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CHAPTER 1 BARRY BIGTIME

Barry Bigtime zoomed down the hall of his chateau in his finest puce tailcoat, lilac pantaloons and a thin grey scarf. His bare chest was puffed out like an emperor penguin's. His hair was slicked back so severely that it forced his eyebrows into permanent surprised mode. HE LOOKED ABSURD.

It was a big day for Barry. Important men were coming over to tell him how well he was doing at life, which he always loved.

Barry's guests were due to arrive any minute. Because his chateau was so OUTRAGEOUSLY LARGE. Barry had to travel through it in a bright pink golf cart to have any chance of reaching the front door in time.

As he sped past expensive sculptured tributes to his past boyband creations, he spotted the rapidly approaching figure of his private chef, Fabio.

One of Barry's favourite things to do was drive at full speed towards his housekeeping staff, changing direction at the last minute to miss them by inches but **SCARE THEM HALF TO DEATH.**



This was a particularly close call. Fabio heard the cart just in time and dived to his left at the very last second, crashing into a bronze statue of Baezone, Barry's finest boyband creation. Barry screeched to a halt.

'I don't pay you to lay around on the job, Fabio,' sneered Barry. 'What are you feeding me today?'

'Deep-fried penguin wings in a Jurassic broth made with real dinosaur fossils like you requested, sir,' mumbled Fabio, using the bronze shoulders of Proudy from Baezone to get to his feet.



'Don't forget the lavender-infused water,' barked Barry.

Barry had been drinking lavender-infused water for the past month because it was supposed to make his farts smell like a meadow. He had been inviting all his friends over to show off his new sweet-smelling farts but when the time came for him to pass gas, it just smelt like **A NORMAL FART**. However, because Barry is rich, important and powerful, all the guests had to laugh and call him a legend despite the hot stench burning at their nostrils.

'Of course, sir,' said Fabio with a bow, 'I'll start infusing the water right away.'

Barry nodded and sped away down the corridor in a flash of pinks and purples.

Barry Bigtime's chateau was built on the edge of his hometown of Crudwell. *Chateau*, by the way, is the French word for 'castle', but things sound more fancy in French so sometimes posh people use that word.

Barry liked making things sound more extravagant than they were. His real name was Glen Jones, but in show business, if you have a normal name like yours or ours, you choose a better one to seem more exciting.

Barry cruised into the chateau foyer and screeched to a halt inches away from one of the gardeners, who couldn't have been a day younger than seventy-five. The old man turned, yelped and fell head over heels into a fountain. He sat, stunned, in the shallow murky water as a bronze statue of Barry tinkled on his crinkly bald head.

Right on time the doorbell chimed, to the tune of Baezone's first hit single, 'Breaktime Girlfriend'.

Barry got out of the golf cart, howling with laughter at the gardener, and strutted to the front door. He flung it open to see three nervous, smart-looking men on his doorstep.

'Gentlemen! So great to see you. Glad you could make it all the way to this miserable little town!'

'Barry Bigtime! King of the Boybands!' yelled a short man named Winston. He had a big nose, an auburn moustache and wore a beige suit that looked like a scarily tight squeeze. He tipped his matching cowboy hat at Barry.

'Winston, my round friend, such a delight to see you,' said Barry, who was too rich for manners.

'Gee, Barry. This is some way from the big city,' said Winston, who was trying to hide his nervousness with chatter. 'You must like something out here to have withstood the hankerin' to head to Hollywood, huh?'

Barry was born and raised in Crudwell. He'd never been popular. When he became **'KING OF THE BOYBANDS'** he used his millions to buy up acres of cherished parkland and built his chateau overlooking the rest of the town.

'I hate this town, Winston, and everyone who lives here,' said Barry, who looked like he could smell sewage. 'But it gives me joy to know that the same people who doubted me now look at my gorgeous chateau with faces full of envy. Besides, I don't keep you around for your real estate advice – I need you to keep *The Big Time*'s television ratings at their lofty levels now that the new season has started.' Barry patted

the short man on the head like he was a good dog, but Winston looked hot and bothered.

Barry turned to the second man. He was tall and thin, balancing circular spectacles on a nose that was as wonky as his hair was straight.

'Hector Macaulay!' bellowed Barry. He gave Hector a strong slap on the back and the man looked like he was about to shatter from the impact. Hector had the look of a man who was being sent into the Colosseum to fight lions.

'Good morning, Barry,' he said. He made a good effort to sound calm but a bead of sweat betrayed him by sliding down his forehead.

'You financial types are always so dry,' scoffed Barry. 'Looking after my money is the easiest job in the world, Macaulay! **Get a smile on your face,** I can't bear to look at you.'

Barry turned to the third man. His hair was thinning on the crown but long silk-like strands hung past his shoulders. His ruddy skin was the same colour as a hot dog sausage. He wore a baby blue suit, an open shirt and his weathered old face looked like it had seen a lot of good times. It did not look like it was going to see any good times today, though.

