

UEFA EURO 2020

A GHOST STORY

by Tom Palmer

CHAPTER ONE

Thursday 10th June 2021

It was late and it was dark. There was a strange buzzing and flickering coming from one of the old floodlights in the far corner of Mel Park football stadium. But that didn't stop Rocky Race and her brother sneaking inside.

They came here once a week, in fact. To get out of the house, take a break from what was happening there. Dad was ill. Very ill. And sometimes you just need to get out and talk.

As usual, once inside Mel Park, Rocky and Roy sat in the home dugout. Neither of them saw the figure in the goal to the left at first, the eerie mist coiling around it. Nor did they notice when the figure began to move towards them. They were too busy talking about how they were supposed to be on a tour of Europe, watching Euro 2020.

'We'd have been there now,' Rocky sighed. 'In Rome. Can you imagine? The night before the opening game. You and me chatting with Italian fans in some café next to the Stadio Olimpico as the sun goes down.'

The plan had been that – at the end of the season – Roy and Rocky would go and watch the whole tournament. And why not? Roy and Rocky were both elite footballers now. They had the summer off and had planned to travel from city to city. Rome to Copenhagen. London to Glasgow. They had their tickets booked and everything.

Then Covid struck. And the best plans they had ever made were ruined.

The eerie figure was halfway across the pitch now. Closer to Rocky and Roy. A cigarette between his fingers. Roy could hear a rattling sound: like those old-fashioned rattles that fans used to bring to football matches 50 years ago. The figure was a large man. Dressed as a goalkeeper.

'We'll have to just watch it on TV,' Roy replied, shivering, smelling cigarette smoke. Not wondering why. Not looking up. Not yet.

'It's rubbish,' Rocky complained. Then she stood up quickly, hitting her head on the top of the dugout, eyes wide. 'Roy,' she gasped. 'Look.'

Roy leaned back in his seat to study his sister. 'Look at what?'

Rocky pointed. Roy looked and saw a figure standing on the touchline in front of them. The smell of cigarette smoke was overpowering now. A great cloud of it was wafting down from the stands and around the figure.

Roy slipped his phone out, ready to tap 999. There was an intruder in Mel Park. He wasn't having that.

Rocky grabbed a heavy broom that was propped against the dugout. 'Who are you?' she snarled.

It was a man. He was white. Wearing a baggy green goalkeeper's top and long shorts. Like something from the 1950s or 1960s. The air around him was quivering.

Roy stood next to his sister. 'No reception,' he muttered. 'It's dead.'

'Like him. He's a ghost,' Rocky said, narrowing her eyes.

Roy felt something like a bolt of electricity go through him. Fear. Raw fear. But he sensed his younger sister was more interested than afraid.

Typical Rocky. It took a lot to freak her out.

'Come on,' Roy whispered, grabbing Rocky's arm. 'Let's go. If he's a ghost, I...'

The shimmering figure stepped back. 'Please. I am not dangerous,' he said, sitting on the pitch now. 'Listen to what I have to say.'

'Come on,' Roy said, pulling at Rocky again. 'We're going.'

Rocky shook her head and addressed the man. 'I recognise you,' she said.

Roy almost smiled. How could his sister be so cool? His heart was hammering so hard he felt sick. And what did she mean? How could she recognise him?

'I am Toby Morton,' the ghost told them. 'Or I was. I am dead now. So, yes, I am a ghost. But back in the day I was one of Melchester's finest.'

'Well, it's been great to meet you,' Roy said. 'But we'd better get home.'

'You can go to Rome, if you prefer,' the ghost said.
'St Petersburg. Copenhagen. Baku. All of the venues.'

Rocky and Roy did not reply. What was he talking about?

'I heard you speaking,' said the ghost, volunteering an answer to their unspoken question. It was like he could hear Roy's thoughts and he was answering them. 'I can take you there. To those cities.'

'How?' Rocky asked.

'You've read A Christmas Carol? It would be a bit like that.'

'Why?' Roy asked a question now.

'Because I know who you are, too. Both of you.'

'No you don't,' Roy said. His fear was surging again.

'Come on,' Rocky said. 'Give him a chance.' Then she asked the man: 'Who are we?'

'This is madness,' Roy went on.

'You're Rocky Race. And you're that so-called Roy of the Rovers. You are the future of this club. And... and I know your dad. He came to watch me in Europe.'

'He's ill,' Rocky said.

'I know,' the ghost replied. 'I'm sorry.'

Roy frowned. He had come here to get away from thinking about his dad. He turned to face the ghost. 'Prove you can do it,' he snapped. 'Prove you can take us to the Euros.'

'Tell me where you want to go,' the ghost said, smiling.

'The middle of the Stadio Olimpico in Rome,' Rocky said.

A swirl of cloud as the floodlights flickered all around Mel Park. That sound of rattling again. That smell of cigarette smoke. Now they were inside another stadium. A huge stadium. It was warm. Much warmer. There was no question where they were. The Stadio Olimpico in Rome. Unmistakable.

'I can bring you here for the game tomorrow night.'

'Really?' Roy asked.

'Really.'

'I'm in,' Rocky said, looking at Roy.

Roy didn't fancy this. It didn't feel right. But he could see that Rocky wanted it. He knew she had a sense of adventure that he had never possessed. And that she needed adventure in her life, especially the way things were with Dad and Covid. And – annoying as his sister was – he wanted her to be happy.

So what should he do? Take a risk? Make his sister happy? Or play it straight? He stared into the shadows of the main stand and thought he saw something else move.

But he dismissed it. He needed to give Rocky an answer. But he had one last question.

'Why would you take us to the Euros?' Roy said to the ghost footballer.

'Because of who you are. Because of what you are going to become for this football club. Both of you. Because of your dad.'

'And you'll take us to any game we want?' Roy asked. 'England's games too?'

'Any game,' the ghost agreed. 'All the games. You'll have a front row seat.'

'Okay. I'm in,' Roy said, not looking closely enough into the shadows of the main stand, not seeing that someone else was watching them, surrounded by a swirling darkness.

The story continues! Further instalments are being written live throughout UEFA EURO 2020 by top author Tom Palmer. Follow Roy of the Rovers and his sister Rocky as they respond to real events as they take place by downloading each new chapter for free, three times a week throughout the tournament: literacytrust.org.uk/euro20.