

STRIKE

To Harrie, with love from me to you

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STRIKE

MITCH JOHNSON



USBORNE



Place the ball. Pick your spot. Three steps back.
Breathe.

I feel my chest rise and fall. A cool breeze ripples the red material of my shirt. Off to one side, the corner flag twitches and flutters.

Breathe.

The goalkeeper yells at the players in front of him. He wants an extra man in the wall – a fifth. He’s panicking. The free kick is in the best possible position for me, which is the worst possible position for him: far enough out to get the ball up and over the wall, but close enough that he will see it late. Very late. Too late.

Breathe.

Teddy stands a few paces to my right. He runs a hand

through his shock of ginger hair, judging the distance to goal. But he's a decoy. He'll take one step and stop, which is when I'll whip the ball over the wall and into the top corner. Just like we practised. Over and over and over again.

Breathe.

I hear someone clap from the sideline and I know, even before he speaks, that it's Dad.

"You've got this, Owen."

He almost manages to keep the tension out of his voice. Almost. But I know he must be nervous. He's the coach, after all, and we're one-nil down in the Youth Cup final with seconds left on the clock. This free kick will be the last kick of the game.

Unless I score.

Breathe.

I listen as the referee tells the wall to move back, but my eyes are fixed on the ball. I don't look at the goal. I know where the goal is. The goal never moves. I don't look at the keeper either. He'll be dead centre. He has to be, if he wants to cover both sides. And I don't look at the other touchline, the one opposite Dad and all the other parents, where two men stand apart from each other.

The scouts. The *actual* scouts: one from Liverpool and one from Everton, which explains the unfriendly distance between them – and the reason my heart is hammering in my chest.

Breathe.

"You've got this, Owen," Dad says again, as though reading my mind. "Eight days a week."

That makes me smile. It's a joke: I'm so obsessed with football Mum used to say I play eight days a week. I hum a line from the Beatles song of the same name quietly under my breath.

Breathe.

I visualize the flight of the ball, imagine the satisfying sound of it hitting the back of the net. Teddy is the one I'll turn to first to celebrate with, just like I always have. We've been playing together for so long that he's something else I don't have to look at; I know where he'll be instinctively. But I look at him now and he gives me a tight, determined nod.

Breathe.

The five-man wall is set. The referee takes up his position and blows the whistle. A sudden hush descends on the pitch. I can feel every pair of eyes on me.

This is it.

Teddy takes a step towards the ball and stops. That's my cue. I run up and swing my right leg, wrapping the inside of my boot around the ball. The connection is beautiful, and I know even before the ball leaves my boot that it's good. The defenders jump in a desperate attempt to block the shot but the ball arcs over their heads and immediately dips towards the top corner. Through the wall of bodies, I glimpse the goalkeeper take a step to the right and stop short, his face turned to the sky. Like everyone else, he is powerless now, a spectator.

Time seems to slow. I hear someone on the touchline let out a tormented shriek as the ball glides towards the goal. I notice the corner flag snap to attention as a sudden gust whips across the pitch. I feel my heart beat once.

I lose sight of the ball as it dips behind the wall. I wait for the sound – that soft purr as the ball rolls across the squares of the net. I hold my breath.

And then the sound comes – only it isn't the sound I'm expecting. Instead of that satisfying purr, what I hear is a loud, clanging rattle as the ball cracks against the crossbar. It flies high into the air and I'm already moving towards the box in case it drops in front of the goal. But then I stop. It's dropping behind, out of play, into touch.

And then I hear another sound, startlingly close and

deafeningly loud: two short toots on a whistle, followed by a long blast.

And then I hear a third sound. Cheering. From the touchline but mostly from right in front of me. The wall has become a huddle, bouncing up and down as more players pile in to join the celebrations.

I squat down on my heels and run a hand across my forehead.

I missed.

We lost.

I *missed*.

I feel Teddy's hand ruffle the hair on the back of my head.

"I thought that was going in, mate," he says.

So did I.

But I *missed*.

"Next time." He reaches a hand under my arm and hauls me to my feet.

I can't face him or any of my teammates. Most of them are lying scattered around the penalty area like casualties on a battlefield. I've let them all down. Even worse, I've let Dad down. He's poured so much time and energy into me and this team, and it's all been for nothing.

Because of me.

The thought of seeing his disappointment is so unbearable that I turn the other way, towards the opposite touchline, then really wish I hadn't.

The scouts – the ones I'd dreamed of impressing and being signed by at the full-time whistle – are walking away. I watch them pass the clubhouse, where the Youth Cup trophy and medals are arranged on a table. I watch them enter the car park. I watch them climb into their cars and drive away, taking my dreams with them.

They don't look back.



I shuffle around the pitch after the game, shaking hands with the other players. Then I stand in a circle with my teammates and listen to Dad deliver a team talk. I don't hear a word of it. I watch numbly as the other team is presented with the trophy. *Their* trophy. I clap for as long as I can manage, then I go and sit on the touchline.

We're pretty much the last ones to leave, what with Dad being the coach. I want to go to bed and crawl under the covers and never emerge again, but instead I have to hang around, getting colder as the wind picks up. Teddy comes over and drapes a jacket around my shoulders. He sits beside me while Dad stuffs bibs and cones into a big holdall. Teddy doesn't say anything – just sits there. We watch the car park empty. Then we watch Dad take the nets down.

Eventually, he's ready to go. We help Dad carry one of the bags and dump it in the boot, before flopping onto the back seat. Dad gets in but doesn't start the car. He sits with his hands resting on the steering wheel.

"Want to talk about it?" he says, looking at us in the rear-view mirror. "Five-minute rule?"

The "five-minute rule" means we can talk about a match for five minutes, but then we have to move on. It's a way of making sure we don't sulk over defeats or get too carried away with a win. Today, it's obviously about sulk-avoidance.

Normally I'm happy to dissect a game, even the ones we lose. But there isn't usually as much at stake as there was today. And it's usually not my fault. I can tell Teddy doesn't want to talk either. He keeps his eyes down, pulling at a loose thread on the hem of his shorts. I shake my head.

"I see," Dad says. "It must be serious. How about a song?"

Neither of us respond, which Dad obviously takes as a yes. He taps his phone screen and a few seconds later, the opening bars of "Hey Jude" play through the car's speakers.

"I don't want to feel better," I mutter, looking out at the white frames of the empty goals.

Surprisingly, Dad hears me. "I know how you feel," he says.

And he does know.

But now isn't the time for *that* conversation.

He starts the car and drives us home.

By the time we drop Teddy back at his house, I do feel slightly better. But also sadder, because the music reminds me of Mum.

Music is weird like that.

When we get home, the car makes an angry screeching noise as Dad reverses into a tight space by the kerb. It's been making that sound for a while. Dad kills the engine and we sit in silence, listening to the car settle. Then he twists round to face me properly. I can sense a team talk coming, whether I want it or not. I keep my eyes on our narrow house, squashed in between all the others.

"I know you're upset, Owen, but you just played one of the best matches I've ever seen you play. We lost by a single goal to a very good team. There's a lot to be proud of."

I know he's right. I also know that spinach is good for you. Doesn't mean I want it.

"I missed," I say, hating how small my voice sounds.

“You mean that free kick? Owen, it was almost perfect.”

“*Almost* wasn’t good enough. I should have scored. You would have scored. The team was counting on me.” I see my scowl deepen, reflected in the glass. “I let them down.”

“Ha!” Dad says, so loudly and unexpectedly that it makes me jump.

“What?” I say, frowning at him. “What’s so funny?”

Dad looks at me – properly looks at me – and his eyes are wet and kind and full of something so honest it makes me squirm a little: love, or pride, or hope.

“Owen, the only way to let your teammates down is to give up, to not try. There is no other way. You tried your best, and no one can ask for more than that.” He reaches back and tilts my face so that our eyes are level. “Chin up, son.”

“But the scouts...” I say.

“Don’t worry about them. One of them was from Everton anyway.” He grimaces. “Can you imagine?”

I smile even though I’m not done sulking. Dad supports Liverpool: Mum supported Everton. The battle for my allegiance began the moment I was born, which is why in some baby photos I’m wearing tiny Liverpool kits, and in

others I’m wearing tiny Everton ones. Dad swears the reason I love ketchup so much is because he used to put it with every meal, so that there would always be red on my plate.

But in the end, I shocked them both by picking Tranmere Rovers – the undisputed third best team on Merseyside. I just couldn’t pick between Liverpool and Everton: it felt too much like choosing one parent over the other. I could tell they were both disappointed, but they were also relieved. I remember Mum turning to Dad and saying, “I thought he was going to say the ‘M word.’”

The “M word” is *Manchester*. It pretty much counts as swearing in our house.

“Maybe I’ll get spotted by Tranmere,” I say now, deciding to play along.

“Hey,” Dad says, smiling. “You didn’t play *that* badly.”

“Tranmere Rovers are on the up!”

“You’re probably right about that,” he says. “After all, it’s not like they can go much further down.” He winks. “And you’re right about something else too.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“I probably would have scored that free kick.”

“In your dreams!”



I go straight into the garden to practise my free kicks.

We live in a terraced house, so the garden is really narrow – about half as wide as a goal – and it ends in a whitewashed brick wall that is the back of someone’s garage. I drag two wheelie bins into position to form a wall and prop their lids open. When everything is set up, I fetch the bag of footballs from the boot, place one on the patchy lawn and take a deep breath. I listen to the sounds of my neighbourhood: a dog barking, a distant argument, the wail of a police siren. I try to clear my mind until it’s just me, the ball and the wall.

Dad has stencilled boxes on the brickwork for me to aim at, and the first shot hits the one in the top left corner with a *boom*. I take a second shot, watching as it whips

over the bins and hits the mark again. My third one is a replica of the first two, bouncing off the target with a loud *slap*.

Right on cue, Mrs Lindsey, our next-door neighbour, leans out of an upstairs window. She’s wearing bright yellow rubber gloves and a bandana that keeps most of her steely hair out of her face. Mrs Lindsey is mostly nice but a little unpredictable, a bit like a cat. Which perhaps isn’t a coincidence as she lives with three of them.

“Are you planning to keep that up all afternoon, Master Sharp?”

“Not all afternoon, Mrs Lindsey, no.”

“Good, because I want to do some gardening later and I want to do it in peace.”

“I understand, Mrs Lindsey. I’ll stop soon.”

She disappears back inside, closing the window. I place another football on the grass, but I’ve hardly taken a step back when I hear the window swing open again.

“I hope you’re going to compensate me for all this disturbance.”

I turn around. “What’s that, Mrs Lindsey?”

“Compensation. For all that I’ve put up with over the years.”

For a moment, I think she's talking about all the help she's given us – still gives us – but Mrs Lindsey isn't like that. I look around our little garden, confused.

“Not *now*,” she says, as though that's obvious. “I don't want compensation *now*. I want compensation when you're a professional footballer and can buy me a nice house in the country. Somewhere I can get a bit of peace and quiet.”

“It's not that bad round here, Mrs Lindsey.”

A police siren blares past, interrupting our conversation. She raises her eyebrows.

“A big house in the countryside, understand? One of those posh villages in Cheshire would do nicely. And I want it in writing.”

Then she's gone again. Mrs Lindsey is all right, really. Better than all right. She brought round big cottage pies and pasta bakes and trifles, back when Mum... Back when it was still new and bewildering, instead of just bewildering.

I take one last shot, kicking the ball much harder than I need to, before heading back inside. Dad sits on the sofa with a mug of tea. He nods at the TV, where a group of pundits stand beside an immaculate football pitch. Behind them, sprinklers arc back and forth, the

water sparkling in the sunlight.

“They're building up to the Harrowfield game,” Dad says. “Sounds like there's no end to the injury woes.”

There's no joy in Dad's voice. He may be a massive Liverpool fan, but he's never glad to see someone get injured. Because the thing with Dad is that he could have been a professional. He was a bit of a superstar: team captain, top scorer, playing for a top-flight academy with interest from half a dozen more. He was all set for the big time until a defender put in a heavy tackle to prove a point early in a match. The point that defender proved is that if you hurt someone's knee badly enough, they'll never play football competitively again. And that was the end of Dad's dream.

He doesn't talk about it much, but I can see him thinking about it at moments like this, as he absent-mindedly massages his left knee.

Sometimes I wonder how different our life would be if that hadn't happened. How we'd live in a much bigger house. How we'd never have to worry about money. How I'd get to go to football matches every week. So far this season I've been to one match, and that was at Tranmere because there's no way we could afford a game at Liverpool. Having a TV package that lets us

watch live football is as close as I'm going to get, and I know Dad has to do overtime at the warehouse to make sure we can keep it.

But then I remember – if it hadn't been for Dad's injury, I wouldn't even *be* here. Dad had years of surgery and physio and hospital appointments to strengthen his knee, and at one of them he was helped by someone training to be a nurse. That person was Mum. So in a way I know I should be grateful that Dad got injured, but how can you be happy about something so sad?

It's why I have to make it as a pro. The only way to make things balance out is to realize Dad's dream and give us the life we should have had.

Dad tuts quietly, shaking his head. He's still massaging his knee. I follow his gaze and see a list of names superimposed beside one of the pundits – the bald one. He was a natural goalscorer, back in the day. I've watched countless videos, ones from a time before HD, when he still had hair.

"It's a really shocking run of bad luck," he says into his microphone. "They've lost Adeyemi, Wallace, Le Blanc and Fernando to injury in the space of a month. Those players have scored sixty goals between them this season. I don't actually know who they'll play up front for the last

few games; they're almost at the point of using kids from the reserve team! It's especially cruel as they've been so strong all season."

"And let's not forget where Harrowfield were just a few years ago," says a pundit with a long ponytail. "Languishing in a lower league, facing bankruptcy: a complete shambles on and off the pitch. What Augustus Sinclair has achieved here is nothing short of miraculous. Yes, he's pumped in a lot of money to get them to where they are, but that's the modern game: that's football."

"You get the impression that he loves this club, don't you?" the host asks.

"You really do," the bald pundit says. "He attends every match; he's hands-on behind the scenes. He *believes* in this club. When Harrowfield got promoted last season and Augustus Sinclair claimed they were title contenders, plenty of people laughed. No one was laughing when they finished second. This season, they've got themselves in a position to win the treble: they've got Bayern Munich in the European semi-final midweek, a cup final to look forward to, and a title race that will go down to the wire. That's why these injuries are so unfortunate. Squad depth is crucial at this point in the season, and that's the one thing they don't have any more."

“I think I’m going to head upstairs,” I say to Dad.

He looks at me, slightly concerned, but then relaxes. He stops massaging his knee. “You sure? It’s not long till kick-off.”

I smile. It takes a lot of effort. “I think I’ve had enough football for one day. Besides, I should probably get a shower.”

Dad wrinkles his nose. “Oh, is that smell coming from you? I thought one of Mrs Lindsey’s cats had got in and left us a gift.”

“That is hilarious,” I say. “Truly hilarious. It’s not too late to become a comedian, you know.”

“I don’t think the world is ready for my dad jokes.”

I start to climb the stairs. “You might be right about that,” I call back.

I head into the bathroom, get undressed, and step into the shower. I let the hot water pour over me. I close my eyes but all I can see is that free kick – the ball rising, curling, dipping – then pinging off the crossbar, high into the air, out of play. My teammates lying on the pitch, dejected. The other team celebrating. The scouts walking away.

I missed.

I failed.

When the big moment came, I choked.

I turn off the shower and grab my towel from the rail. I get dressed in my room and then lie on my bed. The shelf above the headboard is crowded with trophies and awards, but now I can’t look at them without imagining the one that’s missing. I take a deep breath and try to remember what Dad said: how the only way to fail is to not try.

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I know Dad is calling me from the bottom of the stairs.

“Owen!” he calls again. He sounds scared – no, excited. I sit up quickly. “Owen!”

“What?” I say, climbing off my bed. “What is it?”

“You’ve got to see this! Come on.”

I rush downstairs and join Dad on the sofa. The Harrowfield match has started, and even though it’s still nil-nil the fans are making a real racket.

“What is it?” I ask, still a little groggy. “What am I looking at?”

“Not *what*,” Dad says, a smile lifting the corners of his mouth. “*Who*.” He points at the screen. “Him.”

A player I’ve never seen before receives the ball, takes a touch, passes it to a teammate and darts away before the closing defender can get within five yards of him. He’s

small but incredibly fast. When he receives the ball again, he's in a completely different position, out wide in acres of space. The right-back rushes to close him down but he's already got rid of the ball. Five seconds later, he's somehow on the other wing, causing problems for the left back.

"He never takes more than two or three touches," Dad says. There's something in his voice, like he's witnessing a real-life magic trick, that makes me turn to look at him. He's transfixed, mesmerized, beaming. "And he's *everywhere*."

It's true. When I look back, the player is drifting into the space between defence and midfield. He takes a touch, passes, moves. Takes a touch, passes, moves. Takes a touch, passes, moves.

And then he receives the ball in the box.

Takes a touch.

Shoots.

Scores!

Harrowfield Park erupts.

"This guy is something else," Dad says.

The player is lost in the middle of a red-and-white-striped huddle. The camera cuts up to the stands where Augustus Sinclair pumps the hand of the suited man beside him. When the camera cuts back to the pitch the

huddle is breaking apart, until finally it's just the player and the jubilant crowd. He puts his fingers and thumbs together in the shape of a heart and lifts them high above his head.

"Who is he?" I ask.

And then the player turns. I see the name printed on his back and my question is answered.

"Budi."



At half-time, they can only talk about one player. “He’s everywhere,” the bald pundit says. “The energy, the movement, the *goal*. I’ve never seen a player run so much!”

“I’m tired just watching him,” says the one with the ponytail. “It’ll be interesting to see whether he can keep up that level of intensity for another forty-five minutes.”

“There’ll certainly be a few defenders who hope not,” the host says with a smile. “Surely he has to ease off, doesn’t he?”

But Budi doesn’t ease off. If anything, he attacks the second half with even more energy. I never see him take more than three touches before passing the ball or shooting. He gets his second goal five minutes after the

restart, his third just as the game is heading into stoppage time. In the second half he switches up his celebration. Instead of making the heart shape, he places both of his hands over his mouth.

At the full-time whistle, he gets a standing ovation – from the home fans, at least – and the referee hands him the match ball as a reward for his hat-trick.

“Have you heard of Budi before?” I ask Dad.

He shakes his head, which surprises me. Dad knows pretty much everything about football. He could tell you which team won the FA Cup in 1988 and who scored and what the manager ate for breakfast. He picks up his phone.

“He’s originally from Indonesia,” Dad says while he scrolls. “Looks like he’s been passed from team to team in Europe without any real game time. It says he moved from Dortmund last summer. Part of a deal with Harris-Locke, apparently. I suppose Harris-Locke stole all the headlines. Hard not to, with diamond earrings the size of sprouts.” Dad smiles. “I bet Augustus Sinclair can’t believe his luck.”

I watch as a group of photographers form a line in front of Budi, trying to get a picture of him with the match ball.

“What’s he doing?” I ask.

“Huh?” Dad says, his face turned towards his phone again.

“Look.”

On the screen, Budi is displaying the strangest post-match behaviour I’ve ever seen. First, he removes his boots and carefully places them off to one side. Then he hugs the ball to his chest with one hand so that it covers the logo on his shirt. Only then does he smile for the cameras.

“Weird,” Dad says. “Although it’s not unusual for sportspeople to have strange rituals.”

I know footballers can be superstitious, but normally that involves stepping onto the pitch with a certain foot, or plucking a handful of grass, or always getting dressed in the same order. What Budi is doing just seems odd.

“Maybe he’s a bit unconventional,” Dad says. “He does play with his first name on the back of his shirt, after all.”

“Not this again,” I say, putting a hand over my face.

“What? All I’m saying is that you didn’t get that back in my day, and I’m not sure how I feel about it now.”

“You know you sound so old when you say things like that.”

He holds up a hand. “Hey, I’m not old; I’m old school. There’s a difference.”

“If you say so.”

He makes a peace sign with his fingers. “Chill, man.”

“Please stop. You are not John Lennon.”

I turn my attention back to the screen, ignoring Dad’s chuckle. While the photographers are snapping away an advertising board is carried onto the pitch, followed by the TV host we saw earlier. But when Budi is called over for an interview he stands beside the wall of logos, not in front of it. The TV host tries to guide him over, but Budi either doesn’t understand or doesn’t want to. The people who carried it on try to position it behind him instead, but Budi simply takes a step to the side. It’s almost comical, and eventually they give up.

“I don’t think he knows what he’s doing,” Dad says.

But I’m not so sure. I think he knows exactly what he’s doing. We just don’t know what it is. The ball is still tucked under his right arm, in front of his chest.

“Budi,” the host says. “Your first appearance and you score a hat-trick in front of the Harrowfield Park faithful. It doesn’t get much better than that. Tell us how you’re feeling.”

Budi beams like a little kid with an ice cream. His black hair is shiny with sweat but somehow he doesn’t seem at all out of breath, despite running for ninety minutes.

“Good. I’m feeling good. I’ve been waiting for my chance for a long time and today it finally came. I got the goals but my teammates created the opportunities, so I am grateful to them.”

“Some people speculated that the dream of the treble was over when Le Blanc picked up an injury last week. Can the fans start to believe again?”

“I am a big believer in belief,” Budi says, his smile widening. “I will do my best. I will try. That is all I can do.”

I remember what Dad said in the car, and glance over at him. He raises his eyebrows as if to say, “See?”

I nod.

“There’s a chance Harrowfield could meet Real Madrid in the European final in a month’s time,” the host says, “and I couldn’t help noticing that your celebration after the first goal was reminiscent of a certain Madrid legend: Kieran Wakefield.”

“He is a hero of mine,” Budi says. “He inspired me as a child and that was my way of saying thank you.”

“And what about your celebration in the second half, when you covered your mouth with your hands?”

Budi takes a deep breath and gazes round the stadium. He runs a hand through his hair and looks down at the ground, reminding me that he isn’t wearing his boots.

For a moment it doesn’t seem like he’s going to answer, but then he looks up at the host. The happy smile is gone.

“There is a lot in football that needs to be fixed. It is supposed to be the beautiful game, but I see a lot that is ugly. So I put my hands over my mouth to show that nobody is saying these things that need to be said. I have my own reasons – my own history – but it is not about me. It is about the people you cannot see: the people who make the kit we wear, the boots on our feet. They need our help.”

The host hesitates, unsure what to say, and the silence opens up like a sinkhole in the middle of the pristine pitch. It feels like it reaches all the way to our front room. The host touches a finger to his ear and quickly thanks Budi, congratulating him again on his hat-trick.

“And now we can speak to the owner,” he says, moving towards the advertising board where Augustus Sinclair waits with a smile as bright and brilliant as his crisp white shirt. “Augustus, you must be very pleased with the way Budi slotted into the team today?”

Augustus Sinclair opens his mouth to respond but we don’t hear what he says, because right at that moment there’s a knock on the door.

Dad and I glance at each other.

“Who’s that?” I ask.

“Let me just engage my psychic powers,” Dad says, closing his eyes. “The oracle hath spoken. It is an envoy from an international retail conglomerate, here to bestow gifts upon this house.”

“You mean it’s a delivery driver?”

He opens his eyes and shrugs. “Probably.”

I nudge him in the ribs. “I suppose I’ll answer it then.”

I get up and walk along the narrow hallway. But when I open the front door, the man outside doesn’t have a parcel. There’s just a slim folder tucked under his arm.

“Um, hello?” I say.

He smiles, his face creasing in a friendly, well-worn way.

“Hello, Owen. My name is Paul. Are either of your parents at home?”

“I—” I stop. There is only ever a maximum of one parent at home. “Wait. How do you know my name?”

“It’s my business to know your name,” Paul says.

I start to feel uneasy. I angle the door so that I can slam it shut if I need to. “You’re not from round here,” I say, detecting his accent.

“No,” Paul says. “I’m not.”

“Who is it?” Dad asks, appearing in the hall behind me.

The stranger looks at Dad. “You must be Owen’s father. My name is Paul Oakley. Do you think I could come in for a chat?”

“You’re not from round here,” Dad says, and if it weren’t for the strange atmosphere, I’d have to smile at that. Two peas in a pod, that’s what Mum used to say about us. Dad places a hand on my shoulder. “Hang on, didn’t I see you at the game this afternoon? Weren’t you with the other team’s supporters?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Paul says. “I was standing with them, but I wasn’t there to support their team.”

“Then why were you there?” I ask, my heart beginning to race. “And why are you here?”

Paul’s smile grows wider. “I was there to watch you, Owen. And I’m here to talk to you about your future.”

He takes the folder from under his arm and shows me the badge on the front.

The same badge that is known and feared the world over.

The same badge that was on Budi’s shirt.

“How would you like to play football for Harrowfield?” Paul says.

Dad’s fingers tighten on my shoulder.

“I think you’d better come in,” he says.



“Why weren’t you standing with the other scouts?” I ask. There are a hundred questions zipping around my brain, but for some reason this is the one I blurt out first, as soon as I’m sitting with Paul at the small table in our kitchen. Dad brings over a mug of milky tea and Paul adds about fifteen spoonfuls of sugar. He stirs and takes a sip before responding.

“I didn’t want them to know we were interested in you as well. Makes my life harder. I don’t suppose they’ve been round already, have they?”

Dad shakes his head and sits down.

“Too bad for them,” Paul says, grinning. He clears his throat. “I just wanted to start by saying that I think you’re

a very promising footballer, Owen. I was very impressed by your performance this afternoon.”

I feel my cheeks go hot. “Ta,” I mumble.

“You’re welcome, but don’t go thanking me just yet. You see, you’re good, but you could be better. A lot better.”

“Oh,” I say, in a voice so small it’s hardly a noise at all.

That makes Paul laugh – a big echoey chuckle that bounces off the walls.

“In all my years as a scout, I’ve never encountered a different reaction to that statement. Don’t worry, though. I’d say the same if you were Kieran Wakefield with half a dozen Ballon d’Or trophies in your downstairs loo. It’s knowing they could always be better that makes players like Wakefield the best in the world.”

“So, what are you trying to say?” Dad asks.

“We want to make Owen better, if that’s what he wants.”

“Of course,” I say without thinking, because *of course* that’s what I want.

“That’s what they all say,” Paul says, “because that’s what they all *think* they want. But improvement takes a lot of hard work.”

“I’ll work hard,” I say. I think I would literally carry

our fridge to the top of Mount Everest if it meant I could play top-flight football.

“And not just on the pitch,” Paul says. “You’ll need to keep on top of your schoolwork too. Have something to fall back on if the dream doesn’t come true. Most academy players don’t turn professional. Ninety-nine per cent of them, in fact.”

I nod. “But that means one per cent of them do make it.”

Paul glances at Dad, who smiles back.

“I want to be in that one per cent,” I say.

“Everybody does. It takes a lot of sacrifice.”

We know all about sacrifice in this house, but I don’t say anything.

“And not just from you.” Paul turns to Dad. “It’s an hour’s drive to the training facility from here. Three times a week.”

“That’s fine,” Dad says, although I’ve got no idea how he’ll fit it in around work and I don’t think he does either.

“Good to hear.” Paul glances around the kitchen. “Is it just the two of you?”

“Yes,” Dad says.

Paul rubs his jaw. He looks at me in a strange way, like he’s mentally moving me from one box in his brain

to another. Then he looks at Dad and lowers his voice. “Look, if you’re ever struggling with the commitment then make sure you talk to the coach about it. They know it’s a juggle at the best of times and they won’t hold it against you – or Owen. The players are our priority.”

I see Dad swallow something knotty, and I think I can guess what’s going through his mind. It’s been almost three years but Mum is still right there, just out of sight.

“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” he says.

“Great. Shall we take a look at the paperwork?”

Paul flips open the folder and talks us through the contract inside. He mainly talks to Dad, which is just as well because I can’t concentrate on anything he’s saying. It’s hard to believe this is happening. I try not to get carried away, but isn’t the problem with getting carried away that you’re not the one doing the carrying? Every so often I catch a snippet, but whenever a word like “contract”, “club” or “deal” is mentioned – which is a lot – I find my thoughts drifting off to the training ground, wondering what the coaches will be like, how good the other players will be, whether I might catch a glimpse of the senior squads in action.

“We find it’s best to familiarize new players with the

facility before they start training,” Paul says. “It’s a big place and it’s nice to know your way around. Would you be free to bring Owen in for a tour sometime this week?”

“How about tomorrow?” Dad says.

“Tomorrow works for me. It tends to be a bit quieter on a Sunday too.” Paul turns to me. “There’ll be a few matches on, so you’ll see some of the other boys in action.”

I nod. My stomach is a churning froth of anxiety. Having waited so long for this moment, it suddenly feels like it’s all happening too fast – that I’m not ready.

“You okay, Owen?” Dad asks.

“Yeah,” I say, forcing a smile. “Of course.”

“We don’t have to decide right away, you know?”

“I know.”

“It’s normal to be a little apprehensive,” Paul says, “but I’m going to stick my neck out and say you’ll fit right in. Especially with a right foot like that.”

“But I missed.” The words are out before I can stop them. It’s almost as though I need to know that he saw it. That he knows I’m not perfect. “I missed the free kick.”

Paul chuckles. “If you can name one player in the history of football who hasn’t missed when they were desperate to score, I’ll give you a tenner right now.”

This time I don’t have to force the smile: I can’t help myself.

Paul drinks the last of his tea, which must be sugary slush by now, then leans forward and interlocks his fingers.

“I’ll let you in on a secret, Owen. A little trick of the trade. When you took that free kick, I wasn’t watching you at all.”

My heart sinks. “You weren’t?”

Paul shakes his head. “Nope.”

“Then who were you watching?”

His eyes twinkle, and in that moment I can tell he loves football as much as I do.

“I was watching the goalkeeper.”

I’m confused. “Were you there to sign him as well?”

He shakes his head. “You don’t understand. I was watching the goalkeeper because you can learn more about a shot – and the person taking it – by watching the goalkeeper instead of the striker.” He lowers his voice, so that it’s barely above a whisper. “Do you know what I saw on the goalkeeper’s face when you were standing over that ball?”

I shake my head. I feel Dad lean in.

Paul’s eyes widen. “*Fear*. And do you know what I saw when you struck the ball?”

Again, I shake my head, not trusting myself to speak.

“*Despair*. For a fleeting moment, your free kick convinced that boy you were taking his trophy. And he was very nearly right.”

The relief I feel when he says this is so intense it brings me to the brink of tears.

Paul leans back and taps the contract in front of him. “At this football club, we want players who take the shot, even when missing means heartbreak. *Especially* when missing means heartbreak. We want players who aim for the top corner. We want players who are brave.” He grins. “Above all, we want players who inspire fear and despair in goalkeepers. So, what do you say?”

I don’t say anything. Instead, I slide the folder towards me and pick up the pen that’s clipped to its spine. I sign my name in the space at the bottom of the contract.

“You know,” Dad says with a smile, “you should really read the small print before you sign things. But I suppose that’s what I’m here for.”

He picks up the contract and reads it carefully. Then he reaches for the pen and signs his name beside mine. Watching the fluid way his signature sprawls across the page makes me realize I should probably work on my

autograph, which is currently just my name tilted to one side.

“Welcome to the team,” Paul says. “Does midday work for you tomorrow?”

“Sounds great,” Dad says.

“Perfect.” He takes a booklet out of the folder and passes it to Dad. “You’ll find the answers to most of your questions in this brochure, but if there’s anything else you need to know just give me a call.” He puts the signed contract in the folder and snaps it shut.

We walk Paul to the front door and see him out. He stops midway along the garden path and turns back. His face is suddenly serious.

“There is one thing I forgot to mention,” he says, squinting at Dad in the sunshine.

For a panicky second, I think he’s going to tell me I have to play in goal.

“What’s that?” Dad says.

“I’m going to have to pinch another one of your players. Number eight.”

“Number eight?” I say. “You mean Teddy?”

Paul smiles. “That’s right. You struck me as something of a double act. I think it would be interesting to bring you both in. If he says yes, of course.”

Teddy will say yes. The thought of playing together at the academy of a major club will probably inspire one of his elaborate victory dances.

“There goes my midfield,” Dad says.

