is being named tonight and..." I started to drift a little and look out the window.

Mam said nothing for a moment.

"It's great that you want to be the captain, Alex. It's such a super honour, but don't go hanging your whole year on going up for the coin toss before each game."

"Yeah, I suppose so," I said quietly. "Like, I know I was captain of the team at U10 level but those were only one-day blitzes. This is the big time," I said with more energy now. "We're playing on full-sized pitches... with massive goal posts... for a real cup at the end of the season. I'd love to be the one to lift it... for the lads."

Mam looked at me with a little smile and patted my leg. "You're right, pet, it would be brilliant to be chosen. Try not to worry if someone else is given the chance though. There's plenty more to you than winning coin tosses and lifting trophies."
Paddy Stapleton

I smiled weakly back and sunk into my seat. She was right. I shouldn’t get so far ahead of myself. It wasn’t that big of a deal. Why did I always waste my time thinking about things like that? Being captain, or what the manager might think of me or what position I’ll be played in? When Mam speaks to me about the game, she nearly always makes me look at things differently, makes it simpler.

“God forbid, this young one would ever be waiting for us outside the house for once,” said Mam as we pulled up close to Lizzy’s house before punching the horn a couple of times.

“Yeah and I’ve told her at least fifty times I like to get there good and early,” I added.

Ten seconds later Lizzy bursts out her front door and down the garden path before yakking the car door open and launching herself into the back seat.

“Hidey-ho gang! Ready for another year of hurling balls and having the lols?”

We couldn’t help but laugh.

“Sorry I wasn’t out sooner. I know Lieutenant A Fitz prefers to be there four hours before training, but I couldn’t find my hurley. Hadn’t seen it since before Dublin.”

So, she hadn’t picked up her hurley for a week, and we’ve championship Wednesday. How was she in such giddy form?!?

“No bother, Lizzy. How were the holidays?” enquired Mam as we pulled away for the short spin to the pitch.

“Savage altogether, Mrs Fitz. I was in an activity camp all week with my cousins. Archery, canoeing, obstacle courses, all that jazz. We went to the cinema then one night to see the new Avengers movie in 3D. I nearly jumped into the screen it was so real!”

“Sounds like you had a great week so. Are you all ready for the hurling year?” enquired Mam, probably because she knew I was wondering the same thing.

“Yeah, sure it’ll be grand. Looking forward to seeing all the lads alright and then getting stuck in.”

Grand? Was she for real? This is our only good chance for the U13 County Championship! We had way too many passengers last year. As if I wasn’t horrified enough, she then pulled a Twix bar from her gear bag.

“Aah Lizzy, we’re training soon. You’ll have a stitch and be stuck to the ground,” I protested.

“Sure, if we went to training at a normal time, I’d have had it eaten in the house and saved you the heart attack.”

“You’re the only one that’s gonna be feeling sick ten minutes into the warm-up!” I replied smartly.

“You’re probably right,” she attempted to say while stuffing the first chocolate finger into her mouth. As she munch, she managed to mumble, “I’ll… MMMUNGH…save… MMMUNGH…the second stick for the way home.”

I was starting to think she had a chocolate problem. I had seen her pull bars from her pocket at the weirdest times, like when we are in the middle of a game of Targets, during mass and worst of all – the very minute she gets out of bed in the morning. YUCK! I remember we were made go to tin whistle lessons together when we were seven, and she pulled a double Mars bar out of her instrument case along with the whistle. She literally had no shame. As much as she doesn’t seem too bothered about championship though, she gives it everything on the pitch. She wouldn’t admit it, but I definitely saw her wipe a tear away after the County Final loss last year.

As we pulled up to the club house Lizzy eventually stopped chewing and we hopped out of the car.

“Ok Mam, we’ll see you in an hour or that. It could be a little longer if Bif wants to talk to us in detail about the game.”

“No problem, pet. I’ll be waiting to hear all the team news,” she said with a smile.

As we were the first to arrive in the freshly painted dressing room, I got changed quickly and started into the stretching routine I saw one of the senior hurlers do at training a few weeks ago. Johnny Sull was a class act, so anything he thought was important, was good enough for me. I had
to study him for three training sessions to memorise his routine, but I
think I have it down now.

Lizzy wouldn't dream of stretching unless Bif was standing right in
front of her with no escape. She was much happier banging the ball
against the changing room walls and making sure it barely missed my
head on the way back. Luckily, she had that down to a fine art after a
few years of bumps and bruises.

About five minutes into my stretches, Muiris came ambling into the
changing room and plonked himself down on the bench beside where
I was stretching. Muiris was our big full forward. From his limp around
the hurling pitch to the fact that he wore black dress socks at training
(like the ones your Dad wears to mass on a Sunday), you would think
he was transported to Glenstown 2019 from Glenstown 1919. His hur-
ley was way too long and as skinny as a hockey stick. His boots were so
old that you couldn't even see what make they were. If you suggested
wearing a body warmer, even in the snow, he'd look at you like you'd
just told him he couldn't go to the ploughing championships next year.

