

**AJAYAHUJA**  
INVESTOR | AUTHOR | FILMMAKER



## OWN GOAL

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Hana.

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## Chapter 1

The lights are glaring, almost blinding Toby. They're shining so brightly that Toby can't see the cameramen or the crew, gathered around on the other side of the cameras. He can hear them though, talking amongst themselves and fine tuning their equipment. The interviewer clears her throat and Toby looks back towards her. She's looking towards the side of the stage, where the producer and the director are standing, talking to someone on the end of a walkie talkie. Someone starts to call out numbers before going quiet and holding up their fingers, slowly counting down.

"And we're back with football star Toby Arnold," the interviewer said suddenly as the fingers disappear. Toby jumped at the sudden silence that filled the studio, "So Toby, I think we all would love this question answered. Did you do it on purpose?"

Toby freezes, his mind racing. He can feel the anger boiling up inside of him. He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes and trying to calm himself down.

"Of course I didn't," he says, choosing his words carefully, "I've said this before and I'll say it again. I never meant to do it on purpose. Why would I? It was an accident. We all have them, we all make mistakes."

"Yes but it was a very stupid mistake," the interviewer replied, "And let's be honest, looking back it really does look like you did do it on purpose. What was going through your mind at that exact moment?"

Toby's nostrils flare. He takes a deep breath. He can't believe that this has come up, again. The interview had been going well so far, for 5 minutes before the show's break they had had a nice conversation and discussed everything that they had agreed upon before Toby

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had come on the show. He looks at the interviewer, she's on the edge of the seat, leaning forward and staring at him intently. He looks away from her, away from the cameras and towards the producer. He's still stood where Toby had been, before the interview had started up once more.

"I thought this show was about plugging upcoming movies," Toby said sharply, "Not the Spanish Inquisition. We're here to talk about movies, and filming behind the scenes, not my past."

He starts to remove the microphone from his shirt. The interviewer is trying to talk to him, to calm him down, but he doesn't want to know. He pulls and tugs at the wires. The interviewer touches his arm and he looks at her sharply.

"Look," he says, "this is just unprofessional. You need to know what to bring up and what to leave out, if you want to get the most out of your guests. If they think you're going to bring up the mistakes of their past, no matter how much they might have put it behind them, people aren't going to want to come on here. All this sensationalist reporting isn't going to work with me, I know what you're trying to do and I won't be any part of it. I told your bosses that right from the outset."

Toby tosses the microphone and pack on to the seat where he had previously been sitting and turns away. He walks off the stage, leaving the interviewer sitting on the set with her mouth moving up and down. She looks like a fish and absolutely terrified. Her eyes flick towards the producer, before she slaps a fake smile on her face and returns her attention to the camera and the auto-cue beneath it.

The producer tries to stop Toby, several other crew members reach out and call to him but the young man isn't listening. The shame and guilt and embarrassment are burning in his



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stomach, making him feel sick. He can't believe that they've brought it up again, the worst moment of his life so far.

The interviewer is referring to the own goal that Toby scored during the FA Cup replay at the Manchester United home ground three years ago. The game had been shown live on BBC 1 and the goal had completely changed his life. He doesn't know yet whether the change was for the worse or for the better.

This is the story of Toby, the greatest star to ever come out of Skelmerage.

## Chapter 2

### *Three Years Earlier*

Skelmerage Football Club is a small club. It's lower league and quite possibly one of the smallest clubs in the entire league. It has a small grandstand, barely a grandstand at all, that can accommodate just up to 1,000 fans, both visitors and home fans alike. The club is so

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small that there was never much chance of the stands being completely filled. It does have a claim to fame though. It's the highest ranking new town football club in the UK, even if it is only the fourth division.

As a result of this, it has a training academy for young and upcoming football stars that show a lot of potential. The changing rooms for the academy members are far less impressive than the main changing rooms for the Skelmerage players. The academy changing rooms are no bigger than a living room in a large house. There are no lockers and only a few hooks to hang the kits. It's more school changing rooms than professional football academy.

Right now it's packed with 20 or so young boys, all in their late teens and chattering excitedly amongst themselves. They're filled with excitement and they're looking around the changing rooms like they're at Wembley Stadium. As the coach walks in and they all fall silent. They look at him, eager faces and shining eyes. They're all standing and most of them tower over the coach. They shift amongst themselves as the coach looks them all up and down, weighing them up.

"Good morning gentlemen," he says, his voice perfectly pitched to be heard by everyone. "Welcome to Skelmerage FC. We're all very happy to have you here."

He looks around, smiling widely. Some of the boys smile back. Then the smile suddenly drops away and he looks at them seriously.

"Now there's something that you need to remember before we begin," he says firmly, "For every one of you, for every seat that each and every one of you currently occupy there were 300 rejects. You should give yourselves a pat on the back for coming so far compared to everyone else."

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He pauses and the boys start to smile at each other. There's a touch of smugness in the room now, confidence that's almost too cocky.

“But before you get too pleased with yourselves!” he says loudly, surprising the boys and making them fall silent again, “You need to remember one more thing. Only three of you will go on to make a career out of playing football. Of those three, only one of you will end up playing in the premiership. The rest of you will either go on to earn a modest income as support staff and some of you will leave the industry all together. I'm am not making these numbers up. These are real statistics and simple facts that are available all over the internet for you to see for yourselves. With this is mind I want to ask you something, warn you if you will. If your heart isn't in playing football and giving it your all, I suggest that you leave now and give your place to someone more determined.”

The coach smiles and looks at them all. Its a slightly vicious smile, too full of teeth and menace to be anything but taunting. He looks at the door, knowing that none of them want to leave. The room sits in silence, the boys looking at each other. Some twist and turn, looking at all of the boys around them. They're waiting for others to make the move, to leave. Toby is doing exactly the same thing. He looks at most of the boys nearby, catches the eye of the young man beside him who shrugs. He smiles, shakes his head and goes back to fiddling with the shin pad that's in his grasp.

The silence continues. The boys start to shift, uncomfortably. It can't have been more than a few seconds but Toby feels like it's longer. There's a small voice niggling in the back of his mind, whispering that he shouldn't be there, that he doesn't want it like everyone else does. He tries to ignore it, but it keeps getting louder and louder. His hands start to shake and he drops the shin pad. It clatters to the floor, almost too loud in the silence.

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People jump and turn to look at him. Toby feels his face heat up. The coach's smile turns a little kinder. He's used to the weight of the silence, the way it can pull at the young boys in front of them and play with their minds. He's been doing this talk for long enough that he knows no one will actually be leaving. After all, the trial process is rigorous and exhausting. None of them would willingly go through the process only to turn around and back out afterwards. Who would want to go through the process if they didn't really want to be a part of the academy.

"So," he calls out, clapping his hands together. "I take it we're all committed then?!"

The boys break into grins and a few chuckles can be heard. There's a sense of relief that fills the room. The silence returns as the coach holds up a hand but it's a lighter silence, one no longer filled with tension and apprehension.

"Ok, let me tell you the regime you're going to be expected to stick to here" the coach says. He starts pacing back and forth across the small gap in front of the boys "We start training everyday at 8:30am and we finish at 6pm. In between these times I am your god. You will do exactly as I ask you to, when I ask you to. You do not question my directions and you do not argue with me. If you have a problem with that, or with any orders I give, you will come and you will speak to me directly. You will not shout out your question in front of the other academy members. Am I understood?"

A low murmur of agreement fills the room.

"When I ask a question I expect you to answer loudly and clearly with 'yes coach,'" he says. "Am I understood?"

"Yes Coach!" the boys say as one.

The coach grins.

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“Excellent,” he says, “Now if you feel that I haven’t resolved your problem or we can’t come to a solution together we will escalate the problem. It will be brought to the attention of our head coach. If the problem is still unresolved then we take the issue even further and we talk to Terry. Whatever Terry says on the matter is final. There will be no arguments and no appeal. If you don’t agree with Terry’s decision then I suggest that you walk away. That is all.”

The boys are nodding amongst themselves. They know these sorts of rules, they understand them. All of them are barely out of senior school, they’ve barely left the world of education behind and the rules are exactly what they’re used to having in place and following. They know how to respond, how to handle these types of rules. They get told what to do and they do it, no questions, no argument.

None of them plan to argue though, they all want to follow orders and do as they’re told. Toby notices that most of the boys around him are shifting restlessly. He can feel that same energy rising up in him, filling his entire body up with an energy that won’t go away, that wants to make his body run and race. They all just want to get out on the pitch and play. They have all had enough of talking and explanations, now they want to get out on to the field and see what everyone else is made of. They all want that top dog position, the one with the greatest chance of getting into premier league football. More importantly they all want to make their mark on the coach and show everyone else what they’re made of. There’s a hierarchy amongst the players, they all know it. They respond to and respect the best player and the sooner they know who that is then the better they can create their own small social structure around him.

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“Ok,” the coach says as the chatter dies down again, “Let’s get out there and do some warm ups. Then we’ll pick teams and start a few matches. Remember, today is about showing us what you’re made of. We’ll be looking for weaknesses as well as strengths, we’re trying to improve everyone’s game here. There is no serious competition today, just a view of your skills for those of the academy staff who were unable to view the trials. Now, let’s get out and there and warm up!”

The boys slowly jog from the changing rooms, the teeth of their boots clattering on the tile floor. It sounds like a hundred small horses trotting down the road as they all make their way out of the changing rooms and on to the field. Within moments the leaders of the group are beginning their laps around the pitch.

Toby pants and leans his hands against his knees. The process is almost exhausting and he’s glad that it’s almost over. He’s played a lot of football, but this session is threatening to kill him. He knows why he’s so tired and sore. Everyone’s trying to show off, to push themselves and make the best impression on the academy staff. Toby has been doing it himself. Even now he can see the academy staff, in their bright yellow jackets, wandering amongst the cooling down players, clipboards and pen in their hands, making notes as they look at each player. He spots one of the team captains in his red bib, helping one of the other players stretch out his hamstring. That tendon has been giving the player grief throughout training, it has almost sent him tumbling to the floor and out of the academy a couple of times throughout the day.

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The captain looks up and catches Toby's eye. He grins, waves and turns back to the player he's helping. Toby continues to stretch and tries to remember the captain's name. He searches and searches, playing back memories of the day, trying to remember if he had heard anyone shout to him. Toby had been on the opposing team, but even he had been forced to admire the boy's skill. He was smart with the ball, clearly knew when to pass and when to dribble, when to tackle and when to back off. The guy was quick, whipping around the pitch with apparently no trouble. Most importantly he seemed to naturally fall in to the role of team captain, spurring his men on and encouraging them with every breath. He spoke up for the boys on his team, asked for clarification on orders when they were unclear and even partitioned to the ref for a reconsideration of a yellow card that had been handed out.

Scooby, his name is Scooby, Toby remembers. One of the boys had called it out while asking for a pass but Scooby hadn't sent the ball over. He'd seen what the other boy hadn't after all, he had spotted the two players closing in on either side of the striker, who could be easily tackled and overwhelmed by sheer numbers. The boy had been annoyed at first, Toby remembered, but Scooby had smiled and explained and the boy had calmed down almost instantly. Scooby has been quick to make friends all day, even the academy staff were laughing and joking with him. He'd encouraged the players on his own team and even those of the other teams when they seemed to be flagging. Scooby seemed to think nothing of patting the other players on the back and praising their game. And he quite happily leapt in to the celebrations for goal, exuberantly grabbing their faces and kissing the scorer right on the mouth before stepping away and ruffling their hair. The other players had initially pushed him away but given up when they saw the captain doing it to everyone. It had made Toby laugh a lot.

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“Ok boys,” the coach calls out as he walks to the centre of the pitch, “Bring it in, bring it in and take a knee,” the players all jog over and kneel in front of him, creating a circle. The coach spins in the middle and looks at them all. His smile is wide, “You’ve all done really well today lads, you should be proud of yourselves. But this was the easiest day you’ll have in the entire program. As of tomorrow expect to be completely exhausted and sore. We are trying to train you all for the big time, whether you make it or not. Which means we won’t be going gently. We will be pushing you harder than you’ve ever been pushed before. So go home, have a cold shower and a hot bath then get plenty of sleep. Don’t forget to eat a good healthy breakfast tomorrow morning and I’ll see you bright and early at 8:30am. Now go get showered and changed.”

The boys all break away and slowly walk towards the changing rooms. Toby walks alone, noticing that some of the boy have already created alliances of sorts, possibly even friendship. They’re walking in small groups of threes and fours, talking to each other and gesturing excitedly with their hands. They’re pushing and shoving each other playfully but everyone is too exhausted to do anything more playful.