“Sorry, mate,” Paul says. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He walks off down the path, closing the gate at the end with a squeak. Then he sets off in the direction of Teddy’s street with his hands in his pockets. We watch him go, then Dad softly closes the door. He pauses with his hand on the frame before turning slowly to face me. His eyes sparkle, and his face breaks into a wide smile – the kind I haven’t seen in a long time.

We start jumping up and down at the same time, cheering as though England have just scored an injury-time winner. Dad grabs me into a hug and we bounce around together. My face bumps into his shoulder and I land on his toes but it doesn’t matter. It’s not just about the academy. It feels as though we’re shedding something heavy that’s been slowing us down for ages. I sense the warmth of Dad’s jumper and his lemony smell and the blood that’s pumping through his veins.

When we finally break apart, Dad is breathless and his eyes gleam with tears. He wipes them away with his sleeve. Not because he’s embarrassed; I know some

people’s dads never cry – at least not in front of their kids – but Dad has always made it seem okay. Ever since Mum, there have been a lot of times when we’ve felt like crying. I can only imagine how much worse it would have been if there had been a rule against it. And if footballers can cry when they miss out on a trophy, I think you can cry when you miss someone you love.

Dad holds my shoulders and looks at me – really looks at me – and I can see his pride right there on the surface. I’ve never felt so happy to make someone cry, because for once they’re tears of joy. They make my eyes prickle, too.

“I’m so proud of you, Owen. No matter where this adventure takes you, no matter what does or doesn’t happen: I’m proud of you. And Mum would be too.”

Dad gets all fuzzy as my eyes fill up with tears.

“Shall we order pizza for tea?” I hear him say.

And I can only nod.



It's worse than Christmas. I toss and turn for hours, trying to imagine what the next day will bring. Having a belly full of Pepperoni Paradise doesn't help. Eventually I get up and tiptoe downstairs to watch old footie clips on my phone: highlights of the legends who played in the era of baggy shirts and crunching tackles and great big hoofing goal kicks. I've watched them all a hundred times before: Zeta, Buccafusca, Ríos "El Dios", Harrington, Schulz. They help to distract me, but staring at a small screen doesn't exactly make me sleepy. Which is probably why Dad makes me keep my phone downstairs in the first place.

After half an hour of dazzling runs and genius set-plays and world-class finishes, I reread the last message I received from Teddy:

Can't wait! We're going 2 show them how 2 play!

I smile to myself. I wish I had Teddy's confidence.

I go back up to bed and stare at the ceiling. I try to take courage from the medals and trophies and awards that crowd the shelf above me. I tell myself that I've earned this opportunity, that Paul wouldn't have invited me unless he thought I was as good as the boys who are already in the squad. But then I find myself imagining those other boys, boys who probably won't appreciate two new kids – two *Scousers* – competing for their place in the team. I doubt passing the ball to Teddy or me will even cross their minds.

The thing that finally works, the thing that calms me down and lets me drift off to sleep, is reminding myself of what Dad said: that he will be proud of me whatever happens. That Mum would be proud too.

That Mum would be proud.

That Mum would be.

That Mum would.

For the first time in my life, I'm relieved I don't have to play football. My insides are such a jumble of nerves and

excitement that I can barely trust myself to lift a spoon to my mouth, let alone impress a coach at one of the greatest football teams on the planet. I tap my fingers on the edge of the table.

“Big day,” Dad says, sitting down opposite me with a huge bowl of muesli. “How are you feeling?”

“Good,” I say. “Okay. Nervous.”

Dad smiles. “I could have guessed that much. Your foot’s been bouncing up and down beneath the table since you sat down. And look at your hands. You’re like Ringo Starr.”

I stop drumming my fingers. “I don’t know how anyone does anything that’s important to them without turning to jelly.”

Dad laughs. “I know how you feel. I felt like a water balloon the day I married Mum. Waiting at the end of the aisle was like torture. I began to think she wouldn’t show up.”

I smile. “But she did.”

“She did,” Dad says. “Fifteen minutes late, but she did.”

I chew another mouthful. Without realizing, I’ve started drumming my fingers again. I swallow, forcing the soggy cereal down.

“Do you think footballers get nervous?” I ask.

“Of course.”

“Even the best ones?”

Dad takes a sip of juice. “I expect so.”

“It’s just that I was watching some old clips last night—”

“On the phone you’re not allowed to use after eight p.m.,” he says, but he’s smiling. “Go on.”

“Right. Sorry.” I clear my throat. “Do you remember that penalty Ríos scored in the World Cup final?”

“How could anyone forget? He strolls up, hesitates for a split second to see where the keeper plans to dive, and rolls the ball into the opposite corner. I’ve seen ice cubes that weren’t as cold as that penalty.”

“Well, he didn’t look nervous.”

Dad considers this for a second. “No. He didn’t. But looks can be deceiving.”

“So how do you know he *was* nervous?”

“Because he’s a human being. How could he not be? A hundred thousand people watching in the stadium: half of them desperate for him to score, half of them hoping he will miss. Tens of millions watching in his home country, a billion more watching around the world. I bet he felt like a bottle of pop that’d just been shaken up.”

Dad must be able to tell I’m not convinced, because he

sets his spoon down and retrieves his phone from the kitchen counter. He taps and swipes for a few seconds then passes it to me.

“Here.”

Dad carries on eating his muesli while I watch another clip of Ríos. It’s one I haven’t seen before. It must be from earlier in his career because he looks much younger. He places the ball on the penalty spot, takes three measured steps back, and waits for the referee’s whistle. Then he runs forward, blasts the ball into the back of the net, and runs off with his team to celebrate.

“I don’t get it,” I say.

“Keep watching.”

After Ríos has finished celebrating, a replay of the penalty is shown. Again, I can’t see what I’m looking for. They show another angle, from behind the goal, but I still don’t know why Dad wants me to watch this video. I start to look up from the phone but then another replay begins. This one shows Ríos off to one side while he waits for the other team to leave the penalty area. It takes a while because they’re arguing with the referee. The camera remains on Ríos. Then I see what Dad wanted me to see.

Ríos puts his hands on his knees, bends over, and vomits onto the turf.

“Gross,” I say.

“Not gross,” Dad says, taking his phone back. “Nerves. But I bet that squirmy feeling only lasted for as long as it took the referee to blow his whistle. Then all the nerves disappeared. Like I said, waiting is the worst part.”

The memory of the time I was left waiting for Mum starts to sneak up on me, so I focus hard on Dad. He’s gone quiet, and I know he’s probably thinking about all those times he waited for the whistle to blow. Back when he played football. When he *could* play football. I want to ask him about it, but I know it must be difficult. To be *this close* and have it all snatched away. When we’ve spoken about it in the past, it’s like he’s talking about someone else, someone he used to like a lot but who doesn’t call round any more. And something changes about him too, a shrinking that’s too subtle to measure.

Dad stands up and takes our bowls to the sink. It’s only then I feel able to ask him.

“Did you get nervous?” I ask. “As a player, I mean.”

I see his hands slow as he washes a bowl.

“Me? I was a nervous wreck.”

“Until the whistle blew?”

He sets the bowl in the drying rack and glances back at me. “Until the whistle blew.” He turns back to the sink.

“But you don’t need to be nervous today. There’s no pressure. Today is all about enjoying the experience. Besides, it’s not like you’ll be on your own. I’ll be there. Teddy too. I’ve said I’ll pick him up a bit before eleven.”

“Is his mum coming?”

“Can’t,” Dad says. “Working.”

“Cassie’s always working.”

Dad shrugs. “Life is expensive. *Growing boys* are expensive. She’d be there if she could.”

I don’t say anything to that. When you lose someone, you get good at spotting conversations that are heading down a dangerous path. Life would be easier for Cassie if Teddy’s dad hadn’t walked out when Teddy was little, just like it would be easier for Dad if Mum was still around.

“Right,” Dad says, pulling the plug and wiping his soapy hands on a towel. “Today is going to be a good day. Even if we do have to spend an hour trapped in a car with Teddy.”



“Here we go, here we go, here we go! Here we go, here we go, here we go-ooooo! Here we go, here we—”

“Morning, Teddy,” Dad says, wincing at the noise. “You’re not planning to chant the whole way, are you? Because I haven’t got round to fitting ejector seats yet.”

For a moment Teddy looks crushed. Then he brightens up and bellows: “*You’re not singing, you’re not singing, you’re not any singing any more! You’re not siiiiiinging any more.*”

Dad sighs. Teddy beams.

“Ta for the lift,” he says.

“No problem,” Dad says. “You don’t have to thank me every time, you know.”

“Okay, coach.” Teddy fastens his seat belt and sticks

his fist out. I bump my knuckles against his.

“And I’m technically not your coach any more,” Dad says, pulling away from the kerb. The thought makes me a little sad, even though I know he’ll always help me with my football. Dad is the only coach I’ve ever had. What if the new one doesn’t get me?

“Okay, coach,” Teddy says.

That makes Dad laugh. “Just make sure your new coach doesn’t hear you calling me that. They might get jealous.” He glances at us both in the rear-view mirror. “Congratulations on being scouted. You deserve it. Both of you.”

“Couldn’t have done it without you, coach,” Teddy says. He looks at me and grins, the freckly skin around his eyes creasing. “Or you. I’ll be sure to mention you both in my Player of the Year speech.”

“I think you’ve got that the wrong way round,” I say. “It’ll be *me* thanking *you*.”

“All right, all right,” Dad says. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

Teddy acts hurt. “You don’t doubt me, do you, coach?”

“Not at all, Teddy. I just don’t think I can listen to a whole hour of you two rehearsing a Ballon d’Or acceptance speech. Or chanting. I’d much rather listen to this.”

Dad prods a button and the car fills with the sound of the Beatles. Teddy is well-acquainted with the music of the Fab Four – it would be impossible not to be, the amount of time he’s spent in our car – and together we have a blast singing along. It must be Dad’s Beatlemania playlist because every track matches the party mood, and we hurtle along the motorway singing at the top of our lungs. It’s such a laugh that for a while I manage to forget about where we’re going and the churning sensation in my stomach.

But every time a sign for Harrowfield whizzes by my window, it all comes back. The nerves, the excitement, the hope, the fear. Teddy must be feeling it too because he stops singing when Dad leaves the motorway. Maybe even Dad is feeling it, because he turns the volume down as we wind along country lanes. The hedges and trees lining them are just starting to look full with new leaves.

“I kind of thought it would be in the city,” Teddy says. “Near the stadium.”

“Me too.”

“Not enough space,” Dad says. His voice is tight, and I don’t think it’s just because he’s concentrating on the twisty road. “And not enough secrecy.”

Teddy and I exchange a glance.

“Secrecy?” I say.

“Football is big business,” Dad says. “Clubs don’t want other teams to know what they’re working on. Could give them an advantage. And that advantage could be the difference between winning a trophy and missing out. And *that* could be the difference between earning millions in prize money and sponsorship, or not.”

“Do you think clubs spy on each other?” Teddy asks. Just the thought of it sends a shiver down my spine.

“Almost certainly,” Dad says. “Which helps to explain why training facilities are stuck out in the middle of nowhere, and why they’re surrounded by a wall that’s seven metres high.”

“Wall?” I say. Then, as the car rounds a bend and the road straightens out, I see what looks like the outside of a fortress. A grey concrete wall, too tall even for a giraffe to peek over, stretches into the distance. As we draw closer, I see that it’s topped by a vicious-looking coil of barbed wire. Which seems a bit extra, because who could even climb that high?

“Woah,” Teddy says.

“Woah indeed,” Dad replies.

He turns the music off as we approach a security checkpoint. A guard emerges from a hut, and he doesn’t

look like the friendliest guy in the world. In fact, he looks pretty mean: face crumpled in a scowl, skull tattoo on each forearm, biceps that could crush a postbox. Not exactly the welcome I was expecting.

“That guy is a *tank*,” Teddy whispers, his eyes wide.

I get a sudden, awful feeling that I’ve done something terrible. My tummy turns to water. A lump forms in my throat. The guard approaches the car and signals for Dad to open his window. Then he just stands there, hands resting on his belt, looking at the car as though he’s never seen such a heap of junk. Which is probably true, considering the supercars that normally drive through a gate like this.

“All right, fella?” Dad says, and I wish he would just say hello or good morning, or at least call this guy “sir” or “brigadier general” or whatever his rank is.

The guard just stares back.

“I’ve got Owen Sharp and Teddy Wilkinson for a tour of the facility. We met with Paul Oakley yesterday. They’ve been invited to join the academy.”

The guard moves to look at the two of us in the back. It’s like coming face to face with a shark in an aquarium. Then he returns his attention to Dad.

“Wait here,” he growls.

The guard goes back to the hut and talks into a walkie-talkie. I can't hear what he says, but I doubt it features a please or a thank you. He doesn't take his eyes off us the whole time. Then he returns.

"Head straight down the track. Drive slowly. You'll be told what to do at the next checkpoint."

I turn to Teddy and mouth, "Next checkpoint?" How many can there be?

The security barrier begins to rise by itself, although I wouldn't be surprised if the guard was making it happen with his mind.

"Ta," Dad says. He closes his window and we set off into the compound.

"Well, he was nice," Teddy says.

It's funny, but the best I can manage is a weak smile. Football suddenly doesn't seem like such a game any more.

The entrance is at the top of a small hill, and we soon get a glimpse of the vast training facility spread out before us. At the end of the long driveway, at the centre of it all, is a complex of large, stylish buildings. Behind those, and all around, are dozens of football pitches, their neat white lines shining brightly in the sun.

"This is unreal," I say, excitement finally starting to

get the better of my nerves.

And then a helicopter swoops low over the fields ahead of us. Teddy and I almost bang heads as we lean into the middle to see who might be inside, but the windows are tinted and it moves so quickly that I only manage to catch a glimpse of the golden letters emblazoned along its tail – SINCLAIR GLOBAL – before it circles towards a helipad beside the buildings.

"Arrival by helicopter," Teddy says. "Why didn't we think of that?"

Dad lets out a long whistle. "Not being the owner of the biggest sportswear company in the world probably has something to do with it."

We watch as the helicopter touches down and two men – one in a suit, and one in jeans and a leather jacket – are ushered inside.

"That was Augustus Sinclair!" I say.

"The richest man in football," Teddy adds.

"Which is saying a lot," Dad replies, nodding at a handful of sports cars and SUVs parked near the main building. "Did you see who he was with?"

"I couldn't tell," I say.

"Cain Carter."

"No way!" I lean forward for a better look, even though

the pair are long gone. “Are you sure?”

Dad nods. “One hundred per cent. I’d recognize that swagger anywhere.”

“So the rumours must be true,” Teddy says. “Augustus Sinclair is going to sign him from Chelsea this summer.”

“I don’t get it,” Dad says.

“What?” Teddy says. “Why? Carter is a beast!”

“That’s what confuses me. Carter is a hard man – an enforcer – and Harrowfield are all about fast, flowing, beautiful football. I don’t see where he fits.”

“Maybe Augustus Sinclair sees something you don’t,” I say.

“You’re probably right. I’m sure Sinclair has a plan. He always does.”

“If I meet Big Gus I’m going to ask him for a tenner,” Teddy says.

“Please,” Dad says, looking at us meaningfully in the rear-view mirror, “whatever you do, don’t do that.”

“I’m just messing, coach.” Teddy grins. “I’ll only ask for a fiver.”

We come to another barrier where a second guard checks our “credentials” before letting us into the car park. Unfortunately, we aren’t allowed in the one with all the flashy cars; Dad has to park in the staff-and-visitor

section instead. Our car is still the worst by quite a distance. We all climb out, stretch a little, and look around.

This is it, I think. This is where dreams come true. I only wish Mum could be here to see it.

“Owen! Teddy!” We turn to see Paul emerging from the building. “Welcome to the home of the best football club in the world!” He shakes hands with each of us before showing us inside.

We have to sign in at the reception desk and hand over our mobile phones. The receptionist smiles a lot but doesn’t seem all that friendly. I can see from her neat little badge that her name is Susan.

“Please stay with your chaperone at all times,” Susan says, indicating Paul. “If you wander off, security will be sent to retrieve you.” She pauses, allowing us to imagine how terrifying it would be to be hunted by the security team here. “The same applies if you are caught in a restricted area. Your chaperone is familiar with these areas and will ensure that you are kept away. If you happen to encounter a player, please *do not* engage them. We do not want them harassed. Is that understood?”

We all mumble that we understand, then Dad has to sign a disclaimer promising that we won’t talk about

what we see, or take photographs, or do anything criminal, and that if we are caught doing any of the above we agree to be punished in a horrible fashion and banished to a place where even the rats are unhappy. That's the gist of it, at least.

Dad signs the form and hands it back. "Don't do anything silly, kids."

"Excellent advice," Susan says. "I'll now hand you over to the care of your chaperone. Please enjoy your visit."

"Follow me," Paul says with a smile, leading us further into the building. Dad walks beside him, while Teddy falls into step beside me.

We walk along a corridor that is lined with large photographs of players, most of them holding trophies aloft or captured in a moment of goal-scoring euphoria. The carpet beneath our feet is so soft and deep our footsteps don't make a sound, and I occasionally hear muffled voices from behind the closed doors that we pass at regular intervals. I know it's probably just the people who work here, but the thought that it might be the team being debriefed after yesterday's victory makes my heart pound so hard I can feel it in my neck.

"This place is like Fort Knox," Dad says.

"It does seem a bit over the top," Paul says, "but you

can understand why we need those security measures in place."

Dad nods. "Isn't it unusual for academy players to train at the same facility as the senior teams? We had a separate place to train back in my day – and it was nowhere near as fancy as this."

"It is unusual," Paul says, leading us down another corridor, "but Mr Sinclair insisted on it, and we've found that it really helps our young players transition to the next level. Of course, many players won't make it, but the ones that do are just that bit more comfortable. The number of senior squad players drawn from the academy here is six per cent higher than any other club. That might not sound like a lot, but at this level anything jumping by six per cent is huge."

Dad nods thoughtfully. "Treat the youngsters like professionals, and more of them make it."

"That seems to be the case," Paul says. "It's why everyone trains in full Harrowfield kit as well. Of course, some of the facilities are reserved exclusively for the senior squads. Like in here, for example."

We reach a frosted glass door with the words REHABILITATION SUITE printed on it. Paul taps his badge against a sensor and we walk into a large, cool

room that is filled with medical equipment: massage beds, X-ray and ultrasound machines, glass cabinets full of neatly arranged bottles and tubes. Over in one corner is what looks like the world's smallest swimming pool. Above it, a harness hangs from the ceiling. I must look confused, because Paul takes me for a closer look.

"Underwater treadmill," he says. "It lets players strengthen their muscles without putting too much strain on them. Unfortunately, this room has been needed a lot lately."

"Has Le Blanc been in there?" Teddy asks.

Paul nods. "As recently as yesterday."

Teddy's eyes go wide.

"Don't drink it," I say.

"But it's...it's basically holy water!"

Paul laughs. "With the list of injuries we've got, we could do with a miracle."

"I'd say you've got one," Dad says, "judging by yesterday's heroics."

"Budi," I say.

"Yes," Paul replies thoughtfully. "The ace up our sleeve. Budi may just save our season yet."

I catch Dad staring at the pool. I wonder whether he's imagining how things might have been different for him,

if he'd had access to something like that.

Paul leads us back out into the corridor and shows us the gym, which is about the size of a supermarket and smells faintly of metal and sweat. Then he takes us through a cafeteria that looks as though it serves better food than most restaurants, then into a room that is like a small cinema.

"This is where the players watch footage from previous matches," Paul says, "so they can prepare for upcoming fixtures."

"And learn from past mistakes?" Dad asks.

Paul smiles. "Yes, that too."

The next stop on the tour is a vast indoor pitch, with rows of seats on either side and a viewing gallery that crosses over, high above the halfway line.

"This pitch – and all the ones outside – match the exact measurements of Harrowfield Park, so players can practise here and transfer what they've learned to an identical environment."

"How much did this all cost?" Dad asks.

"That's not for me to say," Paul says, "but a lot. It was build this or build a moon base, let's put it that way."

I bend down and run my fingertips across the grass. "It's real," I say. It's so perfect, I was expecting it to be fake.

“Imagine playing on that,” Teddy says.

“Imagining is as close as you’re going to get, I’m afraid,” Paul says. “At least until you’re training with the big boys.”

“Are they here?” Teddy asks. I can tell he’s been dying to ask since we arrived. He glances around casually, as though it wouldn’t be immediately obvious if twenty-five famous players were having a kickabout.

“Not today, unfortunately. Rest day. But they’ll all be here tomorrow.”

It’s a little disappointing – almost all of the scenarios I’ve been imagining since yesterday have involved bumping into a superstar. I suppose I should have given up on that when the receptionist warned us about “not engaging” any of the players. But still.

Paul claps his hands and the sound echoes off the distant roof. “Right. Next stop: the outdoor pitches.” He leads us along the side of the indoor pitch and out through a pair of double doors. “This is where you’ll be spending most of your time.”

Up ahead, several games are taking place. That’s when I get really excited. The pitches are so smooth and well-kept they look like snooker tables. Footballs zip across the turf, gleaming in the sunshine. But it’s the players that catch my attention. The ones playing on the nearest

pitch look about my age, and the pace they play at is mesmerizing. The passing is crisp and accurate, the movement is unpredictable, the runs are lightning fast. Every player is wearing the latest boots, but they’re little more than flashes of blue and pink. I suddenly wish I was wearing my boots instead of my trainers, even though they’re last season’s style. I feel like a fan – a spectator – when I should be amongst the action. It takes all my effort not to drift closer and call out to the players who will be my teammates.

That’s how I know this is where I belong.

“Are we the only new players?” I ask.

“You are,” Paul says. “Think you can keep up with those lads?”

I share a nervy look with Teddy. Then I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Teddy nods too.

“Good,” Paul says. Then, after a few seconds, he says it again. “Good.”

We watch until a boy with tight braids swirling across his scalp slices a volley into the top corner, then Paul leads us back towards reception.

Soon, I think. *Soon*.



It's only after we've collected our phones and are heading back to the car that I realize I've been holding in a wee the whole time.

"No problem," Dad says. "We'll wait out here."

I hurry inside and find Susan behind the desk, typing furiously.

"Yes?" she says, without looking away from her screen.

"Um, could you tell me where the toilet is, please?"

She stops typing. The ensuing silence is more than a bit awkward. Her eyes slide towards me. The way she looks at me, you'd have thought I'd asked to wee in one of the plant pots behind her.

"What happened to your chaperone?"

She really does love the word *chaperone*.

"He's out by the car, talking to my dad."

Susan sighs. "I'll have to escort you."

"Escort me? To the toilet? Can't I just go on my own? I'm almost twelve!"

"No," Susan says, snatching a plastic card from the top of her keyboard. She stands up. "Visitors must be accompanied at all times."

"I really am capable of going by myself."

"Trust me, I don't want this any more than you do."

She's about to step out from behind her desk when the phone rings. She glances at the display and pauses. "You'll have to wait. This is important."

I see my chance. "But I can't wait." I hop from foot to foot. "I really have to wee. Like, right now."

The phone beeps again.

I can tell she's caught in two minds. She obviously needs to answer the phone, but she also really doesn't want some kid to wee on the nice thick carpet in front of her desk.

On the third ring she breaks.

"Straight down the corridor, door on the right." She drops into her chair and answers the phone, her voice instantly calm and smooth.

As curious as I am to find out who the important caller is, I don't hang around. I walk briskly down the corridor and

duck into the toilet. It's only when I emerge from the cubicle that I notice how posh everything is. It's probably the nicest toilet I've ever been in. Every surface sparkles, it smells like a flower shop, and there are six flavours of soap to choose from. It's also big enough for a decent game of five-a-side. After I've washed my hands, I take an incredibly thick and soft hand towel from a little wicker basket, dry my hands, and drop it into the bin. Then I step out into the corridor.

I don't mean to hang around. I intend to get back to Dad and Teddy as quickly as possible, and not just because I'm properly scared of Susan.

But then a voice makes me stop. It's clearer than the other voices we heard on our tour, and as I look around I see why: the door to one of the nearby rooms is ajar. I know I should get going, that right now a guard is probably watching me dawdle on a CCTV screen and working out the most painful way to escort me off the premises. But there's something about the voice that's familiar. I know it. I know I do. But I just can't place it.

I move closer to the door and stand just outside. Someone else is speaking: a woman whose voice I don't recognize.

"I'm happy to say everything looks good. Your current treatment is giving you good protection, but we can review it if there are any problems."

"Thank you, Dr Swift."

That voice... I know I've heard it before.

"Do you have any other questions?" the doctor asks.

"I don't think so. Unless you can tell me anything about Bayern Munich's tactics."

The doctor laughs, but it feels like someone has dropped a stone into my stomach. I know where I've heard that voice before. I heard it on TV yesterday, in a post-match interview. It belongs to the player who scored a hat-trick. It belongs to Budi.

"I'm afraid not," the doctor says. "But if yesterday was anything to go by, you don't need my help."

I hear the sound of movement and suddenly realize what I'm doing. I'm snooping, eavesdropping. Spying. I lean back against the wall, my heart pounding. I shouldn't be hearing this. It's private. I have to get out of here. The others will be wondering where I am. I step away from the wall but as I move forward, the door begins to open. There's nowhere to hide. I freeze, right in the middle of the corridor. Dr Swift begins to speak, her voice much clearer now.

"I hope you don't mind me saying, but I thought what you *said* yesterday was even more impressive than what you *did*."

"Thank you, Dr Swift," Budi says.

He steps out and softly closes the door. He turns. And that's when he sees me. He pauses, watching me with kind, hazel eyes. He's not that much taller than me.

"Hello," he says. "My name is Budi."

I nod, because my brain has suddenly turned to mashed potato. What do you say to someone who was scoring a hat-trick this time yesterday?

"I'm Owen," I say, then feel like a fool. *Why would someone like him be interested in someone like you?* "You were great, by the way."

Budi frowns slightly. He half turns towards the door behind him.

"Yesterday, I mean. I didn't hear what you were talking about in there." I spot a white, square plaster in the crook of Budi's left arm. "Well, not much." I feel my cheeks turn pink. "I thought what you said after the match was really important too."

The words are out before I can check whether I believe them – whether I can even remember what he said. But I do remember. He said the beautiful game was turning ugly, that there were people out there who need our help.

Budi smiles. "Thank you. Are you a player here?"

"I just got signed. I haven't started yet." From the end of the corridor, I hear Susan return the phone to its cradle

with a smart *click*. I start to move away. "I've got to get going. My dad is waiting outside. It was great to meet you."

"It was great to meet you too, Owen."

I hesitate for a moment. He said my name. *Budi knows my name.*

"Goodbye," I say, hurrying down the corridor.

I reach the reception area just as Susan emerges from behind her desk.

"You took your time," she says, peering along the corridor behind me. I look back, but it's deserted.

"I..." I don't know what to say to that.

"I hope you enjoyed your visit." The way she says it, I don't think she means it. Then she says goodbye, and she definitely *does* mean that.

I walk outside. Paul is nowhere to be seen: it's just Dad and Teddy leaning against the car.

"You took your time," Teddy says.

"Not you too." Teddy gives me a puzzled look. "That's what the receptionist said. I'll tell you about it later."

"Mate, what you get up to in the bathroom is your business." Teddy opens the back door and climbs in. "Too much information, bro."



I don't tell Dad or Teddy about what happened on the drive home. It's partly because they're too busy reminiscing about their favourite parts of the tour, and it's partly because I can't quite believe it actually happened. But there's also something else, a sense that talking about it will change it, that it won't be mine any more.

When we reach Teddy's house, he bumps my fist and climbs out. "Ta, coach," he says to Dad with a grin.

"See you at school," I say.

"Nah," Teddy says. "I'm done with school now. Don't need it."

Dad leans across. "You absolutely do need it. If I find out you're skipping school, I'll tell your mother."

"You wouldn't," Teddy says.

"I would."

"All right, all right," Teddy says, holding his hands up. "I'll see you at school, Owen." Then he slams the door and walks up the path to his front door.

"That boy," Dad says, shaking his head. But he only says it because it's obvious how much he likes Teddy. Everybody likes Teddy. If you're called Teddy, you can be as cheeky as you like.

A minute or so later, Dad comes to a stop outside our house. "Right," he says, "I'm going to have to head straight to work. There's leftover pizza in the fridge for tea." He glances at me in the rear-view mirror. "You going to be all right?"

"Of course," I say, undoing my seat belt. "Cold pizza is the best pizza."

"Respectfully disagree, but I meant are you going to be all right?" He turns in his seat. "It's been a big day."

I know what he's actually saying. Am I going to be all right on my own in a big empty house? Well, a small empty house.

We've got quite good at talking about Mum without talking about Mum.

Breathe.

“Sure,” I say. “Are you?”

“Me?” Dad smiles as though he’s never really thought of himself as someone who might not be okay. Despite... well, despite everything.

“You’ve got to work late,” I say. “Won’t you get tired?”

Dad shrugs. “I can sleep in tomorrow.”

When I was younger, when it was still new, when I realized she wasn’t coming back – not ever, not even for birthdays or at Christmas – and we had to somehow carry on anyway, I used to imagine that Dad was Batman. No, not imagine – *believe*. It sounds silly and childish now, but that’s what I did. It all made perfect sense. He stayed out late. He had a dodgy knee (probably the result of brawling with bad guys). He was alone. Even the fact that we didn’t live in a fancy mansion made sense: after all, what better cover was there for a billionaire superhero?

And, most importantly, he kept going. He was hurt – and I *knew* he was hurt – but he didn’t show it. He didn’t stop. He just kept going. Because that’s what I needed him to do, because Dad was the only one I had left. I had to believe he was invincible because if he wasn’t, then what? I’d have to live with some relative I see once a year.

Some relative who’s stayed away since it happened, as though the house is cursed.

But Dad’s not invincible. It’s scary to admit, but I’m not a little kid any more. I know it’s just me and Dad, that he’s the last man. The one keeping me onside.

Breathe.

“You don’t need to worry about me,” he says. “You know that, right?”

No, I think. “Yes,” I say.

“Good,” Dad says. “Because you honestly don’t need to.”

I smile. Dad smiles back. He looks older when he smiles. It’s the extra wrinkles.

“You know you can knock for Mrs Lindsey if you need anything. She won’t mind.”

“I know,” I say. “I’ll be fine.”

I climb out, close the door and head up the path. I know Dad won’t drive away until I’m inside, even though there’s a car behind him. The driver is beeping furiously and yelling because our road is too narrow for more than one car to pass. But Dad doesn’t budge.

I get the door open and I’m about to step inside when I see a package tucked beside the bins. I pick it up and look questioningly at Dad.

“It’s for you!” Dad calls through the open window, raising his voice above the car horn. “Can’t believe they left it outside and nobody nicked it! Must be a good day!”

“Can I open it?”

He gives me a thumbs-up because the horn is now one continuous, angry bleat. I carry the package inside and close the door. Dad must get going straight away because the horn cuts out immediately. The sudden silence is eerie. All empty houses are spooky, but there’s something extra unsettling about the ones where someone *should* be. Even if the ghost is one you want around.

I drop my keys into the bowl with a clatter and kick off my trainers. Then I head into the front room, turn the TV on, and sit on the sofa with the package. I tear open the plastic wrap to find a luminous cardboard shoebox inside.

The smell hits me first: that brand-new, department store smell. Glossy and rich and expensive. The lid of the box squeaks a little as I ease it open. Then I fold back the packing paper and lift out a pristine blue and pink football boot. I turn it around in my hands, running my fingertips over the textured instep, the lines of neat stitches, the sleek plastic sole and studs, the slick logo. I think of all the players that have been wearing these boots this season: Kieran Wakefield, Joel Harris-Locke,

Cain Carter – who I saw today with own eyes. Then I imagine all the goals these boots will help me to score for my team. My new team: Harrowfield FC.

For the first time, it properly sinks in that my dream is coming true. A big smile spreads across my face. I can’t remember the last time I felt this happy.

I remove the wad of padding from inside and slip the boot onto my right foot.

I get my phone out to thank Dad, but there’s already a message from him:

Hope you like the boots! Can’t have you running around in scruffs. Enjoy the cold pizza.

There’s an emoji spewing green vomit at the end, which makes me laugh. Then another new message appears while I’m looking at the screen.

Proud of you son.

