

ONE

(England, 1989)

Gordon really didn't want to be doing this. He could barely see a thing, the worn out wiper blades were managing only to comb narrow, useless tracks across the windscreen, and as he peered through them, drips from the leaky sunroof stung his neck with cold.

He slowed the car and peered out at the bay fronted semis, trying to see the numbers on the doors, but the rain fragmented everything. Christ, he just wanted to get this, whatever it was, over with. It worried him that it couldn't wait until tomorrow. What on earth had he done wrong? He knew he'd missed a few deadlines, but nothing this important, surely? Had he somehow upset a parent? He should never have written that comment on Kevin Barton's homework.

He wiped condensation from the side window and squinted into the darkness. It had to be round here somewhere, this was definitely the right road. What number was on that house? A hundred and something? He couldn't tell.

Thump. Lurch. Suddenly, the car was half on the kerb.

With an involuntary cry, he stood on the brakes and brought the car to a halt. He remained motionless for a moment, as though waiting for the danger to pass, then let out a long, deep breath and uncurled his white-knuckled fingers from the wheel.

The car's interior was dimly illuminated now by the streetlamp he'd almost hit and he grabbed the scrap of paper he'd scrawled Isaac Christian's address on. Peering through the glass he forced his eyes to focus on the number of the nearest house. Incredibly, he was more or less there.

He shouldered open the door, and climbed out into the rain. He hurried the short way along the street and then up the glistening driveway. If it wasn't for the fact that he was getting drenched, he'd have hesitated, tried to come up with a last minute excuse for going home and sorting out his Star Trek videos, or even tackling the stack of long overdue marking he'd brought home the last three weekends in a row.

He rang the bell.

The door opened after only a couple of moments. Isaac Christian, the headmaster at the school where Gordon taught, greeted him warmly and ushered him inside. He was a sprightly gentleman, though he walked with a stick. His pointed beard and the white stripe down the

centre of his still thick but greying hair gave him an air of eccentricity. Isaac took Gordon's coat and hung it on a peg.

"Sorry about the short notice, old fellow."

"That's..."

"I'm jolly glad you could come. Fancy a game of snooker?"

"Well, I..." said Gordon. Snooker? Surely that's not what he'd been summoned for?

"Good. Come on, old chap." Isaac led the way through to a patio area which was enclosed by an elaborate glass conservatory. Most of the space on the patio was taken up by a full size snooker table which sat there daring anyone not to play snooker on it. Isaac quickly set up the table and handed him a cue. Gordon eyed the cue doubtfully. Turning to Isaac, he said, "I really do have a lot to..." at which point Isaac said, "You break. So, Gordon, how have you been feeling lately?"

"Well I..."

"Jolly good," said Isaac. "Go on; take your shot, my man." Gordon, struggling to suppress expressions of confusion and angst, took his shot, scattering the balls about the table. To his relief, he succeeded in not tearing the baize, or sending any of the balls sailing through the air to destroy any of Isaac's impressive array of antiques.

"Bravo! Bravo! Look, that one's going to... go on you blighter, in you go... damn you. Rotten luck old boy," said Isaac, and studied the layout of the table. As he bent over to line up for his shot, he added, "I suppose you're wondering why I asked you to come round, aren't you?"

"Well I..." said Gordon, which seemed to be becoming something of a habit.

"Well *I*," continued Isaac, "rather feel you might be somewhat surprised when you learn..." (on the word 'learn', he clenched his teeth and struck the cue ball, which ambled round the table avoiding absolutely everything else) "the reason," he concluded. He seemed totally satisfied with his hopeless shot. "Two shots to you," he beamed.

Gordon took the cue, and said, "I've really got rather a lot of... er... I mean... perhaps you could... what I mean is... well I..."

"Come on, chap, I haven't got all night," said Isaac, which was exactly what Gordon had been wanting to say to him, and now he wondered why he had found it so difficult. He took his shot quickly and potted a red ball, but the white one followed it in.

"Rotten luck, that man!" said Isaac, and put the cue ball back on the table.

"Isaac," said Gordon, with a sudden burst of courage, "do you think... I mean, could we get to..."

“I know, I know. You have a lot to get on with and you can’t really spare the time to play silly games with an old fool. Am I right?”

“Yeee...” Gordon began, “No. No. Old fool? Not at all, Mr Christian.”

“The reason is this,” said Isaac, and executed another fruitless shot. He made a non committal grunt, and went on with his story. “You see, Gordon, I am, like you, a man with responsibilities. I have no time for trivialities such as snooker, which probably goes some way to explaining why I am so atrociously bad at it.”

Gordon nodded slowly, and tried to get a look at the clock without Isaac noticing.

Isaac went on, “My responsibilities are far greater than even you may imagine. I am, and this may have escaped your attention, from the future, and I travelled back in time so I could hide a very special orb.” He smiled at Gordon and chalked the tip of his cue.

Oh great. Terrific. The pressure had finally got to the old man. Why couldn’t he have chosen Mrs Donaldson to have his mental breakdown in front of?

“I can see you’re shocked, Gordon, and I understand that all this is going to be hard for you to believe. But I’m sure you’ll get used to the idea in due time. Chalk?”

Gordon’s face twitched into an involuntary smile as he took the chalk.

Isaac went on. “You see, the reason I invited you round was because I need you to do something for me. You must listen very carefully to what I’m going to say, Gordon.” Gordon gave his best sympathetic smile, and nodded slowly. “I may well ask you to write a précis of it for me at playtime.” Isaac gave a little chuckle. After a long, awkward moment, Gordon decided he’d better laugh at Isaac’s joke, but it came out a little too loud and a little too late. “This,” Isaac said, undeterred, and held up the cue ball, “is of great importance to the safety of the entire galaxy. If this falls into the wrong hands, we, that is, the whole of mankind, not to mention any number of galactic alien races, could be in a spot of bother. Deep, deep bother, that is. In fact, we’d be up Bother Creek without a paddle.” He smiled again, but Gordon just blinked and wondered if he was dreaming.

