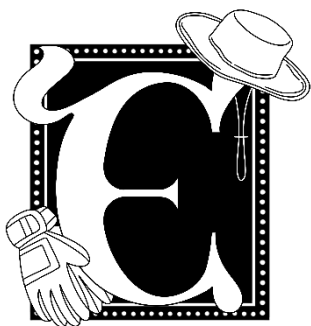


# Chapter One:

## An Umpire is Required



eleven men, young and old, sat in eleven leather armchairs. There was one empty seat at the head of the table.

The walls of the room were covered in cricket bats, cricket jumpers, and pictures of famous cricketers. Except for one. That wall was stacked from floor to ceiling with dusty cricket books packed tightly onto dark wooden shelves.

One of the men drummed his fingers on the mahogany table. His fingernails were perfectly trimmed. As was his white moustache and what remained of his thin, grey hair.

‘Damn nuisance having to wait on the little fellow. I never had to put up with these kinds of things when I was in charge.’

‘And we never had the chance to achieve anything when you were in charge, Number Six. So be quiet and wait for Number One.’

Number Six, the old man with the neatly-trimmed moustache, tutted.

‘Damn nuisance, that’s what I say ...’

But no one was listening to him.

They were all thinking about what was around the corner, and how they were going to take back control of the world of cricket.



‘Your coat, sir?’

‘Thank you, Meadows.’

‘Will there be anything else, sir?’

‘Yes, Meadows, there will be, as a matter of fact.’

‘Follow me to the Larwood Suite; we’ll need a drinks order taken.’

‘Very good, sir.’

Frank Meadows, star batter in the Abbey Road Young Boys First XI, followed Number One down the hall.

Their feet pressed into the plush red carpet. It was soft and plump underfoot, cushioning their steps.

The two men rounded a corner and then ascended a wide flight of stairs.

They passed portraits of famous cricketers.

Bowlers, batters, wicketkeepers.

Cricketers who had done incredible things on the field of play.

Number One reached the Larwood Suite and pushed open the large, heavy door (complete with cricket-ball door handle) that led inside.



‘Very good, Meadows, you have the drinks order. Now be a good chap and fetch those for us, will you?’

‘Certainly, sir.’ He half-bowed as he left. They liked that sort of thing here.

‘Jolly good fellow, that’, said Number Six as the door shut behind Frank Meadows.

‘Deference. That’s what’s missing from cricket today’

‘No recognition of the superior individual.’

‘Not like it was when I was leading the Army XI on our tours of the colonies.’

Numbers One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten, Eleven and Twelve all looked at Number Six.

‘Do shut up, Number Six’, said Number One.

‘There are no colonies anymore, and there haven’t been for a very long time.’

Number Six started to speak, then thought better of it, and instead began inspecting his fingernails.

‘Now, apologies for my lateness, gentlemen, but I had to attend to a minor matter on my way here. If we are all ready, we can get down to business.’

There was a general bobbing of heads and a rumble of agreement.

‘Good. I have the documents.’

Number One pulled a brown leather briefcase onto his lap, flipped open the catches, and retrieved a thick wad of papers.

These were passed around the table, each man taking his own set of documents, until a much smaller pile returned to Number One.

‘Everything is as we agreed?’ asked Number Nine.

Number One nodded.

‘Everything is as we agreed.’

‘Any changes?’ asked Number Eleven.

‘No changes’, said Number One.

‘Fine. Then I suggest we move on and get the thing signed. All in favour?’

Number Eleven glanced up and down the table.

One by one, the rest of the group raised their hands.

‘Then we are agreed’, said Number Eleven. ‘You’ve done your job well, Number One.’

Number One surveyed the room, looking at each of the men sat in front of him. This was his organization now. He ran it. He controlled it. He would take it where it needed to go. And no one would stand in his way. Not Number Six, not Number Eleven. Not anybody.

‘Hang on there, ducky’, said Number Six, leaning forward in his chair. ‘I’m not signing anything without a witness.’

Number One raised an eyebrow.

‘Very wise, Number Six. But you have eleven witnesses right here. Are they not good enough for you? Do you not trust them?’

The words hung in the air for a few moments.

‘I don’t trust a single one of them’, bellowed Number Six, his moustache quivering. ‘And I’m damn sure they don’t trust me. I wouldn’t trust me if I was them. Not one jot. What we need is an umpire. Someone independent.’



Frank Meadows took the small service elevator back up to the Larwood Suite. The twelve drinks rested on the green velvet surface of a drinks trolley.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened.

He pushed the caddy out onto the landing and made his way past a large landscape painting of a cricket ground in the Caribbean.

The artist had captured a quiet moment of play. The batters were halfway down the wicket, talking to each other between overs. The bowler was walking to the start of his run-up. Fielders were getting into position. A peaceful pause before the battle of bat and ball began again.

‘Drinks, gentlemen’, said Frank, as he entered the Larwood suite.

He couldn’t help feeling as if he had interrupted an argument.

‘The boy will do. He’s the perfect fit. Independent. Unbiased.’

Number Six stood up and walked over to where Frank was standing.

‘Serve the drinks, boy, there’s a good chap. Then we have a little job for you. There’s £100 in it if you swear to keep your mouth shut. What, what?’

Frank looked at Number One.

With a swift, dismissive gesture of his hand, Number One indicated to Frank that he should serve the drinks.

What did it matter, thought Number One, if this busboy-cum-waiter learned a little about their business?

What possible effect could it have on the success of his plan? And if it meant Number Six was satisfied, then so be it.

After Frank had served the drinks, a chair was brought across, and room was made in-between Number One and Number Twelve.

‘Take a seat’, said Number One, ‘and remind me of your name.’

‘Frank Meadows.’

‘Good, good. Well, you see, Frank, my friends and I are engaged in a venture. An enterprise. We intend to work together for the good of cricket. To make it better, to be precise. And we are here today to finalise our agreement.

‘I have prepared a contract for us all to sign. A contract that binds us together. And we need a witness.

‘Do you know what a witness is, Frank?’

Frank shifted in his seat. He could feel twelve pairs of eyes upon him.

‘Someone independent. Like an umpire. Who can confirm that everything took place, and that it was all legal, and that everyone was happy.’

Number One smiled.

It was a smile into which a person could fall, if they were not careful, and find themselves trapped.

It was a spider’s web of a smile.

‘There you are, Number Six. Frank is our umpire.’

‘Do you need me to read the contract, sir? Only, I don’t have much experience with that sort of thing. I’m more of a practical guy. Cricket’s my main thing. Playing and coaching.’

Number One shook his head.

‘No, no, no, Frank. You don’t need to read all the boring legal mumbo-jumbo. It will simply be enough that you are a witness.’

‘Watch us sign the documents. Make sure we are all happy. Make sure we are signing them freely, and then you sign yourself.’

‘Not bad for one hundred pounds, young chap, eh?’ said Number Six, stroking his moustache.

‘Sounds good to me’, said Frank.

‘Excellent: then we’re agreed. Onwards we go. Onwards to the future.’

Number One raised his glass. Everyone else around the table did the same. Apart from Frank, who didn’t have a glass. He raised his hand instead, out of politeness, and wondered whether he would use his £100 to buy a new cricket bat, or a set of shiny red match balls.