I don’t know what to say to that – I never do. I’m proud of Dad too, but it’s not the kind of thing you say to your dad. Especially if he’s alone. If I said I was proud, he would know I felt Mum’s absence, and then he would feel

like he wasn't doing enough to make me forget the fact I don't have a mum any more. So I don't say it. Instead, I reply with a thumbs-up emoji and a picture of the boot on my foot.

Then I set my phone aside and try on the left boot. It fits perfectly.

No, not quite perfectly. There's something pressing into my toe – something with a sharp edge. I take the boot off and give it a shake. A square of folded paper tumbles into the heel.

Weird.

The paper is slightly grubby, and as I unfold it I see that it's a note. There are several lines written in a foreign language, but at the bottom are three words I do understand. The handwriting is shaky and smudged, but the words are clear. They make perfect sense, and yet they don't make any sense at all.

PLEASE HELP US!

My mind races with questions. What is the note doing inside a football boot? What does the rest of it say? Who wrote it? When? Where? Why do they need help? Each word seems more desperate than the last, but it's the one

in the middle that keeps snagging my attention like a rusty nail.

Help.

And for some reason I can't stop thinking of Budi.

The way he took his boots off after the game and deliberately set them aside.

The way he hid the logo on his shirt with the match ball.

The things he said afterwards:

It is not about me.

It is about the people you cannot see.

They need our help.

Help.

I stare at the paper. It shakes slightly, and it takes me a while to realize that *I'm* shaking. I try to look away but can't. It's like a clue to a gruesome crime, like a terrible secret that was never supposed to get out, like a scab that will bleed and ooze if I pick it.

What do I do?



I sit on the edge of my bed, holding the note in my lap. The paper feels soft and slightly fuzzy under my fingertips. I look at the smudgy handwriting.

I have to know what the rest of it says.

Holding the note in my left hand, I pick up my phone and begin typing the words into a translation app. It immediately identifies the language as Indonesian. My heart begins to pound as I concentrate on carefully typing each word. It feels like I'm deciphering a code that will lead me to something extraordinary, something awful. I resist looking at the real-time translation that appears underneath in English; I want to know what the whole message says.

Finally, I reach the three English words at the bottom

– PLEASE HELP US! – and set the note aside. My heart is beating so hard it feels like I'm swaying.

Breathe.

I look at my phone. I try to read the words in sequence, but my eyes keep jumping ahead, snagging on phrases that make it harder and harder to focus. I close my eyes and tell myself that reading the note is the easy part. Far easier than writing it.

I open my eyes and read:

We work in a factory in Jakarta making football boots. We work very long hours in crowded and dangerous conditions. Sometimes we are forced to work without breaks and long into the night. The pay is barely enough to survive on. We are hungry and exhausted. Every day is the same.

There are children here too.

PLEASE HELP US!

It's like the words throw me into a deep pit, and for several seconds I can't scuddle out. I close my eyes, swallowing against the queasy feeling that's rising in my throat. I take a steadying breath, but it doesn't help much.

Then I open my eyes and read the note again.

I sit quietly. My phone screen goes black, but I don't wake it up. I don't think I could forget the message if I tried.

There are children here too.

I think about calling Teddy's mum and asking if I can stay over. I used to do it all the time when Dad worked a late shift, but the thought of having to explain the note to a grown-up is overwhelming. Then I think of knocking for Mrs Lindsey. She wouldn't ask any questions, but Dad would still find out – and then he'd think that I can't cope on my own.

I want to know who wrote the note. I *need* to know. Because somebody wrote it. Someone out there scribbled those words and sent them out like a message in a bottle.

Someone like me, maybe.

I check the boots and the box they came in, but I don't find anything else unusual. Then I grab my phone and look up how to trace a pair of football boots, but I soon discover that it's impossible. You can't find out where your stuff comes from. The note mentioned Jakarta, but Jakarta is a city with millions of inhabitants on the other side of the world. Even if I could get there – which I can't – where would I even start? I search for my boots specifically, and how they're made, but all the top results lead me to a page of the company's website where there's a statement promising to “eradicate forced labour,

modern slavery, and all forms of exploitation”. Augustus Sinclair's signature loops across the bottom of the pledge. Beneath that is the company's iconic logo.

I put my phone on the bed and let it go to sleep. I haven't learned anything. I'm no closer to knowing who wrote the note.

I shuffle to the bathroom and get ready for bed, feeling numb. I'm dimly aware of anger, but it feels distant, like a train that is still a long way from reaching the station.

But it's coming. I can hear the blasting of its horn, feel the ground trembling beneath my feet.

I catch sight of myself in the bathroom mirror and feel weirdly detached, as though it's not my reflection I'm looking at.

The words of the note whirl around my head. And I can't help thinking, as I lie alone in my darkened room, that promising to eradicate something isn't the same as eradicating it. In fact, it's kind of like admitting that it still exists.

I don't see Dad in the morning, but I hear snores coming from his room. I tiptoe around the house as quietly as possible, doing my best to dodge the squeaky steps on my

way down to the kitchen. I open and close cupboards carefully, placing a spoon gently in a bowl so it doesn't rattle. I choose rice puffs, partly because I like them but mostly because they're the quietest cereal to pour in a bowl. When I add the milk, the crackling noise seems way too loud.

I'm always careful not to wake Dad after a late shift – I know how little rest he gets – but today I take extra care. If I wake him up, he'll come down to see me before I leave for school, and he'll want to talk about the boots. I'm not sure yet whether to mention the note. I feel like I should tell someone about it – and Dad would be the best person – but I don't want to spoil the kind thing he did.

I pack the note in my school bag, hoping to show Teddy, but I realize as soon as he comes bounding out of his house – ginger hair sticking up, a wide smile on his freckled face, shirt half-untucked – that I can't do it. He's so excited, so *pumped*, that the few sentences I'd been rehearsing on the walk over wither and die on my tongue.

"Top of the morning to you, Mr Sharp!" he says, hurdling over the rusty little gate at the end of the path. He actually clicks his heels on the way over.

"Hello," I say. "You know it's a school day, right?"

"Of course, old chap. As I always say: Monday is the finest day of the week."

"You have literally never said that."

"Nonsense, old bean! Shall we proceed to our centre of learning?" He waggles his eyebrows like some kind of awful salesman. "Wisdom awaits."

I can't help but smile. We set off and I try to put the note to the back of my mind.

"What did you have for breakfast this morning?" I ask. "Something sweet and fizzy?"

"I breakfasted on..." He pauses. "French toast."

I laugh. "Is that the poshest thing you can think of? You know French toast is just eggy bread, right?"

"Really?"

"Really."

"I did *not* know that. I shall take the matter up with my servants directly."

"So if you weren't drinking pop for breakfast, why are you dead hyper?"

"Because, dear fellow, I also breakfasted on *anticipation*. Today is the day we get to announce our success to the world."

"You're excited about showing off?"

"Precisely."

I shake my head. "We haven't even had a training session yet. The first one is tomorrow."

“I know, but one so rarely has the opportunity to show off in school.”

He pulls a face and twists his fists in a boo-hoo gesture that makes me think of crying clowns. I know what he’s saying. Teddy finds himself in the headteacher’s office more often than most people, and it isn’t to collect certificates. And it’s not like I’m at risk of becoming head boy either. I’d been thinking of keeping the academy news to myself, just in case it didn’t work out. But maybe Teddy is right. Maybe we do get to enjoy today. I feel my lips curl into a small smile.

“Okay,” I say. “I’m in.”

“Good show!”

“But I don’t think I can handle a whole day of you pretending to be a toff.”

“I can do cockney, guvnor?”

“Can you do Scouser?”

“I’ll give it me best shot!”

Teddy spends the rest of the walk to school doing the funniest, most extra impression of a Liverpudlian I’ve ever heard – the way people who aren’t from round here think we speak. Everything is “dead good”, and he’s “proper made up” to be joining a top-flight academy. When he starts addressing a wheelie bin as “our kid”,

flapping the lid up and down, I laugh so hard my sides start to ache.

For a while, I almost forget about the note. Almost.

Somehow, everyone in school knows we’ve joined the academy by break time. And when I say somehow, what I mean is that Teddy tells everybody he sees: at the gates, in the playground, in the corridors, in the classroom. You’d have thought he’d just won the Ballon d’Or.

By lunchtime he’s basically signing autographs.

And while it’s fun to feel like the centre of attention, I can’t enjoy it completely. Definitely not in the way that Teddy seems able to. Because I was the centre of attention once before. People stole glances at me and whispered things back then too. *Did you hear about Owen’s mum?*

It’s amazing how invisible you can feel when everyone’s eyes are on you.

In the afternoon, it’s a struggle to concentrate in maths. Even *more* of a struggle. I keep thinking about the note. When I take my pencil case out of my bag, the note tumbles onto the desk. Teddy glances at it, but it’s folded up and I quickly sweep it back into my bag as though it’s nothing.

But it's not nothing. It's a cry for help that only I can hear. And so far, it feels like I'm ignoring it.

When I get home, there's a different note waiting for me. I find it on the kitchen counter, written in Dad's small, neat handwriting:

*Some overtime came up so went in
early - shouldn't be back too late.
Mrs L dropped round some shepherd's
pie! It's in the fridge.
She's very pleased about your news and has
started looking at mansions in Cheshire.
Hope you had a good day and Teddy
wasn't too outrageous.
Can't wait for tomorrow!
Love, Dad*

I walk to the fridge and open the door. Inside, between a half-empty bottle of ketchup and a jar of pickled onions, is a stack of four plastic containers. I remember the first time Mrs Lindsey brought round her shepherd's pie. It was in a big glass oven dish. She hadn't had any herself: it was all for us. She was probably worried we might starve without Mum. Or maybe she just knew that it's hard

enough to eat when you lose someone, let alone cook.

Nowadays, she uses smaller containers that make it seem as though she's just bringing round leftovers. But I know that if you added the four portions together, they'd fit neatly inside a big glass oven dish. It's her way of making it seem as though we need less help than we used to. I look at Dad's note, wondering whether he's worked that out too.

Remembering what Paul and Dad said about keeping on top of schoolwork, I carry my bag to the kitchen table and do homework until my stomach starts to growl. Then I fetch one of the containers and put it in the microwave. While it's warming up, I boil the kettle and make some gravy.

The humming microwave and bubbling kettle remind me just how quiet the house is.

When the microwave pings, I take the container to the table and pour on the gravy. I lift a forkful to my mouth and blow on it. There are peas and little diced carrots mixed in with the mince. It's an old family recipe, apparently. Top secret.

When it's cool enough, I take a bite.

It tastes delicious.

It makes me sad.

It always does.



Today is the day.

My stomach churns like a washing machine as I lie in bed, looking up at the shelf of trophies. Is this how every footballer feels before a big game? I sit up and want to puke. That makes me think of Ríos – the video Dad showed me of him throwing up before taking a penalty – which weirdly makes me feel slightly better.

I get up. I get dressed. I force down my rice puffs.

Dad appears in the kitchen doorway before I leave for school. He looks half asleep.

“Exciting day,” he says, wincing at the sunlight. “Beautiful day.”

“Did I wake you up?” I ask.

“No, no,” he says, shuffling towards the toaster. “I set an

alarm. Didn’t get to see you last night. How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Nervous.” *Annoyed that you’re asking.* Then I feel bad because I know he only wants to help.

“You’ll be great. Today’s session will mostly be about settling you in. No pressure.” Dad drops a slice of bread into the toaster. He yawns. “I’ll pick you and Teddy up from school and we’ll go straight to the academy, okay? I’ll bring your kit. Can you make sure Teddy has his with him? And make sure he doesn’t get a detention. Timings are going to be tight as it is.” He turns around and leans against the counter. “What do you think of your new boots?”

“They’re boss,” I say. But I can’t help thinking again of the note hidden inside. “Ta, Dad.”

“No problem. You deserve them.”

He turns back to the toaster, and this is the moment I should tell him about the note. Somehow it seems easier while his back is turned. But I don’t know how to do it. I don’t know what to say, and that only makes me more annoyed because I’ve always been able to talk to Dad about anything, even the worst things. Then the toast pops up and Dad carries his plate to the table. Suddenly the moment is gone. He spreads butter on his toast and takes a big, crunchy bite.

“Everything okay?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“You’re going to be late.”

I glance at the oven clock. It’s an hour behind because we still haven’t got round to changing it, even though the clocks went forward over a month ago. I grab my bag.

“See you later,” I say.

I take a step closer, then stop. It’s like I don’t know what to do. I suddenly feel too old for a hug, even though I need one more than ever.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Dad asks.

“Yeah.”

I quickly hold my fist out. Dad looks at it uncertainly. Then he closes his hand around it and shakes up and down, as though he doesn’t know what a fist bump is.

“Nice...to...meet...you,” he says slowly.

I smile. “You’re a doofus. See you after school.”

Five seconds later, I’m out in the sunshine and heading towards Teddy’s house.

School drags on and on. It’s impossible to concentrate. All I can think of is my first training session at the academy. I know Teddy is distracted too because he’s quieter than I’ve ever known him to be.

When the end of the day finally comes, we’re the first ones out the door. Dad must have been waiting in the car for ages because he managed to get a spot really close to the gates.

“Hop in quick,” he says, “before everyone else starts moving and we get stuck in traffic.”

We pile in, shoving our bags onto the middle seat. Dad starts the engine, and for a heart-stopping moment all the car does is whine.

“Come on,” Dad mutters. He tries again...with the same result. A knife of panic twists in my chest. Dad closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

“Time to say a quick prayer to John, Paul, George and Ringo,” he says.

He tries again.

And this time, the car fires into life.

“Go! Go! Go!” Teddy says.

“All right, all right,” Dad says. “I’m not a getaway driver.”

He pulls away from the kerb and drives us out of the neighbourhood, onto the main road. I breathe a sigh of relief. The fear I felt when it looked like we might be stuck outside the school gates makes me realize how much I want this. Sometimes fear is good. It makes you focus.

“Woah,” Teddy says.

I glance across and watch him prise my boot bag from the bottom of the pile between us. One side of the bag is made of black mesh, and Teddy has obviously caught a glimpse of my new boots. He pulls them free, causing a small avalanche of school bags.

“You kept these quiet,” he says, turning them over in his hands.

I glance up and see Dad’s puzzled expression in the rear-view mirror. He’s probably wondering why I haven’t told Teddy about them. It’s what we normally do whenever we get new boots. I quickly look back at Teddy.

“They’re from Dad,” I say. “For getting into the academy.”

There’s a moment when Teddy’s face falls a little, but the smile is back in an instant. “Coach,” he says, giving Dad’s shoulder a squeeze. “You really shouldn’t have. It must have cost you a fortune to buy us both a pair.”

“Ha!” Dad says. “You know I would if I had the money, mate. I did bring you both a banana for the journey, if that’s any consolation.”

Teddy spends about ten minutes inspecting the boots, pointing out every little detail. He’s particularly obsessed with the way they fade from pink at the heel to blue at the toe. Normally I’d be all over them too, but I can’t help thinking of the person who wrote that note. For the first

time, I’m looking at something I own and wondering where it came from.

Teddy must be able to tell that I’m off because he goes quiet too. Eventually he returns the boots to the bag and we each stare out of the window, as if there’s loads to look at on the motorway. Dad tries to make conversation, but we end up driving the rest of the way in nervy silence.

Soon – too soon – the immense concrete wall looms ahead of us. It looks even taller and more menacing than last time. Dad gets us through the security checkpoint without incurring the wrath of the guards, drives to the training facility, and parks up. There are lots more cars this time, most of them unloading kids in matching Harrowfield kits. Everyone seems to know where they’re going and what they’re doing. I gulp.

“Do you think they’ll give us the Harrowfield stuff?” I ask. I look down at my school uniform and already feel out of place. “Otherwise we’re going to look like the kids who forgot their PE kits.”

“I’m sure they’ve thought of that,” Dad says. “I can always ask Paul about it.” Then he points through the windscreen. “Speak of the devil.”

Up ahead, by the main doors, Paul gives us a quick wave. In his other hand are two bundles of red and white, wrapped

in clear plastic. We climb out and head towards him.

“I guess there’s no chance of meeting a pro this time either,” Teddy says, nodding at the empty player car park. “They’ll already be in Munich for tomorrow’s semi-final.”

I swallow hard. Not telling Teddy about my new boots is one thing, but keeping him in the dark about Budi is even worse. A red card offence. And I still can’t work out why I’m hiding it. The two secrets seem to be connected, somehow, and until I figure it out, keeping quiet feels like the best option.

“Some of the injured players might be here,” I say. “You never know.”

Teddy holds up a hand: fingers crossed.

“Welcome back,” Paul says, shaking Dad’s hand. “You brought the sunshine with you.”

“It’s always sunny in Liverpool,” Dad says, which it most definitely is not.

“Maybe I’ll retire there,” Paul says, smiling. He hands over the kits. “These are for you, boys. They should fit but let me know if not and I’ll fetch another size. I’ll show you where you can get changed. Follow me.”

We walk around the outside of the buildings, towards the outdoor pitches. Other players jog past, glancing at us coolly. I try to keep my eyes dead ahead.

We turn a corner and Paul comes to a stop. “Here we are. You can get changed in there.”

Teddy and I walk into a huge changing room. It never occurred to me before that changing rooms could be nice. The only ones I’ve ever been in have been smelly, damp and either too hot or too cold. (Normally too cold.) I thought it was kind of a rule. But this one is clean and gleaming, with small dividers between each peg so you don’t feel like you’re getting undressed in front of the whole world. We get changed as quickly as possible. The kit fits perfectly. We step out of our booths, look at each other, and grin.

“How do I look?” I ask.

“A little bit like a candy cane.”

“You know you’re wearing exactly the same clothes, right?”

“I’m just messing. You look boss, especially in those boots.” I look down. They do look boss. But then I immediately feel guilty.

“You ready?” I ask.

He holds out a fist and we bump knuckles. Then we walk out together, our studs clacking on the floor.

“Perfect,” Paul says when he sees us. “You shall go to the ball.”

Dad takes the bags that are stuffed with our uniforms

and just looks at us. I can tell that he's proud enough to cry and I'm very relieved that he doesn't.

"The boys will be training on pitch number four," Paul says to Dad. "No parents allowed on the sidelines, I'm afraid, but you're welcome to watch from the cafeteria. Just go through that door and follow the smell of coffee."

Still looking a bit stunned, Dad snaps to attention. "Of course. Coffee sounds good. I probably spend enough time on touchlines anyway." He flashes us a smile then quickly walks away. I expect him to turn back but he goes straight through the door. Suddenly I feel like crying too.

"Pitch four is over there," Paul says. "Your coach is called Jack."

"What's he like?" Teddy asks.

"You'll see," Paul says. He smiles. "My advice would be to stay on your feet."

Teddy and I exchange a glance.

"You mean he doesn't like diving?" Teddy asks.

"I mean: stay on your feet."

"Roger that," Teddy says.

"Any other advice?" I ask.

"Yes," Paul says. "Don't keep him waiting." He checks his watch. "Training starts in thirty seconds. Good luck."

Teddy and I take the hint. We turn and run.



Jack is a lot younger than I was expecting – younger than Dad – but his forehead is creased with a permanent frown. There's a tattoo on each of his calves: one of a tiger and one of a leopard. Or maybe a jaguar. I can't tell and I'm definitely not about to ask. His white socks are scrunched around his ankles and his boots look even newer than mine.

His scowling eyes pass over us as we wait in a line. Some of the other players glance at me suspiciously. I wait for Jack to introduce me and Teddy, which I'm dreading, and explain what we're going to cover in the session.

Instead, he shouts, "Pen drills! Go!"

Everyone dashes off. I look quickly at Teddy before

sprinting off after them. My heart is already thumping, and the sudden chaos makes me feel even more out of my depth, but I soon work out what the drill involves – shuttle runs to various points in the penalty area – and try to settle in.

After five minutes, Jack shouts something from the halfway line that I don't hear at all, but suddenly everyone is running towards him. I follow them, pushing hard to make sure I'm not the last to arrive. We stand in a line, panting, while Jack walks along the row, throwing bibs at seemingly random players. Teddy gets a yellow bib. I get an orange one.

I quickly pull it on, grimacing as I get a whiff of stale sweat. At least one thing is familiar. I look around and notice that four areas are marked out with different coloured cones – white, yellow, green and orange – so when Jack shouts, "Cones! Go!" I'm one of the first off the line, sprinting for the square of orange cones.

There is a ball in the centre, and when the others arrive – two with orange bibs and three without – we begin a passing exercise. I'd already convinced myself that no one would want to pass to me, so when the ball comes straight at me – fast and punchy – I nearly miss it

altogether. My first touch is terrible, and one of the non-bibs nicks it off me.

I glance at Jack, hoping that he didn't see.

He stares straight back.

I get to work trying to win back possession, but the other boys are so quick and skilful it's like playing piggy-in-the-middle against giants. A voice in my head tells me that I'm not good enough. That this will be my first and last training session here. I start to imagine how disappointed Dad will be, how un-disappointed he'll act.

No.

I lunge for the ball, intercepting a pass, and quickly send it to one of my teammates.

I glance at Jack again, but of course he's looking elsewhere.

After what feels like a long time, Jack tells us to return the cones and bibs and gather on the touchline. I feel dizzy from twisting and turning so much, but I make it over in one piece. I spot Teddy, his grin telling me that he's having a much better time than I am.

"Okay," Jack says. "We're going to play a match, rolling subs. If I call your name, you're off. Normal positions." He looks at Teddy, then me. "That includes you."

He hands out green bibs. I get one, Teddy doesn't. We

head out onto the pitch and Jack gives a single blast on his whistle. I tell myself not to worry about scoring or doing anything spectacular. I just need to get the basics right, to pass the ball quickly so I don't get caught in possession, to stay on my feet – at least until I've settled into the game. But it never gets comfortable. I make a couple of poor passes and then take one of the worst touches of my life.

“Nice boots,” one of the non-bibs says as he runs past: a defender who wouldn't look out of place on a rugby team. An adult rugby team. He flashes me a smile that is crowded with train-track braces.

I look down at my boots. With a first touch like that, I may as well be wearing clogs.

I'm not surprised when Jack calls my name and I have to jog to the subs' area, but it's disappointing. I look across at the stylish training complex, its windows orange in the evening sun, and hope that Dad isn't watching. I see Paul wandering over and feel bad for letting him down as well.

Most of the other subs get called back onto the pitch pretty quickly, but Jack leaves me on the touchline long enough for my sweat to turn chilly. It isn't until Paul whispers something in his ear that I get another chance.

And it feels, already, like a last chance.

“You're going back on,” Jack says. Then he turns to the pitch. “Lewis! Give your bib to Teddy!”

Paul gives me a subtle wink, then I burst onto the pitch. I pass close to Teddy and we bump fists.

“Let's go!” Jack calls.

And suddenly, it clicks. I don't know whether it's being on the same team as Teddy, or the fear of being booted out of the academy, but I instantly remember how to play football. When the ball comes to me, I take a touch, slide it to Teddy, then dart into space to collect the return pass. The big defender charges straight at me. I wait until he's committed to the tackle, then poke the ball between his legs. I hear him grunt in frustration behind me, but I've already got my head up, searching for the next pass. I spot a teammate curving his run along the defensive line and chip the ball over the top. The keeper rushes out, but the backspin makes the ball pop up, leaving him stranded near the penalty spot. The attacker lifts the ball over him and into the back of the net. He holds up a thumb to acknowledge the pass.

I'm tempted to check Jack's reaction, but I resist. I have to focus on my game. Besides, he'll probably just be scowling: that's the only expression I've seen on his face so far.

As I jog back into position for the restart, the big defender dips his shoulder into my chest, making me stagger.

“Careful,” he says.

I glare at him for a second, wondering what his problem is. Then I carry on across the halfway line, wincing at the pain in my chest. Teddy drifts closer.

“Bit of a scally, that one,” he says. “You okay?”

I nod, even though the pain gets sharper with every breath.

“I think you angered the bull,” he says, grinning. “It would be a real shame if you did it again.”

I start to laugh but a stabbing sensation in my ribs cuts it short. “Agreed.”

Jack gives a short blast on his whistle and the game restarts. I don’t see much of the ball for a while because the big defender stays close to me. I know he’s trying to intimidate me. I’ve played against plenty of players like him before and the worst thing you can do is let them bully you. Instead, you have to turn their aggression against them. I drop deeper into my own half, dragging him further and further out of position. It works.

“Bradley!” Jack barks. “Get back in position!”

The big defender – Bradley – retreats into his own

half, finally giving me space to play. I remember how Budi played on his debut and try to take a maximum of two or three touches before sending the ball to a teammate. Each time I get the ball, it’s gone before Bradley can put in a tackle.

And then something happens that changes everything.

I pick up the ball on the right wing and look for runners. It’s only a split-second hesitation, but it’s long enough. I’m suddenly aware that something is wrong. Very wrong. I don’t know what it is but then I do: I can’t see Bradley. He should be ahead of me but he’s not. Without knowing why, an image of Dad playing his last match flashes across my mind. Instinctively, I put my studs on the ball and drag it back, spinning in a tight circle. Something large hurtles past, right behind me. I feel a rush of air, like when you’re standing on a kerb and a bus speeds past.

Breathe.

I complete my turn just in time to see Bradley slide into a rack of water bottles, scattering them like skittles. For a moment, no one on the pitch makes a move or a sound. Then Teddy raises his arms like a flamenco dancer, claps twice, and shouts, “*Olé!*”

Which cracks everyone up – apart from Bradley.

And Jack.

“Stay on your feet!” he shouts, kicking one of the water bottles into high orbit. “Bradley, off! Noah, on!” He turns to look at me. “Did you hear a whistle?!”

I shake my head.

“Then why have you stopped?!”

It’s a good question. All at once, the players come alive again. I dodge an incoming tackle and dribble along the touchline. I glance up. No passes are on so I cut inside, hurdling over an outstretched leg. I’m so pumped from the near-death experience with Bradley, so full of adrenaline, that all I can hear is my own pounding heart.

Breathe.

I look up again, but there’s no one in space and the defenders are backing off, so I keep going, straightening up my run so that I’m heading directly towards the goal. And still they back off. I catch a glimpse of Teddy making a run to my right, but the pass isn’t on and I think he knows it. He’s just trying to drag one of the centre backs towards him, creating extra space for me.

It works.

The shot is on.

I don’t even think. I pull my right foot back and strike the ball as hard as I can.

I must be twenty-five yards out. Thirty, maybe.

But what did Paul say?

We want players who take the shot.

We want players who aim for the top corner.

We want players who inspire fear and despair in goalkeepers.

The goalkeeper doesn’t even move. He watches with the rest of us as the ball travels in a straight line, up and up and up. For an agonizing heartbeat, I think I’ve put too much on it.

Breathe.

But then the net bulges and ripples as the ball finds the top corner.

A huddle forms around me, led by Teddy, and through the bodies I see Jack on the touchline. He’s clapping. He’s doing it slowly and kind of reluctantly, but he’s clapping.



I'm still replaying the strike over and over in my mind at breakfast the next morning – right up until Dad walks into the kitchen. He's looking at his phone as though it's a strange artefact, left behind by an alien species. My stomach squirms with a sudden sense of dread.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I just got a call from Mrs Simpson.”

“Mrs Simpson? The headteacher?”

Dad nods. The dread gets deeper.

“At eight o'clock in the morning?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What did she want?”

Dad taps the edge of his phone against his chin. “She

said a journalist wants to interview you and Teddy about being scouted by Harrowfield. On camera.”

“What?” The fear turns to excitement. I can't help but smile. “When?”

“Today. At school. She needs my permission. And yours, of course.” Dad frowns. “How did a journalist even find out about it?”

“Well, Teddy did tell pretty much everyone.”

“Of course he did.” Dad shakes his head but he's smiling. “So, what do you think?”

I open my mouth but nothing comes out. I never expected anyone beyond me and Dad to care about me joining an academy. The thought of being interviewed makes my stomach flip and my skin tingle, but in a good way. It'd be like being a proper footballer.

“I want to do it,” I say.

“You sure?”

“Hundred per cent.”

“Great. I'll call Mrs Simpson back.” He ruffles my hair. “Looks like I'm your personal assistant as well as your chauffeur.”

“Don't forget butler,” I say.

“Careful – you're beginning to sound like Teddy.” A slow smile spreads across Dad's face. “God, he's going to

be unbearable. I hope someone gives that journalist a heads-up.”

A few hours later I find myself sitting at the edge of the playing field next to Teddy. Someone has brought out the soft chairs from the front office but I still can't get comfortable. I don't know whether it's the glaring light or Mrs Simpson's fussing or the suddenness of it all, but I feel anxious and fidgety. The worst thing is the camera. Its big black lens stares at us while the crew makes some final adjustments.

The journalist seems friendly, though. She introduces herself as Jenny and smiles a lot. I try to get a look at the questions on the tablet in her lap, so I can start to think about my answers, but it's impossible.

Teddy doesn't seem nervous at all. He's just happy to be missing maths.

“Okay, it looks like we're all set,” Jenny says. “Remember, this isn't live so it doesn't matter if you make a mistake. We can always edit things out. Try to relax and most of all – enjoy it!”

Mrs Simpson does a final uniform check before standing off to one side.

“So,” Jenny says, adjusting her glasses and glancing

down at the tablet. “Why don't you tell me about the moment you found out you'd been scouted by Harrowfield? How did it happen? How did you feel? Let's start with you, Owen.”

I start to talk but I have no idea what I'm saying. It's like someone is deleting the words from my brain the moment they're spoken. But Jenny leans forward, nodding in an encouraging way, so I keep going. I glance at the camera a couple of times, even though we were told not to, but otherwise I think I do okay.

Then it's Teddy's turn. He must do a lot better than me, because Jenny asks him a couple of follow-up questions. I glance over my shoulder at the PE lesson that's taking place on the far pitch, and wish I was playing football instead of talking about it.

“Tell me about your inspirations,” Jenny says, and I turn back to find she's looking at me.

“Inspirations?” I say. I immediately think of Mum, but I can't bring myself to say her name. I think I'd choke. I clear my throat. “My dad, probably. He's been my coach pretty much since I learned to walk. He's the one who got me into football and without him I don't think I'd have a place at Harrowfield.”

“Me neither,” Teddy says. “Don't tell him I told you,

but Owen's dad is a bit of a legend. Terrible singer, but a great coach."

That makes Jenny laugh, and I see her exchange an impressed look with the cameraman. Mrs Simpson catches my eye and gives me a double thumbs-up. I start to relax.

"And why do you want to become a professional footballer?" Jenny asks.

"That's easy," Teddy says with a grin. "Money!"

Mrs Simpson puts her face in her hands, but Jenny sees the funny side.

"Fair enough," she says. "What about you, Owen?"

And I don't know if it's because I'm settling into the interview and getting used to the black hole of the camera lens, but I take a second to actually think before responding. Why do I want to become a footballer? I've never really asked myself *why* before. It's what I've always wanted, but that's not really a reason. Do I want it for me, or for Dad? What if the main reason I want to succeed – *have* to succeed – is for him? To put right what went wrong? To fix the things that were broken?

I know Jenny is hoping for a serious answer, especially after Teddy's joke, because she leans forward and squints at me, resting her chin in her hand.

"I want to become a footballer," I say, and still I don't know what I'm going to come out with. "I want to become a footballer because I want to make things fairer."

"Fairer?" Jenny says. "In what sense?"

I thought I meant Dad, and his injury, and how much harder everything has been without Mum. And maybe I did. But I can't talk about those things. Not to a stranger. I glance at the camera. Not to the world.

And then I remember the note.

"I mean, less..." I'm not even sure of the word. It comes out as a question. "Exploitative?"

For the first time, Jenny frowns. But I can tell she's not angry. She's curious.

"What makes you think football is exploitative?"

The camera lens seems to widen. The light gets brighter and hotter. My palms feel sweaty and I rub them against my trousers. I can feel Jenny's eyes on me, and Teddy's, and Mrs Simpson's. They're all waiting for what I'm going to say next.

"Everyone knows there's a lot of money in football," I say. "But no one seems to know about the people that football is exploiting. Football wouldn't even be possible without them."

"Which people are you talking about?" Jenny asks.