Isaac’s smile dissolved into a sigh, and he continued.

“My pursuers have finally caught up with me. They want the orb, Gordon, and it is very important they don’t get it.” The cube of chalk which Gordon had been twisting on the end of his cue all this time fractured into a tumble of blue crumbs. He smiled awkwardly, and blew the excess chalk dust into the air. Isaac wafted at it, coughed, and continued. “Yesterday, what I had feared all along finally started to happen. They are on to me. They have tracked me down. They will strike soon. And that is where you come in. You must take the orb home with you, and hide it.”

Gordon had absolutely no idea what to say. But he felt himself under enormous pressure to say *something*. Almost involuntarily, he breathed out through his vocal chords and left the decision about what words to form entirely up to his lips and tongue.

“I’d be delighted to,” they said.

“Wonderful, wonderful,” Isaac beamed. “I know you are the right man for the job. In fact, something tells me you are inextricably connected to all this, which is why I have chosen you, but time will tell.”

Inextricably connected? What was he talking about? Gordon wondered what he should do about him. He’d have to tell someone the old man had totally lost his marbles. And gained an orb.

He searched his mind for an excuse to leave. The oven. That’s it! He would tell Isaac he’d left a pie in the oven, and had to go immediately. Be assertive, he thought. Don’t take no for an answer. Put this stupid snooker stick down and walk out of here. Make your excuses and leave. Don’t hang around.

“I must go now, Isaac. It’s been ever so nice chatting with you, but now I have to go.”

He attempted to move towards the door, but Isaac’s expression froze him. It wasn’t a cruel expression; it wasn’t an expression of command or domination. Rather, it was the deep wisdom he saw in the dark eyes, and the unselfish concern he read in the lines of the usually so carefree face which caught Gordon’s attention. This wasn’t a joke, and for a moment, it didn’t seem like madness either. It obviously *was* madness, of course, Gordon reminded himself, but just for a moment it didn’t seem like it.

However, in a bid to re-energise his sense of utter disbelief, which had been such a comfort to him up until now, Gordon said, “May I respectfully suggest, Mr Christian, Isaac, that you allow yourself another day in bed? Don’t worry about school, we’ll cope. You’ve been under a lot of pressure and...”

“Give me that cue, Gordon.” Gordon gave him the cue.

“Jolly good,” said Isaac. “Now, if you look out of the window you will see two men in a red Datsun Cherry watching the house. Be very discrete; I don’t want them to see you yet.”

Gordon did as he was told. As he moved the curtain aside he saw a small red car, which he assumed to be a Datsun Cherry, but he couldn’t see whether or not anyone was in it. He let the curtain fall back into place.

“I’m going into hiding for a while,” Isaac said, “but we will meet again.”

“Ooh, lovely,” Gordon managed. Isaac held out the white ball, and Gordon eyed it suspiciously. There was a long silence. Gordon hated long, awkward silences, and it was apparent to him that the only way he was going to end this one was to take the ball.

He took the ball.

“Guard it well, my dear friend,” Isaac said.

“I will,” Gordon nodded, forcing a smile, but Isaac gripped his arm suddenly.

“Listen to me, Gordon. If you remember nothing else, it is imperative that you remember this: soon, I may have to ask you to meet me in that pub where we had last year’s staff Christmas meal. Do you remember it?”

“That one in Tallington?”

“Indeed.”

“I thought you said it was a grubby little place.”

“Oh, I did,” Isaac smiled. “But that is where you will find me when you come for me.”

“When I...?”

“Yes. We’ll meet there soon.” Mercifully, Isaac released Gordon’s arm.

Gordon helped himself to his coat and stepped out into the rain. He glanced across at the Datsun. Although its headlights were off, there did seem to be people in it, but he imagined he could probably come up with an explanation for that which didn’t involve time travel, orbs from the future, or the forces of evil.

“Don’t worry about a thing, Mr Christian,” Gordon said. “We can manage without you for a few days.” Then he added reassuringly, “Your ball is safe with me,” and he waved it in the air. The old man shushed him and gestured to him to put the ball away. “Oh, sorry!” Gordon chirped, and pushed the ball into his coat pocket. He got into his car and the engine resentfully roused itself from its peaceful slumber. As he pulled away he noticed in the mirror a pair of headlights fairly close behind him, and was a little unsettled to see that, although he was, as usual, driving with the speed and control of a supermarket trolley, the car behind made no attempt to overtake.

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Somehow, the relative sanity of his own home didn’t seem to offer him much comfort. The stack of children’s books had slewed sideways across the floor into a sprawling mass. Gordon eyed them guiltily, knowing he’d never be able to concentrate on them now. A swarm of questions buzzed around inside his head: what was wrong with Mr Christian? And

what was Gordon going to do about him? Should he tell someone the head teacher had gone bananas? But, more importantly, why was there a red Datsun Cherry parked outside his house?

Gordon paced the room. How the hell did he get dragged into this... whatever it was?

Inextricably connected, even.

He swallowed a couple of his so called 'easy to swallow' stress relief pills and looked out of the window again. Yep, the car was still there.

Coincidence, obviously, of course, but even so...

He stood still, breathed deeply, and choked a little on one of the pills, which was about as easy to swallow as a dinner plate. What was he going to do? Something about the whole thing had chilled him, even though it was all utter nonsense. Still, at least it had taken his mind off his marking.