'Marcos Paul!' shouted Barry unnecessarily as Marcos was only inches from his face.

'Hello, Barry,' muttered Marcos hesitantly. 'H-how is it going my man? M-m-my dude?'

'What on earth is wrong with you?' said Barry. 'You've just come back from managing a megatour with Baezone and The Fenton Dogz. Did you have a little too much fun out there?'

Marcos gave a nervous chuckle and a shrug.

Barry smiled. He was used to people being nervous in his presence. **HE WAS BARRY BIGTIME!** The most powerful person in the music industry. He got lost in a daydream about how lucky other people must feel to be breathing the same air particles as him. The other men waited patiently on the doorstep as Barry's eyes glazed over, their faces in pain from exchanging too many awkward smiles.

'Come on in.'

CHAPTER 2 SINK OR SWIM

'We're here!' yelled Barry as the golf cart screeched to a halt. A housekeeper who hadn't been quick enough to leap out of the way rolled off the front of the cart to the floor with a splat. Barry stepped over them as if they were a dog dropping.

The men followed Barry into the largest room in the chateau. The floors were made from shiny marble and the ceiling was high and grand. In front of them was a large swimming pool in the shape of Barry's head. The pool flooring was a terrifying mosaic of Barry's face made from various precious stones.

Winston's head swivelled, searching for regular meeting items like tables and chairs, but found nothing except for a range of inflatable animals.

'Gee, Barry . . . Uh . . . Are we goin' swimmin' or are we havin' a meetin'?'

Barry stripped off his lilac tailcoat, dropped his pantaloons and flung his scarf into the air, which daintily landed on Marcos's balding head. He stood **PROUDLY** in a little pair of pink Speedos.

'We're having the meeting in the pool today. See if that can't put a smile on your stupid faces.'

'Barry, sorry,' whimpered Hector, 'but I don't have any, uh . . . stuff. For swimming.'

Do you know those times at school when a grown-up has forgotten to pack your PE kit and you have a terrible realisation that you may have to borrow old stinky kit from lost property? This was very much the feeling of these three men.

'Stuff will be provided for all three of you.'

Barry ordered them to change. They returned and he surveyed them from the pool, leaning on his side, head on hand, in a giant inflatable clam.

Winston now wore a tiny, flesh-coloured pair of trunks that were so small you could barely tell he was wearing anything at all. It was a haunting sight and we're sorry that we have to describe it to you.

Hector was wearing a bright red pair of shorts that were far too big. He desperately clutched his £5,000 laptop with one hand while stopping his trunks from falling down with the other.

Marcos was wearing a ladies' swimming costume that was decorated with crabs, lobsters and other crustaceans, while holding onto a leather-bound folder of important-looking documents.

'Fetch an inflatable, get yourselves in here and tell me how great I am!' yelled Barry.

Hector chose a magnificent inflatable unicorn. He tucked his laptop into the elastic of his trunks, wrapped a spindly arm around the beast's neck and took to the water with the trembling grace of a baby giraffe. Winston chose a large inflatable dolphin that was sporting a rather fetching sailor's hat. Winston, who couldn't swim and was terrified of water, clung to the dolphin for dear life as he entered the pool. Marcos, who had been to his fair share of pool parties in his time, slid gracefully into the water on the back of a pink flamingo.



Barry looked around, satisfied. 'Now, start lavishing me with praise. Hector!' he yelled. 'How great are the Big Time finances?'

Hector delicately and carefully fumbled with his laptop while trying to stay balanced on his unicorn.

'So . . . Mr Bigtime . . . I've put together a graph . . . of . . . your financial balance for the year . . .' Hector looked close to tears. He slowly turned the laptop around and showed Barry a graph. The graph was a long red line that looked like a sad worm with its tail in the air, burying its head deep underground. Worms with their heads in the ground are not good news in graph land.

Barry's eyes narrowed **DANGEROUSLY**. He paddled the inflatable clam slowly towards Hector who was trembling so hard it looked like his unicorn was trying to win a dance-off with itself.

'This doesn't look good,' snarled Barry.

Hector gulped. 'After the failures of the Barry Big Time Burgers, the closure of Barryland, and the legal costs from last year which we don't talk about . . . You owe the bank . . . a considerable amount of money.'

Barry started turning pink.

'If the next boyband you create isn't as big . . . if not bigger than Baezone ever were, by Christmas . . . Then you could lose the chateau, the TV studio, the—**AHHHH!**

There was a pop as Barry pulled the plug on Hector's inflatable unicorn. With a sad hiss, the unicorn's horn began to flop and then its body collapsed. Hector desperately tried to keep his laptop above water and stop his trunks from abandoning him as the unicorn sank into the depths of Barry Bigtime's pool.