“The people who make football boots,” I blurt out, and immediately it feels as though a weight has been lifted. “When I got into the Harrowfield academy,” I explain, “my dad bought me a new pair of boots. Inside one of the boots was a note, written by the person who made them.”

“And what did the note say?” Jenny asks.

“It described the horrible conditions they were working in.” I look down and notice that my fingers are all twisted together. “And they asked for help.”

“Help?”

I nod.

Jenny shares another look with the cameraman before asking, “I don’t suppose you still have this note, do you?”

I nod again. “It’s in my bag.”

I reach down and unzip the front pocket of my backpack. I hand the note to Jenny, who taps the words into an app on her tablet. For a few seconds, she reads the translation in silence. Then she offers the tablet to me.

“Would you mind reading it aloud?”

I glance uncertainly at the camera.

Then I take the tablet, clear my throat, and read.



“How was the interview?” Dad asks.

I sling my backpack on the floor and collapse onto the sofa. “Okay, I think. A bit weird. I don’t know how footballers deal with it all the time.”

“Practice, I suppose,” Dad says, handing me a glass of chocolate milk and a granola bar. “Just like everything else.”

I know I should tell Dad about the note, but part of me hopes they might not use that bit of the interview. Jenny did say they could cut stuff out. I take a long sip of my chocolate milk.

“I keep checking my phone,” Dad says. “Even more than usual.”

He puts his phone down on the coffee table, but I can tell he’s itching to pick it up again.

“What was Teddy like?” Dad asks.

“Oh, you know,” I say. I take another sip. “Like Teddy.”

I remember how natural Teddy was in front of the camera – how much Jenny seemed to enjoy questioning him – and feel slightly better. They’ll probably focus on him and use what he said.

Dad’s phone buzzes.

“It’s Jenny,” he says, checking the screen. “She says the story is online.”

He clicks the link, and my mouth suddenly goes dry and sticky.

“That’s weird,” Dad says, frowning. “It’s on the home page.” His frown deepens. “Why do you look so serious in the picture?”

I catch a glimpse of it and see myself staring back, dead moody. I’m holding the note in front of me, just like Jenny asked me to after I read out the translation. I swallow, but it’s like trying to swallow a mouthful of dust.

Dad presses play and Jenny’s voice begins to talk over footage of my school.

“The dream of becoming a professional footballer is one shared by countless children. Two boys at this Merseyside school are one step closer to making that

dream a reality, having just signed at the academy of title contenders, Harrowfield FC.

“But for many other children, dreams take a far humbler form. For some children, the dream is to live in safety, to have enough to eat, to go to school.”

“Er, mate,” Dad says, glancing at me. “What’s all this about?”

“Just watch,” I say, even though I can’t. I take one of the cushions and sit back, clutching it to my chest. I close my eyes, but that doesn’t stop me from hearing my own voice, strange and tinny, like someone doing an impression of me.

“I want to become a footballer because I want to make things fairer.”

I put my hands over my ears and keep them there for a long time. At one point, I take them away and hear Jenny say, “This is not the first time a note has been smuggled out of a so-called sweatshop. Augustus Sinclair, owner of both Harrowfield FC and the sportswear company involved, was unavailable for comment.”

I put my hands back over my ears and keep them there until I feel Dad’s hand on my shoulder. He gives me a gentle shake.

“Owen,” he says, his voice muffled. I take my hands

away and open my eyes. Dad's phone is back on the coffee table, its screen black. "You okay?"

I shrug.

Dad takes a deep breath and scratches his bristly cheek. "Want to talk about it? Five-minute rule?"

I shrug again, but it's more of a yes than a no.

"First of all," Dad says, "I'm sorry you found that note in your new boots. It must have been quite a shock. You know you could have talked to me about it, right?"

"I didn't want to ruin things," I mumble.

"I get that," Dad says, "but you can still talk to me."

"I know."

"Good. I also think you should know that I'm really proud of you."

That takes me by surprise. "You are?"

"Of course!"

"But...why?"

"Because it took courage to talk about what you found. I bet most people would have binned that note without a second thought. It would have been far easier to say you wanted to become a footballer because you love football, or winning trophies, or..."

"Money?"

"Right!"

"That's what Teddy said."

Dad smiles. "Thankfully they didn't use that clip."

"So you think it's a good thing?"

"Definitely. You said something that will make people think. It's making *me* think, and I hardly turn my brain on at all these days."

That makes me laugh. "Thanks, Dad."

"Any time." He ruffles my hair and stands up, wincing as he straightens his knee. "Are you still on for the footie tonight? I bought popcorn."

"Sweet or salty?"

He frowns. "Sweet, obviously. Salt is for crisps."

"Sounds like a plan."

That night, we watch Budi single-handedly dismantle Bayern Munich. They can't deal with his pace, with the speed of his decision-making, with his total disregard for playing in a set position. He's everywhere: a nuisance and a nightmare. He gets an assist midway through the first half, but Bayern come back to equalize before half-time.

The second half is cagey. Even with the second leg still to play, both teams know that conceding could cost them a place in the European final. There's a lot of passing

from side to side, a lot of walking, a lot of waiting for an opening.

But Budi doesn't walk and he doesn't wait. It's like he missed the half-time team talk. He makes everyone else look like they've been sedated.

He's fearless, I think. He doesn't seem to care that one mistake could end it all.

The Bayern players clearly don't like how the tempo jumps whenever he gets the ball. It must be like trying to keep time when one person is playing a different tune. It makes them edgy. It makes the crowd edgy too. I can tell from the noise they make, and the occasional glimpse I get of fans munching on their nails.

The pressure on the pitch must be unbearable.

Something has to give.

And then, with five minutes to go, it does.

Budi picks up the ball in the centre circle. The Bayern players have learned how pointless it is to close him down – he gets rid of the ball before they can get near. So they keep their distance.

Mistake.

Budi darts forward, dashing between two midfielders before they even realize he's on the move. The panic in the back line is obvious. Budi passes the ball to

Harris-Locke on the edge of the box and continues his run into the penalty area, looking for the return pass. One of the Bayern players spots the danger and lunges desperately, bringing down Harris-Locke before he can lay it off to Budi.

The referee blows his whistle, rushing over with a yellow card in his hand.

I sit up straight. The free kick is just outside the box, dead centre. The same position as the free kick I missed in the Youth Cup final.

I expect Zubia to take it, but instead of placing the ball on the turf he tosses it to Budi. Zubia doesn't even stand nearby as a decoy. It's just Budi and the ball. And I think that is what unsettles the Bayern players most of all. The plan is so simple and brazen it makes them fidget in the wall. His loneliness is his power. It says:

I am going to take this free kick.

I am going to score.

And there is nothing you can do about it.

The referee blows his whistle. Budi takes one deep breath that makes his chest swell.

Then he runs up and strikes the ball hard.

Too hard.

There's no way it will dip in time.

But then, at the last moment, it changes trajectory, dipping abruptly. It clips the underside of the bar, bounces up off the line, and surges into the roof of the net.

The away fans erupt.

Budi runs towards the corner flag to celebrate. Before his teammates arrive, he reaches under his shirt and pulls something out. I can't tell what it is until he lifts it up and claps it to his mouth.

When he takes his hand away, a piece of black tape is covering his mouth. Then he's mobbed by his teammates, lost in a frenzy of back slaps and fist pumps and animal yells of triumph. When he finally emerges, he peels the tape away from his mouth and sticks it, very deliberately, over the logo on his shirt.



At school, the staring and pointing and whispering make me feel like a celebrity, or maybe an exotic animal at the zoo, but training is totally different. I may be the most famous person in the playground, but at the academy I'm basically a nobody.

But that feels good. And it feels good to be playing again. Football is simple. There are clear rules and everything is marked out in clean, crisp white lines. When I'm playing football, I don't have to worry about anything else: all the messiness that exists beyond the touchline. I can just...be.

I feel as though I'm settling in, and I start to pick up the names of my teammates. There's Rhys, the rapid striker with braids curling across his scalp; Craig, the

goalkeeper who always wears a baseball cap, even when it's cloudy; and Sean, the stocky left-back who looks like a bruiser but never puts in a hard tackle. Unlike Bradley, who seems to have it in for everybody, but me most of all.

The only problem is that everybody seems to think my name is Matt. It isn't until we're on our way back to the changing room that Teddy explains it's short for "the Matador", which is the nickname he's created for me and is using at every opportunity.

"You know what a matador is?" he asks. "One of those guys in the fancy costumes who waves a red cape, trying not to get skewered like a kebab."

"A bullfighter, you mean?"

"That's the one."

"And this is just because I dodged one of Bradley's tackles?"

"Just?" Teddy exclaims. "*Just!* It was majestic. He'd have knocked you into next week if you hadn't pulled off that turn."

I see Dad up ahead and try to close the conversation down. Dad saw the tackle from the cafeteria the other day and was not happy. Which is a bit of an understatement. It's not often that Dad gets angry, but I could see he was struggling to keep his temper under control. He kept biting

his lip on the ride home, gripping the steering wheel hard enough to turn his knuckles white. I spent most of the journey persuading him not to confront Jack about it.

"The nickname won't stick," I say now, while secretly hoping that it might. "The Matador" does sound kind of cool.

"You'd better hope it does," Teddy says. "They'll go mad for it in Madrid when you become a Galáctico."

"Who's becoming a Galáctico?" Dad asks, joining us near the buildings.

Teddy holds up a hand. "Sorry, sunshine. You want to talk to the talent, you got to talk to his agent." He jabs a thumb at his own chest. "That's me, by the way."

"Well," Dad says, "you want a lift home, you better be nice to his chauffeur. *Sunshine.*" He winks at me. "Looks like you both had a good session out there. I'll see you back at the car."

We walk into the changing room, our studs clacking on the hard floor. I'm just about to reach my section of the bench when someone barges into me from behind. I put a hand on the wall to steady myself and look back. Bradley smirks at me, his braces catching the light.

"What's your problem?" I ask.

"My problem?" Bradley asks, looking around as though

I might be talking to someone else. “Don’t know what you’re on about, mate.”

“You literally just shoved me.”

He shrugs. “You’ll just have to deal with it. Football isn’t fair, right?”

He walks away, and I notice a few of the others smirking and stealing glances at me. My cheeks flush.

“Is this because I made you look like a bowling ball the other day?” I say. “Because it’s not my fault you can’t time a tackle.”

Bradley doesn’t like that. He likes it even less when some of the others start laughing.

“Strrrrrrike!” I say, rubbing it in.

Bradley storms over and for a moment I think he’s getting ready to hit me. Teddy steps up beside me, and maybe that’s what makes Bradley stop short. The changing room falls silent.

“I don’t know who you think you are,” Bradley says, “but you’re wrong. You just got here and already you’re acting like a diva. So you found a scrap of paper? Big whoop. Why do you even care?”

I feel the others staring at me, waiting for my reply. Why *do* I care so much? And is it really worth making an enemy of my teammates because of someone thousands

of miles away? Someone I’ll never meet? A stranger? I could just drop it, laugh it off, move on. It’d probably be a joke by next week. But for some reason I can’t. And it’s not just about standing up to Bradley.

“Because it’s not fair,” I say. “That’s why I care.”

Bradley looks at me as though I’m dirt. “Huh. Well, don’t expect any help from me. Whatever...crusade you’re on, you’re on your own.”

The way everyone’s looking at me, I think he might be right. Bradley turns away.

“Isn’t fairness important to you?” I ask.

He looks back, a deep frown creasing his forehead. “No,” he says. “But winning is. Don’t you want to be a winner?”

I swallow the knot in my throat. Eventually, I nod. Because I do. More, perhaps, than anything.

“Then keep your mouth shut from now on. Otherwise, it’s going to get you in trouble.”

He walks over to his peg, fist-bumping Rhys on the way. I sit down on the bench and roll down my socks. I remove my shin pads. Take off my football boots. Before long, the room is full of chatter and laughter, but I’m not part of it.

I’m too busy trying to work out whether Bradley’s words were a warning or a threat.



I know something's up when I come downstairs on Saturday morning and the radio isn't on. The comforting stream of football chat is how I know it's Saturday when I wake up. That and the smell and sizzle of a cooked breakfast drifting upstairs.

"Morning, mate," Dad says as I enter the kitchen. He whistles a Beatles song as he peers into the oven to check the sausages. I notice that the little digital clock is still an hour behind.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Full English," Dad says, giving the pan of beans a stir. "Breakfast of champions."

He resumes his whistling. He still hasn't looked at me.

"What's happened?" I ask.

"Huh?" he says, glancing at me quickly over his shoulder. "Can you give me a second? Everything's pretty much ready and I'm about to serve up."

I open my mouth to protest when the toast pops up.

"Can you butter those?" he asks, pulling on an oven mitt.

I walk over to the toaster, but instead of reaching for the bread I flick the switch on the radio. It's the call-in segment of the show, and the sound of someone having a rant fills the kitchen.

"—leave politics out of football. Footballers are paid to perform and get results. That's the end of it. They're not paid to give their opinion. And now we've got kids trying to make us feel guilty just for living our lives. First it was that girl with the bee in her bonnet about the environment, and now it's this boy who allegedly found a note. I mean, who's to say it's even genuine? He might have written it! It looks like it was written by a kid."

"Has it occurred to you," the host says, in a voice that is somehow empty of all the rage I'm feeling, "that perhaps the note was written by a child?"

"Look, all I'm asking is: are we really supposed to care about strangers on the other side of the planet? Why is

that my problem? I'm not the one running these factories. I don't own a multinational sportswear company."

"So should people like Augustus Sinclair be held responsible?"

"Absolutely not! And I'm not just saying that as a Harrowfield supporter." The caller laughs. "Besides, Augustus Sinclair has already confirmed the note couldn't have come from one of his factories. He's even spoken out in support of Budi, despite the lad showing a total lack of respect and professionalism. That's what I hate most of all: the ingratitude. Budi's ridiculous wages are paid by Sinclair, and this kid plays at an academy built by Sinclair's millions; the least they could do is show a bit of appreciation. And if they can't manage that, they should keep their mouths shut."

There's a sharp click as Dad flicks the switch on the wall, and the angry voice is silenced. I take a deep breath, my heart pounding so hard it feels as though my whole body is rocking.

"So that's why the radio wasn't on," I mutter.

"Don't worry," Dad says. "It'll blow over."

"That man doesn't even know me," I say, and I hate the whine I can hear in my voice. I sound like a baby. "He doesn't know anything. How can he say that stuff?"

Dad puts a soft hand on my shoulder. He's still wearing the oven mitt. "Everyone has an opinion. Unfortunately, people have a habit of confusing their opinions with the truth. But he's wrong."

"Is he?" I ask. I can't help thinking about how the caller's words echoed Bradley's. It's the second time in as many days that I've been told to keep my mouth shut.

"Of course he is!" Dad says. "And anyway, there are plenty of people who are glad you found that note."

"Really? Why?"

"Because it's evidence," Dad says. "Evidence that we're living in a system that isn't fair. Lots of people suspect it, but the note you found is proof. And that's why all the people who dismiss it are wrong. If it's the kind of thing we should ignore, why is it so hard to forget?"

Dad takes his hand off my shoulder.

"Thanks, Dad."

He gives me a hug. "You know I'm always here for a team talk, right? I'm quite the sports psychology guru."

"Shame about the cookery skills."

"Huh?"

"Beans are boiling."

Dad lets me go and turns back to the hob. He stirs a

wooden spoon through the gloopy tomato sauce. “There goes my Michelin star.”

The toast is cold, the sausages are crispy, and the beans have become more of a thick soup, but it’s the best breakfast I’ve ever had. I think it’s because I know, more than I’ve ever known, that I’ll never truly be alone. Even when it feels like the world is against me, Dad will always be in my corner, fighting with the strength of two parents.

It gives me the courage to talk about something we hardly ever mention.

“Do you remember,” I say, running my fingertip around the rim of my glass of orange juice, “when you took me to my first game at Tranmere?”

“I didn’t realize you remembered that,” Dad says. “You must have been about five years old at the time.”

“Are you serious? I remember all of it: being wrapped up in a big coat, the glare of the floodlights, the way the players steamed in the cold air. You made me wear ear defenders in case the crowd was too loud, but I took them off.”

“Loud and swears,” Dad says.

“I remember how fast and physical it seemed, how clear the players’ shouts and calls were – even the sound

of the ball as it zipped across the turf. You let me sip your tea and bought me a chocolate bar.”

I pause, but Dad doesn’t say anything. He just looks into his empty mug.

“Mum was there,” I say, staring hard at my plate. “She let me wear her woolly hat because I’d left mine in the car. I remember her leg knocking against mine every time she stamped her feet to keep warm. I remember her saying, ‘You’ve got to pick up the runners’, over and over again. I remember her...” I trail off, looking up at Dad, but he’s all blurry. I shrug. “I remember her.”

I blink, and for a moment Dad comes into focus. A single tear rolls down his cheek. He reaches out a hand and holds mine, between the bottles of ketchup and brown sauce. I hear him take a deep, shaky breath.

“I was gutted Tranmere didn’t win that game,” he says. “I wanted them to win so badly. For you. I wondered whether you’d still be interested in football after that. Ninety minutes is a long time to sit in the cold, just for your team to concede a last-minute winner.”

“Tranmere lost?” I say.

Dad nods.

“I always thought they won that game,” I say.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m convinced they did.”

“Nope,” Dad says, dabbing his eyes. “They lost. Mum was right: they didn’t pick up the runners, and they paid the price.”

“Huh,” I say, sitting back in my chair. I wonder whether what happened with Mum will ever change. Whether that loss, with time, will become something else. Not quite a victory, but not a defeat, either.

Dad leans across and ruffles my hair.

“Chin up, son. Chin up.”



Just after the breakfast things have been tidied away, there’s a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it,” Dad says.

I hear him have a brief conversation before the door slams shut. The next thing I know, he’s drawing the curtains, throwing the front room into darkness.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“There are reporters outside,” Dad says. “Do me a favour and don’t talk to them.”

I move towards the window to take a peek, but Dad holds out an arm.

“There are photographers too. We just have to ignore them and they’ll lose interest.”

He heads upstairs and I hear him closing all the

curtains up there as well. Then he comes straight back.

“There we go,” he says. He looks around the gloomy front room. “Just like when we used to build dens.”

I can tell he’s trying to be cheery, but it feels like we’re under siege.

“Do you think they’ll be gone by the time Teddy comes over to watch the football?” I ask.

Dad checks his watch. “I hope so. Teddy versus the paparazzi is a drama we don’t need right now.”

But when Dad checks a couple of hours later, there’s still a huddle of reporters outside the garden gate.

“I’d better call Cassie,” Dad says.

He leaves the room, and when he comes back he looks exhausted.

“She’s going to drive him round on her way to work and make sure he doesn’t get up to mischief.”

“But he lives, like, a two-minute walk away.”

“It’s for the best.”

I can’t believe it. Is this what life is like for famous footballers?

It’s obvious when Teddy arrives because there’s a sudden commotion outside. The reporters probably recognize him from the interview we did at school. Dad

tells me to stay out of sight while he opens the door to let Teddy and Cassie in.

“Sorry about that,” Dad says, after the door has shut out most of the noise.

“It’s not your fault, is it?” I hear Cassie say.

I poke my head into the hall. Cassie is wearing the purple tunic she wears to work at the care home. I hardly ever see her in anything else.

“Hi, Owen,” she says. “I see you’ve become quite the celebrity.”

“Annoying, isn’t it?” I say.

“You’re telling me!” Teddy says. “They should be outside my house. I’m the photogenic one.”

“Careful what you wish for,” Dad says with a smile. Then he turns to Cassie. “Do you fancy staying for a cup of tea?”

“Can’t, I’m afraid. I’ve got to be at work in twenty minutes. If I can make it through the scrum outside, that is.”

“Hopefully they’ll be gone soon,” Dad says.

But I can’t help wondering: what if they never leave?

“Let me know if they’re still here and I’ll pick Teddy up on my way home,” Cassie says. Then she kisses Teddy on the head, even though he tries to squirm away.

“Leave it out, Mum.”

“Aw, you’ll always be my little teddy bear.” She pinches his cheek, which has already turned as red as a Liverpool shirt.

“Just go to work!” Teddy says.

Cassie laughs and says goodbye. I duck out of sight while Dad opens the front door – unleashing a moment of chaos – before quickly shutting it again. He comes to join me and Teddy in the front room.

“Right,” he says, clapping his hands together. “Who’s up for watching some football?”

We decide to watch the Harrowfield game instead of Liverpool. Dad complains, but I can tell he’s secretly excited to get another glimpse of Budi. I think about mentioning the encounter I had with him at the academy, but the last thing I want is another drama, just as we’re beginning to forget the mob outside.

When Budi walks out of the tunnel and onto the pitch, I see that he’s got black tape covering the logos on his boots and kit. But he’s not the only one. Zubia has a strip covering the logo on his shirt, as does Hughes. Dad looks at me and raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t say anything.

Once again, Budi starts running from the first whistle and doesn’t let up: closing players down, chasing lost causes, running in behind, dragging defenders out of

position. The crowd urges him on every time he gets the ball, screaming at him to shoot when he gets close to the penalty area.

But he doesn’t shoot.

Instead, he lays the ball off to Harris-Locke on the right wing, who surges towards the corner flag, trying to get around Chelsea’s left-back. He runs out of room and checks back, twisting and turning to make some space. He does a neat little step-over, creating enough space to swing in a cross. It goes high, sailing over the heads of the players already in the box. It looks as though it will bounce harmlessly towards the opposite touchline.

But then a player comes steaming into the box from the opposite wing. He flings himself forward as the ball drops, diverting it back across goal with a diving header. Everyone stops. The keeper, the crowd: everyone.

Budi lands as the ball hits the back of the net, sliding on his stomach towards the crowd of photographers positioned behind the goal. The clicking of their cameras is lost beneath a roar from the stands.

Budi’s teammates pile on, eventually hauling him to his feet and jogging back to their own half. Budi stands alone before the photographers and the jubilant crowd, a piece of black tape sealing his mouth shut.

The referee blows for half-time shortly after the restart and the players head for the changing rooms.

After the adverts, the pundits endlessly analyze Budi's goal, showing how he sprinted in a wide arc across the pitch after laying the ball off to Harris-Locke, arriving just in time to meet the cross and score. The bald pundit describes it as "the greatest one-two in history".

When the teams emerge for the second half there is only one change.

"Uh-oh," Teddy says. "They're unleashing the beast."

On-screen, Cain Carter sprints onto the pitch and gets what Dad calls a mixed reception from the Chelsea fans. It mostly consists of booing.

"Looks like they've heard the rumours that he's moving to Harrowfield this summer," Dad says.

But Carter doesn't look bothered. He's the kind of player who has been booed his whole career. He smirks as the howls ring out around the stadium. Then he cups a hand to his ear, and the booing goes up a notch.

Carter's job is obvious from the restart: stay close to Budi and make his life as difficult as possible. He follows Budi everywhere: pulling his shirt, blocking his runs, putting in challenges that force Budi to take evasive action.

"For someone who's going to be playing in red and

white next season," Dad says, "he's got a funny way of winning over the Harrowfield fans."

He keeps hounding Budi, on and off the ball. Budi tries to speak to the referee a couple of times, but he gets waved away.

Then something happens that changes everything.

The ball goes out of play, and the referee signals for a substitution. One moment, the players are all standing around, hands on hips. The next, twenty players are involved in a full-on scuffle.

"Honestly?" Dad says. He can't stand this kind of thing.

The referee eventually manages to regain control. The players part to reveal someone rolling around on the floor, holding his face.

"Carter?" Teddy says. "I didn't even think he could feel pain. You'd need a wrecking ball to knock him over."

That's when they start showing the replays. The ball bounces out of play. The referee signals for a substitution. In the centre of the pitch, Carter stands right beside Budi. He leans in and whispers something. The next moment, Budi turns around and shoves Carter away. It's hardly even a push, but Carter immediately drops to the ground, holding his face. They show another angle, which makes the dive look even worse.

“Carter’s got to be booked for that,” Dad says. “It’s embarrassing.”

The referee reaches into his pocket, but instead of heading towards Carter, who is only just getting to his feet, he turns towards Budi. The card comes out, and the referee holds it high above his head. Budi looks up – and sees red.

“What?!” I say. “That’s impossible.”

But even as I say it, I know it’s not. Rules are rules. A push is violent conduct, and violent conduct gets you a red card. Even if you were provoked. Even if the other player isn’t really hurt. Even if everyone can see how unfair it is.

The other Harrowfield players can’t believe it – even the Chelsea players look surprised – and Budi has no choice but to trudge off the pitch. The camera follows him all the way to the tunnel, then cuts to Carter’s smirking face.

“That man,” Dad says, “is going to be the most hated player at Harrowfield Park next season.”

“Maybe,” I say, but the only person I can think of is Budi, sitting alone in the changing room, wondering if he’s just cost his team the title. There are three games left, and if the referee’s decision stands he’ll be banned from playing in all of them.

“They’ve got to appeal,” I say, but Teddy and Dad don’t respond. They both look like they’re in shock.

We watch the rest of the match in silence. Budi’s teammates look defeated. They desperately cling to their one-nil lead until the ninety-fifth minute, which is when Chelsea score.

And just like that, the title race is blown wide open.

When the full-time whistle blows a few seconds later, the Harrowfield players trudge off the pitch with their heads bowed. I hear Dad sigh.

“Poor kid,” he says. He stands up, wincing as he straightens his knee. “I’m going to see if those scallies outside have moved on.” He walks to the curtains and peeks through a tiny gap, letting in a shaft of blinding light. “Unbelievable. They’re still out there. Haven’t they got anything better to do?”

“Obviously not,” I say. I feel wretched – for me, for Dad, for Budi. I just wish I could turn back time and keep my mouth shut.

“How are we going to get rid of them?” Dad asks.

“Have you got any stink bombs lying around?” Teddy asks.

“No,” Dad says.

“What about water balloons?”

“Teddy, I appreciate your help, but I don’t think pranking the paparazzi is going to do us any favours. Besides, this isn’t a joke shop.”

“Pity.”

On the TV, Augustus Sinclair is about to give a pitch-side interview. He smiles as the reporter asks her question, but it looks forced: the kind of smile you put on when you’re served your least favourite meal.

“A draw isn’t ideal,” he says, “but we’re still in the title race. The treble is still on. We have to believe.”

“We saw a moment of madness in the second half,” the reporter says. “Is that a sign Budi isn’t ready for this kind of stage?”

“What a ridiculous question,” Dad says. “He scored a hat-trick last weekend!”

But Sinclair doesn’t dismiss it as ridiculous. He opens his mouth, hesitates, holds out his hands, sighs in exasperation.

“What’s he doing?” Dad says. “You’ve got to back your players. Always.”

That makes me feel slightly better. Never, in all the years he was my coach, did I ever hear Dad criticize one of his own players.

The reporter pushes Sinclair for an answer. “How costly could that red card be?”

“Look,” Sinclair says, “the red card is disappointing. It’s sloppy. It cost us the game, and maybe a trophy. Maybe three. We’ve been very unlucky with injuries this season, but there’s nothing you can do about that. A red card, on the other hand.” He shrugs. “Let’s just say it’s easier to win a football match with eleven players on the pitch. But we’re more than just one player. We made it this far without Budi; we can make it the rest of the way without him too.”

Dad’s mouth drops open. “That’s not fair. He’s making it all Budi’s fault. And who asked for his opinion anyway? He’s the owner, not the manager!” He bites his lip and his hands curl into fists. “Right! That’s it! I’m going to tell those scumbags where they can shove their cameras!”

Teddy glances at me. Dad is so rarely angry that he doesn’t know how to react. Neither do I. I glance around for some kind of clue. My eyes fall on the TV screen, on Sinclair’s pained smile. Dad strides towards the hallway.

“Wait!” I call. Thankfully, Dad stops in the doorway. “Don’t go out there.”

“I’ve had enough,” Dad says. “This is ridiculous. I want them gone.”

“There’s a better way,” I say.

Dad waits, his chest rising and falling. “I’m listening.”

“Call Paul.”

“What?”

“Call Paul, at the academy. The first team players must have to deal with this kind of thing all the time. Maybe Paul can help.” I point at the TV. “He works for the richest man in football, remember?”

I look at Teddy for support. “It’s definitely a better plan than chucking stink bombs and water balloons,” he says.

Slowly, Dad releases his grip on the door frame. His face relaxes. “Okay. I’ll call Paul.”

He goes upstairs and shuts his bedroom door. For the next couple of minutes, Teddy and I sit in silence, listening to the sound of his muffled voice. When he comes back, he finds us exactly how he left us.

“Well?” I ask.

“He said he’ll sort it.”

“Really?” I ask.

It sounds too good to be true. In my experience, problems don’t get resolved that easily. But fifteen minutes later, when Dad peeks out, there’s nobody there.



On the way to the academy the following day, there’s only one topic on the radio: Budi’s red card. Every caller is angry, blaming him for pretty much everything.

“Poor kid,” Dad says, turning off the radio when someone mentions my interview. “Budi doesn’t deserve any of this.”

“At least he’s still eligible for the cup final and Europe,” Teddy says.

“Yeah,” I say, “but just imagine the hate he’s going to get from the fans. He’ll be in a stadium with a hundred thousand people against him. That’s if he even gets picked.”

“Check you out,” Teddy says. “Mr Doom and Gloom.”

I turn away without responding, pretending to be fascinated by something on the grey stretch of motorway.

“Just you watch,” Dad says. “Football has a funny way of making its heroes. The season isn’t over yet.”

I don’t know why, but Dad’s words do nothing to lift my spirits. It’s like there’s too much holding me down. Or maybe it’s because Dad was wrong: the note situation didn’t “die down” or “blow over” or “peter out”, the way he said it would. If anything, it’s got worse.

Dad tries again.

“I’ll bet you a chocolate bar of your choice that Harrowfield make it to the European final. And win.”

“You do know they’ll probably be up against Real Madrid?” Teddy says.

“I do.”

“*The* Real Madrid. The team captained by Kieran Wakefield. The team that demolished Milan four-nil last week.”

“Correct.”

“Then you’re on!” Teddy says.

“What about you, Owen?” Dad asks. “Fancy buying me a chocolate bar for a change?”

I keep looking out the window. I know it’s just a silly bet that Dad is using to cheer me up, but for some reason I can’t bring myself to bet against Budi. Maybe it’s because

of what I read about him last night, after Teddy went home.

“Did you know Real Madrid was Budi’s childhood team?” I say, watching cars zip by on the other side of the motorway.

“No,” Dad says. “How do you know that?”

I shrug. “I looked him up.”

“What else did you find out?” Dad asks.

I wonder what to tell them. The honest answer is a lot: things I found hard to believe, things that seem too sad to be real, too cruel to be true. I could tell them everything – it’s Teddy and Dad, after all – but for some reason I don’t.

I clear my throat. “Well, did you know he’s the only footballer in the league with haemophilia?”

“He-mow-what now?” Teddy says.

“Haemophilia. It’s a condition that means your blood doesn’t clot properly. If he gets a cut or an injury, he might bleed for longer than normal. He could even bleed inside his joints. He has to inject himself with medication to protect himself, especially on match days. It’s really rare for someone with haemophilia to be a professional athlete, especially in a contact sport.”

“Ta, Wikipedia,” Teddy says. “That was very informative.”

I nudge him in the ribs.

“Maybe that’s why he plays the way he does,” Dad says.
“One touch, pass, move.”

“Maybe,” I say, knowing that he’s probably right and wondering how he works that kind of stuff out so quickly.

“Can you imagine him and Kieran Wakefield on the same pitch?” Teddy asks. “Who do you think is faster? Budi or Wakefield?”

“Budi,” I say. “Wakefield isn’t as quick as he used to be.”

“I don’t know,” Dad says. “I think these days he seems slower because he does a lot less running. But Wakefield is smart. He’s like a greyhound, conserving his energy. Snoozing, snoozing, snoozing. Then...*bam!* Goodbye and good luck. Budi, on the other hand, he’s like a Jack Russell in a field full of rabbits, dashing around for ninety minutes.”

That makes us laugh.

“Who would you rather have on your team?” I ask.

“Wakefield,” Dad says. “No contest. Experience counts for a lot, and he’s won pretty much everything.”

“I think you’re only picking Wakefield because he’s an old man like you,” Teddy says, winking at me. “I heard a rumour that he’s going to retire at the end of the season.”