Toby feels a figure coming up beside him and he looks over. It’s Scooby.

“I don’t know about you mate, but I’m knackered,” Scooby says. He sounds out of breath. “Brutal or what?”

“I know!” Toby cries, “I don’t think I’ve played so hard in my life.”

The two start to talk properly as they make their way in to the changing rooms and prepare to head home. Their conversation pauses in the shower, talking while naked just isn’t done amongst the players, no matter how comfortable with their bodies they might be. It’s just a matter of principle. By the time the two boys are dressed though, they’ve already gotten





to know each other a little better, knowing where the other lives, which schools the other went to and whether either of them have a girlfriend. Toby does, Scooby doesn't. They're waiting outside and already consider each other a good friend with the potential to become best friends. Toby really has to ask the question that he's always asking himself.

“So...” he says slowly, turning towards Scooby, “Why do you want to become a professional footballer?”

For a moment Scooby looks at Toby like the other boy is out of his mind. It's an obvious question, one that doesn't really need an answer. Scooby looks like he's not sure whether to laugh at Toby or walk away because clearly he's a lunatic for asking such a stupid question. Finally though he shrugs and grins.

“Why else?” Scooby says, “Because I love football! What about you?”

Toby hesitates for a moment, unsure of which answer would go down better; the honest one or the expected one that he almost believes himself now, having to say it so many times. He makes his choice.

“Because I love it too!” he cries.

Scooby cheers and holds his hand up in the air. Toby laughs and puts his up too. They high five and laugh together for a few moments. Other players walk past, heading to their own homes and they look at the two boys, shaking their heads and smiling.

“So you live near me don't you mate?” Scooby says as they walk towards the bus stop, “Near Canterbury Street?”

“Yeah,” Toby says with a grin, “About three streets away, ten minute walk easy.”

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“Fancy hanging out on Saturday?” Scooby asks. There’s a little fear in his eyes but it’s hidden behind a playful spark. “We could meet on Canterbury Street and then head in to town.”

“Sure,” Toby says, shrugging. He has nothing else to do, “What do you fancy doing?”

“We could go to the shopping centre?” Scooby suggests, taking a seat on the bus stop bench. He stretches his legs and arms out either side of him. Toby stays standing, “I think some of the shops are getting some new sports gear in, dead top of the line stuff. We can check that out, see if there’s anything worth getting.”

“Sounds cool,” Toby says, grinning now.

“And maybe when we’re done we could head over to the Oval Centre,” Scooby continues, a grin slowly forming on his face, “The girls like to hang out there. We could go and check them out.”

Toby laughs and agrees. His bus comes and he climbs on board and takes a seat. He waves goodbye to his new friend as the bus pulls away. Scooby absently waves back before turning his attention to his phone.

As the streets and houses pass by Toby sits back in his seat and sighs heavily. He really is exhausted. The day was hard, much harder than he had expected and all he wants to do is go to sleep now. It hadn’t been all bad though. He’d already made a new friend and was having the chance to go and do something none of his mates seemed interested in doing. It was unlikely that Toby would actually be able to buy anything but he liked looking and checking out girls was never a boring thing.



## Chapter 3

Toby sits at the dining room table eating his dinner. In reality he's just picking at it, moving pieces of food around the plate with his fork, head propped up on his other hand. Beside him his sister Rebecca is chattering away about her day, spent at the local kids club where she sang karaoke for most of the afternoon.

"It was so much fun!" she cries out, "I did one song and then they kept asking me to do more! At nap time for the little kids they even got me to sing some lullabies so the little ones could fall asleep. Even some of the older kids came in to listen and they fell asleep too!"

"Wow!" their dad, Anthony says enthusiastically, "Well I'm glad that you had fun. Are you going to be ok with going there again for most of the summer,"

"I suppose so," Rebecca says, shrugging. "They let me sit in a corner and write my own songs which is pretty cool. One of the ladies even plays the piano and another plays the guitar. They said they might be able to help me work out the music if I'm a good girl."

"Well you better be a good girl then hadn't you love?" Anthony says. He looks at Toby, "And what about you son? How was your first day at the Academy? Everything that you expected?"

"It was alright," Toby says, barely glancing up from his plate, "The guys seem alright and the coaches seem to know what they're doing."

"And you're glad to be there," Anthony says, "We've been working on this for years. You've got there out of loads of applicants, you're supposed to be there. Just listen to what they have to tell you and take all of their advice on board. And remember! Play your heart out!"

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Anthony keeps chattering away about the Academy, saying how proud he is that Toby got into the event and how hard he should work to make sure that he deserves the chance. Toby tunes his dad out though, focusing on eating at least something. The idea of going back the next day makes him feel queasy, turns him off his dinner. He glances at his dad and nods even though he doesn't know what the man is talking about now, it just feels like the right thing to do. He catches Rebecca's eye as he looks back at his plate and he can see the frown growing on her face.

She's always been able to read him too well, even with so many years between them. Toby's always felt like she's older than she actually is, she's never been as much of a pain as some of his friends' younger sisters. He frowns and looks at his plate. He knows that she's going to be able to tell he's not as excited as their dad is. He just doesn't feel right going to the academy, even though he's earned his place. He doesn't feel like he fits in, like he doesn't want to be there quite as much as everyone else. He remembers when the trials were finished and the successful people got in, the way some of the other boys, the unsuccessful applicants seemed close to tears and some even did cry with disappointment. He wonders for a moment how he would have reacted and knows that it wouldn't have bothered him as much as it did them.

Every time that he looked around the pitch today he could just see the happiness, the joy and the excitement on the faces of all the other players. They were genuinely pleased to be there. He'd tried to smile, grin and laugh as hard as they had, tried to seem like he was as excited as they were but it felt completely fake and forced. When he was all alone on the pitch he felt much calmer, not having to pretend to feel something that he didn't. Toby shrugs to himself. It's all probably due to the fact that it's the first day. Everything feels weird on the

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first day and there's no reason for the Academy not to. Besides, Toby realises, he's played and trained harder than he ever has before, he's pushed himself further and is exhausted. It's probably all catching up with him, tiring him out and making him feel things he doesn't really feel.

The next day is probably going to be much better. He knows people there now, he has Scooby to talk to and hang out with. He knows what's going on now, how things work and what's expected of him. He's got an idea of what the Academy involves now and he shouldn't be dealing with any surprises now. Tomorrow has to be better than today.

Toby is laying on his bed, one hand resting on his stomach and the other is tucked behind his head. He's watching Mean Machine with Vinnie Jones in it, examining every part of the film. He's seen it almost 100 times by now, he supposes, he knows the story by heart and pretty much each and every one of Vinnie's lines by now. But he likes to watch it over and over. Each time he finds some new thing to interest him, some nuance of Vinnie's acting that he's not seen before. He likes to watch the film, imagine how it was made and try to work out why Vinnie Jones made certain choices to act out certain scenes. Toby does that a lot, watching films and trying to figure out the reasons behind the actors' decisions.

His door creaks open quietly and he reaches for the remote. He pauses the film and looks towards the doorway. Rebecca is hovering in the gap, peeking through at him. He smiles and waves at her.

“What's up chuck?” he asks



“Nothing,” Rebecca says in a singsong voice as she walks in to the room. She takes a seat at the bottom of his bed, “I just kind of thought that you were really quiet at dinner, like too quiet. I mean you got in to the Academy and you’re not really that excited about it. What’s wrong?”

“Why would something be wrong?” Toby asks, poking her with his toe, “I’m just knackered. We did a lot of running around and played so much football.”

“Well it is a football academy,” Rebecca says sarcastically, “I’d be worried if you’d spent the day playing table tennis.”

Toby laughs, throwing his head back and letting his whole body go. He feels a lot better than he did before. He looks at his sister.

“Good point,” he says, still smiling a little, “So what do you want anyway?”

“I’ve been practicing a new song,” Rebecca says, turning and bouncing on Toby’s bed, “Do you wanna hear?”

Toby nods and Rebecca starts singing. The song sounds familiar and yet different at the same time. It isn’t until the chorus that he realises that Rebecca is singing Leona Lewis’ ‘A Moment Like This’. The young girl had changed it up quite a bit, lowering some notes and making others higher. She’s singing some of the lines at a different pace. He smiles and chuckles softly. She’s doing what she loves and she’s good at it.

His smile drops away and he stares up at the ceiling as Rebecca keeps singing. He sighs heavily as she draws her song to an end. He glances at her and she smiles widely, looking at him expectantly.

“It’s good,” he says quietly, “Really good Becky.”

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She smiles and bounces on his bed a couple of times. Then she sit back on her heels and frowns at him, cocking her head to one side.

“But you’re not happy still,” she says. Then her face brightens and she starts to bounce again, “I know! This song has GOT to cheer you up.”

Rebecca burst out in song, rapping away to Eminem’s ‘*One Shot*’. It sounds different, almost like she is singing the rap instead of speaking it. Toby stops sulking for a moment, relaxing and listening to the words. He always likes to listen to Rebecca sing, it soothes him in a way, reminds him of his mother. Rebecca has real skill, a talent that she’s never taken lessons for but that just seems to get better the more that she practices. Toby plans to one day pay for her to have singing lessons, maybe to even pay for her to record her own album. He’s heard her singing her own songs before, they’re even better than the covers that she does, and he would love her to finally get her own music out there. Of course in order to do that he needs to have money and right now the best chance of getting that money is to become the premiership player that his dad is convinced he can be.

For a moment Toby almost sinks back in to his dark thoughts again but Rebecca pokes him whilst she raps and he pays attention again. She’s really in full swing, enjoying every minute of singing and she’s even dancing along with her words. He starts to laugh, enjoying the fact that Rebecca’s having fun. Then he laughs at the way that she’s singing and at the song itself.

Eventually she finishes her song and Toby is still laughing. She sits back and smiles at him, proud of herself. Toby can tell there’s a little bit of relief in her face, there’s a relaxed state to her shoulders now that wasn’t there before. She looks at him expectantly, clearly waiting for him to talk again.

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“So...” Toby says slowly, “Have you managed to choose your X Factor audition song yet?”

She’s been trying to figure it out for months, trying different songs, picking and choosing songs that seem to fit and then throwing them aside a few weeks later. They all know that she’s about 3 years too young to actually enter yet but it doesn’t really matter. By getting ready sooner she can ensure that there is a better chance of herself winning.

“I think I might have,” Rebecca eventually admits after thinking it through for a while. “I’m sort of stuck on three that I really do like, but I can’t choose between them. Do you want to hear them? They’re really good!”

She doesn’t wait for Toby’s response. She just starts to sing, starting off with what is clearly her first choice. But Toby’s had enough, he feels a bit happier now and just wants to go back to his film. She’s still singing but she starts laughing as Toby takes her hands and slowly pulls her from his room.

“Come on Becky!” he cries, “It’s time to get some homework done! Go on.”

“I’m singing you a song!” Rebecca cries “You’re supposed to be listening!”

Toby just laughs, gives her a gentle shove and shuts his bedroom door. He leans against the door, still laughing slightly. He closes his eyes and listens. He can hear Rebecca singing even as she walks back to her room. Her door shuts and it goes silent. Toby turns away from the door and throws himself on his bed. He sighs and wriggles around to get himself comfortable on the bed. Eventually he gets himself comfortable again, just as he had been earlier. He turns the film back on and goes back to watching it. He feels a little better now, lighter somehow.





## Chapter 4

The training is just about to start the next day when the coach strides in to the locker room. He seems excited, Toby notices, but it seems like he's trying to hide it slightly. The coach smiles at them all as the players start to calm down from their rowdy playful banter and turn to look at him.

"Alright you horrible lot," the coach says, clapping his hands together. "Pay attention now, pay attention!"

Finally all of the players calm down and fall silent. Some sit on the few benches that are scattered around the small changing room. Toby leans against the wall and watches the coach.

"Now," the coach says, "We've got an interesting opportunity for some of you today. Or at least those of you that are interested in taking advantage of it. The club has recently been approached by a small film production company. They're after a stunt double or two for a low budget football film. Apparently the actors that they've got can't play football for the life of them. We've had this in the works for several weeks now and we finally got the go ahead from both sides recently. So if any of you are interested come and see me after training. Now, everyone get out there and get training!"

He clapped his hands together and strode out of the room. Some of the other coaches start to encourage everyone out of the changing rooms. The hallway and walls echo with the sounds of click clacking studs on the tiles. Toby follows out after everyone, jogging along

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just behind Scooby. The players all start to run laps around the training field. At first they start off in a long line but as the coaches keep them running and running the line begins to break up and the boys settle in to small groups of two or three. The coaches slow the run down into a light jog.

