

# The Bailiff

By George Baggaley

She was certain there were footsteps in the courtyard.

Ears strained. Pulses racing. There! The unmistakable sound of a key turning a lock echoed through the room.

The woman pulled her small son tighter.

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“Why’d anyone wanna spend twelve fuckin’ quid on woke *cooaze cooaze* when ya can get’a bacon butty at Greggs ‘cross town for three-nine’y-nine?!” Terry had wheezed between vape puffs in The Hare & Hounds – still the stronghold for true working locals, where lager was cheap and food familiar.

“These idiots from London,” Terry had sworn. “I give it six months ‘fore we’re called in there.”

The Bailiff didn’t know what couscous was. And he never had the chance to find out. At least, not at Deli Marrakesh on the High Street.

Terry had been right about everything but the time. The shop limped through a customer-less year, give or take, before Stonewall Associates were called in to collect rent three months in arrears - swiftly managing the sale of its kitchen appliances and remaining produce on behalf of the landlord.

It was this reputation for efficiency that had made Stonewall the top enforcement agency in Buckinghamshire.

As the Bailiff stood before Deli Marrakesh on this grey, drizzly Friday afternoon, it looked like more than six weeks since he and Terry bolted the doors. The hand-crafted sign above the entrance was already missing one of its ‘R’s and a crack ran the length of a front window pane that once displayed rows of freshly made falafel.

Several ‘DO NOT ENTER’ Stonewall posters blotted out any view of the interior.

Friday was ‘rounds’ day, when the Bailiff looked in on all the retail units on Stonewall’s books. Part contractual obligation, part squatter deterrent - something his broad, six-foot six frame made him particularly good at.

The lads would often joke about his “death rattle” - the huge bunch of keys pinned to his hip by a steel carabiner that jangled as he stalked the town’s streets. Store owner’s peeping from their windows praying it wasn’t them he was coming for.

It used to only take him a couple of hours to get around the lot. So much so, he’d be in the pub by lunch most weeks. But recent years had seen closure after closure. At last count, Stonewall was mangling about ten percent of the town’s retail space.

“Cost of living crisis? Load of bollocks,” Terry had surmised, plonking another round of Stellas on the table. “My wages ‘av almost doubled since Covid. People just ain’t careful ‘nuff with their money!”

The Bailiff couldn’t complain either. The more businesses went under, the more work he had.

But there was a sadness that nibbled away at him with every storefront he boarded up. Every broken owner he turfed out. Even at the height of the summer just gone, the High Street was a pale imitation of the bustling town artery the Bailiff remembered as a child. As the rain whipped up under his hood on this rain-soaked late-November afternoon, the wet cobbles glinting in the yellow street light were virtually deserted.

Plunged deep in his black trench coat pocket, the Bailiff's hand gripped Deli Marrakesh's ornate brass door key. The shop had become the final stop on rounds day due to its proximity to The Hare. But instead of withdrawing it, he turned on his heels and began trudging back down the High Street towards one of the few places with a light on.

Martha's Bistro was just about clinging on to the Victorian charm its late nineteenth century bricks and mortar bequeathed it. But as the Bailiff squeezed through its small doorway, his eyes were drawn to its neglected wooden frame, exposed and rotting in the rain. Then the sad looking muffins behind the counter, untouched by the day's trickle of customers.

A middle-aged lady with rapidly greying hair emerged from the kitchen. She recoiled slightly at the vast figure filling her parlour, his hairless scalp almost touching the ceiling as he drew back his hood. Her eyes lingered uneasily on the Stonewall insignia sewn across the breast of his fleece, visible between the thick lapels of his open coat. The Bailiff knew this look well. Usually, it meant it wouldn't be long until he was back in a professional capacity.

"Two chicken mayo sarnies please love," he growled to break the silence. "And, err..." his voice faltered slightly as he ordered something unnatural to him. "... A couple of hot chocolates...ta."

The lady regained her composure now she was presented with an order and set to work preparing the food.

"Marshmallows on the chocolates?" she asked, amusing herself at posing this question to such a brute of a man.

"Umm, yeah... and whipped cream if you've got it?" came the slightly sheepish reply, much to her surprise.

Soon the two drinks lay steaming invitingly on the counter, along with the sandwiches.

"There we go. Anything else?" the lady enquired encouragingly.

"Err... yeah... one o'those..."

The Bailiff jabbed a plump pink finger the size of a Cumberland sausage in the direction of a beautifully crafted shortbread. It was carved in the shape of a footballer kicking a ball, with different coloured icing forming the detail of the player's strip.

He exchanged a twenty-pound note for the bag of goods, striding out into the failing light before the lady could return the change.

His breath mingled with the steam of the drinks as he headed back up the Hight Street towards Deli Marrakesh. But instead of approaching the poster-covered front door, he stooped down a side alley that was so tiny it was almost invisible to anyone passing by in a hurry. It led to the back of the premises.

An underwhelming motion light flickered into life, casting a dim orange glow across a tiny secluded courtyard which the Bailiff half-filled as he popped out of the tight brick tunnel.

There was just enough light to see the jagged hole in the bottom left pane of the back door window - the one closest to the handle. It had all the hallmarks of a break-in.

The Bailiff rested the cafe goods on a window sill as he retrieved the key. Despite his best efforts, it made a loud clunk as it turned. Conscious the intruder was now aware of his impending presence, he moved swiftly past a couple of storage cupboards, emerging into the front room of the derelict shop. It still bore evidence of the depth of love and ambition the owners had ploughed into their doomed endeavour, from the classy green wall paint to the pine topped counter.

However, unlike other shuttered establishments on the Bailiff's books, there was a lamp resting on the pine. And it was on.

Beneath it, on a pile of blankets behind the counter, were huddled a woman and a young boy - the mother's eyes widening as she peaked over at the giant in their midst.

"Hello," he offered, as softly as his gruff voice would allow.

"Hel-lo," the woman replied unsteadily, the grip on her son loosening.

"Yous warm'nuff?" the Bailiff enquired, rubbing his arms with the opposite hands.

It took a second for the mother to understand, nodding enthusiastically and gesturing to the blankets the Bailiff had rescued the previous week from the local Oxfam.

"Got yous chicken today.... Di'n't know yous lot di'n't eat pork last time," he said apologetically.

The child was now emerging from behind his mother's slender frame, eying the packages hungrily.

"Aaaaaand..."

With some impromptu showmanship, and a grunt that sounded a little like "ta da!", the Bailiff produced the shortbread footballer, placing it before the boy who squeaked in appreciation.

The Bailiff grinned and savoured the child's reaction for a few seconds before recovering his stony exterior.

"Well... I'll, err, be off then," he concluded with a nod, before making his way towards the back door.

"Yous take care," he added over his shoulder.

"Tashakor-e ziyād," came the soft reply.

Once back on the street, the Bailiff tried typing the woman's parting words into his phone. But, just like last week, Google wasn't forthcoming with an answer, failing to recognise his misspelt jumble of k's, z's and y's.

After a few unsuccessful variations, he gave up and clicked on the app Stonewall ran its operations from. With a few swipes he brought up: 'Premises no.56 – Deli Marrakesh.'

Scrolling to the bottom, he entered the date and time, and ticked two boxes: 'checked' and 'clear'.

Returning the phone to the depths of his trench coat pocket, the Bailiff had one glance back at the former deli. To the untrained eye, it looked empty.

Satisfied, he bowed his head into the drizzle and strode in the direction of the pub, where the lager was cheap and the food familiar.