“That’ll be a sad day for football,” Dad says. “He’s one of the greats.”

There’s a moment of quiet as we all imagine what football will be like without Kieran Wakefield.

Then Dad says, “And what are you talking about, *old man like me?* I’m in my thirties!”

Teddy shakes his head. “Tragic.”

“Oh, I don’t have to listen to this!” Dad says. He hits a button and the sound of the Beatles fills the car.

Dad parks up outside the academy but doesn’t get out.

“I think I’m going to have a kip,” he says, yawning. “I’m feeling a bit wiped out.”

“No worries, Dad,” I say, climbing out.

“Look forward to hearing how it goes,” he says, reclining the seat so that it’s almost horizontal.

Teddy and I walk across the car park, carrying our boot bags.

“Is your dad okay?” Teddy asks.

“I think so,” I say, remembering the way he got angry yesterday. “Just tired. *Old* and tired.”

It’s supposed to be a joke, but Teddy doesn’t laugh. “And you?” he says. “Are you all right?”

“Me? Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Teddy shrugs. “Dunno. You’ve just been a bit off lately.”

I open my mouth, not quite sure what’s going to come out. I feel the truth – about Budi, and what I read about his childhood, and how confused I feel about the note – rushing up my throat. It’s like I’m going to spew, and although I wish I didn’t have to, I know I’ll feel better when it’s done.

But then I see something – someone – as we’re passing by the entrance to the academy building. It’s only a glimpse, and the light reflecting on the glass doors makes it hard to be sure, but it’s enough to distract me from what I was about to say.

Teddy glances over his shoulder, but we’re already beyond the reception area.

“Your mouth’s hanging open, mate,” he says. “Just telling you as it’s not a great look.”

I shut my mouth.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

I make a split-second decision. I know it’s a risk, but it’s a risk I feel I have to take.

“No,” I say. “I don’t feel great, to be honest.” I put a hand on my stomach. “Dodgy tummy.”

“You haven’t been eating cold pizza again, have you?”

I try to make my smile look like a wince. “You know me.” He tuts.

“Do you mind telling Jack? I might hang out in the cafeteria for a bit and see if I feel better. I just…”

“Need to be near a toilet?”

I nod.

“The humanity,” he whispers, looking horrified. “All right. Take it easy and hopefully see you out there in a bit.” He disappears into the changing room. “I’ll spare them the gory details!” he calls back.

And just like that, I’m alone. I feel terrible, and it’s got nothing to do with having a dodgy tummy – I’m lying to Teddy now, not just keeping things from him.

I can’t think about that. There’s something I have to do. Something important.

I take a deep breath and walk along the outside of the building. I reach the door to the cafeteria.

And walk straight past it.



I hesitate before going in. If I do this – and get caught – they could kick me out of the academy. Worse, it could get Dad into big trouble. He signed the paperwork too.

Breathe.

I know the players won't be inside. They'll be resting after yesterday's match. But what if a groundskeeper spots me before I can do what I need to do? Or a cleaner? Or a security guard?

I swallow. The longer I wait outside, the more likely it is that someone on one of the outdoor pitches will spot me. Before I can think any more about it, I push open the frosted glass door, step inside, and quickly close it behind me.

The hush of the huge space makes my skin prickle. It's like a cathedral. It's not too late to abandon my plan: just

step outside, put my boots on, and jog over to join the rest of the team.

But then I spot him.

Budi.

He's standing at the far end of the indoor pitch, his back to me. There's a ball on the turf in front of him, and ten yards further on is a wall of fluorescent yellow mannequins.

I see his shoulders rise and fall as he takes a deep breath. Then he runs up and strikes the ball. It flies over the wall before dipping sharply towards the empty goal. It clips the underside of the bar and rolls down the back of the net.

It's almost an exact copy of the one he scored against Bayern Munich.

He retrieves another football from a bulging bag beside him and places it carefully on the grass.

I start to walk towards him. I don't dare step on the pitch, so I walk along the edge, in front of the empty stands. By the time I reach the halfway line and pass beneath the viewing gallery, Budi has scored another free kick and is setting up a third.

I keep going, although it feels unreal, like I'm walking on a cloud in a dream.

He still hasn't noticed me.

He takes three big steps backwards and stops, assessing the shot. I pause too, not wanting to distract him. Once again, his shoulders rise and fall. He runs up. He strikes the ball with a brutal amount of power. Then the sudden dip, as though the ball is a homing missile and the goal is a big red flashing target.

He stands at the edge of the box. Then he turns and looks directly at me. I suddenly feel like someone who's been caught trespassing in a royal garden. The ridiculous urge to run away is almost impossible to resist.

But then Budi smiles. It's a quiet smile. Not big and full of perfect, shiny-white celebrity teeth. It's small and secretive, like he's remembering something funny someone said once. He starts to walk towards me. I'd forgotten how short he is; in my mind, he's a giant.

He stops about five paces away. I know I should apologize – say I lost my way or something – but my mouth refuses to work.

“Hello, Owen,” he says.

My mouth drops open. “You remembered my name.”

It's a pointless thing to say, but it's literally the only thought in my mind.

“Of course,” Budi says. His smile widens. “Do you remember mine?”

A weird little laugh escapes from my mouth before I can stop it. “Yeah. I think so.”

He nods. For a few seconds we face one another, saying nothing. High above, the fans of the climate-control system whirr away.

“So,” he says. “You are here.” He looks around the empty pitch. “Here you are.”

My brain finally – *finally* – clicks into gear. It's worse than Dad's car.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “I know I shouldn't be here. I didn't mean to interrupt you.”

Budi waves a hand. “It's no problem.”

I glance quickly at the goal – at the cluster of footballs nestled in the back of the net. Budi follows my gaze.

“How do you get the ball to dip so quickly?” I ask.

“It's hard to explain,” he says. “It would be easier to show you.”

It takes me a long time to realize that this is an invitation. My brain stalls. My mouth flops open. I am, once again, an extra in a zombie movie.

“Like...now?”

“Sure. Do you have boots in the bag?”

Bag. What bag? I look down and see that I'm holding my boot bag. I nod.

“Then let’s go.”

He turns around and walks back to the edge of the penalty area. After a moment of doing nothing, I kick off my trainers and pull on my boots, lacing them as hurriedly as I can. I glance over and see that Budi is walking in a circle, lazily looping the ball from one foot to the other. I stand up, the toes of my boots just behind the neat white line at the edge of the pitch. I take a deep breath before stepping over it, then jog towards Budi, imagining that I’m being brought on as a substitute in a big match. I know it’s silly, but it’s impossible not to.

Budi traps the ball beneath his studs as I arrive. He takes a couple of steps back.

“Show me,” he says.

“You want me to take a free kick?”

He nods.

“Okay,” I say, although I feel anything but okay. I’m so hyped, so dizzy with excitement, that it’s hard to breathe. With this much adrenaline pumping through me, I’ll end up blasting the ball high over the bar.

Breathe.

I take three measured steps back. I look at the goal.

Breathe.

I try to forget that Budi is watching. After all, if I can’t

do this with an audience of one, how will I ever do it in front of one hundred thousand?

Breathe.

I let my shoulders drop as I exhale. Then I run forwards and strike the ball, wrapping my foot around it to get as much spin on the shot as possible. It flies over the wall, then begins to curl downwards. For a split second I think it might be going in. But then it bounces on top of the net and rolls away.

“Very good,” Budi says. “But this time, try striking through the ball. It’s the only way to get the power and the dip.”

I set up another free kick and this time I strike through the ball. The shot is still rising when it hits the tall nets behind the goal. Not pretty. I glance at Budi, expecting him to be annoyed like Jack would be, but he’s the opposite. He seems excited.

“Not on the laces,” he says, crouching down to gently press a finger on my toes. “Here. You must kick the ball with the...knuckle.” He stands up and rolls another football towards me. “Try again.”

I place the ball on the turf and take three steps back. I take a deep breath. I’m about to start my run-up when Budi speaks.

“Try to imagine that the wall is not there,” he says.

I look at the line of fluorescent mannequins. “It’s kind of hard to ignore.”

He nods. “But thinking about what stands in your way won’t help you to score. Think of the ball and think of the goal. Nothing else.”

I focus on the ball, and how I want to strike it, and where I want it to go.

Breathe.

I run up and blast it as hard as I can, making sure to connect with my toes. The ball fizzes over the top of the wall. And then it dips sharply, as though it has a mind of its own – like it’s a falcon that has spotted a mouse in the field below. The ball hits the crossbar with a crack that echoes around the huge space, before bouncing into the back of the mannequins.

I turn to look at Budi, a smile spreading across my face. I’ve never been so happy to miss a free kick in my life.

“That was amazing,” I say. “I mean, it didn’t go in but...the ball shouldn’t move like that. It’s like a magic trick. Or a superpower.”

“Exactly!” Budi says. “And superpowers are useful – especially when people look at you and see only weakness.”

I try to imagine what he could possibly be talking about. And then I remember.

“Do you mean the problem with your blood? The haemophilia?”

A flicker of surprise crosses Budi’s face, then he nods. “I was told by many coaches that I would never make it, that nobody would sign someone with my condition. They thought the bench was the safest place for me. So I had to find a way to turn it into a strength.”

“How?” I ask.

“Football is a contact sport. You can get hurt, and I can get more hurt than most people. But I had a lot of time to think on the bench, and I realized that football doesn’t have to be a contact sport.”

“What do you mean?”

“If nobody can catch you, nobody can touch you. And if nobody can touch you, nobody can hurt you. It’s why I play the way I do: pass and move, pass and move. I turned what everyone told me was a weakness into a strength.”

I smile, remembering how Dad worked that out.

“Is that why you specialize in free kicks?” I ask. “Because everyone has to keep their distance?”

Budi nods. “I practise free kicks and penalties a lot. Corners too. I’m never going to be the best in the box – I’m too small, the box is too crowded – but I can work on my delivery to give my teammates the best chance of

scoring. I also work on being as quick and fit as possible. These are the things I can control, so I control them. The rest I have to let go.”

For a moment I don't say anything, I just look at the pristine turf between us. There are things I can't change – things from the past that hold me back. What would it be like if I let go of them and focused on what I *can* control? I think of Mum – properly, with my full attention and not just from the corner of my eye – and it's like standing at the edge of a sheer drop. The feeling is so real and dizzying that I take a small step backwards.

“Are you okay?” Budi asks, his voice full of concern.

“Yes,” I say. I'm suddenly desperate to change the subject, to divert Budi's attention away. “How did you deal with being on the bench? It must have been dead frustrating, being made to wait so long for your chance.”

“It was, but I kept busy. I studied other players, tried to predict where the spaces would be, imagined the movements I would make. I learned to speak English too. I thought it might be useful one day.”

I remember what I read about Real Madrid being his favourite childhood club. “Not Spanish?” I ask.

He hesitates. “No, not yet.” He tilts his head slightly. “You seem to know all about me.”

I suddenly feel embarrassed, like I've been caught peeping at someone else's test paper.

“Only a little bit. I was just curious because...” I trail off.

“Because?” he says.

I take a deep breath and make my decision.

“When I was reading about you, it said that you had quite a...tough childhood.”

If what I read is true, this is a massive understatement. But Budi doesn't say anything, so I keep going.

“It said that you had a job. In a factory. Making football boots.”

My heart is pounding. I try to meet Budi's eyes but can't. I'm convinced that he will storm off, or get angry, or tell me to leave. Who do I think I am, asking personal questions about his childhood? How would I feel, if he asked questions about the worst things in my past?

I wait, braced for the explosion.

But it doesn't come.

Instead, Budi says only one word: “Yes.”

I finally manage to make eye contact. He's not scowling or frowning; his expression is calm, patient. But there's sadness there too.

“I got some new boots when I joined the academy,” I

say. "Inside them was a note, written by the person who made them."

"I know," Budi says. "I saw your interview."

I clear the knotty lump from my throat. "Is it true?" I ask. "Do people have to work in places like that?"

"Yes," Budi says. His voice is quiet and his eyes are unfocused. I try to imagine what he's imagining. What he's remembering.

"Including children?"

He nods. My boots suddenly feel as though they're two sizes too small and filled with grit.

"But that's so unfair," I say, a sudden anger rising in me. "Why doesn't someone make it stop?"

Budi's gaze falls. "I have been trying to work that out for a long time."

For a few moments neither of us says anything, then Budi turns and blasts a football at the wall of mannequins. It hits the one on the end so hard that it topples over backwards. Budi's chest rises and falls rapidly.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"It's okay," I say. "I get angry too."

Budi goes over to the mannequin and lifts it back into a standing position. There's something about it that reminds me of the Chelsea match.

"You didn't deserve to get sent off yesterday."

"Thank you. But I was foolish. I let the opposition get to me. I reacted."

"What did Cain Carter say to you?"

"Nothing."

I think of Budi's past – the life he escaped. "Was it about your childhood?"

Budi sighs and rubs a hand across his face. "More or less."

I think of the note, now hidden inside a trophy on the shelf above my bed. Someone wrote those words – someone who right now might be hunched over a sewing machine in a sweltering factory, working tirelessly for an amount of money that barely covers their rent. And all the while I stand here in the boots they made, playing silly games.

I feel two hands gently squeeze my shoulders. Budi looks into my eyes, and as I look back, it's easy to see the boy he used to be.

"You must not lose hope, Owen. Change will come. Giants can be toppled. Dragons can be defeated."

"How can you be so sure?" I ask.

He smiles, and there's a brilliant twinkle in his eye. "Because I have seen it happen before."



That's when Budi tells me his story, in his own words. He tells me about the brutal conditions in the factory where he worked as a child. He tells me about the Dragon, a gangster who controlled his neighbourhood. He tells me about his family, and how they gave him hope even when terrible things were happening: his parents, who were full of love; his grandmother, who was always ready with a comforting story; his uncle, who was a villain – until the moment he became a hero. He tells me about his best friend, Rocky, who was more like a brother. Rocky, who saved him. Rocky, who he set free.

When Budi finishes, I don't say anything for a long time. I just sit beside him on the pristine pitch, thinking about the things he has had to do to survive. How unlikely

becoming a professional footballer must have been. How unfair life can be. I try to imagine what happened all those years ago, when Budi was just a boy. What that life must have been like. What that life is like, for all the others who don't escape. It makes me sad. So, so sad.

"Sometimes," Budi says, "I look around at all this, and it doesn't seem real. It feels like a dream. Other times, it is the past that doesn't feel real – a nightmare I only just woke up from."

He lowers his hands and brushes his fingertips against the grass, as if checking that it's real.

"Budi," I say, focusing on the blades as they bend and spring back. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

I clear my throat. "Some bad things have happened to you in your life. More than seems fair." I pause, and Budi waits silently for me to continue. "How did you keep going? How did you make sure those experiences didn't beat you?"

He draws in a long, slow breath. "I think...I think I am very lucky."

"Lucky?" I ask, certain I've misheard him.

"Yes."

"But what about having to work in that factory? And

living in fear of gangsters? Don't those things make you unlucky?"

"Maybe. But I survived them. And they made me what I am." He must see my confusion because he stops stroking the grass and smiles. "I will try to explain. If you went on a boat and it sank, and you were the only survivor, and then the boat that rescued you sank, and you were the only survivor, would this make you lucky or unlucky? Are you unlucky to suffer two shipwrecks? Or are you lucky to survive two shipwrecks?" He laughs. "That sounds like a story my grandmother would have told me."

I fidget with a blade of grass, rolling it between my fingertips. "I think it's amazing, how easily you can talk about things from the past. Things that must hurt to think about."

He shrugs. "Things that hurt to think about hurt less to talk about. Bad things hurt more if you lock them up. They get meaner, like tigers kept in cages. You have to set them free."

That's when I make the decision to talk – really talk: to tell Budi the worst thing from my past, the day I keep locked up because I'm afraid of what might happen if I set it free.

Breathe.

"When I was little," I say, "I played football for my school team. We practised after school, on the playing field, all year round." I clear my throat and blink quickly. "My mum used to pick me up. It was always Mum because of Dad's work patterns. The car park was on the other side of a hedge, and Mum would usually arrive early and watch the last part of the session. I remember the hedge because it hid the cars as they arrived, so I never knew when Mum would appear beside the pitch. Knowing that she might be watching, but not knowing for sure, made me focus, made me play better."

"One day, when the session ended, I looked over and couldn't see Mum. She wasn't there, but I didn't worry. Sometimes the traffic was bad. So I helped the teacher collect the bibs and cones and footballs with this other boy called Daniel, whose mum was always late. The other kids climbed into their cars and went home. By the time we'd tidied away all the equipment, it had started to rain a bit, so the teacher took us to wait on the porch at the front of the school."

I take a deep breath and clasp my hands together to stop them from shaking.

"I started to get cold. I pulled my sleeves over my hands and stamped my feet. I remember the echoey sound of my

boots clacking against the bricks, and the clumps of mud that gathered around my feet. And the teacher kept saying, 'I'm sure she'll be here in a minute. She's probably just stuck in traffic.' But the minutes ticked by and still she didn't show up.

"Then a car finally turned into the car park, and I'd already taken a step before I realized it was Daniel's mum. She stopped out the front and Daniel climbed in. They drove off. Then it was just me and the teacher. He kept telling me Mum would be here any minute, but I could tell he wasn't sure any more.

"And then he stopped saying it."

I wipe my face with my arm and drag in a shaky breath. I blink, but everything's still blurry. I wouldn't be able to see Budi even if I could bring myself to look at him.

"That's when I knew something was wrong. You know that feeling you get on the pitch, when you've missed something important, but you don't know what it is? You only know that it's already happened. That it's already too late. I had that feeling. The teacher went into the school to use the phone. It was only for a minute, but I was left on my own. I started shivering again and couldn't stop. I remember the teacher coming back out, telling me that he hadn't been able to reach Mum or

Dad. I remember having no idea what would happen to me."

I'm crying now, great big blubbing sobs that make my nose run and my body shake.

"And then a car arrived, and for a moment all my fears disappeared, like the whole thing was a false alarm or a horrible prank. But it wasn't Mum. And it wasn't Dad. It was our neighbour, Mrs Lindsey, and she looked like she had driven through a warzone. Her eyes were all starey and her hands were gripping the steering wheel so tightly I thought her knuckles might break through her skin.

"We watched her drive up and stop. Then she got out and told the teacher who she was, and that she'd come to fetch me. And when I asked her, 'Where's Mum?' she couldn't answer me. She had to look away. So I asked her again. I said, 'Where's Mum, Mrs Lindsey?' But she couldn't tell me. She just told me to get in the car."

I heave in a big snotty breath, not caring about how gross it sounds.

"She died," I say, barely able to form the words. "In an accident. That's why she never turned up. And sometimes I feel like I'm still that little boy, waiting outside the front of the school for his mum to show up. Sometimes I worry that I'll always be him. It's what I think about when I'm

standing over the ball, waiting to take a free kick. I try not to. But trying not to think about it only makes the thoughts louder. Do you know how hard it is to focus when there's a voice in your head telling you that you aren't good enough, that you've already failed, that it's already too late?"

There's a long silence, which is only broken by my crying. Eventually, I sense Budi shift slightly. He clears his throat.

"I am sorry that your mother died," he says, and there's something so honest in his voice, something so devastatingly simple about the words, that fresh tears spill over my cheeks, hot and slick. "And I'm sorry that you were left waiting. Waiting is the hardest thing." I hear him take a deep breath. Tears drip steadily from my jaw onto my shorts. "When my grandmother died, I was devastated. It felt like she had gone and taken everything with her. It took a long time to realize she left something behind."

"What was it?" I ask.

"Hope," Budi says.

I blink, and my vision clears just enough to see that Budi's eyes are glistening too.

"My grandmother was always telling me stories about

brave boys with big dreams, who never let anything stand in their way. I took the stories very seriously. So now, even when I find myself in a situation that seems hopeless, I am hopeful. Hopeful that the things we can change *will* change, and hopeful that the things we cannot change will give us strength, and make us brave. After all, when the worst has happened, what comes next must be better. It has to be, yes?"

I don't know what to say to that. I want to believe it as well, but I'm not sure that belief is something you can choose.

Budi gets to his feet and offers me his hand. I reach up, and with his help I stand. For a moment I feel woozy, but it passes quickly. Budi fixes me with his hazel eyes, steadying me.

"You know, every coach I've ever played for always has the same expression: Play to the—"

"Whistle," I say, managing a small smile. "Play to the whistle."

"So you know it?" Budi says. Then he laughs, and the sound is so warm and reassuring that I feel a small tingle of something in my chest. Hope, maybe. "Every. Single. Coach." He shakes his head. "Tell me, Owen, have you heard a whistle yet?"

“No.”

“Then it isn’t over. There is still hope.” He gazes around the vast indoor pitch. Eventually, his eyes come to rest on the goal. “You asked me if I know what it’s like to have a voice in my head, telling me that I am not good enough? Well, I do. I hear it when I step up to take a free kick. Every time. I am full of doubt, full of nerves.”

I think about something Dad said. “Until the whistle blows?”

“Yes!” Budi’s face suddenly brightens. “So there are two types of whistle: the one that tells you to stop, and the one that tells you to go.”

“But how do you know what to do?” I ask, thinking of how mixed up I feel about the note, and my dreams, and what to do for the best. “How do you know whether to stop or go?”

Budi shrugs. “That is up to you. The whistle always sounds the same.”



There’s no point trying to keep my conversation with Budi a secret. Lying to Teddy and Dad would be even harder than telling the truth. Besides, I’m done with keeping secrets. They are more exhausting than shuttle runs.

I keep my mouth shut until we’ve driven through the security checkpoint, but then I tell them everything. After I finish speaking there’s a long, tense silence. I stare at my fidgeting hands while I wait for someone to say something.

Finally, Dad speaks. “Let me get this straight. You’ve met Budi not once but twice, including a kickabout just now while I was napping in the car park?”

“Yeah.”

“And Budi has inspired you to stage some kind of protest, to raise awareness for people who work in sweatshops?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you wanted all the attention to die down?”

I look up to find him watching me in the rear-view mirror.

“I did. But now I’m not so sure.”

“It’s kind of a lot to take in, mate.”

“I know,” I say. “But it’s true.”

I look at Teddy, but he turns and stares out the window.

“Are you annoyed?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I just didn’t realize that you were best mates with Budi. I thought *I* was your best mate.”

“You are.”

He suddenly turns back to me. “Then why didn’t you tell me any of this before?”

Teddy is so rarely angry that it catches me off guard. “I...I don’t know. I was trying to get my head around it all, I think. I didn’t know what I wanted until today. None of it made sense. And now I *am* telling you.”

He huffs. “You’re kind of ruining football for me, mate.”

“So now you’re annoyed that I told you?” I say. “A minute ago it was the other way around, so which is it?”

Teddy doesn’t say anything to that. He just rolls his eyes and looks at the hedgerows whizzing by.

“I’m annoyed too, you know?” I say. “We finally – *finally* – got into an academy, and I thought it would be all about the game, and improving, and winning. And ever since we signed those contracts, all I can think about is my boots, and where they came from.”

I sit back and fold my arms. I stare out the window, my eyes prickling with tears that I’m determined not to cry. I’ve cried enough today.

Nobody speaks until we’re almost back in Liverpool. I’m expecting Dad to say something, but in the end it’s Teddy’s voice, low and thoughtful, that breaks the silence.

“Is it really true? All the stuff Budi told you about his childhood, and how boots are made?”

“It is,” I say.

“Then I agree,” Teddy says. “We *should* do something.” The urgency in his voice makes me turn towards him. “People need to know about it. I don’t want to be running around in boots made by kids!”

I’m so relieved he’s on my side I could hug him. “So what do we do?” I ask.

“What can we do? It’s not like we’ve got millions of

subscribers. And we're talking about companies that have billions of pounds."

"Billions that they refuse to share," I say. "I think that's the worst part: they've got the money to pay people fairly. They're just choosing not to." I'm struck by a sudden idea. "What if..."

"What if what?"

I turn to Dad. "Tomorrow is a bank holiday, right?"

"Right."

"Harrowfield's kit is made by the same company that made my boots, so what if we staged a protest at the club shop? There will be plenty of people around because there's no school, and even if we get just a few people thinking about where all their stuff comes from, it would be a start."

Teddy cocks an eyebrow. "Homemade banners. Megaphone. That kind of thing?"

"Exactly."

"Hang on a second," Dad says. "Where are you going to get a megaphone?"

"Don't worry about that, coach," Teddy says, patting him on the shoulder. "I was born with one."

"How could I forget?" Dad shakes his head. "Are you sure you want to do this? It all sounds very noble, but you might upset a few people."

"Isn't that the point?" I ask.

"I suppose so. I just want to make sure you know what you're getting into."

"I don't want to do it," I say, "but I think I have to. I've felt weird ever since I found that note. Maybe it's because, deep down, I know I'm not doing enough to help whoever wrote it."

"Fine," Dad says, pulling in outside Teddy's house. "I'll have to come with you. To supervise."

"You can trust us, coach," Teddy says.

"I'm sure I can," Dad says. "It's the rest of the world I'm worried about. Besides, it'll be nice to drive you two around for a change."



That's how, the next afternoon, we find ourselves outside the club shop with thousands of shoppers streaming past us. It's just me and Teddy, even though I messaged the team to let them know the plan. The only response I got was from Bradley – *Can't. Busy.* – but I try not to let that bother me.

Teddy wasn't lying about his voice. If the football doesn't work out, there's probably a job for him in the army as a drill sergeant. We decided beforehand not to mention Budi directly, partly because a lot of people are probably still raging about his red card, but mostly because it doesn't feel right to talk about his personal life without his permission. And given the volume that Teddy can broadcast at, I think it was the right call.

“Did you know that 170 million children are forced

to work around the world?!” Teddy shouts, holding his banner high above his head. It's emblazoned with the words: STOP BUYING FROM BAD GUYS. “Do you know where your clothes were made? Or who made them? Or how much that person was paid?”

I look across at Dad, who's set himself up at a table outside a coffee shop on the other side of the high street. He mimes putting on a pair of ear defenders.

“Some people are paid as little as fifteen pence an hour!” Teddy shouts. “Fifteen pence an hour!”

He starts chanting it, marching back and forth in front of the club shop entrance. It works, grabbing the attention of more people. At one point I see Bradley, smirking as he films us on his phone. He obviously lied about being busy, but I choose to ignore him. Instead, I explain to whoever will listen why we're protesting and offer them a leaflet. Not everyone is interested – it's not nice to find out your designer trackies might have been made by a kid earning fifteen pence an hour – but lots of people listen carefully and ask questions, promising to learn more about it. We even manage to put a few people off going into the club shop.

Which is probably why a security guard comes out and tells us to move on.

“Go on,” he says. “Clear off.”

But before either of us can respond, one of the people I'd been talking to steps in front of me.

"They're not doing any harm," she says, lifting her sunglasses onto her head and glaring at the guard.

"Yeah, it's a free country," a familiar voice says. I turn around to see that Dad has come to back us up.

The security guard looks surprised to find himself suddenly outnumbered by grown-ups.

"These boys are trying to do something positive," the woman says. "It's not like they're out here stealing or causing trouble."

"They're affecting business," the security guard says. "They're putting people off coming into the store."

"Well, if what they're saying is true, people *should* be put off," the woman says.

"It's not true," scoffs the security guard. "Fifteen pence an hour. It's ridiculous!"

"How can you be so sure?" I ask. "If I went in there and picked up a shirt, could you even tell me the country where it was made?"

The guard glares at me. "Well, you won't be doing that, because you're not allowed into the store," he says, crossing his chunky forearms. "You're banned. Both of you." Then he turns and heads back inside.

"Hang on a second," Dad says, but the guard doesn't stop. Instead, he goes up to someone who looks like the store manager and points a finger in our direction.

"Unbelievable," Dad says. "Are you boys all right?"

The truth is, I don't know if I'm all right. It feels as though I've got something hot and powerful flowing through my veins: poison or rocket fuel or lava. I feel as though I could take on the world. At the same time, I feel as though a strong breeze might knock me over. My body quivers with every booming heartbeat. All I manage is a nod.

"Are these your boys?" the woman asks Dad.

Dad puts a hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. "Technically, just this one. But I may as well adopt Teddy. I spend enough time with him."

The woman laughs. "Well, I think you should be very proud of them." She holds up a leaflet. "Ta for this – I'm going to look into it when I get home. Keep giving them hell." She gives us a thumbs-up, slips her sunglasses down over her eyes, and walks away.

Dad lets out a long breath. "Banned from a store," he says. "I know I'm supposed to be angry about that kind of thing, but I feel quite pleased, to be honest." He looks around. "How much longer do you want to stay here? It's died down quite a bit."

“The shops will be shutting soon,” I say. “Then it’ll be a ghost town.”

“Let’s call it a day,” Dad says. “All right with you, Teddy?”

Teddy glances around. He catches the security guard’s eye and gives a little wave and a smile. “Yeah, I think our work here is done.”



“Owen!” Dad calls. “I think you should come down and see this, mate.”

I clamber out of bed and make my way downstairs, towards the smell of burning toast and the sound of Dad’s voice. I find him in the kitchen, staring at his phone. Behind him, a thin trail of pale smoke rises from the toaster.

“Toast’s burning,” I say.

He quickly reaches over and pops the blackened bread.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “I’ll scrape that off. You have a fresh slice. But first you need to see this.”

He puts his phone down on the counter. I’m still half asleep, but when I realize what I’m looking at it’s like being zapped by a cattle prod. It’s a video of me outside

the club shop, waving my sign and handing out leaflets while Teddy marches up and down, chanting in his foghorn voice.

“Where did you get this?” I ask.

“It’s online. Someone at work told me about it. Look.”

My eyes drop to the view count beneath the video.

“Woah.”

“You’ve gone viral,” Dad says. “The kids still say that, right?”

I nudge him with my elbow. “But...how?”

“It looks like it was shared by someone with a lot of followers...” Dad scrolls and taps on a different profile.

“Budi,” I whisper.

“The main man himself. Needless to say, he wholeheartedly endorses your protest.”

“That’s amazing!” I say.

“It is,” Dad says. “Just imagine how many people are thinking about where their stuff comes from because of you.” He puts his phone in the pocket of his pyjamas.

“Hey,” I say, wanting to see more.

“It’s very impressive,” Dad says, scraping the burned toast over the sink. “And I’m very proud. But even revolutionaries have to go to school. There’s no point educating everybody else and neglecting yourself.”

Reluctantly, I get ready for school. But I’m also psyched because I can’t wait to catch up with Teddy. When I come back down, Dad is waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

“I won’t be in when you get back,” he says. “Apparently Gavin has broken his arm skateboarding, so I’ve got to go in early to cover his shift.”

“Skateboarding?” I ask. “Isn’t Gavin almost as old as you?”

“Hey!” he says. “Grown men can skateboard too.”

“Obviously not.” I waggle my arm like it’s in a sling.

“Well, have a good day, I suppose.”

“You too.”

I don’t just have a good day – I have a great day. Teddy exaggerates things slightly, or slightly more than slightly, by telling pretty much the whole school that I’m mates with Budi and train with him at least once a week. At lunchtime a kid approaches me to ask if I can get Budi’s autograph, and before I know it everyone has the same idea: handing me scraps of paper as though paper doesn’t exist outside of school. Teddy thinks it’s hilarious until people start asking him as well.

By the time I head home I’m half expecting to find the paparazzi outside my house again. But there aren’t any photographers when I turn onto my street. Instead,

I find something else. Something that makes me slow to a stop.

As I touch my key to the lock, the front door swings open.

All the day's excitement crumbles into cold dread.

"Hello?" I call. "Dad?"

I step inside but keep the front door open.

"Hello?" I call again, even though the house is silent. For a moment I don't know where to go. I take another step and pause. Still nothing. There's a faint breeze blowing through the house, which is weird because that only happens when both the front and back doors are open at the same time. Then I take another step and get a glimpse of the kitchen, and the draught suddenly makes sense.

The back door is open too.

I take another step, still hoping that there's a normal explanation. But then I reach the door to the front room.

"Oh."

It's completely wrecked. The TV has been torn from the wall. The sofa has been upended and slashed. A trail of white feathers leads to a crumpled cushion beneath the window. The plant on the coffee table has been hurled against the wall, leaving a dark smudge.