As he runs, one foot in front of the other over and over again, Toby can't get the thought of the acting opportunity out of his mind. He can already picture it, playing football in front of the cameras, doing his best and shining out. He would show everyone what he's made of, what he can do. He might even outshine the actors and get cast to play an actual role. He feels like it's a sign, when the night before he was watching Vinnie Jones films, one of the most famous footballers turned actors. And now this opportunity comes along.

The thought is running through his brain, over and over, even as the coaches split them up in to pairs and get them started on some stretching. He's paired with a guy that he doesn't really know but who also doesn't seem to stop talking.

"What do you reckon about this acting gig?" Toby eventually asks, "How long do you think they've been working on that?"

"Probably months," the boy says as he helps Toby stretch his hamstrings, "The club's probably been trying to get as much money as they can out of those film people and knowing film people they've probably been trying to get help cheap."

"Know many film people do you?" Toby asks with a sly grin.

"Shut up," the boy says, but not harshly, "You know what I mean. You hear about it all the time. They try to save as much money as they can so they can keep more for themselves."

"Don't think that's just film people mate." Toby says.

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The pair fall silent for a little while, stretching and pulling muscles out in to shape.

“But what do you reckon about it?” Toby asks eventually, “The acting thing I mean? Do you think you’ll give it a go?”

“Not likely mate!” the boy says, laughing hard, “I mean come on, acting’s for pansies!”

“No way!” Toby cries, “There’s loads of hard guys in acting. I mean, look at Vinnie Jones, Ray Winstone, Vin Diesel. Hell Jason Stratham’s as hard as they come and he’s an actor. That bloke does all his own stunts.”

“Yeah and he wears make up!” the other boy cries, “He spends his time poncing around in a suit and covered in a face full of girl’s make up. Like I said, all of that acting stuff, film stuff, all that stuff is for pansies.”

“Say stuff a little more mate!” One of the other boys shouts out from where he’s stretching, “I don’t think you used it enough,”

“That stuffs for pansies!” Toby’s partner shouts at the top of his lungs, “You wouldn’t catch me ten yards near that place.”

Most of the boys start laughing and jeering, agreeing with his statement. Toby notices though that some of the lads, the ones that have been a bit quiet so far, don’t seem to be as enthusiastic in their insults towards acting and the film sector. In fact they look almost embarrassed and ashamed. None of them are looking up, most are looking at the floor or have suddenly found their hands incredibly interesting. Several have little spots of red rising up on their cheeks. Toby realises that he wasn’t the only one who was interested in the chance to try and be a stunt double.

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“I don’t care,” Scooby suddenly shouts, “I’m manly enough and comfortable in my masculinity. I’m gonna give it a go.”

“You wanna wear make up Scoob?” one of the lads shouts out, “Oi lads! Scooby’s a cross dresser!”

“Hell I’ll give anything a go once,” Scooby says with a shrug, “They can put me in a dress if they want. I don’t care as long as I get to play footy. Besides, it’s not like anyone’s going to actually see my face. It’d be wicked to do I reckon and I bet the ladies would love it. They’ll be all over me once they know I’m a cool actor.”

“Sure mate...” some of the lads say, their voices mocking and full of disbelief. “You’ll be the next Tom Cruise.”

“Nah!” Scooby shouts, “I’m not a midget. I’ll be Brad Pitt. He’s the one with Angelina Jolie after all. Can’t call him a pansy can you!”

The boys start to laugh and joke amongst themselves, even as the coaches start to split them in to teams. Toby stays quiet for most of the training, his mind not completely on the present. His body is pretty much acting on autopilot now and he’s barely aware of what’s going on around him.

He wonders whether it would be better to step back, not try to get the acting job. The boys already think he’s a bit weird and this would just give them more ammunition. But then again he really does want to find out more about the world of acting, beyond what he can see in the ‘Making Of’ featurettes on DVD and You Tube videos. The desire to know more, to find out more and see for himself whether acting is really as much fun as it seems threatens to overwhelm him for a moment. He almost wants to run straight out of training and find the film crew just so that he can watch.

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But a lucky tackle from Scooby draws his attention back to the present and he starts to pay more attention to the games that are happening and less time thinking about the acting. He still really wants to go though. However, he doesn't want to go on his own.

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“So were you serious Scooby?” Toby asks his friend as they head back to the changing rooms, “About the acting I mean?”

The training is done with for the day and everyone is exhausted. Scooby's walking by Toby's side, having jogged up as soon as the last training game was ended. They walked in silence for a while but now Toby's curiosity has overcome his wariness of the entire situation.

“Of course I'm serious!” Scooby cries out, “I'll really give it a go and see if I like it. If I don't like it fair enough, at least I've got some time out of training. And if I do like it... wahey, watch out ladies! Here comes the world famous actor Scooby!”

Toby laughs and claps Scooby on the back. They're stuck outside the changing rooms now, waiting for the showers to free up a little more so that they can shower in peace.

“What do you think mate,” Scooby asks, nudging Toby's arm with his shoulder, “Wanna give it a go? Stand by your new mate?”

“I think I might you know,” Toby admits, fighting the urge to simply shout yes to the ceiling. “It could be a laugh.”

“Yeah!” Scooby cries, “That's what I'm talking about. What could be more fun? Two mates playing football and getting filmed to do it.”

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“Mate!” Toby shouts, “Re-phrase!”

“Whatever,” Scooby says, waving a dismissive hand towards Toby. He glances in to the changing rooms and turns back to Toby with a frown on his face, “The queue’s still massive. Shall we go and see the coach now?”

Toby peeks around the corner and sees what Scooby means. There are boys everywhere, still in their kits and still covered in mud. They’re queueing right up to the doorway and barely anyone is coming out of the showers. One or two of the lads have apparently managed to get showered and they’re wandering around the changing rooms with towels around their waists.

“Yeah,” Toby says, stepping back from the door, “You might be right there mate. Let’s go and see the boss man.”

Scooby grins and spins away from the wall, somehow managing to make even that simple move look cool. He strides off down the corridor with his hands tucked in to his pockets. Toby laughs when his friend starts whistling and hurries to catch him up.

The coach’s office door is wide open. They peer around though and see him sat at his desk, filling out some sort of paperwork. They quickly pull back and start to squabble over who’s going to disturb their coach. The pair push and shove each other, whispering between themselves and trying desperately to get the other to go.

“Exactly what are you two up to?” a voice asks behind them.

The boys freeze and turn to look at the speaker. It’s the coach. Somehow while they were arguing the coach must have overheard them and then snuck up on them while they fought between themselves.

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“Oh hey Bossman,” Scooby says, looking sheepish for the first time, “There’s a real explanation for this, I swear.”

The coach stares at them and crosses his arms over his chest. They look at each other and then at him again.

“Well?” he says, “I’m waiting.”

“Oh right!” Toby cries, he stammers for a few seconds before he finally gets his thoughts in order, “We were wondering about that filming thing. We’re kind of interested.”

“Wonderful!” the coach cries, clapping his hands together, “Well I don’t know much about it but tell you what, why don’t you go to the studio on Monday, at 3pm. You’ll be able to find out more there and maybe get the filming started.”

“But training’s until 6,” Scooby says, “I thought we needed to attend everyday.”

“Well this is good for the club,” the coach says with a shrug, “The owners agreed that keeping this film company is better than keeping all of the Academy together apparently. You’ll be allowed to leave early.”

“Thanks Coach!” the two boys cry out together.

“Get going then,” the coach says, waving his hand to dismiss them, “Get out of here and enjoy your weekend. I expect you both to work twice as hard at training on Monday though, to make up for leaving early.”

The two boys nod quickly, excited. They practically bounce as they turn and hurry away.

“Oh and boys?” the coach cries after them.

They pause at the door to the football grounds and turn to look at him.

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“If either of you get the part,” the coach says, “Don’t forget to try and make sure that Skelmerage F.C. is mentioned in the credits. It’d do wonders for the club.”

“Yes Coach!” the boys shout.

The coach disappears back in to his office. The two boys turn to each other and grin.

“Roll on Monday!” Toby declares.

“Roll on tomorrow more like!” Scooby cries, “We’re going to the shopping centre remember, checking out the girls!”

“Oh yeah...” Toby says slowly, “I’ll see you then.”

Toby turns and races off to where he can see his dad already waiting in the car. He really had completely forgotten about their plans for the weekend and that made him feel a little bad. Then again he has a lot on his mind and things are bound to slip through the cracks.





## Chapter 5

Saturday dawns bright and clear and Toby really doesn't want to get out of bed for a moment. He is sore all over from training so hard and what his body is telling him is that he should just lie in bed and watch films. Then his phone beeps with a message from Scooby, reminding Toby to get out of bed and get to town. Toby groans as he rolls out of bed. He can already hear Rebecca singing in the shower. Hopefully she won't take too long.

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Scooby's already waiting for him, parked on a bench and playing some brightly coloured, happy sounding game on his phone. Scooby looks up as Toby draws closer and his face breaks out in to a bright grin. Seconds later, before they've even had a chance to say hello to each other, the bus appears and they climb on. Scooby takes his seat and Toby sits just in front of him, twisting on the chair to look at his friend.

"So what's the plan then?" he asks quietly, mindful of the people on the bus.

"It's simple," Scooby says as he lounges back, spreading himself across the two seats. "We go to the shopping centre and look at all the sports shops. I wanna keep an eye out for any of the latest footy gear. I've heard there's been a new release and I wanna see if I can find it cheaper. And while we're at it we can look at all the ladies that are around. Once we're

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done in the shops we can try and actually get talking to some of them, maybe see how far we can get.”

“I’m not gonna try and get anywhere Scoob,” Toby says firmly, “I’ve got a girlfriend remember.”

“Fine, fine,” Scooby says. He waves a hand as he speaks and looks out of the bus window, “We can talk to them and I’ll chat them up. You just look and see what you’re missing out on.”

Toby grins and turns to look at the front of the bus. Today could be better than laying around and watching films after all.

The two friends wander around the shops, seeing all the new sports gear that’s on offer. For some reason they can’t actually find anything new that’s for football. Everything new that the shops have in their windows are centred around tennis or cricket.

“Do you ever wonder?” Toby randomly says as they leave yet another shop, “I mean, do you ever think to yourself about what you’re going to do if you don’t get to make it as a footballer?”

Scooby looks at him and then away. His face is blank and then bemused, a strange twist of the mouth that makes him look like he’s sucking on a lemon.

“You know...,” he says slowly, “I never even thought about it. I mean, why would I bother. I’m a great footballer, I’ve always figured I would make it.”

“So no back up plan then?” Toby asks.

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“Nah,” Scooby says as they wander through the shopping centre, “I mean what’s the point. I’m going to make it as a footballer, people are always telling me I’m going to. There’s no point making any other plans. I’ll just end up distracted if I try that.”

“Is that smart though?” Toby asks. “Like, should you just focus everything on one job and not even think about what you’re going to do if you can’t manage it? I mean, it could take a while to actually get to be a proper famous footballer with loads of money, shouldn’t you get a job in the mean time so that you’ve actually got money?”

Scooby stares at Toby for a minute. His eyes narrow and he looks at his friend closely, as though he’s examining something new that he’s never seen before.

“Are you sure that you really want to be a footballer?” he asks, “All this talk about what if you don’t make it and getting a job in the mean time. Doesn’t sound like someone who’s set on being a footballer to me.”

“Of course I want to be a footballer!” Toby cries, shoving his mate a little. “But I’m being realistic too. I wanted to be a fighter pilot when I was younger and that was all I thought about until I found out that I get sick in planes. I was so sad after that because I realised that I couldn’t be a pilot if I was throwing up every few minutes. That’s why I got in to football. I just can’t help but worry about what I’m going to do if I can’t make it. It’s like coach said, only 1 out of all of us is going to end up being a proper premiership player.”

“Yeah and it’s going to be me!” Scooby said, laughing loud and pushing Toby to one side. “I leave you all behind in training, run rings round you with that ball.”

The two boys start running a little and laughing loudly. They slow down eventually and walk side by side towards the market.

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“All this talk of what if is boring me now,” Scooby says after a while. “Come on mate, I know you’re worrying about it but just stop. We’re both young remember! We can’t even buy a pint for fuck’s sake. We’ve got loads of time to make mistakes and fix them when we’re older. For now I just say fuck it. Put your all in to doing one thing and doing it really well and then face the consequences of your failure or your success in the future. Live while you’re young and all that crap.”