Barry's eyes flashed towards Marcos. 'How has this happened?! Baezone and The Fenton Dogz were on a mega-tour!'

'The sales were, um, disappointing,' stammered Marcos. 'Baezone hype has been diminishing for several years now, Barry, surely you've seen that? And all our other boybands have just never come close to their success. We're trying with The Fenton Dogz but unfortunately they're just a bit, you know . . .' Marcos trailed off, trying to think of a nice word. 'Average.'

Barry looked at Winston, who looked like he wanted to paddle on his inflatable dolphin back across the Atlantic. 'What about *The Big Time*'s TV ratings?'

'Gee, Barry, I don't know what to tell ya,' muttered Winston.

We'll help Winston out here: The Big Time ratings

stank. It used to be the biggest TV show in the world. Hopeful bands and musicians would queue for hours to audition to appear on *The Big Time* live shows. The best ones would head to The Big Time Grand Final, singing to win a spot at the **WORLD MUSIC FESTIVAL**, **THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS EVENT IN WORLD MUSIC.**

(Ugh, we sound like the advert.) Anyway, the main problem here is that Barry Bigtime would always fix the voting in the final, so boybands he created always won.

'Ya see, the networks are unhappy with the ratings

this year . . . It's like nobody's interested in TV singin'

talent shows any more, you know? Also, the World Music Festival have been unhappy with the calibre of contestants . . .' Winston looked everywhere but at Barry. 'They're thinkin' of withdrawin' their offer of givin' the show winners a spot at the festival. They're sayin' that the acts are all the same, and a little old fashioned —they'd prefer to give the prize to one of

those big YouTube bands, or ... OH COME ON, BARRY!'

The Y word had tipped Barry over the edge. He paddled towards Winston, who had neither the grace nor guile to avoid the incoming clam. Barry grabbed the inflatable dolphin's sailor hat and tore it from its head. Air rushed out and the hatless dolphin disappeared into the pool.

Barry turned his clam towards Marcos, who, despite the carnage, was showing as much composure as possible for a man sitting on an inflatable flamingo in a crustacean-emblazoned swimming costume.

'Look, Barry, I know you hate YouTube bands,' began Marcos.

'Amateurs!' spat Barry. 'I choose who becomes successful in this industry, Marcos. Who do these little maggots think they are, trying to get famous on their own, in my world? I own it. *Me!*

Marcos put on his most soothing voice. 'The world is changing, dude! Why don't you just think about giving the prize to someone other than your bands?

Invite one of these up-and-coming Internet bands to give it a shot? If they're good it could boost ratings and keep World Music Festival happy?' Marcos pulled a sheet of paper from his leather-bound file and handed it to Barry.

'Me and a few of the music team have put together a list of up-and-coming bands causing a splash on YouTube.'

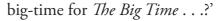
Barry glared at the list of young musicians who felt they could make their own way in the music industry on raw talent alone and without his brilliance. Barry jabbed at the first band name on the list with his finger.

'BNA? What does that stand for?'

Marcos shrugged. At this moment, he thought it could stand for 'Barry's Not Amused'.

'Oh, Barry, BNA are some real talented fellas. A little under the radar now, but the BNAniacs are a rabid fan base.' He paused. 'We did put some feelers out, but they said *The Big Time* may not be for them. But—'

'I'm sorry,' Barry interrupted, the intensity of his sploshing increasing. 'This BNA think they're too



Marcos looked Barry dead in the eyes. He knew what was coming. He said a quiet goodbye to the flamingo as with a loud **POP** and a **HISS** the

flamingo's once proud neck crumpled. The cold pool water rose above the crabs and lobsters of his swimwear and swallowed the file of Internet boybands. As he splashed, the inflatable clam shell loomed over him, Barry's head in the centre like an evil pearl.

'I want all of you to listen to me. Winston, Marcos, Hector. You get this BNA to appear on *The Big Time* tomorrow. I don't care what it takes or what you have to promise them. You get them to come to the studio and we'll see if they're too big-time for *The Big Time*.'

'But the auditions are over! Week Three of the live show is tomorrow night!' spluttered Marcos.

'Well, I'll just invent a brand new special fast-pass wildcard rule. **It's my show, you idiot, we can do whatever we want!'** Barry yelled, splashing more water in Marcos's open mouth. 'If BNA are for whatever reason not on *The Big Time*

stage tomorrow night, all three of you will be in a very different pool with some very different creatures, none of which will be inflatable.'

With that he stormed out of the pool, leaving the three men thrashing around after the worst tell-Barryhow-good-he-is-at-life day ever.

Barry **SQUELCHED**, still sopping wet, to the golf cart, fired up the engine and zipped down the hall. He was heading to his laboratory. There was only one way to save *The Big Time*. It was time to fire up the **BOYBAND GENERATOR** once more.