But it's the mirror above the mantelpiece that makes the breath catch in my chest.

A message has been scrawled on it in bold, black letters.

KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!

That's the worst of it – it has to be – but then I take another step and something cracks beneath my shoe. A photo frame. I crouch down and turn it over. Mum looks back at me through a spider-web of broken glass. And I suddenly feel so alone – so lost – that the picture starts to blur behind a film of tears.

Carefully, I set the frame to one side and start placing the biggest shards of glass on top.

"Hello?" a voice calls. "Owen?"

I sniff and quickly wipe my eyes. "In here," I say.

"You know you've left the front door open," Mrs Lindsey says, as her footsteps sound on the floorboards in the hall. "Anybody could walk right in and— Oh my goodness."

There's the briefest pause, then in two quick steps Mrs Lindsey is beside me.

"You leave that to me," she says, setting down a stack of containers on the floor.

“It’s okay,” I say.

“Tell that to your hands,” she says. “They’re shaking.”

I clutch my hands in my lap to make them stop. Mrs Lindsey disappears and returns a minute later with a newspaper and a dustpan and brush.

“Who did this?” she asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

“Well, they obviously know *you*, otherwise they wouldn’t have left that message on the mirror.” She sweeps up the shards of glass. “If you’re in trouble it’s best to tell someone, Owen. Doesn’t have to be me – I’m far too nosy to tell a secret to – but make sure you tell someone.”

I nod, watching as she tips the shards into the newspaper. Then she shakes out the remaining fragments from the frame and places it on the mantelpiece.

“There. Now, why don’t you come and sit in the kitchen while I call your dad? I’ll call the police too. We probably shouldn’t touch anything else until they get here.”

Mrs Lindsey picks up the food containers and steers me into the kitchen. I zone out while she makes the phone calls. None of it feels real. While we wait for Dad and the police to arrive, Mrs Lindsey heats up one of

the portions of lasagne. She talks the whole time, but I have no idea what she says. I feel like I’m in a film, and Mrs Lindsey is an actor, and the kitchen around me is a set, and at any moment someone will shout “Cut!” and I’ll swap back to my real life, and it’ll be Mum by the kitchen counter, and nothing bad will have happened, and everything will be normal again. But that doesn’t happen.

A plate of steaming lasagne arrives in front of me, and the rich, comforting smell of home-cooked food brings me back. I know I have to eat, and that if I don’t Mrs Lindsey will probably spoon-feed me, so I pick up my fork.

“Careful,” Mrs Lindsey says. “It’s hot.”

She starts washing up at the sink, talking all the time, and when I’ve finished she takes my plate and washes that up too.

That’s when Dad arrives. He comes straight through the house, barely even glancing at the destruction in the front room, and wraps me up in a strong hug.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I nod.

“I think I’ll be off now,” Mrs Lindsey says. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you so much,” Dad says.

“Don’t mention it,” she says, collecting her plastic container from the draining board. “What else are neighbours for?” She ruffles my hair on her way out. “You’re a good boy, Owen. Don’t forget that.”

And for some reason, that makes me want to cry more than anything else that’s happened.

Mrs Lindsey must pass the police on the garden path, because no sooner has she gone than two officers appear in the doorway, asking to come inside. They both have a look around, inspecting the carnage while I sit with Dad at the kitchen table. After a few minutes, one of them sits down opposite us and flips open a notebook.

“My name is PC Sarina Amiri,” she says. Then she gestures to the burly officer who is inspecting the back door. “My colleague is PC Stone, but you can call him Joe. Is it okay if I ask you some questions?”

I nod. The police officer has kind, dark eyes and a gentle voice, but I still feel nervous.

“Why don’t you start by telling me what happened when you got home?”

So I tell her about the front door being ajar, and the back door being wide open, and the mess I found in the front room.

“Mrs Lindsey helped me tidy up the broken picture of Mum, but otherwise we didn’t touch anything.”

“That’s really helpful,” Sarina says, jotting something down on her notepad. “Thank you. And what about the message on the mirror? Do you have any idea who might have written that?”

The only person I can think of is Bradley, who used the exact same words in the changing room at the academy. He definitely seems to have a problem with me, and I’m almost certain he’s the one who uploaded the video of me outside the Harrowfield club store, probably hoping to get me in trouble. But would he really break into my house? And why? I know I should say all this to Sarina, but I’m stopped by the thought of the police arriving at Bradley’s house, when he potentially hasn’t done anything wrong. If he’s already got it in for me, who knows what he’d do after that? Besides, I don’t want to waste their time with a dead end.

So I shake my head. Sarina’s eyes narrow slightly, as though she knows there’s something I’m not telling her, but luckily Dad speaks before she can ask any more questions.

“Owen has been at the centre of a bit of a media storm recently. He found a handwritten note in a box of football

boots – a plea for help. It’s inspired him to get into activism.”

“We’re aware of the note,” Sarina says. “Please carry on.”

“Well, it seems to have caused a lot of upset. Football fans are annoyed because it tarnishes the sport they love, and human rights campaigners are angry because it shows how awful some people’s lives are.”

“But you can’t think of anyone in particular?”

Dad shakes his head. “Thousands of people must have seen the story about the note, and the video of the protest.”

“Mr Sharp,” Joe says, “can you tell us whether anything has been taken from the house?”

Dad puffs his cheeks out and scratches the back of his neck. “Stolen, you mean? To be honest, we don’t have a lot worth stealing. Except…”

I see his eyes widen in fear, and it makes my stomach lurch.

“Oh no,” he says, standing up so quickly his chair legs squeal against the floor. “No, no, no.”

“Mr Sharp?” Sarina says.

Dad rushes from the room and bounds upstairs, taking the steps three at a time. I hear him cross the

floor directly above us. We all look at the ceiling. Then I hear him let out a little laugh, and he plods back down the stairs. When he enters the kitchen he’s smiling with relief.

“Is everything okay, Mr Sharp?” Sarina says.

“Fine,” Dad says, falling heavily into his chair. He holds out a fist and slowly uncurls his fingers. In his palm, sparkling like the tears in his eyes, are two delicate silver rings. Mum’s rings.

“These were my wife’s,” Dad explains. “I keep them on my bedside table.”

“In plain sight?” Sarina asks.

Dad nods. “I know it’s probably not the safest place for them, but I can’t bring myself to hide them away.”

He holds up the wedding ring. Despite the halo of tiny, glittering diamonds, all I can focus on is the empty space in the middle. The hole. The space where Mum’s finger should be. I put my hand on Dad’s arm.

Sarina exchanges a glance with Joe, who clears his throat before speaking.

“We can arrange for a forensic unit to dust for fingerprints, but I’ll be honest with you, Mr Sharp – I’m not hopeful they’ll find any.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Well, I’m pretty sure whoever did this was a professional. They’ve gained entry through the back door, wreaked havoc, then exited via the front. The fact they didn’t take anything is suggestive.”

“Suggestive of what?” Dad asks.

“That they didn’t *need* to take anything. Even in cases where intimidation is the main objective, perpetrators will normally swipe what they can. It would have taken less than sixty seconds for someone to run upstairs and do a quick scan for valuables. Seemingly, they didn’t do that.”

“Maybe they got interrupted?” Dad says.

“Perhaps,” Joe says, “but as I said, they left via the front door.”

“So?” Dad frowns in confusion.

“So even if they didn’t go upstairs, they still passed that side table in the hall on their way out. I couldn’t help noticing the little bowl on it when I came in. The one with the ten-pound note in it.”

“That’s for Owen,” Dad says. “In case he needs money and I’m not around.”

“Very sensible,” Joe says. “But in all my years as a police officer, I have never known a burglar to pass up the chance to nick a tenner.”

“That’s why we think whoever did this is a professional,” Sarina says, her eyes suddenly sharp, her voice determined. “You ought to be very careful.” She looks from Dad to me. “Both of you.”

After that warning, it’s hard to concentrate. Luckily, the last few questions the police have are for Dad, and a few minutes later he shows them to the door.

“Wait!” I call, gripped by a sudden idea. I rush after them and run upstairs to my room.

“What is it?” Dad calls.

I hurry back, taking the steps two at a time, and skid to a stop in front of the police officers.

“Here,” I say to Sarina, my hand outstretched. She holds out a hand and I drop a square of folded paper into it. “It’s the note I found in the box of football boots. Do you think someone at the police station could find out who wrote it?”

She looks at the note, then glances at Joe. “It won’t be easy, but we can certainly try.” Then her eyebrows twitch into a small frown. She reaches into one of the pockets on her armoured vest and pulls out a clear plastic bag. “In fact, this might be useful evidence in an ongoing investigation.”

Ongoing investigation? I want to ask what she means,

but then she seals the note in the bag and an unexpected sadness seeps through me. I know it's just a scrap of paper, and I know it wasn't addressed to me or anything, but it's always felt precious. Personal. And now, all of a sudden, I'm letting it go. By giving it away, it feels like I'm giving up on whoever wrote it. I know that's not true, but that's how it feels.

"Look after it," I say. "It's important."

"I will," Sarina says. Then she looks me in the eye. "I promise."



After the police have gone, Dad closes the front door and leans his forehead against it.

"Five-minute rule?"

I take a deep breath, already knowing that this is going to be a tricky one. "Okay."

As we walk to the kitchen, Dad shuts the door to the front room. I get a brief glimpse of myself in the mirror – the angry words scrawled across my face – before the door blocks it out.

"I'll deal with that tomorrow," Dad says, "after the police have done what they need to do."

We sit down at the kitchen table, side by side, facing the third empty chair. On the tabletop, Mum's rings catch the last of the light coming in through the window.

“Owen,” Dad says. He takes a deep breath. “I think maybe it’s time to put that note behind you.”

Something heavy sinks through me. It’s like the opposite of being sick. “You think this is my fault?”

“No.”

“Because it sounds like you’re blaming me.”

“I’m not blaming you.” Dad rubs his face. It’s so quiet in the house I can hear the rasp of his stubble. “I just... Our house got broken into today, Owen. Someone forced their way in and trashed the place. They stood in the front room and wrote a threat on the mirror. What if you had been at home when that happened? I have to think about things like that. It’s my job to keep you safe.”

I feel a sudden spike of anger.

“I’m not a little kid,” I say, harsher than I mean to. “You don’t have to worry about me all the time.”

Dad looks up abruptly. “I know you’re not a little kid.”

Good, I think. Because I’ve already had to deal with more than most kids my age have to. I feel like shouting at Dad. I don’t know why, but I suddenly can’t stand to look at him.

“It’s so unfair that you’re the one in charge.”

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“It doesn’t matter what I want. I just have to fit in with you.”

I see the muscles in Dad’s jaw working as he decides what to say next. When he finally speaks, he has to push the words through gritted teeth.

“So what do you want, Owen? Because I thought you wanted to be a footballer. That’s always been your dream, and I’ve tried to support you in that as well as I can. Is it still what you want?”

“Of course it is,” I say.

“Because you’ve just been scouted, and for some reason your focus isn’t on football. I’d hate to see you miss this opportunity.”

“Why?” I say. “Because you missed yours?”

I know I shouldn’t have said that – it’s mean and unfair – but the words are out before I can stop them, and I’m so angry I can’t even think of apologizing.

Dad doesn’t say anything. He stares at the chair opposite, breathing heavily, imagining or remembering something that isn’t there. The kitchen is gloomy now, the rings dull.

Eventually, Dad says, “Is this about Mum?”

“No,” I say, before I’ve even had a chance to consider what he’s said. But of course it’s about Mum. If Mum

were here, I wouldn't be on my own so much. If Mum were here, I wouldn't feel so much pressure to be perfect. "Not everything is about Mum!" My heart beats at the back of my throat. My eyes sting. I breathe in deeply but the air feels too thin.

Dad leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Because I think Mum would want—"

"How do you know what Mum would want? That's the problem. You're trying to fill a gap you don't know how to fill and you're getting it wrong!"

"Owen, just—"

"And maybe I don't know what I want! Maybe I'm scared of getting what I want, because I'm worried it will be taken away."

At some point I must have stood up, because I'm looking down at Dad from above. For the first time, I notice how many grey hairs are hiding amongst the brown.

"Like Mum was?" Dad says, without looking up.

My eyes fill with hot tears.

"Yes," I say, my voice thick. "Like Mum was."

He sighs. "Sit down, mate."

I sit down.

"Look, I know it's tough. I miss her too. Every day. But

I do my best. We both do. And the reason I'm over-protective sometimes is because I'm scared too. I know I can trust you. But the world out there... Sometimes it feels as though the world just doesn't care."

"Well, maybe that makes taking a stand even more important."

"Maybe." Dad takes a deep breath and checks the oven clock, still set to the wrong time. "Five minutes is pretty much up."

"Aren't you supposed to end with something positive?"

"I am?"

"You always used to, when you were my coach."

He shrugs. "Sometimes there isn't a positive. And that's okay. You can't always expect to feel good. That's a lot of pressure." He looks at me. "What? Why are you smiling?"

"I'm just thinking about the time we were six-one down at half-time and all you could talk about was how great Teddy's goal was."

"It was a worldie," he says, smiling. "And the team talk worked."

"No it didn't! We lost seven-three!"

Dad's smile gets a little wider. "That means we won the second half."

I pause. “Oh, yeah. I suppose it does. I never really saw it that way before.”

“Okay, so why don’t we do that now? Why don’t we try to win the second half?”

“What does that look like?”

“Hmm. I think we should try to get through the next week without any more drama. We don’t have to make any big decisions – just no more drama. Do you think that’s reasonable?”

I hold out my hand. Dad reaches out to clasp it. His hands are warm, and rough, and still so much bigger than mine.

“Deal,” I say. “And Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

He draws me into a hug and kisses the top of my head.

“Me too.”



When I get home from school the following day, my key doesn’t work.

“Got the locks changed,” Dad says, after he’s let me in. “Front door and back door. I also spoke to work and they’ve agreed to let me do day shifts for a while. They weren’t happy, but when I explained about the break-in they didn’t have much choice. It means you won’t be on your own so much. Hope that’s okay?”

“Of course,” I say.

“That’s not all,” Dad says. “Follow me.”

We walk to the front room and he opens the door with a flourish.

“Woah,” I say. “You have been busy.”

All the broken stuff has been put away. The mirror has

been removed. The sofa is covered with a big red blanket, hiding the slashes. There's a new plant on the coffee table and Mum's picture is in a new frame. But that's not all.

"Where did you get *that*?" I ask.

"Pretty good, eh?"

"It's massive!"

Dad nods. "Big enough to put the local cinema out of business."

I walk towards the TV in awe. I'd resigned myself to a world without football or films when the last one got wrecked.

"How did you afford this?" I ask. "I thought we were skint?"

"Well," Dad says, "I did have a small pot of money in case the boiler went, or the car broke down, but I thought we deserved something good. I'm not missing the end of the season because of some scally, and neither are you."

"Ta, Dad." I give him a hug. "Did you hear that Harrowfield made it to the European final?"

Dad nods. "I'm one victory away from winning a chocolate bar. Things are looking up."

"Ha! Teddy told me that Budi scored the winner."

"He did indeed. A screamer from the edge of the box, apparently. The Harrowfield fans are still giving him a

tough time over that red card though." He shakes his head in disbelief. "Madness."

"Have you turned this thing on yet?" I ask, running my fingers along the edge of the screen.

"Not yet. I thought we could fire it up for the Real Madrid match tonight."

"That would be boss."

"All right then. Homework. Dinner. Football. Sound good?"

"Can Teddy come over?"

"Why not?" Dad says, rolling his eyes. "I haven't seen him in ages!"

There's something about Real Madrid. I don't know if it's the dazzling all-white kit, or the club's history, or the audacious way they play, but they just make the impossible seem possible. No-look passes, dizzying step-overs, soul-crushing nutmegs: the match is a showboating spectacle. And then there's Kieran Wakefield: patient, powerful, precise. "The tiger in the grass," Dad says.

Whatever it is, watching Madrid cruise through to the final stirs something in me. The performance reminds me how good it is possible to be. How good *I* want to be.

So I focus.

The next day at the academy, I set aside all the chaos and concentrate on making everything count: every pass, every run, every tackle, every shot, every call. I lose myself in football for the first time in ages. For an hour, I forget about the note, and the break-in, and even Mum. I stop thinking and just...play.

At the end of the session, Jack gathers us round.

“Okay,” he says, scowling at his tablet. “As you know, we’ve got the first of our end-of-season friendlies on Saturday against Manchester City. The starting eleven is as follows: Craig, Sean, Bradley, Noah, Ashley, Teddy, Josh, Callum, Rhys, Charlie and...” He scrolls down and drags something across the screen with his fingertip. “Owen.”

He looks at me as though trying to work out whether he’s made the right decision. I stare back, trying to look calm and determined – like some kind of action hero given an impossible mission – but on the inside my stomach is fizzing and all I want to do is run around the pitch with my shirt pulled over my head.

“Lots of important people will be watching,” Jack says to the group, “so make sure you turn up ready to win. All right, off you go.”

We walk back to the changing room, half of us buzzing

to be in the starting eleven and the other half trying hard not to let the disappointment show. When we’re a safe distance from Jack, Teddy claps me on the back and gives me a playful shove.

“Well done, mate!”

“You too,” I say with a grin. “I knew you’d get picked, but I was a bit surprised when he said my name.”

“Never in doubt,” Teddy says. “Apart from that awkward moment when he hesitated before saying your name.”

I laugh, and so do a few of the others around us.

“It’s only a friendly,” I say with a shrug, aware of the players who didn’t get picked. “I’m not getting carried away.”

“Ha!”

I look over and see Bradley smirking. I haven’t spoken to him about the break-in, hoping he might let on if he knew something about it. So far it’s been impossible to tell.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“You,” he says, “calling the match a friendly.”

I frown, confused. “Well, that’s what it is.”

He shakes his head, smiling as though he can’t believe how clueless I am.

“Jack might say it’s a friendly, and there might not be any points on offer, but there’s something else to play for. Something even more important.”

Everyone is listening, but it's me who has to ask. "Like what?"

"Your place at the academy." Bradley looks around the group, and I can tell he loves being the centre of attention, the one who knows everything. "They call them friendlies to our faces, but behind our backs they're known as *unfriendlies*. That's why they have them at the end of the season – to work out who will be invited back." He looks directly at me. "And who will be dropped."

A few of the others exchange worried glances – I'm worried too – but I know I have to keep calm. If we play with fear on Saturday, we'll lose.

I shrug, ignoring the uneasy feeling in my stomach. "It doesn't matter what they call them. It doesn't change anything. All we have to do is show up and do our best."

"Well, whatever," Bradley says, the grin sliding off his face. "Just so long as you're focused on the football now." He pauses, and I know what he's talking about: the note, and how there isn't room for both football and factories in my life. "You can't be distracted against a team like City."

"I won't be," I say. And I mean it.

"Good," Bradley says. "Because we're on the same team – and I'm not losing."



I jog out onto the pitch, Teddy just ahead of me. It's like a miniature stadium, with a few rows of seating all the way around. Most of the seats are empty – it's mainly just friends and family – so I spot Dad and Cassie straight away. They wave, and I give a quick wave back.

"Have you seen who it is?" Teddy says in a low voice. "Halfway line, sitting in the top row. Opposite side. Don't stare."

I glance up and immediately feel my heartbeat quicken.

Augustus Sinclair is here: sunglasses on, arms draped over the empty seats on either side of him. At each end of the row, dressed in black, are two huge men that must be his security team. Their shades make it impossible to tell where they're looking, but as I stare at the one with sharp

cheekbones and a jaw that could stop a runaway train, it feels as though he's looking right at me.

"Head in the game, mate," Teddy says. "Here come the boys in blue."

As the City players walk onto the pitch, it's impossible not to think of all the trophies decorated with sky-blue ribbons that have been lifted over the years. The red and white stripes of Harrowfield don't inspire the same awe. Not yet, at least.

Breathe.

"We've got this," Teddy says. He holds out a fist. I raise my own.

"Yeah," I say. "We do."

We bump knuckles.

There's a tightness in my chest, but having Teddy on my side gives me courage. And when the whistle blows, all the fear and doubt disappear.

In the early part of the game I keep it simple: passing to teammates, tracking runners, defending when our backline is under pressure. I know where Teddy is instinctively. We don't need to communicate. Once Dad made our team play a training match in complete silence to improve our movement and positioning and instinct. He even brought along yellow and red cards for anyone who broke the rule.

It was hilarious watching Teddy get sent off for a second bookable offence: shouting "Man on!" to a teammate. But it worked. And now we link up effortlessly, making a pass or a run before the City players realize it's on.

As the game progresses my confidence grows. I start making more runs, pushing forward, taking shots. I feel like I'm playing well, but it's still a shock when we win a free kick on the edge of the box and Jack lets out a piercing whistle from the touchline. He takes his fingers from his mouth and points at me. I'm struggling to work out what he means when Rhys pushes the ball against my chest.

"Your shot," he says. He winks. "Time to shine, Matador."

I suddenly feel like the centre of attention – probably because I *am* the centre of attention. The eyes of every player and spectator are on me. Only me.

I place the ball on the turf and take three steps back.

Breathe.

The City keeper shouts instructions at the players in the wall. I focus on the ball, trying to block everything else out, trying to remember what Budi showed me.

Breathe.

I hear the whistle blow. I take one last breath before running up and striking the ball hard, driving through with the knuckles of my toes. It flies off the turf, rising

over the wall, and then it swerves down sharply: towards the goal.

The ball crashes against the bar so hard it's still shaking when Rhys volleys the rebound into the back of the net. He runs towards me, and we're quickly squashed in the centre of a huddle. When we break apart, I spot Augustus Sinclair smiling in the stands. He holds his finger and thumb a few centimetres apart. I know what he's saying: a little lower and my free kick would have been in.

I'm getting better.

I'm getting closer.

"Next time," I tell myself as I jog back to the halfway line. "Next time."

The goal really fires up the City players, and we spend the next ten minutes defending our lead. I may not like him very much, but Bradley puts in a great block to stop them from scoring just before half-time. Keeping the score at one-nil feels like a massive victory.

During Jack's team talk, I glance up at the stands. Dad smiles and gives me a thumbs-up, but I know it must be tough for him. It's the first game I've ever played that he's had to watch from the stands. Knowing that only makes me more determined to give him something to celebrate.

When the second half starts, I realize that I'm not

nervous at all. The sky-blue shirts don't intimidate me any more. They're just boys who want to become professional footballers, like me. They're not superstars – not yet – and knowing that makes me play with extra confidence. It's not like I try and score a rabona or anything, but I make passes and crosses that I wouldn't even attempt in a video game.

It's one of those passes – a long, cross-field ball – that sets Rhys up for the second goal. I know, as soon as the ball leaves my boot, that it's going to land exactly where I want it to. It hangs in the air, sailing over the City defence, and drops right in front of Rhys. He hits it first time, looping the ball over the advancing goalkeeper and into the back of the net.

I know then, even with twenty minutes left to play, that we're going to win. In some games everything just clicks and you feel untouchable, and this is one of them.

When the referee finally blows the full-time whistle, a wave of relief and joy washes over me. I know it's just one game – a friendly – but it's a win that means so much more to me. It's proof that I can do it – that I belong. I am part of a team that can beat Manchester City.

I look up into the stands. Dad is on his feet, beaming. I raise a clenched fist. And then my teammates surround me, blocking him from view.



I spend the rest of the day in a kind of daze. The game doesn't seem real. The result doesn't seem real. The "player of the match" award definitely doesn't seem real, even when I put it on the shelf above my bed and stare at it for ten minutes straight. But it is real. It's happening. I'm on a path that leads to the big time, and trophies, and all the things I've dreamed about since I was a little boy.

All I have to do is keep going. No distractions, no diversions. Just football.

That's when I head downstairs and see Budi, almost life-size on our new TV. The note, and its desperate plea for help, come rushing back.

"What's going on?" I ask Dad.

"Budi's giving an interview," he says. He takes a sip of tea. "A live interview – with Giles Gastrell."

"Isn't he the scally who—"

"Yes," Dad says. "He's an awful man. I just hope Budi knows what he's walking into."

Giles Gastrell sits opposite Budi, wearing an expensive suit and a sceptical expression. He crosses one leg over the other and clasps his hands around his knee, revealing the glittering face of a designer watch. He leans in, eagerly awaiting Budi's response to his last question.

"I am a footballer," Budi says. "That is what I am and always wanted to be, ever since I was a child. It was my dream. I come from a very poor neighbourhood in Jakarta, Indonesia, and for many years I worked in a factory that made football boots. This factory is still there. Many buildings in that neighbourhood have collapsed or been flooded or abandoned, but that factory still stands."

"That sounds terrible," Gastrell says, but there's no sympathy in his voice.

"It was," Budi says. "And even now, as I speak, there are people inside that factory. They work long hours in hot, cramped, dangerous conditions. They are not paid enough money to pay their bills. They often work without

breaks. Overtime goes unpaid. Sometimes they are humiliated and intimidated by their bosses.”

“Isn’t that just the way things are?” Gastrell says. “In business, in life, in *football*? There are winners, and there are losers. You cannot have one without the other.”

Budi pauses to take a breath. He clears his throat. The camera zooms in slightly, so that his face fills the entire screen.

“There is losing,” Budi says, “and then there is... annihilation. The game is fixed so that the same people – wealthy, powerful people – will always win.”

“People like Augustus Sinclair?” Gastrell asks, raising his bushy eyebrows. It’s like he’s daring Budi to say something controversial.

“Yes,” Budi says. “Exactly. But they lose their power the moment we get a glimpse inside their sweatshops: if we see the true cost of their merchandise.”

“Are you suggesting that Augustus Sinclair’s company uses sweatshop labour?”

“Yes. Of course.”

Gastrell sits back, shocked. “And how can you be so sure?”

Budi smiles, but there’s no joy in it. “Because that is how business is done.”

“That’s quite the allegation. Has it occurred to you that your own experiences might be causing you to exaggerate?”

“No,” Budi says. “My experience allows me to see things as they are. And there are millions of people having that same experience right now.”

“So why don’t they rise up?” Gastrell asks, his tone turning sharp. “If their numbers are so great, and their conditions so poor, why don’t they do something about it?”

“Because they are scared of the consequences, and scattered across the world. Divided.” Somehow, Budi manages to keep his voice calm. “But imagine if these people were to unite. To say no. To strike. What would become of these companies, with no one to make their clothes? Their shoes? Their football boots?”

Gastrell tilts his head to the side, frowning slightly. “Isn’t that wishful thinking?”

“What is wrong with wishful thinking?” Budi asks.

“Nothing, in principle. What I mean is, you are suggesting radical action: action that, as you just pointed out, would have consequences. What would become of the workers if they were to revolt? If they are paid as poorly as you allege, surely they would starve without these jobs.”

Budi's eyes narrow. "They starve *with* these jobs," he says angrily. "They starve while men become millionaires. Billionaires. Do you think I would suggest such a thing if I thought these people would be left with nothing?"

There's a frosty silence. I glance at Dad, his mug of tea tilting dangerously on the arm of the sofa. He's so mesmerized by what he's seeing that he hasn't noticed.

"I would not leave these people with nothing," Budi says, his voice calm once more. "My suggestion is that workers should be paid to stay away from the factories that exploit them."

Gastrell leans in a little closer, his watch twinkling. "Do you really expect factories to pay workers who don't show up?"

"No," Budi says. "Of course not. Sometimes factories don't pay their workers when they *do* show up."

"So who's going to pay them?" Gastrell asks.

"We will," Budi says. "The players."

For the first time – maybe in his entire life – Gastrell is speechless. I feel a little thrill of triumph, as though Budi has just nutmegged an overly aggressive defender.

"Footballers are paid a lot of money," Budi continues. "Everybody knows this. Some footballers earn more in a day than hundreds of factory workers will earn in a year.

I have now become one of these people. I am paid more than I can possibly spend. And how could I spend that money when much of it comes from companies that exploited me, and continue to exploit so many others?"

Budi pauses, but Gastrell can only gulp like a stranded fish.

"So I have founded a charity," Budi says, "supported by my teammates and players from other clubs. A charity that will pay workers to stay away from these factories."

"This is absurd," Gastrell says. "What about the economy?"

"Many of these companies do not pay taxes. They do not support the economy."

"And what happens if you're successful, and you bring these companies to the negotiating table? Do you really expect them to change their ways?"

Budi smiles. "I do not want to negotiate with these companies. I am not sure that we need them at all."

He signals to someone off-camera, and a shoebox is handed to him. He flips open the lid, takes out a pure white football boot, and holds it up for Gastrell – and everyone watching – to see. I instinctively look for a logo, but there isn't one.

"This football boot was made by someone who earns a

living wage, in a safe factory where workers are respected. This boot represents a new beginning: a new way of making things.”

Gastrell lets out a short, dismissive laugh. “So all of this is a publicity stunt? You’re just another celebrity with a product to sell.”

“You don’t understand,” Budi says. “The profits from the sale of every pair of boots will go to the charity. Not the pockets of millionaires and billionaires. The money will go back to the people who made the boots, and to help others who are trying to escape exploitation.” Budi looks at the gleaming boot. “These boots have the same name as the charity: Merdeka. It means *independent*. It means *free*.”

“Back in 1945, Indonesia – my nation, my home – declared independence. That brave decision inspired other nations to set themselves free. And that is what we must do now. We are no longer ruled by countries; we are ruled by companies. But it is time to rise up and say: No more! It is time to strike!”

Giles Gastrell opens his mouth to respond, but nothing comes out. He looks more foolish with each second that passes. Eventually, he scowls at someone off-camera and makes a slicing gesture beside his neck. A moment later,

the feed is cut, and the programme moves swiftly onto something else.

Dad turns the TV off and rescues his mug of tea just in time. For a few moments, we sit without saying anything.

“Well,” Dad says. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Me neither,” I say, feeling shaken.

But what was I expecting? To focus on football and forget about everything else? To turn my back on people who need me and feel fine about it? I remember the protest outside the Harrowfield club shop, how good it felt to feel like we were making a difference. The feeling that something impossible was about to happen. It’s the same feeling that football gives. That football *should* give.

“I think,” Dad says, running a finger around the rim of his mug, “I think I was wrong.”

I frown. “About what?”

“I discouraged you from engaging in any more activism after the break-in, even though it obviously meant something to you. I made it seem like you had to choose between two things that are important to you. I made it seem like there was a choice to be made between football and doing the right thing. I think I was wrong to do that.” He looks at me. “I’m sorry.”

I shrug. “That’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. Because I don’t think you have to choose. You can be someone who chases their own dream without trampling on the dreams of others.” He nods at the black screen. “Budi is proof of that.”

“But what about the break-in?” I say. “The message on the mirror? Doesn’t that prove I should stay out of it?”

“That’s what I thought,” Dad says. “But maybe it’s a sign that you’re doing something right. Maybe it’s a sign that you should keep going.”

“The whistle,” I say, remembering my conversation with Budi.

“What’s that?” Dad says.

“Sometimes the whistle means stop and sometimes the whistle means go,” I say, excitement surging through me. “It sounds the same but has two meanings. You have to decide what to do.”

“I like that,” Dad says.

I turn to him, my mouth dry. “But do you think it will work? Do you think I can make a difference?”

Dad doesn’t look at me. He stares straight ahead at the picture of Mum on the mantelpiece. He smiles.

“It’s got to be worth a try.”



“You’re going to do what?!” Teddy says.

Every single player in the changing room stares at me. The urge to back down, to tell them it’s all a joke, is almost overwhelming. I look at my boots and try to imagine the person who made them. The person who wrote the note. Their bravery gives me the strength I need to stand my ground.

“I’m going to stage a protest,” I say again. “At Harrowfield Park. On the last day of the season.”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?” Teddy says. “The last time we did something like that, someone broke into your house and trashed the place!”

The others mutter and glance at one another. Obviously they didn’t know, and now that they do they’ll

be even less likely to join me. But I need them – all of them – if my plan is going to work.

I glance at Bradley, trying to work out whether he already knew, but he seems as surprised as everyone else.

“We don’t know that they’re connected,” I say.

“Mate, they obviously are,” Teddy says.

“Then why didn’t your house get broken into? You were protesting outside the club shop too.”

He holds out his hands. “I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to give them another reason.”