“Have you been watching day time TV again?” Toby asks with a laugh, “You sound like Oprah or something,”

“Hey, what can I say?” Scooby says with a cocky smile and a shrug, “I’m wise beyond my years.”

The two boys laugh and fall in to silence as they slowly wander the shopping centre side by side. Toby wonders whether Scooby is right. Maybe worrying so much about the future is distracting him, taking his mind away from the here and now so he’s not doing his best. Could it be that by not focusing on the football, on improving his game or anything like that he’s actually screwing up his own chances? Toby figures that Scooby makes a good point, in a weird way.

“Hey!” Scooby says sharply, nudging Toby, “Check out that blonde over there!”

He points blatantly at a group of girls sat on the fountain, talking and laughing amongst themselves. Toby grabs his arm and shoves it down. They start to walk past them.

“I would totally do her,” Scooby says, craning his neck to look at her amongst her friends, “She’s like an 8 or something. Proper good hair and fantastic tits! I mean look at them mate!”

“I don’t want to,” Toby says, “I’ve got a girlfriend.”

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The girls are behind them now. Scooby turns and walks backwards, watching the blond and almost tripping over a woman with two young kids holding her hands.

“I bet she’s really filthy,” Scooby says, “Like proper, do me up the arse filthy. And I would you know, if it was her that was asking me.”

“She’d never go for you mate,” Toby says, grinning, “She’d take one look at your ugly mug and run off screaming.”

“Her mate’s fit too,” Scooby says, glancing at Toby and ignoring the last comment, “I’d do her too. Even if she is ginger. She’s got a great arse and I think her tits are actually better than the blondes. ‘Course she’s got a face like a cat’s arsehole but I don’t plan on looking at her face.”

He chuckles to himself and turns around, bumping Toby’s arm with his elbow as he does so. Then his attention is distracted by another sports shop and the display of football boots in the window. He drags Toby over and starts pointing out the flaws of each different boot. Toby looks at the boots, not really able to see any difference between them. He’s had enough of window shopping really, and of looking at girls. He likes the girl he’s got and even looking feels a little wrong. All this talk of football is starting to make him feel ill too. He wants to be around someone who doesn’t care about football for a while, who will talk about anything else, even if it’s just the weather. A light bulb goes off in his head and he pokes Scooby’s arm to get his attention.

“Hey,” he says, “Wanna go and meet a mate of mine?”

“Sure,” Scooby says with a shrug.

He turns away from the football boots almost reluctantly though and Toby just knows that he’s not really that interested in meeting someone new. They walk side by side.

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“This guy is like my best mate from school,” Toby says, “He’s really smart and could have gone to college but he didn’t want to. He opened up a market stall and he’s doing really well actually. He sells mobile phone accessories, covers and charms and all that crap,”

“Ah cool!” Scooby says, suddenly cheering up a bit, “I need a new cover for my phone.”

They make their way through the people that are everywhere. It seems to be getting busier and busier the further that they get into the market. Toby finally spots his friend’s stall, the hand painted banner is bright and eye catching. He remembers making that with his friend before he had to start going to the Academy. There are a few girls at the stall, looking at the accessories and giggling to each other. Toby notices that they keep glancing at Arjan who’s lounging near the money box. Arjan catches Toby’s eye as they get closer and breaks in to a big smile.

“Toby!” he cries, holding out his arms, “How you doing mate?”

Toby steps forwards in to his friend’s arms and accepts the hug. He pats Arjan on the back and steps back again.

“I’m good mate,” he says, “Really good.”

Scooby nudges Toby in the back and he jumps.

“Oh crap!” he says quickly. “Arjan, this is Scooby, he’s a new mate from the Academy. Scooby, this is Arjan, my best mate and one of the main reasons I managed to get through school.”

The two boys look at each other, sizing the other up. Then they smile and shake hands. After a few words are exchanged Scooby wanders off to look at the things on the stall,

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examining some of the covers that catch his eye and grinning at the girls that are still stood giggling nearby.

“So, how’s it going Toby?” Arjan asks, “Is the Skelmerage Training Academy everything it cracked up to be?”

“Yeah, it’s alright,” Toby says, “They’re working us hard of course but then again, that’s not really a surprise is it?”

“Nah mate,” Arjan says with a chuckle, “I told you, you were mad to try and sign up. I don’t want to spend most of my time running around and getting sweaty with no pay out,”

“Always about the money ey?” Toby says with a grin, “How’s the stall going? Business good?”

“You know it,” Arjan says with a cocky smile. He glances over Toby’s shoulder and his smile drops away. “Oh shit, no! Why’s he here?”

Toby turns and sees exactly what’s bothering Arjan. His dad is pushing his way through the crowd, a look of thunder on his face. He stops right in front of his son and stares at him. Toby spots Scooby looking over with an expression of confusion. He shakes his head. Now is not the time to get involved or even to listen in. Scooby starts making his way over anyway though.

“So you’re still doing this then?” he says. Arjan opens his mouth to respond but his father cuts him off, “When are you going to learn? This is not the life for you. This is not the life I want for you. I taught you better than this. It’s not too late to get your life back on track.”

“Dad...” Arjan says slowly, warningly. “Not now, ok?”

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Arjan's dad bristles and Arjan looks away, a stain of red traveling up his face. He won't meet Toby's eye, or Scooby who is now stood just behind him. Instead he fixes his eyes on the ground.

"You should listen to me son," Arjan's dad says, "I am your father and I know what's best for you. This is not it."

"Dad, really?" Arjan says, "Do we really need to do this right now? I'm trying to work."

"Look son," his dad says, leaning forwards and speaking urgently. It's like he's not even heard what Arjan is saying. "You still have time to change this. You can still enrol in college. I've arranged it all already. I spoke to the college today, I called them up and begged with them. They finally agreed and told me that they are willing to let you apply still, even though it's technically over. As long as you apply before Friday you're pretty much guaranteed a place on any course that you want."

"Dad!" Arjan says firmly, "I've told you before and I'm telling you again. I'm not going to go to college. This is what I want to do, this is how I want to live my life."

"I am going to talk to your mother," Arjan's father says firmly, pointing his finger at Arjan "We have to stop this, you have to stop this. This is bringing shame down upon our family! Others have sons and daughters who are doctors and accountants and solicitors and here you are, just a market trader."

"Dad!" Arjan shouts, "This is what I want to do, this is who I am. Just because I could do something else doesn't mean that I will or that I want to do something else."

"You can be more than this." Arjan's dad shouts.



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He throws his hands up in to the air and spins on his heel before he storms off. Toby watches the older man storm off through the crowds, shoving a few people aside. As he gets further away Toby can hear a few people shouting out in anger. Clearly Arjan's dad is very angry and doesn't seem to care about who gets in his way. Toby turned back to Arjan and saw him looking down at the ground, his face getting redder and redder.

"Your dad doesn't look happy," Toby says quietly, a little embarrassed on his friend's behalf, "Does he get like that a lot?"

"He's getting worse," Arjan says after a moment, giving a heavy sigh. "He just doesn't get it, he can't understand it. This is just what I want to do, how I want to live my life. It's just like you guys, you're following your dreams, working hard to get what you want. I'm just doing the same, following my own dream. He wants me to follow his dream though, he wants me to do what he wants for me. But I'm not going to do it, no way am I going to do it."

"I totally get you," Scooby says from behind Toby. "I wanna do my thing, what I want with my life, not what everyone else says. Right Toby?"

Scooby nudges Toby and the other boy smiles tightly and nods. He lets the smile drop away quickly and turns away, pretending to look at all of the covers and charms that Arjan's got on his stall. He wants to agree, he feels like he should agree but as soon as he started nodding, trying to agree, it just felt wrong, like he was lying to Arjan, to Scooby and to himself.

"Next time he gets on at you just remind him!" Scooby says suddenly, "Alan Sugar started out as a market trader, he left school and went straight in to trading on a stall. Now

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look at him! He's like a bloody billionaire or something. And he's on TV with dozens of businesses on the go at once."

"Oh yeah!" Arjan cries, "I never thought about that. I've gotta remind him of that next time he starts going on,"

"I'd say do it," Toby agrees.

Scooby steps away from the other two for a moment and goes back to looking through the phone covers that Arjan has on offer. Toby watches him, unable to find anything else to talk to Arjan about. He doesn't know why but it feels uncomfortable right now, awkward and unusual, nowhere near close to how comfortable they normally are. He hopes that it's just him, that Arjan doesn't feel as awkward as Toby does. Arjan doesn't deserve that and doesn't need that on top of everything else that has already happened.

"This one!" Scooby suddenly shouts.

Toby looks over and sees Scooby holding up his choice. It's a phone cover with footballs and a football pitch pattern. Toby laughs.

"Totally predictable," Toby says with a chuckle. He turns back to Arjan, "How much mate?"

"Ah, take it," Arjan says, waving his hand in the air, "They only cost me a few pence from China. I get to make a fair profit so you're cool to have it."

"Really?" Scooby asks, "Nice one." He turns back to Toby, "I like your friend. He's cool,"

"Cheers Arjan," Toby says. "Take care of yourself, we've got to get going now."

"Yeah see you," Arjan says.

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Toby reaches out and shakes hands with Arjan. Arjan drags him forwards for a hug and Toby laughs and hugs his friend back. Toby grabs Scooby's arm and drags him away. His new friend doesn't really want to go, he's obviously staring at some of the girls nearby who are still watching at Arjan and giggling amongst themselves. They make their way through the market, weaving in and out amongst the people who are busy staring at the nearby stores.

"Why we leaving so early mate?" Scooby eventually asks as they get closer to the bus stop. "I've not got to go anywhere."

"But I do mate," Toby says, clapping Scooby on the shoulder, "I've gotta go and see Emma, my girlfriend. I promised her pizza tonight."

"She's got you by the balls mate," Scooby says with a laugh. "Don't think you'll get off that easy next time. I'm making you stay out."

"If you say so," Toby says, shaking his head, "Just make sure I know first."



## Chapter 6

Toby climbs off the bus at the stop closest to Emma's house. He's already picked up the pizzas he promised and they're still really hot against his hand. He makes his way towards the house and his phone starts to go off. After quickly checking he realises that it's from Emma. It's the third one from her in the last fifteen minutes. She knows he's on his way but she still keeps contacting him.

"There you are!" a female voice shouts, "I was getting worried."

Toby looks up and spots Emma on her front doorstep. His heart leaps a little, it always does when he sees her. She's a beautiful, bubbly blonde and they've been together since they were 14. As he gets closer he realises that she's wearing more make up than normal, her skin is almost orange and her clothes look brand new. He sighs. Ever since he got in to the Academy she's been talking about how she's going to become a WAG at last. Now it seems like she's finally taken those steps to becoming the WAG that she's always had in mind. He sighs but hurries up, it won't do to keep her waiting more than he needs to.

"Sorry!" he calls as he gets closer, "The bus got stuck behind a tractor."

"Oh phew," Emma says as he makes his way up the steps to her door, "For a moment there I thought you'd found a new girl and run off to Gretna Green or something."

"Would I do that to you?" he asks.

He leans forwards to kiss her on the cheek but she moves her head and his lips end up meeting hers. He tries to pull back, aware that her parents are probably around somewhere

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like they always are. But she won't let him go, she wraps her arms around his neck and starts to kiss him hard. She presses herself against him and worms her tongue in to his mouth. He falters, arms flying out to keep his balance and to stop the pizzas getting squashed. It's an unpleasant kiss, wet and sloppy with too much tongue and teeth. She shoves her tongue against his over and over, practically trying to taste the back of his throat. She gets too carried away at one point and he gags in his mouth a little. The bitter acidity of bile comes up, burning his throat.

She still won't stop though, she just keeps kissing him harder and moaning in the back of her throat. Toby thinks that she sounds like one of those girls in a bad porn film, the ones he always turns off before the action really gets going. He can taste her lip gloss, tacky and bland with a hint of too much sweetness. Eventually he has enough and he places a hand on her chest, just between her breasts. She groans and reaches up, grabbing his wrist and pulling his hand over to cup one plump mound in his palm. He drags himself away and wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. His lips feel sore and sticky, tacky from her lip gloss. He looks at Emma, confused. She'd never acted like that before. She's scanning the street, looking up and down, searching for something. Whatever she is looking for though she doesn't find judging by the frown of disappointment that covers her face quickly. She looks at him and smiles brightly.

“What the hell was that?!” he cries, “You nearly knocked me down the steps.”

“I was just saying hello,” Emma says playfully.