"Jayus lad's 'tis unreal sileage weather int' it?"

"'Tis to be sure, Muiris. Were you flat out today?" Lizzy asked between
blasting the ball off the wall nearest to her.

"I was of course, Lizzy. Out helpin' the auld lad cut a few acres. Great
day," he said while squashing his wide feet into those filthy boots.

"Have you no multi-studs for the hard ground?" I asked. "You'll cut
the feet off yourself."

"Not at all, Fitz. One pair is all you need. Build up a bit of hard skin
and away you go. Sure, I won't be moving too far playing full forward.
Just let the ball in good and long, none of your stupid fancy balls out the
wing. Speaking of fancy, what are those spaceships on your feet?"

"New boots, Muiris. Padraig Walsh wears the same ones," I replied.
"Sure, Padraig Walsh isn't going to be there Wednesday night drag-
ging your skinny backside around the field," laughed Muiris.

Lizzy sniggered. I just laughed and threw my eyes to heaven. Different
year, same Muiris.

Out of nowhere a ball came flying in the changing room door. I barely
saw it before ducking my head.

"Ah Fitz, why didn't you catch it?" laughed Bones as he strolled in.
"Bones, what are you at? We've the game Wednesday and you nearly
took the eye out of my head."

"Don't worry, Fitzy, the ball is rarely on target when you're around."
"Ah shut it, will you!" I blurted out.

"Ah now, sorry about that, Fitzy;" he said as he opened his gear bag.
"Here's an apology gift." Laughing, he pulled a bright yellow body warm-
er from his bag and held it in front of me.

"Ha ha! Bones, that is rank!" said Lizzy as she covered her nose and
mouth.

"Ah will you stop, Bones! How am I going to put up with that smell
for an hour?" I protested.

"I dunno man, but I seem to remember you making the rules."

"I've smelled worse in calving season though, Fitzy," said Muiris with
a knowing look.

"Where did you even get that, Bones?" I said exasperated.

"My brother wore it to training a month ago but didn't take it out of
his bag until today when he was cleaning his room. Lucky timing really."

"Yeah, unreal," I said before snapping the stinking, shiny top from his
skinny fingers.

As we all puckered around casually before training, I could barely stand
the odour coming from under my pristine new Galway number 11 shirt.
After each inhal of breath, I nearly vomited out through my helmet
bars. I had to put on my best poker face though. I didn't want anything
hurting my chances of being named captain.

As Bif's whistle sounded, we all jogged in quickly to form a semi-cir-
cle around him. We knew the drill by now. I noticed Scampy Ryan scur-
rying through the pitch entrance late as we were called in, blending
seamlessly with the crowd. His drill hadn't changed either.

"Ok lads, final training before... God almighty, what is that smell?
Muiris, were you swimming in the slurry pit again?"
“Ha ha! No Bossman, Fitzy there isn’t fond of the shower hose.”
“I lost a bet, Bif,” I said quickly. “Bones took it too far though. He’s making me wear a body warmer that hasn’t been washed since Christmas.”
“What was the bet?” Bif enquired with a strange look.
“He beat me in Targets.”
“You deserve to wear that for the rest of the season as punishment for thinking you could beat Bones in a game of Targets,” laughed Bif.
“I nearly had him…”
“Aaaaah sure, nearly never won the race Fitzy!” interrupted Bif. “We don’t do nearly around here. We nearly won the U13 County Championship and you don’t hear lads bragging about it.”
“Yeah, I suppose,” was all I could muster.

I noticed Bones looking at me with pity. He loved a good prank but knew this was my worst nightmare. If there was one time that I didn’t want to have a standoff with Bif, this was it. I’ve been telling Bones all year how I would love the chance to captain the team, to make the difference. Funkily enough, there’s not a bad bone in his body so I’m pretty sure he felt terrible right then.

Bif moved through his checklist of important issues for Wednesday night.
“Laces checked, lads?”
We all nodded.
“Lifts to the game sorted? I don’t want anyone calling me twenty minutes before throw-in to say they got caught in traffic at Supermacs drive-thru again… Bones?”
We all nodded again while Bones quietly whispered, “That was my bad, guys,” and held his hands up in remorse.
“Ok, so I have a couple of more issues to talk about. The first is to name the captain for the season.”

Oh jeepers, this was it. I squeezed my hands tight around my hurley.
“As you know, captain is not a title I care very much about in the first place. I believe the fifteen of you all need to lead for the sixty minutes. 15 x 60, the only way it should be.”

Ah Bif, come on, you’re killing me here…
“As it is in the rules, I have decided to make my decision based on who has given their all to the cause over not only this year, but in the previous six years.”

It had to be me. I’ve ate, slept and drank Glenstown hurling for the last thirteen years, never mind six. I was carrying water for Dad’s junior team when I barely had a full head of hair. It had to be me.