I take a deep breath and stand up. “Look, I need all of you for this. We’ve got a chance to change things. Ever since Budi gave that interview, factory workers around the world have started striking. He needs us right now. If we wait, the moment could pass and things will remain the way they are. This is a chance to be part of something huge.”

Craig raises a hand. He’s still wearing his goalie gloves. “I’m not trying to be funny, but why should we care about people we don’t know on the other side of the world?”

There’s a muttering of agreement from the others.

“Because it’s all connected! Footballers and the people who make football boots are all part of the same system. And I don’t want to be part of that system. I want to be

part of a *better* system: one that doesn’t make millionaires at the expense of millions of people. We can do that. We can help to make that happen.”

As I look around the room, I can see that some of them are starting to listen. No, more than listen. *Believe*. This must be what it’s like to be a captain, with the whole team counting on you to turn a game around.

“Just think how strong it would look if all of us were there outside the stadium, wearing our Harrowfield kits. We could reach tens of thousands of people. We could make them see that it’s possible to love your club and wear the shirt and still care about where that shirt came from and the person who made it. And if the fans demand change, things have to change, right?”

Rhys and Sean nod their heads. Josh and Ashley exchange a look. They’re on the edge of joining me, I can feel it.

And then Bradley opens his mouth.

“Hang on,” he says. All heads turn towards him. “Did you say you want to do this on the last day of the season?”

“It’ll have the most impact,” I say. “There’ll be close to seventy thousand people heading towards Harrowfield Park.”

Bradley nods as though he's considering this, but I can tell he's already got something smart to say.

"I can't make it," he says with a shrug.

I try to keep my voice even, but anger forces me to squeeze the words between gritted teeth. "Why not?"

"I've got other plans," he says. "And so do you."

"Me?"

Bradley grins. "We all do." He looks around the room. "Next Sunday is when we play Liverpool."

And just like that, I know I've lost them. They look relieved. They laugh it off, glad that they don't have to make a difficult decision after all.

"Wait," I say, raising my voice to be heard. "Don't you see? This is more important than one game of football."

"That's right," Bradley says. "It's only a friendly, remember?"

And then I really do lose them, because we all know there's no such thing as a friendly at this club. I watch helplessly as they go back to joking around with each other.

"Never mind, mate," Teddy says, patting me on the back. "You did your best."

I slump down onto the bench. "Thanks for nothing."

"What?" he says.

"You didn't exactly back me up, did you?"

"Oh, leave it out, mate. I'm just trying to look out for you."

"Well, you got what you wanted."

He doesn't respond to that, and we get ready to leave in silence. I'm still determined to go ahead with the protest. One is better than none. But if I can't convince my own team – people who are literally on my side – what chance do I have of convincing anyone else?



"This was a mistake," I say to Dad, watching as thousands of fans stream towards me. "I can't do it."

"You can," he says. "I know you can."

It feels like my chest is full of bats, blindly bashing around my ribcage and threatening to erupt from my throat. I look at the faces passing by, full of excitement for the big match, full of hope for a first ever league title.

"People are going to hate me," I say.

"That's not true," Dad says. "They might not like what you've got to say, but it's not personal."

"I haven't got anything to say, remember?"

"You know what I mean."

"It'll feel personal, even if it isn't."

"You're right," Dad says. "It probably will."

I can't get enough air into my lungs. A group of fans barges past, chanting and singing, and I almost lose my balance. Dad puts a steadying hand on my shoulder.

"You know," he says, "I'm not going to force you to do anything."

"Stop it," I snap.

"Stop what?"

"Pretending you don't mind if I back out. It won't work. It won't make me want to do it. I'm not four."

Dad laughs. "I'm just saying that we can go home whenever you like. It's not a trick. I'm proud of you."

I think about saying the words that are on the tip of my tongue: "I want to go home." I imagine what would happen next. How we'd take the banner we spent all week making and carry it against the flow of people, bumping from shoulder to shoulder, until we reached the car with the banner in tatters. We'd drive through deserted streets, all the way back to Liverpool. We'd get home in time to see the second half – to see what happens inside this stadium, never knowing what could have happened outside of it.

And all the while, Mum would be smiling down at me from the mantelpiece. Smiling, even though I'd let her down. Her and pretty much everyone else.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay what?”

“I’m ready.”

“You sure?”

I nod. “Positive. Help me up.”

Dad gives me a leg-up and I clamber onto the base of the Harrowfield Park statue. I barely reach the shorts of the giant bronze figures, but the plinth is high enough for me to see the whole length of the parade leading to the stadium: a wide, churning river of red and white.

But it’s a different colour that catches my attention: a flash of ginger hair.

“Teddy?” I call.

“Hang on!” he shouts, pushing his way through the crowd. That’s when I notice the train of people following him: Sean, Rhys, Craig... He’s brought the entire team – even Bradley – and some of the parents are there too.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, when they reach the base of the statue.

“Backing you up!” Teddy says with a grin. “I’m glad you climbed up there. I couldn’t see you before – it was like one of those *Where’s Wally?* pages where all the people are dressed like Wally. We’ve really got to do something about this kit.”

I’m so full of relief and happiness and hope that I can’t keep the smile from my face.

“But what about the match?” I ask.

Teddy shrugs. “We wouldn’t have had a chance without the Matador. Now, help us up.”

I reach down and haul Teddy up. Then we help the others, and within a minute the whole team is stood on the plinth, high above the flood of fans. Bradley is the last person to climb up.

“I’m surprised to see you,” I tell him. “I’d have thought you’d rather face Liverpool alone than help me out.”

“I know I’m good,” Bradley says. “But I’m not *that* good. Besides, Teddy is annoyingly persistent.”

“You’re welcome!” Teddy says. “Now, what’s the plan?”

“Dad,” I say, holding out a hand. “Tape.”

Dad rummages in his backpack and brings out a roll of thick black tape. He tears off a piece and passes it to me. Then he makes his way from player to player, passing up strips of tape.

“Is this going where I think it’s going?” Teddy asks.

“Yep,” I say.

“You’re finally going to get some peace, coach!” Teddy says.

“Hallelujah,” Dad says.

“Has everyone got a piece?” I ask.

“Not quite,” Dad says, from somewhere on the far side of the statue. “Okay, that’s the whole team. Ready!”

“Okay. Just remember not to cover your nose with it.”

“What would we do without you?” Teddy says.

“Suffocate, probably.” I hold the corners of the tape in my fingertips. “Ready? Silent protest begins in three... two...one!”

I lift the tape and press it over my mouth, and so do the rest of the players. Dad hands me the banner and I hold it high above my head.

**END THE SILENCE!
BACK BUDI!
SUPPORT THE STRIKE!**

We get a lot of strange looks from the fans. Frowns replace smiles, chants turn to whispers. People point and stare, but I don’t care. In fact, that’s the whole point. If companies are going to hide their workers away in cramped, sweltering factories on the other side of the world, we need to show people something here that will make them stop and think. A few people get a bit

aggressive – shouting about how we’re spoiling their fun with stuff that isn’t their fault – but our parents form a ring around the base of the statue, keeping the gobbiest people at bay.

It isn’t long before a nearby news crew stops interviewing fans and starts filming us. I try not to look directly at the camera, but once or twice I find myself staring down its big black lens. I can only hope that this protest will get as much attention as the last one.

My shoulders and neck start to burn from holding the banner above my head, but I’m determined not to lower it. The pain must show on my face because Bradley taps me on the shoulder and gestures with his hand. After a moment’s hesitation, I pass it to him, and he takes over. When he gets tired, someone else takes a turn. If it wasn’t for the tape, I know I’d be beaming. We’re finally united: a true team.

After an hour or so, the crowd starts to thin as fans take their seats for kick-off.

“Time to call it a day?” Dad asks, looking up at me.

I look around, squinting in the mid-afternoon sunshine. The parade is almost deserted, apart from a handful of litter pickers collecting empty cans and cups. Then I look at my teammates. It’s impossible to tell how

they're feeling – the tape makes them look stern and sulky, and it's not like I'm in a position to ask. Eventually, I nod.

“Now for the fun bit,” Dad says.

A few of the other parents chuckle. I frown and hold out my hands.

“Time to remove the tape,” Dad says. “On three?” He looks around at the other mums and dads, and they all join in.

“One! Two! Three!”

There's a loud ripping sound as we peel the tape off our mouths. It's painful enough to make my eyes water, but all I can hear around me is laughter. And when I finally manage to blink the tears away, a whole squad of players is smiling back at me.

“I really hope we made a difference,” Teddy says, rubbing his top lip, “because my dreams of growing a handlebar moustache are well and truly over.”



Harrowfield lost. They lost the match, which means they lost the title, which means they lost any hope of winning the treble. That should be the headline.

But it isn't.

I sit with Dad on the sofa and scroll through one story after another, my mouth hanging open as I read about strikes in China, India, Vietnam, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Indonesia. And it isn't just factory workers who are taking to the streets: it's students, teachers, doctors, lawyers, children. The only people who don't seem to be protesting are the police and soldiers tasked with containing the crowds. But even they, according to some of the reports, are only doing so reluctantly.

“It’s happening,” Dad says, squeezing my arm. “It’s actually happening.”

I scroll back to the top of the feed and freeze. For a split second, I don’t recognize the person staring back, even though his green-blue eyes are the same ones I see every time I look in the mirror. I’m scowling because of the sun, my eyebrows bunched together. The black tape hides the bottom half of my face like a bandit’s scarf.

“Woah,” Dad says, and I can’t help but smile at the awe in his voice. “You look like a hardcore revolutionary. Someone ought to put that on a poster.”

“Teddy will be fuming,” I say. “He’s the photogenic one, remember?”

“So he tells me.” Dad sits back. “Owen, this is major. It’s the last day of the season and instead of talking about football, everyone is talking about stuff that actually matters.”

“Doesn’t football matter?”

“It does. I mean, it *should*.” He runs a hand through his hair. “You know me. Football is the closest thing I have to a religion. But it’s changed, even in my time. I don’t know. Sometimes I wonder what happened to just playing for the love of the game. I never wanted to be a footballer for the money. I wanted to be a footballer because I couldn’t

think of anything else I’d rather do. This was before I realized how exciting warehouses could be, of course.”

He smiles but there’s pain in his eyes. I put my hand on his knee. He pats it, then tilts the phone so I’m looking directly at the picture of me.

“The beautiful game might have turned ugly,” Dad says, “but this – *this* – is beautiful. A masterpiece. Hang it in the Louvre.” He ruffles my hair and pulls me closer. “My boy. My beautiful boy.”

He kisses me on the top of my head. I can see the photo of Mum, and with Dad’s warmth beside me it’s almost possible to believe she’s sitting on the other side of him, silently sharing the moment.

I could stay here for a long time.

But then the phone rings and Dad sits up, forcing me away.

“If this is a journalist asking for an interview, I’ll—” He stops talking when he sees the screen. “Oh, it’s Paul.”

He answers the phone and puts it on speaker. Then he sets it down on the coffee table.

“Hi, Paul. How’s it going?”

“Oh, you know. So-so.”

“I guess the mood in camp must be pretty subdued after missing out on the title.”

“You could say that, yeah.”

“Owen’s here, by the way.”

“Hi, Paul.”

“Oh, right. Hi, Owen.”

There’s something in his voice that makes me feel like a plug has been pulled deep in the pit of my stomach.

“What can I do for you?” Dad asks.

“Is there any chance we could speak in private?” Paul says.

And it’s still there – a coldness, a deadness – that reminds me of waiting outside school, in the rain, while the teacher made a phone call that nobody would answer. I sit as still as I can, barely breathing.

Dad frowns. “Whatever you’ve got to say, you can say with Owen here.”

There’s a pause. Paul clears his throat. “Owen...didn’t make the cut.”

Dad lets out a breath that is almost a laugh. “I’m sorry, mate, you’ve lost me.”

“We don’t think it’s working out at Harrowfield.”

And there it is. It’s like something vital is draining out of me, more vital than blood: hope.

“Wait,” Dad says, his voice suddenly hard. “You’re dropping Owen?”

“That’s right. I’m sorry.”

I stay silent. I can’t think what to say.

“This is because of the protest, isn’t it?” Dad says.

“It’s got nothing to do with that. It’s performance-related.”

“Performance-related?! Owen was player of the match last weekend!”

“Jack said he missed the match today.”

“They *all* did! Are you telling me you’re dropping the whole team?”

Paul sighs. “No.”

“Just Owen?”

Another long pause. “Yes.”

“Because he was the ringleader? Because he led his team to something worthwhile? Something none of them could have done without him? Do you realize how much bravery it takes to stand up to your friends? To stand up to power? Don’t you see the leadership that shows? You should be giving him the captain’s armband!” Dad pauses, scowling at the phone on the table. “You just lost your best player, Paul.”

And I know, in that moment, that Dad will always be in my corner, fighting the battles that I’m too scared or tired or bruised to fight.

I hear Paul take a deep breath. “Mr Sharp, I don’t doubt that for a second.” I look at Dad. He looks as confused as I feel. “I’m just calling to tell you the decision.”

“So this isn’t your call?”

“No. It’s not.”

“Then who was it? Jack? Give me his number.”

“No.”

“No, it’s not Jack? Or no, you won’t give me his number?”

“Both.”

“So whose decision is it? I’ll talk to whoever I have to.”

“Mr Sharp—”

“Stop calling me Mr Sharp!”

“I would advise you to drop it,” Paul says, and there’s an edge to his voice that makes me shiver. He sounds serious. Serious and scared. “This goes higher than me.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Just take my advice,” Paul says. “Drop it. It’s a strange time at the club.” He sighs. “Are you still there, Owen?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“You listen to me. Some other club is going to snap you up the moment we release you. This isn’t the end of the road, you hear? Ten years from now, I wouldn’t be surprised to see you lifting a major trophy above your

head. The ribbons on it might not be red and white, but I’d bet my house there’ll be kids up and down the land wearing a shirt with your name on the back. So you keep doing what you’re doing, understand?”

“Thanks, Paul,” I say with a snivel.

I look at Dad and he quickly wipes his eyes on his sleeve.

“Yeah. Thanks, Paul,” he says. “Sorry if I got a bit lairy. Appreciate you taking the time to make a difficult call.”

“No need to apologize. You take care of each other, okay?”

“We always do,” Dad says.

He hangs up.

Then he turns to me. “How you doing, mate?”

I shrug. I feel numb and hollow. It’s as though I’m sinking, like a damaged ship plummeting towards the seabed. I swallow what feels like a clump of wet sand.

“Don’t worry,” Dad says. “No five-minute rule for this one. We can talk about it for as long as you want. Or not at all. It might take a while to process. It’s okay to be sad.”

“I’m not sad,” I say, only realizing that it’s true as I say it. I’ve been sad a lot over the last three years. And when I think of all that’s happened – Mum, the note, the

break-in, being dropped – a different feeling rises in me. “I’m angry.” I turn sharply to face Dad. “What did Paul mean? He said it’s a strange time at the club. What do you think he meant?”

Dad puffs his cheeks out. “It could be anything. He might have been talking about players or finances or staff. Football clubs are complicated places: big expectations, big egos.”

“But…” I stop. Dad starts to speak but I hold up my hand. If I don’t focus on the thought, I’ll lose track of it. But it’s tricky, like a maths problem you have to solve in your head.

“Paul said I wasn’t being dropped because of the protest, but he made the call just a few hours afterwards. That seems like a pretty big coincidence.”

“I agree.”

“But why would they get rid of me for that?”

“Reputational damage, I suppose. It doesn’t look good when a club’s academy team stages a protest outside the stadium. Especially when the owner of that team owns the biggest sportswear company in the world.”

I shake my head. It doesn’t make sense. “How much damage do they think I can do? If they were going to get rid of anyone, wouldn’t it be Budi?”

And suddenly it feels as though it’s all about to click into place, like the dial of a safe turning towards the right combination. I’m moments away from unlocking it and yanking it open – moments away from discovering what’s been hidden inside all this time.

But then there’s a knock at the door.

“What now?” Dad says. “If that’s the paparazzi, I am going to war.”

He leaves the room. I listen as he opens the door and brace myself for a shouting match.

Instead, I hear a quiet voice, but it’s impossible to make anything out. After a pause, I hear Dad reply. Then the door gently closes. I hear footsteps in the hallway and assume Dad sent whoever it was away.

But the person who appears in the front room isn’t Dad.

It’s Budi.



“What are you doing here?” I ask. I know I sound rude, but it’s the first thing that comes into my head. The sight of Budi in our front room is so unreal it’s like my brain refuses to believe what my eyes are telling it. He’s wearing pale blue jeans, a red T-shirt, and a black baseball cap. No logos, no bling. You’d never know he was a footballer if you passed him in the street.

He smiles his small, shy smile. “I came to see you, Owen.”

I glance at Dad standing in the doorway. He’s staring at Budi as though a god has just materialized in front of us. Budi obviously has plenty of experience dealing with people who are starstruck because he takes the lead.

“Can I sit down?” he says.

“Please do,” Dad says, coming back to life. “Sorry it’s a bit of a squeeze.”

“It’s nice,” Budi says, sitting beside me on the sofa and looking around. “A good family home.”

I wonder what his family home was like when he was growing up, but can’t bring myself to ask. I see his eyes linger for a moment on the picture of Mum. It feels strange that he already knows about her. Strange, but also reassuring. One less thing to explain.

“Can I get you anything?” Dad says. “Tea? Coffee? Er...squash?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

Dad sits down on the arm of the sofa.

“I hope you don’t mind me turning up like this,” Budi says. “I got your address from the club.”

“It’s fine,” Dad says. “Besides, it’s not like you’re going to bump into us at the academy any time soon.”

Budi looks confused.

“I got dropped,” I say. It’s hard to look him in the eye – it feels like I’ve let him down as much as anyone else – but I manage it, just about.

“I don’t understand,” he says. “When did this happen?”

“We got the call just before you arrived,” Dad says.

“So, after your protest?” Budi says to me.

I sit up a little straighter, my chest swelling with pride. “You saw that?”

“It’s why I’m here. I wanted to thank you for what you’ve done. It shows you have a good heart. That you care. It was also very brave.” He shakes his head. “But it shouldn’t have cost you your place at the academy.”

“I don’t regret it,” I say. And I really don’t. “It was worth it.”

“Do you think you could get Owen back into the academy?” Dad asks. “Is there anyone you could speak to?”

“I don’t think so. You see, I’m not sure who I can trust any more.”

Dad and I exchange a glance. “What do you mean?” I ask.

“I think something strange is happening. Ever since the protests began, there has been an...atmosphere at the club. At first I thought it was just me – because of the red card, maybe – but the other players have noticed it too.”

“An atmosphere?” I say. “Can you explain what you mean?”

Budi shakes his head. “Not really. Or maybe...” He glances at Dad, then returns his gaze to me. “Do you

remember that feeling you told me about, when we talked about your mother?”

I take a deep breath. I can feel Dad looking at me.

“You mean the day I was left waiting for her, outside the school?”

Budi nods. “You said you knew something was wrong. You didn’t know what it was, only that it was already too late.” He pauses. “That’s the feeling I have right now.”

We sit in silence for what feels like a long time. I get the impression that Budi is thinking deeply about something, but whatever it is seems to defeat him. Dad stares at the picture of Mum, lost in thought. I sit between them, wondering what Paul wanted to say but couldn’t.

It’s a strange time at the club.

Eventually, Budi clears his throat.

“I am very sorry you lost your place at the academy, Owen. I don’t think I can put that right, but there is something I would like to do, as a token of my gratitude for speaking out. Next weekend is the cup final. As I’m sure you know, each player walks out onto the pitch accompanied by a child.” He looks me straight in the eye. “I would like to walk out with you, Owen. If that’s something you would like too.”

For a moment, it’s like someone has turned my brain

off. Then it's like a huge switch is thrown in the opposite direction. A power surge sweeps through my entire body, making my blood fizz and my skin tingle.

"Really?" I ask.

"Really," Budi says, smiling. "And of course you and your father would be welcome to watch the final afterwards." I glance quickly at Dad. He also looks a lot like someone who's hit a glitch. "Guests of the players are invited to sit in the royal box," Budi adds.

I imagine what it would be like to walk out in front of ninety thousand people, to feel the perfect turf beneath my feet, to watch from the best seats in the house. Then I think about what it will be like to tell Teddy, and just like that, all of the joy and excitement evaporate. He'll be made up for me, of course, but he'll also be gutted. Devastated.

Teddy, my best mate.

Teddy, who backed me up.

Teddy, who deserves this as much as I do.

I clear my throat.

"I don't suppose there's a spare ticket for my mate, is there?"



I emerge from the changing room into a corridor that's bustling with people. Emily, the person in charge, guides me to one side where the rest of the mascots are waiting: half of them in Harrowfield kits, the other half in the black-and-white stripes of Newcastle. She ticks something off the list on her clipboard. I watch people rush by, walkie-talkies babbling on their hips. I recognize one man who strides past, dressed in black and wearing shades, but I can't remember where I've seen him before. Then he's gone. Someone calls, "Fifteen minutes till kick-off!" before disappearing through a door that leads onto another corridor. I get a glimpse of bare concrete, silver pipes and thick cables before the door swings shut.

"Okay," Emily says with a smile. "Everybody ready?"

The other kids must be too nervous to speak, because all she gets in reply is a mixture of nods and stares and mumbles.

“Ready,” I say.

“Great! Follow me.”

She leads us to a pair of heavy-looking doors. She taps her badge against a sensor on the wall, which emits a small beep. Then she pulls one of the doors open.

The first thing is the noise. It jumps from a distant, low grumble – more of a vibration than a sound – to a deafening roar. The chanting of ninety thousand people pours through the opening to my left, loud enough to make me take a small step back.

Breathe.

I step through the door and immediately realize where I am: the players’ tunnel. I’ve seen it so many times on TV that actually being here feels like a dream. The Harrowfield and Newcastle crests are emblazoned on opposite walls, and I know that on the other side of them the two teams will be listening to a last-minute team talk. As I move further towards the tunnel entrance, I get a glimpse of the pristine pitch, its white lines glowing in the sun.

The noise spills through the whole time, like two armies going to war.

Emily lines us up in two rows and reminds us which players we’ll be walking out with. When she gets to me, I’m so distracted by the roaring crowd and the thought of walking out in front of it, that I mishear what she says.

“Excuse me,” I say. “Did you say I’m walking out with Zubia?”

Emily double-checks her clipboard. “Owen...that’s right.”

“No,” I say. “I’m supposed to be walking out with Budi.”

“There’s been a change to the starting eleven,” she says. She turns her clipboard to show me. “See?”

I look at the black line that has been drawn through BUDI, and the neat handwritten letters beside it that spell out ZUBIA.

“Why has it changed?” I ask. “Budi was already on the team sheet.”

Emily shrugs. “If I knew the reason, I’d be the one managing them.”

She moves off and I look around, hoping that Budi might appear to explain what’s happened. But he’s nowhere to be seen. Further back, a pair of double doors lead to a wide, carpeted corridor that’s lined with reporters and news crews, but all the players must be in the changing rooms. A door off to one side opens and the

referees emerge, carrying the match ball and flags. They walk into the tunnel together and stand near the entrance.

Then the players emerge, and the tunnel echoes with the clacking of studs and the clapping of hands. Seeing them line up – players I’ve watched every week for as long as I can remember – is surreal. But Budi’s not with them. The players hold the hands of their mascots, who look up at them as though they’re giants. Zubia is one of the last to emerge, two sharp lines shaved into the short hair at each temple. I take one last look around, searching for Budi.

That’s when I spot the man in black again. He’s by the door to the referees’ changing room, quickly tapping in a code on the keypad. In a flash, I remember where I’ve seen him before: he was at the academy match against Manchester City, sitting in the top row. He’s one of Augustus Sinclair’s bodyguards.

So why is he entering the referees’ changing room?

On impulse, I walk towards him, threading my way through the mascots and players. Everyone is too distracted – by the players, the bustle, the fierce noise of the crowd – to notice me. I reach the door just as it’s about to close and wedge my trainer into the gap. I push the door open and slip inside, letting it close behind me. The sudden dip in volume is unnerving.

I find myself in a short, whitewashed corridor. There are two doors: one immediately to my left, and one straight ahead, at the end. The one to my left is propped open, revealing a couple of black sofas arranged on either side of a small table. There’s a vending machine, and neat piles of clothes on a bench, and what looks like a shower room. A noticeboard has information about the teams pinned to it, with miniature red-and-white shirts lined up beside miniature black-and-white ones, and on the counter beneath it is a machine for inflating footballs. A half-empty bottle of water sits on the table, its cap screwed on at a wonky angle.

This must be where the referees got changed and prepared for kick-off, but it’s empty now.

The second door – the one at the end of the corridor – is closed. I walk slowly towards it, trailing my hand along the scuffed paintwork. As I draw nearer, I hear muffled voices. It’s impossible to tell what they’re saying, even when I’m right outside with my ear against the door. There’s a sudden surge in the noise from the crowd, and I realize that the players must be walking out onto the pitch. I wonder what Teddy and Dad will do when they realize I’m not there.

What can they do?

Very lightly, I push against the door, testing whether it's locked. It opens ever so slightly. The voices are clearer but still indistinct. The throb of distant music vibrates through my fingertips. I push the door a little further and peer around the edge. It's another changing room, but the main area is tucked around a corner. I can see a row of lockers, another vending machine, and a table with footballs stored beneath it at the far end. Above it, a shiny whistle hangs from a peg.

I edge inside, closing the door as gently as possible. The voices are suddenly very clear.

"It has to stop!" a man shouts. "Do you understand?"

I creep closer to the corner of the wall. In the reflection of the vending machine window, I see the broad back of the bodyguard. I shuffle a little further, and the glass reveals more of the room beyond. The table has been shoved aside, leaving a single chair in the centre of the room. And on the chair sits Budi, wearing the red and white stripes of Harrowfield. Another bodyguard looms behind him, and in front of him, pacing back and forth like a panther in a cage, is Augustus Sinclair.

"Do you understand?" Sinclair roars again, and there's something so wrong about what I'm seeing and hearing that I slide my phone from the pocket of my shorts. I

reach out until the camera is just peeking around the edge of the wall, then hit record.

"Your antics are making this club look bad, which means you're making *me* look bad. We're losing sponsors left, right and centre because of your protests. Do you realize how much money my company is losing because of these strikes? Because of your antics?"

"Your company doesn't sponsor me," Budi says simply, but his calmness only seems to aggravate Sinclair.

"No, but you play for this football club, and I *own* this football club, which means I own you, so you ought to do what I say."

"I do what the coaches tell me to do. That is my job."

"And the coaches will do what *I* tell them to do. Red cards aren't the only way to keep you on the substitutes' bench."

I almost gasp as I realize what Sinclair is saying – that *he* was behind Budi's sending off. When we saw Sinclair and Cain Carter on our tour of the academy, they weren't discussing a summer transfer. They were working out how to get Budi out of the way.

But it backfired. By sabotaging Budi, Sinclair also sabotaged the whole team, ruining their chances of winning the league.

Budi seems to consider Sinclair's threat for a moment. I expect him to snap – to lash out – but he somehow manages to control his voice. "I don't think the fans would like that."

This comment must flip a switch, because Augustus Sinclair roars so loudly it makes me flinch. "DO YOU THINK I CARE ABOUT THE FANS?!"

"No," Budi says, and his voice is so quiet it's like my ears have popped.

"I don't care about the fans, I don't care about football, and I certainly don't care about factory workers," Augustus Sinclair says. "My only concern is making things cheaply and selling them for as much money as possible. Profit comes before everything else, which is why your *insubordination* has to stop. Do you understand?"

Budi doesn't reply for a long time. "You know," he says eventually, "I have met bigger men than you."

"I highly doubt that."

Budi ignores this and carries on. "When I was a boy living in Jakarta, my neighbourhood was controlled by a gang: the Dragon's Clan. Their leader was a man just like you. He called himself the Dragon."

"Never heard of him."

"No," Budi says, his voice still quiet. "He died."

"Why are you telling me this?" Augustus Sinclair says. His voice takes on a sharper, more dangerous edge. "Are you threatening me?"

"No," Budi says. "I am trying to help you. Bad people get what they deserve. They never think they will, but they do. There is still time to do the right thing."

"Which is?"

"Change the way you do business. Stop exploiting people. Give them fair wages and safe workplaces. You have the money and the power to change millions of lives. So do it."

"Ha! You're giving me advice now, are you? Well, if you think I don't know where you come from – what you are – then you're wrong. I know exactly where your story started: in the slums. You ought to be careful. It would be tragic if your career ended just as it was getting started. So be a good boy, do as I say, and play by the rules."

"No," Budi says.

My heart is thumping so hard my phone trembles in my hand, but I keep filming.

Sinclair growls in exasperation. "What do you want? More money? I can double your salary. All you need to do is make a statement, admitting you were wrong about

sweatshops and child labour and all that other stuff. My people can write it for you.”

“No,” Budi says.

“Fine,” Augustus Sinclair says. “I’ll triple your salary. That’ll make you one of the best paid players in the world. Not bad, considering you were a nobody less than a month ago.”

Budi shakes his head. “You don’t understand, do you? It’s not about money. Money cannot solve your problems.”

“It can!” Sinclair says. “And it will. Because it has to. I’ve made too many promises to too many investors to let someone like you wreck things. And they’re not the kind of men you can get away with disappointing.”

Budi says nothing.

“This is your last chance,” Sinclair says. “Agree to the deal and we can solve each other’s problems.” He glances at the red numbers of the digital clock on the wall, counting down to kick-off. “Less than five minutes to go. Say yes and you play in this final. Say no...and I can promise you will never play football again.”

At a signal from Sinclair, the bodyguard behind Budi rests a huge hand on his shoulder. The message is clear.

I stop recording and lower my arm. I need to tell someone about what’s going on. I tap share and select the

group containing Teddy and Dad. I hit send. I don’t dare try to leave until the video has been sent, but it seems to take forever. That’s when I realize that everyone in the stadium is probably live-streaming the build-up or sending messages to their mates.

I keep out of sight, willing the video to upload.

But it’s slow.

So slow.

And then a message pops up from Teddy:

Where r u???

And I realize what’s about to happen a split second before it does.

My phone pings.

And the changing room falls silent.



I don't wait. I reach for the door with my free hand and yank it open. I sprint to the end of the corridor, chased by angry voices and pounding footsteps. I reach the outer door and pull as hard as I can. But it won't budge. I pull again, panicking, but it's stuck fast. That's when I remember the keypad. It's locked. I quickly reach out and slap the door-release button. The door finally gives, but I've only opened it a fraction when a hand slams against it, forcing it shut. I'm yanked backwards, and as I fall to the floor my phone flies out of my hand. I watch it slide to the end of the corridor, where the second bodyguard is waiting. He lifts his foot and brings the heel of his shoe down hard. I hear the screen crack. Two more angry stamps and my phone is in pieces.

I start to shout, even though I know it's useless. If the door can block out ninety thousand people, my voice isn't going to reach anybody. But it's the only thing I can do. I shout as loud as I can until I'm hauled to my feet and the bodyguard clamps a hand over my mouth. I try to struggle, but he's so strong it's like trying to resist a bear. He drags me back to the room at the end of the corridor, shoving me until I'm face to face with Augustus Sinclair.

There's a moment of confusion. Then his mouth widens into a smile, revealing two rows of unnaturally white teeth. I glance quickly at Budi and try to take courage from his calmness.

"Well, well, well," Sinclair says. "So you're the one who was snooping? I'm beginning to take all of your efforts personally."

"It is personal," I say, surprised by how much anger is in my voice. And then I pause. He recognizes me, which means he must know about my protests, which means...

"It was you!"

He cocks an eyebrow. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You were the one who got me kicked out of the academy." And then another realization hits me. "You were the one who trashed my house."

“Do I look like the kind of person who breaks into homes?”

“No, but your goons do.”

“And why would I order something like that? Why would I concern myself with a mediocre wannabe like you?”

“Because you know I’m making a difference,” I say through gritted teeth. “Because you know that if people like me stand up to people like you, you’re finished.”