She's standing weirdly, hands behind her back, one leg in front of the other, chest pushed out. She's got her head down and she's looking up at him through her eyelashes and

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fringe. Her hair is way too blond, and it's clearly a bad job. The roots are showing and some of it looks practically yellow.

“What did you do to your hair?” he asks.

“Oh do you like it?” Emma asks brightly, fluffing it up with her hand and bouncing off inside, “Me and mum did it this morning. We thought it would look better, what with me being on the arm of a footballer and all that. Brown is so last year.”

Toby doesn't respond, she's too happy with her new blonder than normal hair. He just follows Emma in to the house and in to the living room. They take a seat on the sofa, pizza between them.

“I can't believe you got me a stuffed crust!” Emma says as soon as she opens the box.

Toby looks at her, trying to work out if she's happy or angry. There's no difference in her voice when she said it, no change in pitch that normally lets him know that he's done something wrong. She raises her eyebrows and stares right back at him. Clearly she expects him to know what she's trying to say. Toby hasn't a clue though and he learned a long time ago that it's better to stay quiet rather than guess.

“I can't eat stuffed crust!” Emma finally says, throwing her hands up in disgust. “I shouldn't really be eating pizza either.”

“Why not?” Toby says, shoving a piece in his mouth and talking around it, “You always love pizza.”

“I'm on a diet,” Emma says as though it's obvious, “You don't want a fatty on your arm do you? All the other footballers will laugh at you.”

“Emma,” Toby says with a sigh, “We've been through this before.”

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“I know, I know,” Emma says, waving a hand in the air. “You’re not a proper footballer yet, blah blah blah.”

She focuses on her pizza slice and picks off practically everything but the mushrooms and the peppers. Toby watches her, his brows rising higher and higher. She tentatively takes a bite and chews it furiously.

“It’s just,” Emma says, swallowing the tiny mouthful after what feels like too long chewing. “I want to look good for you and we all know you’re going to end up being a proper famous footballer sooner or later. I just figure that if I start getting myself looking like a proper WAG now then it’ll be easier to get everything ready later.”

“Get everything ready for what?” Toby asks, picking up another slice.

It hasn’t escaped his attention that Emma’s on her second slice already and she’s not picked off any of the toppings this time. She’s just biting in to it with relish.

“Ready for the wedding of course,” she says.

Toby chokes on his pizza and spends the next short while coughing to get it out of his lungs. Finally he can breath and he stares at Emma, eyes goggling and watering.

“What wedding?” he asks, gasping a little.

“Our wedding of course,” Emma says, matter of fact. She glances at Toby and sees his shock, “Oh come on Toby! We’ve talked about this. We both know that sooner or later you’re going to ask me to marry you and we both know that I’ll say yes. You should stop fanninging around you know and just ask me the question already.”

“We never talked about this!” Toby cries, his voice going high and cracking, “I would remember if we’d talked about this.”

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“Of course we talked about it,” Emma says. She bites in to another slice of pizza, “We’ve been discussing it for months, ever since you applied to the Academy. You just said it wasn’t the best time right now to get married, that we’re both too busy and we don’t need any more stress. I said ok and agreed to wait. Now you’re at the Academy and on your way to becoming a famous footballer, I figured that now was a better time to talk about it.”

“I meant in maybe three or four years time if we were still together!” Toby cries, “Not when I’m in the Academy! I’m still really busy and going mad with training. Besides! Coach said that it’s likely that only one of us is going to go on to the premiership. The rest are going to end up as support or not even playing football.”

“Oh he’s just saying that to scare you,” Emma scoffs, “You’re a brilliant player and you know it. So, when you do propose I expect you to have a ring and I really hope that it’s somewhere public, maybe at a restaurant or something. And I need to look amazing so maybe give me a little hint. Oh and make sure that there’s a photographer there! I want pictures for everyone, so I can show off my handsome and lovely future husband.”

Emma trails off in to a long discussion about wedding venues, cake combinations, guest lists and dress. Toby mostly tunes her out, only nodding her and there when it sounds like she expects some sort of response from him. He can’t believe this. He’s not even finished at the Academy and already Emma’s going on at him to marry her. There is no way, in Toby’s mind, that either of them are ready for marriage and to be honest, from what Toby has seen of other families it might be better if they didn’t marry. But Emma doesn’t seem to care about any of that, she’s so completely focused on becoming his actual official WAG before he goes big and is surrounded by girls. She won’t stop talking and Toby gets an idea to make her shut up.





Slowly he moves his pizza box on to the seat beside him and slides off the sofa. Emma isn't looking at him, she's examining her pizza and trying to pick up some of the previously removed toppings so she can eat them. Of course she's still talking away. Her voice sometimes gives Toby a headache and this is one of those times. He slides off his seat and kneels on the floor. He lifts up one leg, setting his foot on to the carpet and clears his throat. Emma stops talking and stares at him for a moment. Her mouth drops open and then she smiles and makes a small squealing sound.

“Oh my god yes!” she cries.

She throws herself at Toby, knocking him on to his back and covers his face with kisses.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she says over and over, “Yes I'll marry you.”

Toby lays there, taking it. His mouth moving like a fish, he's trying to get the words out but they won't come. Emma sits up, straddling his stomach and looks down at him.

“Where's the ring?” she asks. Before Toby has a chance to answer though she springs up and drags him with her. “Oh never mind that. Come on! Come on! We have to tell mum and dad the good news.”

She drags him after her and bursts in to the kitchen where her parents are having a quiet conversation.

“Mum!” she cries, “You won't believe it! He's finally popped the question!”

“Oh my darling!” her mother cries, “That's so wonderful. Oh congratulations.”

Debbie, Emma's mum, rushes to her feet and hurries over to them both. Toby quickly finds himself wrapped up in an almost smothering hug. Then Eric, Emma's dad is in front of him and shaking his hand hard. The couple congratulate their daughter, hugging and kissing

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her before they start to do the same to Toby. He really wants to tell them it was a mistake, that it was just a joke, but it's like his throat is closed up, he can't get the words out. He simply stands staring, unable to say anything. A small knot of cold hard dread settles in his stomach as Emma and Debbie start to talk about wedding plans and Eric pushes a glass of champagne into his hand with a cheeky wink that just looks creepy.

'What have I done?' Toby wonders to himself.

Training had been hard that Monday, both Toby and Scooby were exhausted. They had pushed themselves twice as hard as the other boys, working to get everything learned properly in their heads before they left. At 2pm they'd rushed over to the coach and he'd nodded at them, simply waving them towards the showers. The other boys had cheered and cracked jokes as they raced off, but Scooby gave them the finger and one of his usual cheeky grins and disappeared in to the changing rooms. Toby just shrugged and waved a hand before he too headed off in to the changing rooms.

They reach the studio buildings well before 3pm, at 2:45pm in fact and Scooby is practically vibrating with excitement. Toby really doesn't understand what happens next, it's all a blur of activity as they're asked to sign a few release forms and then hurried off to an empty room to change in to their football gear. A young woman is waiting for them outside the room and she leads them towards the stage, through winding corridors and past bustling offices. The entire time Scooby tries to chat her up but she's having none of it and just laughs at his attempts. At one point she even goes so far as to ruffle his hair and tell him that he re-

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minds her of her brother. Scooby looks affronted and horrified by the idea and Toby laughs at him.

The studio itself looks like an indoor sports hall, like the ones that Toby used to do PE in at school. Most of it is filled with filming equipment, a maze of cameras, lights, leads and other stuff that he has no idea about. But the woman, Zoe she says her name is, leads them through it like she was born there. The stage is a small square of artificial turf with a green screen background. Toby wonders why they didn't just do it on the fields at Skelmerage FC but realises, as he looks at all of the equipment, that the weather outside just wouldn't have worked. Everything would have ended up ruined.

"This is David," Zoe says, stopping just beside a tall man who's talking to a cameraman. "He's the producer. He'll tell you what to do."

Zoe walks off and Scooby looks after her, eyes blatantly staring at her arse with a look of longing across his face. Toby laughs at his friend and then hits him on the arm as David walks over. Scooby quickly turns back around and straightens up, smoothing his face down into blankness. Toby has to fight to hold back a grin.

"Ok," David says, looking them both up and down. "Which one of you's first?"

"Me of course," Scooby says, grinning at Toby, "Gotta have the best got first after all. Don't want you thinking Toby's right then having to let him down when you see how amazing I am."

"Shut up," Toby jeered, smiling the entire time.

"Ok, whatever," David says.



He's not even looking at either of them, he's just ticking things off on a clipboard which he hands back to one of the many people wandering around. Finally he looks back and stands beside Scooby.

"Right," David says, "What I want you to do is stand on that turf there and mime out a few goals. Doesn't matter if they're ones you've seen on the telly or ones you've scored for yourself. We just want to see you pretending to score. Goals you've done before might be easier though, that way you know how the body actually went."

"Got it," Scooby says. He turns and smirks at Toby, "Eat my dust Arnold."

Toby shakes his head and rolls his eyes as his friend walks over to the turf, a cocky swagger in his step and a confident smirk still plastered over his face. Scooby stops on the turf, takes a deep breath, shakes his body out a little and turns around.

Toby watches as the smile slides off Scooby's face. He looks around at everyone nearby like a rabbit caught in a trap. There's a camera pointed right at him, dozens of people staring and watching him like a hawk. Toby can practically see the beads of sweat rising up on Scooby's skin and he's sure that his friend is shaking. There's a look of sheer terror in his eyes, all traces of confidence are completely gone and the colour seems to be draining away. Toby hisses at Scooby to move under his breath. David looks at his watch. Some of the people look at each other and try to cover up their grins.

"Come on boy," David shouts, "Try and do something, anything!"

Scooby jerks and then gives a shaky nod. He tries to act like he's scoring a goal but it just makes Toby wince. Scooby looks like he's a puppet, his limbs are jerking all over the place and he almost falls over a couple of times. All Toby can do is watch, as his normally amazing footballer friend trips and stumbles as he tries to pretend he's scoring a goal. Within

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minutes Scooby stops moving completely and just stands there, his head hanging and eyes fixed on the floor. He's breathing heavily and Toby can hear a bit of sniffing.

"OK," David says, "I think that's enough from you."

There are a few sniggers from people who are hiding in the shadows and Toby cranes his neck trying to look for them. How dare they take the piss out of Scooby, it wasn't funny, it was sad and a little upsetting. It wasn't his fault that he froze.

"Toby, it's your turn next," David says.

Scooby nods and walks slowly towards where Toby has been standing. Toby tries to look his friend in the face as they pass each other but Scooby's eyes are fixed on the ground. All traces of confidence is now gone from Scooby. Toby shrugs and works his muscles loose as he slowly jogs in to place.

"Let's hope he's better than the other one," someone whispers.

"Yeah," another person whispers, "I don't think I can watch that again."

"It was just painful," someone else whispers, "What was he thinking?"

A surge of anger rushes through him but David coughs and catches his attention.

"Whenever you're ready Toby." David says.

Toby looks around. He can't see much beyond the lights that are shining right at him but he can see a few people watching him, the cameras pointed right at him. What feels like a surge of electricity rushes through him, making his fingers and toes tingle. He wants to move, he wants to run and jump and race around. The eyes on him don't bother him, in fact they just fill him with a confidence that he's never felt before, a surety that every move he may make will be the right one.

"Ok," David says impatiently, "Go!"

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Toby grins at the camera and starts to do a few imaginary dribbling steps, he starts to act out some of the goals that he's scored in the past, at matches and in training. He can hear Scooby whooping in the background somewhere, cheering him on and it just spurs him to move faster. He acts out goal after goal from his past and then moves on to famous goals from the world cup. He never knew that he knows so many goals, could never have imagined it. But he does and he pulls them all off amazingly. He does his favourite goal of all time as his final one, the goal that Beckham scored right from the halfway line, the goal that's famous the world over for the sheer amount of skill that it needed. He can't help but do the celebration afterwards as well but eventually he stops and looks towards the producer.

"Was that alright?" he asks tentatively "I mean, it wasn't too much or anything?"

"It was fine," the producer says, his voice strangely blank, "Do you know any of Rooney's famous goals?"

"Of course I do mate!" Toby says with a laugh, "What kind of footballer would I be if I didn't?"

"A crap one!" Scooby shouts out from behind the camera.

Toby laughs as he hears various people shushing his friend. It looks like Scooby's got his confidence back.

"Well can you act out a few of those goals too?" David asks, ignoring the sounds from behind him. "Pretend you've got an imaginary ball and just act like you're scoring some of them."

"Sure," Toby says, nodding.