“I am delighted to announce that captain this year will be Fitzy…”
Yeeessssss! Finally! This was what it was all about, up the steps of the stand at the end of the year to lift that cup!
“…and…” said Bif interrupting my fantasy. “…Lizzy Wolf. Well done you two. We will have joints captains.”

I thought I was going to vomit, and it wasn’t from the body warmer this time. I was definitely getting dizzy.

“Fitzy has been a great servant for years, and Lizzy has been a warrior in the backline for the last two seasons with her pace and intensity. No matter where the other team go on the field, we will have leaders there,” declared Bif.

“We will need lots of leaders Wednesday night away from home against this Baile-Fheirme crowd though. They’re usually fairly hardy, rural buckos who like to leave the pitch nice and hairy for good wristy players like us. They’re well able to cut silage but they forget about cutting the hurling field.”

“Go handy on the silage cutters, Bif,” interrupted Muiris quickly. “We have feelings too.”

“Sorry Muiris,” smiled Bif. “I’m sure you’re all as soft as fresh cow manure underneath it all.”

I didn’t know whether I was happy or distraught. Yes, my ambition was to be captain for the year, but I wanted to be the one that showed the way. Lizzy didn’t even seem to care that much most of the time. Of course, she hammered into it when she hit the field but there’s more to being a captain than that. Even looking at her in the huddle, she was more worried about a loud car passing the pitch than being told she had the honour of captaining the team.
"Oh yeah, one more thing that I nearly forgot lads. There's a rumour going around that Arnie might have transferred to Baile-Fheirme for the season ahead. We know he has cousins playing with them and spends a fair bit of time down at their farm, so it could be true. Not to worry though, lads, we're ready for whatever comes our way. Off ye go there with Bridget and get your team photo done for the year."

As we followed Bridget, the club secretary, over to the front of the club house I couldn't help but forget about the captaincy momentarily. Arnie could be there Wednesday night, and between Lizzy and myself we'd have to stop him.

"Ok boys and girls, tallest should stand at the back and smallest to the front," ordered Bridget as we arrived in front of the club house.

No offence to Lizzy, but if she was centre back on him, she was in for a rough night – anyone would be.

"Alright so everyone, push in together good and tight. Pretend like you're happy to see each other," shouted Bridget like she had said to dozens of teams over the years.

I was confident we had enough in us to go to Baile-Fheirme and win, but this Arnie situation could make it tight.

"Ok lads, now on three. I want your best cheesy smiles. 1 – 2 – 3!"

"Aaaaaaaaaah!!"

A loud cry comes from over Bridget's shoulder.

Suddenly a lanky lunatic sprinted from inside the clubhouse past Bridget, towards the team swinging a big hammer in the air. As he came closer, I noticed he had a big green head of hair and looked a bit like The Joker from Batman. All of us scrambled to get away but kept falling over each other. This lad was a maniac.

He was roaring angrily now, like a lad who had burnt his tongue badly on a cheese and ham toasted sandwich. He was about to swing at someone! Just before he got to the group, Scampy quickly hopped up from his pose on one knee and roundhouse-kicked the lunatic, karate style, straight into the groin area. The maniac immediately collapsed like a Jenga tower on a washing machine. The roaring turned to groaning. It looked like he was down for the ten-count.

"Jayus Scampy, what the hell did you do that for?" groaned a muffled voice from under the mask.

Scampy just stared at him with a blank expression. Scampy was more of an action type of fella.

"Ha ha! Preston is that you?" squealed Lizzy.

"Uh... Aah... Yeah, course it is," replied Preston as he slowly rolled into a sitting position on the grass while pulling the mask up onto the top of his head, like a cap.

"Ha ha! What the hell were you doing running out of the club house like that?" asked Lizzy. "Halloween isn't for a few months yet."

"And to be honest, Preston, I hope you kept the receipt for that mask. I wouldn't have worn it in second class," advised Muiris.

"What were you up to at all?" I asked. "Bit said you were too sick to train, that you were touch and go for Wednesday night."

"Well, I was kind of sick, but I improved a bit today. I didn't want to chance training, but I thought I might play a prank with my new camera. I gave Bridget a buzz this afternoon and told her my hilarious idea – she was well up for it, as always. Thanks again, Bridget."

"No bother at all, Preston. I've got it all on your camera there."

"Ah, sound Bridget, but I think I might keep that one for the archives. Such a shame though 'cos I thought you would have all run in every direction. Thought I would have had you screaming. I could have had a million views on YouTube, if it went to plan."

"Preston, I don't think you could have pulled off anything funnier than your long frame getting brought down to earth by little Scampy," interrupted Bones. "He's barely up to your belly button."

"Ah no! That's a bloopo. Sure, there's plenty of those online," responded Preston who was standing but bent over with his hands on his knees.

"Every Tom, Dick and Harry has seen those videos. No, I'll get something epic alright. Even if it's the last thing I do this summer."

"Ok boys," said Bridget. "Let's get that picture now that you're all here. Quickly, all together again. 3 – 2 – 1!

"Chheeeeeeesssssssssssssss!"