“Ha! You really do have an inflated opinion of yourself, don’t you? I can see why you two get along.” He shoots a hateful glare at Budi, then his eyes dart to the digital clock. The red numbers are almost at zero. “It looks like kick-off is imminent. I should really take my seat in the royal box.” He adjusts the knot of his tie and smooths the front of his jacket. “It’s such a shame that you won’t get to see the match. Soon you, and all the mess you’ve made, will be forgotten. There’s nothing quite like a big shiny trophy to make people forget things. And then it will be back to business as usual.” He looks at the bodyguards. “No loose ends, understood?”

The bodyguards nod, their eyes hidden behind their shades, their faces solemn.

“Goodbye,” Augustus Sinclair says.

Then he turns and leaves the room. Panic squeezes my chest as his footsteps fade. My mind races. I think of Dad, alone – completely alone – and instantly I’m looking through a film of tears. I see him standing on countless touchlines, in the rain and the snow and the swirling wind. Dad, who has taught me so much. Dad: my protector, my hero, my coach.

My coach...

I know we have to get out, and there’s only one chance of escape.

But sometimes, one chance is all you need.

I hear the bodyguard behind me take a step closer.

“Wait!” I say, and to my surprise he hesitates. Maybe it’s because I’m a kid – *just* a kid.

My mind fills with an image of me as a little boy, shivering outside the front of the school in my muddy kit. A little boy who doesn’t know how cruel the world can be, but is about to find out. A little boy who is helpless, hopeless, alone.

No.

The thought causes hot anger to spread through me. It’s a fuse being lit in my brain: a fuse that leads down my spine, along my legs, and all the way to my toes. The

fizzing and smouldering and smoking leave no room for anything else.

The time for thinking is over.

There is only time to act.

I look at Budi.

“Do you remember when we talked that time, about coaches?” I ask. “How they all say the same thing?”

Play to the whistle, I think. I think it hard and loud, as though Budi might be able to hear me. *Play to the whistle*.

Budi’s eyes dart to the corner of the room, then back to me.

“Do you understand?” I ask.

Budi nods.

I sense the man behind me grow impatient.

I hear the crack of knuckles.

My heart pounds.

Breathe.

I adjust the position of my feet, tensing my legs so that they’re ready to spring.

“Now!” I shout.

I dart to my right, spinning around the nearest bodyguard, towards the footballs in the corner of the room. I drag one back and flick it towards Budi, who

ducks away from the man behind him. I turn – the bodyguard looms over me, his hands inches from my face.

The ball reaches Budi and he catches it on the half-volley, firing it back towards me like a cannonball.

I swear I have never seen anyone kick a football so hard.

It hits the bodyguard square in the face, whipping his head to the side and sending him sprawling.

“Go!” Budi shouts.

I dash across the room and race along the corridor. When I reach the outer door I learn from my mistake and hit the door-release button before yanking it open. The double doors to the players’ tunnel are shut – a red sensor on the wall indicating that they’re locked – and there’s no one around. I dart the other way, along a passage that is lined with food trolleys. I pull one over as I pass, spilling metal trays and leftovers all over the floor. Hopefully it will slow them down. I can hear footsteps, but I don’t dare look back.

I barge through another pair of doors and race along another corridor, lined with photographs of iconic Wembley moments. The corridor twists and I slam through another door. It crashes against the wall with a

bang. I'm in some kind of gloomy tunnel: a road within the stadium. It must be the one the team buses use. The noise of the crowd is louder and I run towards it, my legs and lungs burning. I can see a patch of light up ahead: an opening. The footsteps behind me draw nearer and I know I'm not going to make it. They're almost level with me, and then they are. I glance to the side and see—

“Budi!” I say, my voice ragged.

“Keep going,” he says. “Almost there.”

I dig deeper, fighting against the bite in my muscles. And all the time the roar grows louder. I see part of the crowd, and then the corner flag and the pitch beyond. If we can just make it out of the tunnel and into the open we'll be safe.

But then a large figure emerges from a doorway up ahead and lunges across our path, blocking our way and forcing us to stop. He stands silhouetted against the brilliant green pitch beyond. We're so close. I can see stewards at the edge of the pitch, but they're looking up into the stands, and everyone else is captivated by the football.

Heavy footsteps echo behind us, slowing to a stop as the second bodyguard finally catches up. He doesn't look happy that we made him run. And now we're trapped.

“What do we do?” I ask Budi.

He looks from one bodyguard to the other.

“We play to the whistle,” he says.

He holds out a hand and unclenches his fist. There in his palm, shining like a jewel, is the whistle from the changing room. The bodyguards must know what I'm planning to do because they both rush towards me.

But too late.

I lift the whistle to my lips and blow as hard as I can. The tunnel rings with the shrill sound, and even as hands grab me I keep blowing, determined to make as much noise as I can. I catch a glimpse of the pitch and see a steward in a fluorescent jacket peering into the gloom, a hand shielding his eyes. I don't know if it's the sight of me being wrestled by two men who could do a decent impression of Stone Henge, or the sight of Budi running towards him, but his eyes suddenly widen. A moment later, he's shouting into his walkie-talkie and frantically waving to someone I can't see. I lose sight of him as I'm dragged to the ground and the whistle is torn from my lips. I close my eyes, bracing myself for something painful: a punch or a kick or a stamp.

But it never comes.

When I open my eyes, stewards and security guards are flooding into the tunnel, led by Budi. I glance the other way and see the bodyguards running into the gloom.

I roll onto my back, exhaustion and relief seeping through my body. I close my eyes and listen to the swelling roar of the crowd.

Breathe.

When I finally open my eyes again, Budi is standing over me.

He holds out a hand.

I fill my lungs one more time, and take it.



I'm led to a quiet room deep in the stadium, where the noise of the crowd is muffled, like distant thunder. A wall-mounted TV shows highlights from the first half, but I don't even glance at it. My hands are shaking and I suddenly feel very cold. One of the security guards sits me down on a red sofa, and a moment later there's a bottle in my hands.

"You should drink," he says. "I think you're in shock."

I raise the bottle to my lips and take a sip. Something sweet and fizzy fills my mouth.

"Where's my dad?" I say. "He was in the royal box with—"

The door bursts open, and a familiar face with a shock of ginger hair peers inside.

“Teddy!” I say, and I’ve never been so pleased to see him. Then Dad appears, and I’m so relieved I could cry. He strides over and squeezes me in a tight hug.

“It was Sinclair,” I say, the moment he releases me. “Someone needs to find him! He’s—” Then I realize it’s hopeless. The evidence I had was lost with my phone. It’s my word against one of the most powerful men on the planet.

“It’s okay,” Dad says, resting a hand on my shoulder. “We know.”

“You do?” I ask.

“You sent a video,” Teddy says slowly, as though he’s talking to a freshly hatched alien. “Remember?”

“You got that?” I ask, lifted by a sudden hope.

“We did,” Dad says. “But by the time we’d shown it to security and worked out where it was filmed, you were gone.”

“We escaped,” I say. Then I glance around. “Where’s Budi?”

Teddy glances at the TV and points. I look up to see the Harrowfield players emerging for the second half. At the very front, sprinting out ahead of the others, is Budi. A huge cheer goes up from the fans. Then the camera cuts to the royal box, where Augustus Sinclair stands,

hands frozen mid-clap, a look of confusion and horror spreading across his face. They must be showing the same footage on the big screens in the stadium, because the cheers turn to boos. The sound, low and angry and menacing, makes me shiver.

“I don’t understand,” I say.

“You sent that video to me, you numpty!” Teddy says. “I had to do something with it, didn’t I?”

“Like what?” I ask.

“Well, I wanted to get it up on the big screens, because that would have been epic, but it turns out they don’t let just anybody into the control room – no matter how good-looking and charming they are.”

“I wonder why,” Dad says, rolling his eyes.

“No idea. Anyway, that option was out, but then I remembered: what do people do at half-time when they go to a football match? Besides buying over-priced snacks and braving the toilets?”

I think for a second. “They check the other scores on their phones.”

“Exactly!”

“But there are no other scores,” I say. “The season is over.”

“Doesn’t matter – old habits die hard. Anyway, I realized

that I didn't need to get your video on the big screens. I could use the screens in everybody's pockets instead."

"That's pretty smart...for you."

"I know, right! I uploaded it as a reply to that club shop protest we did – the one that went viral – so all the tagged accounts would see it. Then it was just a case of letting the internet do its thing."

"So everyone knows what Augustus Sinclair did?" I ask. "They know he kidnapped Budi and threatened him?"

Teddy takes a bow. "You're welcome."

I look at the TV screen. The boos and howls are still ringing out. For the first time ever, Augustus Sinclair looks panicked, like a king without an army. And then the boos turn to cheers as police officers stream into the royal box. Sinclair is quickly surrounded, and we watch as he's put in handcuffs and led away, jeered by ninety thousand people.

I know I should be happy, but I don't really feel anything. My muscles are tired and achy, but inside I just feel...empty. It doesn't feel like a victory. I've lost my place at the academy, my dream of becoming a footballer feels further away than ever, and I'm not even sure if it's still something I want. The beautiful game, like Budi said

the first time I ever saw him, can be so ugly. I look up at the screen – at the two teams assembled for kick-off – and feel nothing.

One of the security guards whispers something to Dad, glances at me, then leaves.

"The police want to talk to you," Dad says, squatting down in front of me. His knee clicks and he winces briefly. "We don't have to do it now. We can still watch the second half, if that's what you want?"

I look at the TV again. Budi stands with his foot on the ball, alone in the centre circle. I wait for something to happen inside me, for the old familiar thrill, the anticipation of witnessing something impossible.

Nothing.

The referee restarts the game, setting the players into motion. But to me it's just a meaningless whistle.

"Can we go home?" I ask.

Dad nods. "Of course we can."

I look at Teddy. "Sorry, mate."

"No problem. It would be weird to stay."

Dad leaves his details with a police officer and then we're escorted to the exit. We walk down the long, deserted street that leads to the train station, the noise of the crowd fading with every step. But just as we reach the

top of the station steps, a huge roar goes up. We all stop and look back at the stadium, the arch above it like the loop of a rollercoaster.

The announcer's voice is muffled and echoey, but the goalscorer's name is clear.

"Budi!" Teddy says.

But I feel nothing.



All I want is to be left alone. But all everyone else wants, it seems, is to talk to me.

Friends, journalists, the police: they all have something they want to ask. Even the relatives we never hear from get in touch. I'm just glad it's half-term, so I don't have to face school. Dad sends everyone away, except for the police, but I don't know how much use I am. They make me retell parts of the story over and over, until it feels like they don't believe me. Until I don't quite believe it myself. When Dad asks them whether Augustus Sinclair will go to prison, they dodge the question, saying only that he has a lot of explaining to do. But it's hard to believe someone like him will be punished. I already know, from overhearing the news

on TV, that he's assembled the best team of lawyers that money can buy.

"But I think you should know," one of the police officers says, looking at me, "that the note you gave to PC Amiri could turn out to be a crucial piece of evidence when the modern slavery charges are brought to trial."

"Did you manage to find the person who wrote it?" I ask.

But the police officer refuses to say either way.

After the police leave, I drift around the house feeling numb, the way I did in the days after Mum died. I know I should be angry or sad, but I just don't have the energy. I can tell Dad is trying to cheer me up because he orders takeaways for tea and puts on his Beatlemania playlist at least twice a day, but it doesn't work. Mrs Lindsey bakes me a cake – something she only ever does on my birthday – and it takes all my energy to smile and say thank you. I don't eat any.

Midway through half term, Dad suggests going out in the garden for a kickabout, but all I manage to do is stare at the football, wondering how I ever got so obsessed with something so pointless. In the end, I go back inside without even kicking it.

"Why are you watching that?" I ask Dad as I pass the

front room. On the TV, a news reporter is speaking outside Harrowfield Park.

"It's important," Dad says, turning towards me. "Why don't you come and sit with me?"

I open my mouth to tell him why I can't, then realize I don't have anything better to do. I sit down on the sofa.

"They're talking about the future of Harrowfield," Dad says. "It looks like Augustus Sinclair will have to forfeit ownership."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

Dad shrugs. "It means they'll have to find a new owner, but I'm not sure who'll take it on. Tax evasion, kidnapping, bribery, modern slavery." Dad shakes his head. "Sinclair is leaving quite the legacy."

I don't say anything for a while. It's hard to care. It's only football. Just a game.

"Won't the club just be bought by some other billionaire?" I ask.

"Maybe," Dad says, "but there's another option."

Despite how rubbish I feel, I can't help being curious. "Like what?"

"In the past, lots of clubs were owned by their fans."

"That makes a lot of sense," I say, wondering why that ever changed. "Could that really happen to Harrowfield?"

Dad shrugs. “Maybe. It’s what Budi wants. And now that Sinclair’s crimes have been exposed, it sounds like a very sensible idea.”

I try to imagine a world where money is not the most important thing, where people come before profit. A world where everyone is on the same team, working with each other, *for* each other. United. It seems too good to be true.

A knock at the door makes me flinch.

“Unless that’s Teddy,” I say, “I’m not interested in talking to them.”

“It’s not Teddy,” Dad says.

I frown. “How do you know?”

“It’s Paul.”

“Paul?”

“He called, and I said he could come over.” I open my mouth to protest but Dad holds up a hand. “If you really don’t want to talk to him then you don’t have to. I would understand and so would he. But we’ll be talking about you.”

For a moment it’s like I’ve been stung, right in the centre of my chest. I look away, my face set in a scowl.

I hear Dad turn the TV off, feel the sofa sag as he twists towards me.

“Owen, I think I know how you feel. It’s not nice getting a glimpse of ugliness in something you love. I felt the same way when I got injured – like football had betrayed me somehow. I’d given football everything, and football left me on crutches. But even though I couldn’t see it back then, it was football that gave *me* everything.”

I turn back. “It did?”

Dad nods. “Without that injury, I wouldn’t have met Mum. And if I hadn’t met Mum, then I wouldn’t have you.” He cups a hand against my cheek. “*You* are everything, Owen. When I look back, I realize that everything I did to become a footballer, I was actually doing to get to this point here. To you.

“You are an incredibly talented player. What happened doesn’t change that. But it will if you let it. So I think you’ve got to keep going. Because who knows where your path leads? Who knows what future you’re training for?”

I look at the picture of Mum on the mantelpiece – still smiling, always smiling – and realize that Dad is right.

“We should probably let Paul in,” I say.

Dad ruffles my hair, then gets up to open the door. It’s weird seeing Paul in our house again. The last time he visited, I was dizzy with excitement to be signing with Harrowfield. This time, I don’t know how to feel.

He looks at me with his twinkling eyes and holds out a hand. After a moment, I shake it.

“How are you holding up?” he says. “You’ve been through a lot.”

I shrug. “Okay, I suppose.”

“Well, you don’t have to sugar-coat it for me. I’m sure it’s been a very difficult time for you – for both of you – and the first thing I’d like to say is sorry. When you’ve been in football as long as I have, you come to expect shenanigans – but what’s coming out about Sinclair is something else. If I’d known I was working for a man like that, I would have packed my bags a long time ago.”

“Thanks,” I mumble, unsure what to say.

Paul flaps a hand. “Don’t thank me. I don’t deserve it. I felt wretched making the phone call to tell you we were letting you go – utterly wretched – but I did it anyway.” He shakes his head. “It makes you wonder what kind of person you really are, when you go against your gut like that.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “Really. Sometimes it’s hard to trust your gut.”

Paul smiles, his skin splintering into tiny wrinkles. “That’s why what you did was so impressive, so important. You followed your instincts. You stood up for something

you believe in. You showed integrity. That’s what football needs. And it’s *definitely* what Harrowfield needs.”

“What are you saying?” I ask. I glance at Dad and notice a small smile curling the corners of his mouth. Paul reaches inside his jacket and withdraws a folded sheet of paper.

“Owen, I’d like to offer you a place at the academy. Again. You don’t have to decide now. I know it’s a big decision – even bigger than the last time I asked – but I want you to know that Sinclair’s influence ended the moment he was put in handcuffs. With him gone, Harrowfield is free to reach its full potential. We’ll be looking at how the people associated with the club are treated: from the people who make the kit, to the players who wear it. We hope this will make us a better club – a better *team* – and we’d love for you to be a part of it.”

I don’t know what to say. It feels like a happy ending, but I know there’s still a long way to go. So maybe it’s a happy beginning: a *hopeful* beginning. A whistle that means stop for one thing and go for another. Paul passes the contract to me. I start to unfold it, then stop. He’s right. It’s a big decision and I should probably wait before I commit to anything.

I stand up, cross the room, and tuck the contract behind the picture of Mum.

“I’ll let you know,” I say.

“Super,” Paul says. He claps his hands together. “Right. I better be off.” He walks along the hall but stops before reaching the front door. “Oh, I almost forgot. I bumped into Budi at the academy yesterday.”

“Is he okay?” I ask, realizing that I’ve been so caught up in how I feel that I haven’t really thought about what it’s been like for him.

“He’s doing well,” Paul says, “but he feels terrible that you were dragged into what happened with Sinclair. The cup final was supposed to be a reward for all the good work you’ve done. Needless to say, it didn’t go to plan. He wants to make it up to you.”

“How?” I ask, but my heart is already beginning to race.

“Harrowfield will be returning to Wembley on Saturday for the European final,” Paul says, his eyes twinkling. “How would you like to walk out with Budi for the biggest match of his career?”



The floor vibrates beneath my feet. The air throbs with music and chanting. Up ahead, pale smoke curls across the entrance to the tunnel, obscuring the pitch and the ninety thousand fans beyond. I look around at the other mascots, waiting for the players to emerge from the changing rooms. I turn back to the tunnel entrance, where the smoke glows orange as jets of fire shoot up beside the pitch.

Breathe.

I hear the echoey sound of clapping behind me, the shouts of encouragement in half a dozen languages, the clatter of studs. I don’t look back. I just stare out at the swirling smoke. There’s nothing in front of me except a short walk to the most famous pitch on the planet, and when I close my eyes I can almost imagine that I’m one

of the starting eleven, about to play for the biggest prize in club football.

Breathe.

A hand falls on my shoulder and I open my eyes to find Budi standing beside me, smiling. Behind me, I can sense the other players stamping and fidgeting, but Budi is calm.

“Here we are,” he says.

“Yep,” I say. The noise from above is like thunder. “Here we are.” I nod at the band around his arm. “You’ve been made captain?”

He nods. “Just for this game.”

His last game for Harrowfield, maybe, if things don’t change. Budi glances past the match officials, at Real Madrid’s captain. Kieran Wakefield looks back and nods once. Then he turns his attention to the pitch, not even glancing at the camera that hovers nearby.

If the rumours are true, this is his last game ever.

Breathe.

Someone suddenly gives the signal, and we walk out onto the pitch. Instinctively, I reach for Budi’s hand, and it’s there waiting for me. We pass through the smoke and into the dazzling lights. The crowd roars and the anthem blares from the speakers. I feel like a gladiator entering the Colosseum.

I pass by the huge gleaming trophy on its pedestal, close enough to see my face reflected back at me. And I know, in that moment, that I want it. That I won’t stop until I get to lift it high above my head in an arena like this.

We line up on the pitch, facing the stands. I know Dad is up there, watching me. And maybe Mum is up there watching me too.

Breathe.

I look along the row and suddenly notice that every single player is wearing the same boots: Budi’s Merdeka boots. They look especially good on the Real Madrid players, dressed from head to toe in white.

“Budi,” I say, unsure whether he can hear me over the din. “Your boots.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” he says.

He squeezes my shoulder and then the Madrid players begin to file past. The first is Kieran Wakefield. He clasps hands with Budi and doesn’t let go. Instead, he looks into Budi’s eyes, leans in close, and says one word.

“Merdeka.”

Budi dips his head. They hold hands for a moment longer, then Wakefield moves on. The rest of the Madrid players pass by, and it’s such an unreal experience that all I can do is stare.

Then it's time to leave the pitch. I start to follow the other mascots towards the touchline, but a voice stops me.

"Owen," Budi calls. I turn back. He places a hand over the Harrowfield crest on his shirt, over his heart.

"Thank you."

I smile, lingering on the pitch a moment longer. "Good luck."

Then someone wearing a lanyard leads me away and up a flight of steps into the royal box. She stops at the end of a row of seats and points to the middle. I see Dad straight away, and I can tell he's got tears in his eyes. Beside him, looking like a kid in a sweetshop, is Teddy.

When I reach him I hold out my hand for a fist bump, but Teddy pulls me into a hug instead.

"Did you ask Budi about me coming on as a substitute?" he says, his face dead serious.

"No," I say. "But if it makes you feel better, I've always thought of you as a substitute."

"I'm going to let that slide because I know you've had a dramatic week, Matador."

I shake my head. "I'm telling you, that nickname will never catch on."

"It will if I have anything to do with it," Teddy says. He runs a hand through his hair. "Mate, I've got so many

things to ask you. First and foremost: what does Kieran Wakefield smell like? I bet he smells really good, like a posh soap shop. Or a vanilla cupcake. Or a freshly opened bag of marshmallows."

"I really hope this isn't going to go on for ninety minutes," Dad says.

"I think you're being optimistic, coach," Teddy says. "I can keep this up through extra time and a penalty shootout."

"I'm sure you can," Dad says. "You seem to be forgetting that I'm regularly stuck in a car with you."

I sit down on the padded seat between Dad and Teddy. "These seats are dead good."

"They're literally unbelievable," Teddy says. "You should get kidnapped more often."

Dad flashes Teddy a look.

"Just kidding, coach."

The players take up their positions on the pitch. Budi stands alone in the centre circle, the ball at his feet, waiting for the whistle. He looks around as a strange sound begins to fill the stadium.

"Are people...booing?" I ask.

"Mate," Teddy says, shouting over the racket. "Where have you been? It's the new thing."

And then he starts booing too. He holds his arms out

in front and wiggles his fingers as the noise builds, just like everyone else is doing. I look at Dad, but he seems as confused as I am.

Why are they booing him?

The referee checks his watch, glances at both sets of players, then blows his whistle. As one, the fans lift their arms and shout: “Deeeee!”

And that’s when I get it.

They weren’t booing.

They were calling his name: *Budi*.

Down on the pitch, I see Budi smile. Then he takes the first touch and the final is underway.

It’s obvious, even from the first minute, that both teams have been told to go on the offensive. The pace is scary and it doesn’t let up for a moment. We’re close enough to almost feel like we’re part of the action – we can hear the ball as it fizzes across the turf, the calls of the players, the thundering of boots as they sprint along the touchline. Every player seems charged with the crowd’s energy. All except one.

Kieran Wakefield.

He patrols the centre circle – strolling around as though he’s having a kickabout in the local park. When the ball comes to him, he passes it to a teammate straight away. I glance at the big screen: somehow

fifteen minutes have passed already.

“What’s wrong with Wakefield?” I ask. “This might be his last game and he hasn’t done anything!”

Dad says something but I don’t catch it over the roar of the crowd.

“What?!”

“Yet!” Dad shouts. “I said he hasn’t done anything yet!” He glances at me, smiling. “He’s a greyhound, remember? He won’t move till he sees the rabbit, and then...” Dad snaps his fingers.

I look back at the pitch. Wakefield wanders a few paces this way, then a few paces the other way, following the movement of the ball at the edge of Real Madrid’s penalty area. Then he stops altogether. He stands completely motionless for five seconds. Ten seconds.

Teddy leans in. “Someone’s switched him off!”

“Stand by,” Dad says.

“Exactly!” Teddy says. “It’s like he’s in standby mode.”

“No,” Dad says, edging forwards, eyes wide. “Stand by. He’s spotted a rabbit!”

I return my attention to the pitch just in time to see Harris-Locke get dispossessed by one of the Madrid defenders. Two slick passes later, and Kieran Wakefield is through on goal. Ninety thousand people rise to their feet as

he meets the ball on the edge of the box. The keeper rushes out, arms wide, but Wakefield's touch takes the ball around him. He makes a desperate dive, but Wakefield has created the angle he needs. He slams the ball into the empty net, then runs towards the corner flag, his hands raised above his head in the shape of a heart. The Madrid fans go berserk, waving white scarves and bouncing up and down.

I look for Budi and find him waiting patiently for the restart in the centre circle. Some of his teammates look dejected, but Budi seems unfazed. I think of everything he's overcome in his life – all the defeats he's had to turn into victories – and wonder whether he's thinking the same thing.

The referee restarts the game, and it's clear that the Madrid players can smell blood. They push up and press and press and press. Budi is the only player who looks comfortable, because his style is to pass and move, but there are ten other players in red and white that look rattled.

“They look like they're hanging on for half-time,” Dad says, glancing at the clock on the screen. “This is going to be a long ten minutes.”

They almost make it. Almost. But then, with one minute to go, Wakefield receives the ball on the edge of the box. The defenders give him half a yard. If it was any

other player, it wouldn't matter. But it's Kieran Wakefield, and he uses that space to unleash a shot. The keeper's view is blocked by the defenders and he sees the ball late. He doesn't even move. He watches with everyone else as the ball curls inside the post and ripples the net.

“Argh!” Teddy says. “I think it's time for me to warm up. Budi needs someone to pass to out there.”

“You're not wrong about that,” Dad says. “It looks like they need one of my team talks. Or a stirring rendition of ‘Hey Jude.’”

I can see what he means. They trudge off the pitch, heads down. Budi looks like the only one who doesn't know the score.

“It's not over yet,” I say.

“You think they can turn it around?” Dad asks.

“They've got Budi,” I say. “That has to count for something.”

When the teams emerge for the second half, the volume reaches a whole new level. Kieran Wakefield restarts the game, and Madrid pick up where they left off. For twenty minutes they control the game, keeping possession and trying to find an opening. But the Harrowfield defence is solid, and as the clock ticks past seventy minutes the tactics change. So does the mood. The Madrid fans become less

boisterous and more nervy, as their team goes from trying to increase their lead to trying to defend it. They back off and put men behind the ball.

This is a mistake.

Budi receives the ball in the middle of the pitch and turns. The Madrid players are so used to him getting rid of the ball that no one closes him down. In fact, they do the opposite: they back off.

Budi starts to dribble, looking to the wingers on either side, but they're being closely marked. So he keeps dribbling. And still the Madrid players hold the line. Budi keeps going, until finally someone comes out to tackle him.

That's when Budi bolts. With a sudden burst of acceleration he darts forward, past the Madrid player. There's panic in the back line as Budi surges towards the edge of the box, keeping the ball close to his feet. He rounds one player, turns back inside another, then swerves in the opposite direction. I rise to my feet as he nudges the ball past the last man and finds himself face to face with the goalkeeper.

Budi swings a gleaming white boot, ready to blast the ball into the net. But at the final moment he slows it right down and chips the ball over the flailing keeper.

Half the stadium erupts, but there's no celebration

from Budi. He grabs the ball from the back of the net and runs to the halfway line, placing it down on the spot.

"What a goal!" Dad says. "Fifteen minutes to go! Game on!"

The match restarts, and now it's Madrid's turn to soak up the pressure. Budi is involved in everything: making runs, finding passes, winning back possession. He terrorizes the defence, but as the clock passes the eighty-fifth minute, it starts to look like it won't be enough.

"Madrid just know how to win!" Teddy says, raising his voice over the deafening whistles of the crowd. "Sometimes it's pretty and sometimes it's ugly, but they always get the job done!"

"It looks like they've well and truly parked the bus now!" Dad says. "Even Wakefield is on the edge of his own box!"

It's true. There are so many white shirts that Budi can't find a way through.

So he stops trying.

The next time he receives the ball he's thirty yards from goal. Nobody closes him down. The Madrid players hold their defensive lines, knowing they can smother any runs or passes Budi might try to make. Budi stands there, out of options and almost out of time.

"Why doesn't he do something?!" Teddy screams.

“He is!” I say, suddenly recognizing the way he’s standing. “He’s going to take a free kick!”

“What?!”

“Watch!”

With a deep, steadying breath, Budi runs up and blasts the ball. At first it looks like a wild attempt – desperate. The ball rises up, zipping over the defence. And then, just in time, it dips viciously, as though someone just dialled up Earth’s gravity. The keeper dives, his big gloved hands stretching and reaching and clawing, but he’s too far away, too slow, too late.

The ball smashes into the back of the net.

The next moment we’re up on our feet, jumping in a huddle and cheering.

“Oh! My! Days!” Teddy shouts. “What is going on?!”

We break apart just in time to see Budi return the ball to the centre circle. He places it on the white spot and looks at the dejected Madrid players trudging up the pitch. The message is clear: this match isn’t over.

The last few minutes are cagey. At two-all, both teams know one more goal would win the game – or lose it.

“The tension!” Teddy shouts. “I can’t take it!”

“Hold on,” I mutter, but I’m looking at Budi. “Hang in there.”

Down on the touchline, the board goes up: three minutes of added time.

The players keep it simple. They pass the ball. No one wants to mess up.

“Looks like we’re heading for extra time,” Dad says as we enter the final minute.

But that’s when Madrid launch one last attack. Wakefield picks up the ball out wide and surges along the touchline.

“Stop him!” I shout. “Stop him!”

But the defender’s legs are tired. Kieran Wakefield sprints all the way to the edge of the penalty area. He cuts inside, towards the goal, and the defender makes a desperate lunge.

Wakefield goes tumbling to the turf.

But not before the defender gets a touch on the ball.

The referee points to the corner flag.

“Forty seconds left!” Teddy says.

Kieran Wakefield jumps to his feet and runs to the corner flag. The penalty area is packed with players jostling for position. I look at Budi, standing on the edge of the box with his hands on his hips. He glances at the clock: thirty seconds left. Then he jogs into the box and says something to the goalkeeper behind his hand. The goalkeeper nods.

“What’s Budi doing?” I ask, as he crouches on one knee on the goal line.

“I can’t take this!” Teddy says, covering his eyes. “This is Madrid all over!”

The referee blows his whistle.

Kieran Wakefield raises a hand.

“Here we go!”

Time seems to slow. As Wakefield begins his run-up, Budi explodes from his crouching position, like a sprinter blasting from the blocks. He finds a gap between the bodies and reaches the edge of the penalty area just as Wakefield strikes the ball. It rises into the air, swinging in towards the six-yard box as players fight for space. They jump, desperate to score, desperate to survive.

And still Budi runs.

The ball drops right in the danger zone. The goalkeeper comes – leaping high, arms outstretched – and for a sickening moment it looks like he’s going to be beaten to the ball by a Madrid player. The goal behind him is empty. He hangs in the air amongst a knot of grappling players.

Then the ball finds his gloves.

His fingers close around it.

The danger passes.

Breathe.

I expect him to go to ground and lie on the ball, seeing out the last few seconds on the clock. But he doesn’t. Instead, when he lands, he takes two steps and hurls the ball up the pitch. It arcs through the air, and as it does I get a glimpse of the screen: five seconds left.

The referee checks his watch, starts to raise the whistle to his lips.

The ball dips, crossing the halfway line, falling towards the edge of the centre circle.

Where Budi is running.

You’ve got to pick up the runners. I can hear Mum saying it on a cold night in Tranmere, years ago. *You’ve got to pick up the runners.*

I reach out to grab Teddy, to grab Dad.

This is it.

The Madrid keeper is off his line, caught in no man’s land.

And Budi knows it.

The ball drops over his shoulder.

He must only see it for a split second.

But he’s ready.

He plants his foot.

Swings a gleaming white boot.

And unleashes one final, unstoppable strike.



Place the ball. Pick your spot. Three steps back.
Breathe.

The defenders fidget in the wall, their Liverpool shirts rippling in the breeze. The goalkeeper hugs his post, yelling out instructions. I stand waiting for the referee's whistle.

Breathe.

I know Dad is watching. He always will be, for as long as I play football. And despite everything that's happened, I do still want to play. Because I believe in football. I stare at the ball, knowing that it has the power to change my life, the world: everything. But for now, all that matters is the next kick.

Breathe.

I try to block it all out: the other players, the spectators, the past, the future. There is only me, and the ball, and now. I imagine its flight, the path it will follow. *Up, over, down, in.*

I say it to myself, so quietly that not even Teddy, standing a few paces away, can hear me.

"Up, over, down, in. Up, over, down, in."

The words are like an incantation, a spell that only works when spoken aloud. Some words are like that. That's something I've learned: speaking out is powerful.

Breathe.

Then, from far away, comes the sound of a whistle.

A whistle that means go.

So I take a final breath.

Let it out.

And I go.

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