He stands there for a few minutes, breathing in and out and trying to get himself calm enough to act out the goals. But there are people everywhere, watching him, the camera men,

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the producer, the runners, the sound guys, the casting team. Everyone involved in this project is here and each and every one of them is looking right at him. He doesn't freeze though, he just gets a surge of adrenaline, the same surge he gets when he can take a wide open, clear shot at goal in important matches.

He begins to act out a few goals, not saying a word. But he gets bored of that pretty quickly. It feels weird without saying anything, like he's stuck in some strange silent world surrounded by statues. He can hear whispering from somewhere as he mimes dribbling and kicking, it almost makes him stumble but mostly it just makes him feel a little angry. They're supposed to be paying attention to him after all.

"This is Rooney's first goal he scored for Everton," Toby says harshly.

He mimes it out, dribbling and doing a massive kick. The whispers stop and silence comes over the studio again. As Toby mimes a few more goals he's struck with an idea. He's heard Rooney speak, now he's acting out the goals. Why should he be Toby, pretending to act out Rooney goals? Why shouldn't he just be Rooney, even for a few moments? It's likely to be the closest he will ever get to being as famous as Rooney, he should take the chance. So he clears his throat and jumps in place a few times.

"And this is the first goal I scored for my country," he says, putting on a thick Liverpoolian accent and lowering his voice slightly.

He mimes doing a header and manages to catch himself before he falls to the ground, just like Rooney did.

"And this is my finest goal," Toby as Rooney says, "The finest goal that I've ever scored in any game before or since."

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He throws himself up in the air and does an overhead kick. He lands heavily but is on his feet in moments, not even winded. He bounces in place as he tries to think of a few more goals and decides on the best one of all, the one that he remembers Rooney scoring the most clearly.

“And this is the goal I’m most proud of,” he says.

He acts out a kick and a few other motions that in the actual game made the ball go straight past the keeper from 40 yards away. Finally though Toby has run out of goal ideas and truth be told he’s knackered. He stands there panting for breath, his whole body moving with each inhalation and exhalation. The producer steps forward, clapping slightly. He has a wide grin on his face.

“I think you’ve done well there mate.” David says as he gets closer. He reaches out and shakes Toby’s hand. “You’d be a good stunt man for the film I reckon.”

David quickly walks over to talk to a couple of the casting crew who are gathered around looking at Toby. Toby watches them, a little confused. David seemed happy enough but there had been no mention that he’d actually gotten the part. Toby has seen enough telly to know that if someone has the part they get told straight away. Scooby wanders over with a smile on his face but when he sees Toby’s expression it drops away.

“You alright mate?” Scooby asks.

Toby doesn’t say a word, he just nods towards the whispering adults. Scooby looks over and watches as well. The casting crew keep looking at Toby and whispering to David. There are a lot of hand gestures going on, shaking heads and stabbing, pointing fingers. Toby gets more and more worried that his performance wasn’t good enough after all, that he let himself down somehow. But he couldn’t understand how, he gave it his all and even did a little more than



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they asked for. Perhaps that was it though, perhaps as a stunt man he wasn't supposed to say anything and by doing the Rooney accent he'd just ended up cocking it all up. He says as much to Scooby who laughs. He's about to respond but David rushes over.

"Ok lads, here's the deal," David says urgently, "You know we can only take one of you. And Scooby I don't think it's going to be a surprise to you that I'm asking you to go home. You might be an amazing footballer but not everyone's cut out for standing in front of the camera. I've seen it a dozen times so don't worry about it too much,"

Scooby nods but doesn't say anything. Toby can see he's clenching his fists though, digging his nails in to his palms and squeezing so hard that his knuckles are going white.

"What about me?" Toby asks, "You've not actually said that I've got the part even though you think I'm good."

"We want you stay here for a little longer," David says, "Just to sort a few things out and let you know what's going on properly."

Toby nods and turns to Scooby.

"Sorry mate," he says, holding out a hand, "I know you wanted to do well."

"Nah it's good," Scooby says dismissively as he shakes Toby's hand, "It was for a laugh after all, I didn't seriously want the part anyway. Just a bit embarrassed that I froze. Normally it ain't a problem. You're not going to tell anyone how badly I cocked up right?!"

"No way!" Toby cries, "It could just have easily been me that froze. Besides, you're still the better football player."

"Yes I am," Scooby says proudly, his chest puffing out a little. He pulls Toby in to a quick hug, "Catch you later mate, take care getting home."

"Will do!" Toby calls after him.

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Scooby turns and walks away. Toby watches him go for a moment before he turns back to David. The producer has been watching them, smiling a little. It's a bit creepy, Toby thinks and he unconsciously takes a step or two backwards.

“So, what's up?” Toby asks, trying to be nonchalant.

Inside though his stomach is rolling around and he finds a loose thread on the sleeve of his top to fiddle with. He's trying to keep his breathing steady and to stop his hands from shaking.

“Right,” David says, coughing a little, “We want you to come back tomorrow and help us out. We're certainly interested in involving you in the film and we'd like you to come back a little earlier, probably right from the start of the day so you can help us with a couple of auditions for other roles.”

“Oh right,” Toby says, “Cool. I don't know if the coach will let me but I can try.”

“Don't worry about it,” David says, “I'll ring him and let him know. Just make sure you ring him as well.”

“Cool,” Toby says, nodding his head. He doesn't really know what to say, “So... what's the film about anyway? The coach didn't seem to know.”

“Oh of course!” David cries out, “It's a film about the life of Wayne Rooney. We're pitching it as the life story of the greatest footballer that England has ever known. Bit of a rags to riches thing you know, showing the world how Rooney built his career from the ground up without hand outs and stuff.”

“Oh!” Toby says, a light suddenly dawning, “That's why you were getting me to do all of those Rooney goals.”

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“Yup,” David says with a smug smile slowly dawning on his face, “And I’ve got to say, we were all very impressed with your Liverpudlian accent. If I’m being really honest,” he says, leaning in, “It’s actually far better than the actor’s accent, at least the one the main guy that we’ve got in mind can do. And that guy’s had training in doing accents, would you believe it?!”

“Thanks!” Toby says, “So what’s up with tomorrow?”

“Well,” David says, taking a step back, “We’ve got to do a second audition and we were hoping that you’d be able to act as a stand in. It’s basically for the role of Coleen Rooney and we want to make sure that we’ve got the right girl. And we’re kind of hoping to check her accent against yours. Up for it?”

“Yeah!” Toby says eagerly, “I’m totally up for that.”

“Glad to hear it” David says, clapping his hand on Toby’s shoulder. He hands Toby a few sheets of paper, “Here’s the script. We just want you to familiarise yourself with it enough that you don’t sound like you’re reading from the page. You’ll be allowed to have the script with you, we don’t expect you to be able to remember everything. And believe me, there’s going to be no pressure on you to perform perfectly or even perform at all. We just need someone for Fiona, that’s the girl we’re screen testing tomorrow, to work from.”

Toby flicks through the pages and sees line after line of dialogue. He wasn’t the best student at school, the sight of so much writing on one page would have made him panic back then, but as he looks at it now he’s just filled with a rush of excitement. His eyes catch on a bit of dialogue and he’s already working out how to play it.

“No problem,” he says, “I think I can do this.”

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“Fantastic,” David says. He glances at his watch, “Well I’ll let you head off now, check through those lines and get ready to go for tomorrow. We’ll see you at let’s say... 9:30? You can have a bit of a lie in!”

“Cheers,” Toby says, holding up the script, “I won’t let you down.”

He races off to the room where he left his clothes and quickly gets changed. That was so much more fun than he expected and he could never have dreamed that he’d be asked to help with auditions. He’d have been surprised if they even offered him the part of the stunt man, now here he was acting as a stand in for screen tests. He pauses as he pulls up his trousers and realises that he’s still not been actually offered a role as stunt man, they’ve not even offered to pay him for standing in. It’s possible that they don’t even pay for that sort of thing, Toby hits himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand for being so stupid. It’s too late now though, he’s already told David that he’ll be here tomorrow and Toby never goes back on his word if he can help it.

As he sits on the bus, heading back home he realises that he’s going to need to watch videos of Wayne Rooney talking and playing and giving interviews. He wants to know what was going through Rooney’s head at particular times, what he was thinking, what was driving him forward. Toby knows that they’re not expecting an amazing performance from him, he’s just a stand in, but he’s decided that if he’s going to do it then he is going to do it really, really well.



## Chapter 7

The next morning Toby is waiting outside the studios before they've even opened up, he's so eager to get started on his work. He'd rung the coach the night before and checked that David had indeed been in touch with him as promised, and although the coach had been a little reluctant to let him miss training for the whole day he had eventually told Toby that he could go to the film studio. Toby has been given a warning though, that if he misses more than three training sessions he will be out of the Academy. The news hadn't worried Toby as much as he knew it should have but he's too excited about today to really care.

The doors are finally unlocked and as soon as Toby sets foot in the building he is met by Zoe. She leads him back to the hall that they were in the day before and asks him to wait on some of the chairs. Toby settles himself down to play a game on his mobile but as people start to come in and begin to get the equipment all set up, he soon finds himself entranced by all the activity. There's so much more to filming something than he ever thought and he eagerly soaks it up, wanting to learn as much as he can. Zoe appears a little while later and encourages him to go through his lines again. He starts flipping through the script and works out exactly how he's going to play each line.

"Fiona!" he hears David cry, "So glad you could make it love,"

Toby looks over and sees David giving air kisses to each cheek of a brunette. She steps back and he can finally see her face. She's stunning and for a moment, just a second, Toby can't breathe. She's classically beautiful with defined cheekbones and a perfectly

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straight nose. She's got big brown eyes and her brown hair is professionally highlighted and styled. Her curves are amazing as well and he finds his eyes tracing them up and down.

"I'm sorry darling," he hears Fiona say, "The traffic was just absolutely dreadful this morning,"

Toby's heart plummets. She's exactly the type of girl that would ignore him. The way she rolls her r's and elongates her vowels tells him all that he needs to know. She's posh totally, probably went to private school and likely hasn't done a real day's work in her life. The way she's looking at some of the men around, her nose wrinkling in disgust every time one of them comes a little too close, the way she jumps out of the way as they pass by, it all tells Toby that she's probably stuck up and full of herself. Then again, he reminds himself, the performing arts tends to be full of rich kids from middle class backgrounds, they're the only ones who can actually afford to go to drama schools and who's parents will actually let them attend.

He looks her up and down again. It's a pity really, that she's so fancy and stuck up. She might be completely different to him culturally and socially but in Toby's book she's exactly his type. He shrugs to himself and focuses on his lines again, reading through the script and getting in to the character of a young Wayne Rooney, before he got world famous and before he cocked his whole life up.

"Toby," David calls, walking over with an arm around Fiona's shoulders, "This is Fiona, the woman auditioning for the role of Coleen. Fiona," he says, turning to look at her, "This is Toby, our stunt double. We've asked him to stand in today so it's a bit easier for you. He's a semi professional footballer soon to be professional."

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“Charmed,” Fiona says, smiling politely and holding out a hand, “It’s nice to meet you.”

“And you,” Toby says.

He shakes her hand and then turns back to his script. He doesn’t miss the fact that Fiona wipes her hand on her coat or that she’s looking down her nose at him like she looked at the crew.

“Well,” David says, clapping his hands together, “Now that you two know each other, why don’t you take a seat Fiona and go through the lines again while we just finish setting up.”

“Of course,” Fiona drawls, a bright smile on her face.

David smiles back, too wide and with too many teeth, before he turns and walks away. The smile instantly drops from Fiona’s face and she looks down at Toby with disdain. Her eyes flick to the seat beside him but she doesn’t take it. Instead she wanders off to a sofa that’s placed against a nearby wall and settles on to that.

“Mummy?” Fiona says in to her phone suddenly. Toby turns and looks at her but she glares at him and he turns away, “Hello Mummy. Yes I got to the audition ok. No we haven’t started yet. Apparently these idiots haven’t even finished setting up. I know, I know, I’ll make sure that I know before I leave. Oh Mummy, you won’t believe who they’ve got me acting against for this thing. It’s some footballer, some child. I know! I bet he hasn’t done a day’s acting in his life. Yes, I’m sure he’s just some leery, brash boy with too much flash and no go. I doubt he even really understands what’s going on, or what half the words I have to say in the audition even mean. Yes,” she sighs, “I’ll do my best to act like he’s someone I ac-

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tually like. No Mother! I'm getting the part, I'm going to make sure I do. Ok. Ok. Bye, bye  
bye bye.”

She hangs up the phone and when Toby looks over his shoulder to glance at her she gives him a tight smile and then looks away. He sees her rolling her eyes though. He turns his attention back to his script and shakes his head. He just needs to ignore her words, focus on what he's there to do and become Wayne Rooney. It should be simple.

“Ok, ok,” David shouts out eventually, “Let's get started shall we. Fiona, Toby, if you could take your places please.”

Toby stands and stretches. Fiona just strides past him but they almost collide. He forgot that she was behind him. He stops and steps aside, waving his arm to let her go first. She nods at him but that's it. They walk in front of the green screen and settle on the old sofa that one of the crew must have put there earlier. They look at each other and then at David.

“Ok,” David says, “This is one of the most important scenes in the movie. Fiona I want you to give it your all. Really feel where the character is coming from, understand how she must be feeling and try to get that across. Toby, just do what you can and make sure you keep that Liverpoolian accent going.”

He turns to the camera man for a moment and nods before he looks back towards Fiona and Toby.

“So, here's the set up,” he says, waving his hands around. “You, Toby, as Wayne, are discussing with Fiona, as Coleen, about whether you should leave Everton and go to play for



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Manchester United. It's the chance at the goal of your life, the one thing that you've been working towards since you first started playing. But at the same time you're unsure. It means leaving everything behind, your friends and your family, everyone you ever knew and starting over fresh. It's terrifying, it's exciting and you just don't know what to do. So you turn to Coleen, your girlfriend for many years and the woman you one day plan to make your wife. She's smart, she understands you and she knows that a move for you means a move for her. Ok?"

Fiona and Toby both nod. David smiles and steps back.

"Ok then," he says, "And go..."

Toby looks at Fiona, trying to fight back the memory of her harsh words. He puts Coleen's face over hers, imagines Fiona as Coleen and then himself as Rooney. He imagines the uncertainty Wayne was probably feeling, how terrified he must have been, how much he didn't want to make a mistake. He begins to feel like Rooney, like a large headed balding man with the love of a good woman who will stand by him throughout anything, he feels that burning desire to become a footballing legend spark up within him. He reaches out and takes Fiona's hand. She jumps, flinches a little but it's barely noticeable. He can only tell because he can feel her pulse racing in her wrist.

"I don't know what to do babes," Toby says, as Wayne. He doesn't know what to do, he can feel the uncertainty, the worry, the desire not to let the love of his life down by making the wrong decision, "I feel like I'm going to make the wrong choice whichever one I choose."

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“Babes,” Fiona says, shifting forward, closer to him. Toby’s surprised by how good her accent is and how well she’s hiding the way that she normally speaks. “Babes, what feels like the right decision? For you I mean, not for anyone else.”

“Everton have been so good to me,” Wayne says, looking away. He’s shaking, troubled and avoiding the question “They’ve made me who I am. I wouldn’t even have this chance if it weren’t for them.”

“So why don’t you stay at Everton?” Coleen asks, brushing her hand across his head, “If they’ve done so much to help you why don’t you just stay there?”

“Because I think I can go all the way,” Wayne admits reluctantly. He looks down but Coleen is having none of it. She reaches forward and lifts up his head. He looks her in the eye and continues talking “I know I can go all the way. Everton can’t do that for me though. I’ve always known I can go to the very top, get world famous and really good. I’ve known it since I was 6 years old and so has everyone else. And I want to go to the top. But Everton can’t get me there.”

“Can Manchester United?” Coleen asks, leaning in and cupping Wayne’s cheek in her hand, “Will they be able to get you to the top?”

“Yes,” Wayne says with a sigh, “Yes they can take me there. Or at least I think they can.”

They sit there for a moment, in silence as they just look in to each others eyes. Coleen sighs.

“I think that this is something you need to do for you,” she gently says, “Whatever choice you make it needs to be because you’ve made it for yourself, not for anyone else.

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Sometimes you just have to break away from that team mentality that you all seem to have and then really think about what's the best thing to do for you."

"But how am I going to tell the manager?" Wayne cries out, begging. "He's believed in me since I was a kid. He's stood by there and driven me on since I first started to play football and we all realised that I could go all the way. I can't just turn my back on him like that, can I?"

Wayne looks away, his entire body shaking. The idea of letting the manager down, after how supportive he's been for so long fills Wayne with a massive feeling of guilt. The thought of the man's reaction makes him feel sick, heavy like he's being squashed under a rock.

"He'll understand babes," Coleen says, turning him to look at her again. "I bet he's seen this loads of times before in his time. He's a manager and players come and go. Everton is a good club but it's not one of the greats, Man U is. Anyway, for all we know he could be sat around wondering why you haven't gone there sooner if you both want the same thing for you."

"Yeah," Wayne says slowly, "Yeah that's true. He's the manager of the club, he knows what's going to help everyone out. Maybe he won't be so surprised or hurt."

Coleen nods at him encouragingly, a small smile on her face. He smiles back but it feels a little forced, like when he tries to smile for the camera.

"So..." Coleen says slowly.

"So..." Wayne repeats, "Are we heading to Manchester then?"

"Yeah," Coleen squeaks out, nodding and wiggling in her seat with excitement, "I think we are babes, I think we are."

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Wayne smiles. He gets a little closer to Coleen, his girlfriend deserves a kiss after all.

“BRILLIANT!” David shouts out. “Absolutely brilliant.”

Toby and Fiona jump in surprise and Fiona scuttles away from Toby, putting a large amount of space between them. Toby feels a little confused, discombobulated. He’s filled with this rush of emotions that aren’t really his and he’s trying to get them in order. For a moment he forgets who he really is, where he is and looks around in a bit of a daze. David walks forwards, clapping his hands slowly and looking between both of them. He’s smiling widely.

“Fiona, you are a gem,” he says, grinning at her. Then he turns to Toby and holds out his arms, “And Toby... Toby! Well I think you surprised us all there.”

“Thanks,” Toby says.

He looks down and blushes, trying to hide the wide smile that feels like it’s going to split his face in two. He stands up and hands the script over to David.

“Well thank you again Toby,” David says, shaking his hand vigorously, “Thanks for stepping in and reading those lines. You’ve really helped us out and we really appreciate it. We’ll be in touch soon about the stunt double role. For now though you can go and do whatever you want with the rest of your day.”

“Not a problem David,” Toby says, finally letting his grin out, “That was brilliant. Thanks for asking me to help out.”

Toby practically bounces out of the studio. His entire body feels electrified, like he does after they win a big match but even stronger. He feels like he could run and jump and turn somersaults without running out of breath. He doesn’t want to go back to training, or to

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sit around at home. He wants to move, to see the outdoors and watch people, figure out why they might act or move the way that they do. So he decides to head in to town.

As he walks the streets of Skelmerage town he thinks back on the morning, reminiscing on everything that had happened. Even the memory of Fiona's rude supposition of his character isn't enough to bring him down. He knows that he nailed the role, that he got it exactly right. It had all gone exactly as Toby had spent the night before planning. He's got every emotion down just how he wanted, every word had been spot on with just the right amount of emphasis. He looks around as he walks, takes a deep breath in and smiles widely at anyone who walks past him. All of the colours seem brighter, the lights shiny, the lines and shapes of everything are clearer. For the first time in a very long time Toby feels properly alive and he loves it.

Of course he's felt the same feeling before, after matches and games where he did particularly well. But never before has it been so strong, has everything felt so vivid. He feels unstoppable. The entire day has been a dream come true, he loved everything about it, the cameras, the acting, the bright lights, all of the eyes on him. He adored the limelight, being the focus of everyone's attention.

Toby slows down as he walks and he begins to think things out. He begins to wonder whether football is really what he wants to be doing. Sure, on the pitch he gets plenty of attention and focus, people cheering for him, cheering his name. But there are at least twenty one other players that he's sharing that attention with. None of the focus, none of the appreciation or the cheering is just for him. But on the stage! On the stage, whether it's an actual stage or in front of a camera the focus is entirely on him. No one else measures up. When

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Toby is speaking everyone is looking at him, paying attention to him, feeling what he feels and thinking what he thinks.

In the long run, Toby realises as he comes to a complete stop, the football pitch has just been a surrogate for his entire life. It's just been a way for him to get the attention that he craves and needs because he never realised that there was something better out there. But now he has and now that he's tasted it, well he wants more, as much as he can get in fact. Football might put him in the limelight, but it's a shared limelight and it's the wrong limelight for Toby. His heart sinks a little when he realises that he's still got to find a way to tell his dad this fact.



## Chapter 8

Toby whistles as he walks through the front door and plonks his kit bag on the floor. He's still whistling as he walks in to the kitchen and grabs a glass of water. Rebecca stares at him like he's a lunatic but she quickly starts smiling again when he races over and begins to tickle her and smother her with kisses. They have a small wrestling match for a few moments, nothing too boisterous as Rebecca is in the middle of doing some of her summer homework. Eventually they calm down and Toby sits behind his sister on the bench before the kitchen table. His arms are around her shoulders and he's leaning his head on her shoulders as he watches her do her homework.

"You're in a better mood today," she says slyly, "Manage to score a good goal?"

"Something like that," Toby says. He smiles at the memory of the morning, "Definitely something like that."

"Well I'm glad," Rebecca says as she wiggles free. She sounds like a forty five year old rather than a twelve year old. "When you're happy it makes me happy. You were really sad this weekend, I was worried. But you're happy now and smiling and laughing so it's all good."

"So you're happy because I'm happy?" Toby says, "Nice to know."

Toby jogs out of the kitchen, passing his dad on the way out.

"Evening dad," he says brightly, his smile wide.

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He waves at Anthony before jogging past and heading up the stairs to his room. Anthony watches him go before shaking his head and smiling. He's flooded with relief, please to see his son smiling again. The week before had been worrying, with how quiet and almost sullen Toby had seemed. But now though, the second week in, Anthony is glad to see that Toby seems much brighter and happier. It was probably the settling in. It's always hard and Toby had always struggled a little to cope with sudden change. He's almost expected Toby's bad mood to continue for a few more weeks until he finally found his rhythm but apparently Toby is learning to cope and adapt much better than before.

For a little while Anthony has been worried that Toby didn't want to be a footballer any more. The way that his son sometimes shuts down when they talk about the Academy or what football teams to play for made Anthony worry. The few times that he'd mentioned finding Toby an actual agent, his son had stormed from the room and raced off to exercise. Anthony knows Toby has talent, he doesn't want his son to waste it and he also knows that sometimes he can be a bit harsh as a father. But it's all for the best interest of his children, even if they don't realise it at the time.

It was Anthony that pushed Toby to apply for the Academy, Anthony that encouraged him and nagged at him to practice, it was Anthony that drove him to the trials and cheered him on from the sidelines. Anthony knows that he might have pushed a little harder than some parents but he's proud of his son, and of how well their hard work has paid off. And now Toby seems as happy at the Academy as Anthony is. He's settled and from what Anthony's heard from Rebecca Toby is even making friends. He just hopes that these friends don't distract Toby too much from the reason he's there. Namely to train at football and to catch



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the attention of some premiership club or other so that Toby can finally take those few small but difficult steps to becoming a world famous, top class football player.

Dinner is nowhere near as quiet as it was the week before. Toby's asking Rebecca question after question about anything that he can think of. Anthony is asking Toby about the Academy and their training. This time Toby's actually answering the questions.

Toby can't wait for dinner to be over though. He's spent most of the evening before dinner was ready researching Rooney, learning more about him and his past. He wants to know Rooney, to understand where he comes from and what is probably still pushing him to play. He's trying to figure out and understand Rooney's mannerisms, the way he talks, verbal and physical ticks that can make all the difference between pretending to be Rooney and actually being Rooney. Toby's been doing some other research as well, looking up acting tips. He knows that he needs to understand a real person if he wants to portray them. The tiniest details about someone, even the way that they brush their hair off their face, can make a massive difference to the performance. Toby wants to know these things about Rooney, figure them out and get them down.

But more than that he needs to know when the audition is, where it is, so that all the research actually pays off. He had been just about to google it before Anthony called him and Rebecca down for dinner. Now he wants to get dinner over and done with so he can get his answer and start preparing for the chance of a lifetime.

Even though Toby's plate is empty he's not allowed to leave the table. Anthony has a rule in place and Rebecca is still eating. He jiggles his legs, bouncing around while he waits. He sort

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of wishes that he hadn't asked her so many questions during dinner. If he hadn't she would probably be done by now.

As soon as dinner is over Toby shoots upstairs, barely taking the time to rinse his plate and put it in the dish washer. He scrambles around, trying to find his laptop underneath the pages of the script and newspaper clippings of amazing football games. He finally finds it and within moments he has fired it up and is on Google. He types in 'Wayne Rooney Audition', slowly, one letter at a time. He doesn't spend much time on the computer, not like his friends do, so he's not a quick typer. He knows people who can type dozens of words a minute, their fingers flying over the keyboard. But he can't do that and he is, in truth, a little jealous.

The computer beeps to tell him the search is complete and straight away he sees the information that he was hoping to find. The audition for the lead part of Wayne Rooney for the film England's Finest is on Thursday, at 1pm, at the studio. He looks at it, stares at it really. He knows that he needs to be there, that he won't miss it for anything. For the first time he feels the sharp burn of determination flowing through him. He feels like there are butterflies in his stomach every time he thinks of the audition, a thrill of adrenaline runs through him. He's felt something similar before, like when he tried out for the Academy, but it's never been as strong as it is right now. He knows that he has finally found something that he really, really wants, that he will do anything to get.

Even the fact that he's meant to be at training on the day of the audition does nothing to stop him. He knows that he's going to find a way to get to the audition, football has fallen behind in how important he thinks it is. He's got the audition to worry about, the role of

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Rooney and the part as a stunt double. That's what's important, that's what Toby wants to do with his life. He wants to be an actor and nothing in the world is going to stop him.

With that thought in mind he realises that he needs to practice for the audition. He might have nailed the stunt double part, and done well enough to act in a stand in, but he also knows that his performance today probably won't be good enough for the actual audition. There are going to be guys there with years of acting experience, lads who had been to acting school, who've had lessons and drama teachers and whatever else their parents could throw at them to make them stop whining. Even though Toby knows the producer, has got a leg up in a way, he knows that it will very likely not be enough. He needs to be on top form and the only way he knows how to do that is to practice. It's just a question of who to use.

Then he hears singing from the room next door and it's like a light bulb goes off in his head. He walks to his door, out of it and stands in front of Rebecca's door. He knocks twice and waits. The sound of singing stops.

"Yes?" she says.

"It's me," Toby says, "I need your help. Can you come to my room?"

She pauses for a moment, thinking probably.

"Ok," she says, "Give me a minute."

Toby nods, knowing that she can't actually see him and heads back to his room. He lounges on his bed to wait. She's inside within moments and shuts the door too. He hands her the script.

"What's this?" she asks,

"It's a script," Toby says, knowing that it's obvious, "I need you to read the lines for the character called Coleen for me and I'll read the ones for Rooney."



“Cool,” she says with shrug.

They start reading. Now and then Toby has to look back at the script, snatching it from his sister’s hands in his impatience to remember his lines. He keeps making her repeat it until he knows it word for word, even Coleen’s parts. Then he gets her to keep going. He needs to know the lines but he needs to know how to act them, how to ply them for the best affect. As he reads the lines he remembers Fiona, how easily she slipped from posh middle class girl in to Coleen’s character. He’s going to be up against people who can all do the same so he needs an edge, that extra something that will mark him out from everyone else. He asks Rebecca for her thoughts.

“Well it’s a big decision right?” she says, “Maybe you need to make that clearer.”

“I can’t spell it out Becky,” Toby says tiredly, “I have to stick to the script. So I need to figure out how to show it.”

“Well maybe try and sound like you’re really confused,” she suggests, shrugging, “Make it sound like you really don’t know what to do, that you want to do both but can’t?”

“You’re a genius!” he says.

He grabs her head and kisses it. She smiles and then they go back to reading the lines. This time Toby focuses on the performance itself, not the words. He thinks back to the videos that he’s watched of Rooney talking about the change to Manchester United from Everton, the way he had spoken about Everton when he talked to the press about the move. Toby needs to bring that to his performance, needs to make it even stronger because Rooney is talking to Coleen, the love of his life, not just stating facts to the press. He works and works at it, tries to stop being Toby Arnold and becomes Wayne Rooney. The more that they read

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the more he becomes this other person and eventually Rebecca is smiling as they finish the repetition of the lines for the last time.

“I think you’ve got it,” she says, “I really forgot you were Toby for a minute there.”

“And the accent?” Toby asks eagerly, “Did I manage to keep it up?”

“Didn’t slip for a minute.” She says, grinning even wider. Then she frowns, “What’s this script for anyway?”

“It’s for the Academy,” Toby says quickly, not really thinking, “Something to do with the football club itself and they wanted me to help out.”

“Oh right.” Rebecca says.

She looks through the script, clearly believing him. As they start to run through the lines again Toby feels a pang of guilt in his stomach, he feels queasy when he realises how easy it was to lie to Rebecca. She’s young, just young enough to believe in and trust the people that are older than her and that’s what’s happened. He doesn’t like the fact that he’s lied to her, that he’s getting her to do something that he knows his dad won’t like. But he also knows that this is something that he needs to do, he has to do, in order to be happy and it’s that determination that has won out. It quickly wipes away any feelings of guilt that he’s having. After all, it’s not like Toby’s hurting anyone, Rebecca isn’t doing anything wrong or illegal. He just doesn’t want to reveal the truth until there are results, until he’s got proof that this isn’t all just one big waste of time.

And he knows that she’s mostly helping him because she’s finally getting to spend time with him. They used to spend a lot of time together, after school and at the weekends, but that was before Anthony started pushing Toby harder and harder to play football at a better level. As the times Toby had to practice increased the less time he was able to spend with

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Rebecca. She misses him, he knows it, he can tell by the way she's always trying to get his attention, to sing to him, and how she was so eager to read the lines and not ask any questions. He wishes that he could spend more time with her, maybe the acting is a chance to do it. But football comes first in Anthony's book, and Toby's too, so he can't really cut out football just to spend time with his kid sister, no matter how hard he might want to.

"Are we done now?" Rebecca eventually says, whining a little, "I'm getting kind of bored now."

"Yeah," Toby says after thinking for a few seconds, "I think we're done for now."

"Yay!" Rebecca says. She throws her hands up in the air and tosses the script around, "Can I sing you my songs for X factor now? Please, please please! Pretty please?"

"Fine," Toby says, laughing. "Let me get comfortable and then you may begin."

He settles himself on his bed, wiggling around until he finds some way of sitting that is comfortable and also allows him to watch Rebecca. She watches him, smiling and giggling, now and then bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. Eventually he waves a hand at her to begin.

She bursts out with her first song and Toby closes his eyes to listen. Her talent really is amazing, he realises, she's just got this ability to take any song, no matter how good or bad and turn it into something amazing. She manages to make the song her own, every time. She can change the notes, the melody slightly and still have something amazing. He knows that it takes time to do that, he can almost always hear her singing the same verse over and over in different ways until she finds something that she likes. But she's dedicated and determined to become an amazing singer and Toby admires her for that, for the strength of will that she clearly has to do what she wants.

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“I think it’s a shame that you can’t go on yet,” he says when she’s finished, “You’re loads better than anyone else that they’ve had on before.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re my brother,” Rebecca says, pouting. But he knows that inside she’s beaming with happiness. “And besides, it’s not a big deal. It just gives me time to get it perfect.”

“Good point,” Toby says, hugging her, “Nice attitude. It’s not a bad thing you can’t go on yet, it’s good. You’re using the time to practice and get better. Why don’t you talk to Dad about singing lessons?”

“He won’t let me,” Rebecca says quietly, “He’s already paying loads for your Academy training, he’s not going to put out more money because of something that I want to do.”

“Maybe you should show him how good you are?” Toby suggests, “He might be more willing to help if he knows you’re so good.”

“Maybe,” Rebecca says, a little sad, “I’ll try I suppose, there’s nothing else I can do.”

Toby’s phone beeps loudly in the silent room. It’s a text from David. Rebecca glances at his phone and then smiles.

“I better get back to doing my homework,” she says.

“Thanks for helping me,” Toby says, climbing to his feet, “It really means a lot.”

“Thanks for asking,” Rebecca says, smiling now.

He hugs her impulsively, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and pulling her to his chest. She hugs him back, her thinner smaller arms not really reaching all the way round but she still squeezes him with all of her strength. He smiles fondly and kisses her forehead gently.

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“Now get to your room,” he says sharply but smiling. He pushes her gently towards the door, “If you don’t get to be a singer you need a back up plan. Good grades makes it easier. Besides, we need someone smart in the family and you’re it.”

Rebecca pauses in the doorway and sticks her tongue out at him. He throws a pillow at her as he lays back on the bed but she dodges it and runs away giggling. Toby chuckles to himself and looks at his phone again.

‘Toby, great news. You’ve got the part of the stunt double. I’ll send you a letter saying as much in the post so you’ve got it in writing. You were really great mate and I hope you keep it up. See you at rehearsals. David’

Toby stares at the text, his jaw dropping open. He’s been unsure about whether he got the stunt double role, especially after not hearing anything for so long. But now he knows and he’s satisfied. Even if the audition doesn’t go as smoothly as he hopes it will, even if his practicing turns out to be nothing there’s at least something that he’s going to be doing that’s on the right path for his goal. Finally, without even trying that hard, Toby is a part of the acting set and he’s already going to be entering the world of film. He hugs himself in excitement and throws himself backwards on the bed. He sighs happily and can’t keep the wide smile from his face as he stares up at the ceiling. Now, no matter what happens on Thursday, he’s already on his way to becoming a fully fledged actor.





## Act 2

### Chapter 9

The next day Toby is like a man possessed, like a completely new player. He feels like he's found his excitement for football all over again. He's running faster, scoring more, playing harder than he has before. A new wave of confidence is racing through him. He imagines himself as Rooney, just like he did at the read through. He's no longer the gangly seventeen year old who happens to be good at football. He's the stocky twenty year old who's the star of Everton and soon to be the most famous footballer in the world. He doesn't have a younger sister, a demanding father or a WAG wannabe for a girlfriend. He's got a family who supports him and a girl who will love him no matter what. All the doubts are gone, he's there to play football, his role in life is to play football and he's going to go right to the very top, no matter what.

When confronted with difficult decisions during the training matches he looks around and asks himself what would Rooney do, he tries to think back to what Rooney has done in similar situations. He makes the right decision again and again, passing when he needs to, racing forwards when it's safer. He sees the open spaces, sees the holes in the defence like they've got a great big arrow pointing at them. He can tell that the other players are looking at him funny, that they're whispering to each other behind their hands. Some of them even mock him to his face. But he doesn't care. He knows that they're just jealous because he is

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Wayne Rooney, the world's finest, and they are just amateur football players hoping to make it to the big time. He doesn't have to worry about it. He's already there.

The football flies towards him, right at the perfect overhead height. It's set up exactly for Toby to score the best goal ever, just like Rooney did. He sees it all happening in slow motion, like it's already happened. It plays out in his mind and he knows that he can do this. The ball comes closer and closer. Toby watches it, eyes wide open. He launches himself in the air when he knows that the ball is close enough. He somersaults through the air, sure that he's headed the ball away. Then he crashes to the ground and the ball bounces along the pitch behind him.

Suddenly Toby isn't Wayne Rooney any more. He's just Toby, just a teenager training to be a footballer but wants to be an actor. He sits on the ground and shakes his head. He feels disorientated at the switch from famous footballer to amateur, just like last time. He can hear the other players laughing at him. Scooby is jogging over.

"You alright mate?" he asks, a little concerned.

Toby nods and slowly climbs to his feet. Scooby pats him on the back of his shoulder.

"Did you think you was Rooney there?" he asks laughing, "Sorry mate but you've got a way to go yet."

The others hear that and start laughing. Toby chuckles, self conscious, and rubs the back of his neck.

"Yeah, you might be right," he admits, "I think I got a bit ahead of myself there."

"Hey I know you were great at that audition but that was imaginary," Scooby says, a little quieter. The laughter is continuing, covering his words, "Maybe you just need a little more practice with a real ball to be as good in real life as you were there."

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Toby nods and begins to jog off. He returns to his place and as he stands around, waiting for the next part of training to start he realises the truth. He isn't Wayne Rooney, he isn't a superstar of football, known the world over. He's just an average football player who happens to be better than most. He has the potential to be great but so do all of the other players at the Academy. He isn't special, he isn't extraordinary, he's just Toby.

As they carry on playing he looks around and sees at least 10 other players who are far better than him, even when he's pretending to be Rooney. Scooby is one of them but that's no surprise. Toby knows though that if he's going to stand even the smallest chance of making it as a premier league player then he needs to be in the top 5 to get noticed in the slightest. It's high stakes and unlikely to happen but he's going to try. He shoves the thoughts about the futility of making it to the big leagues to the back of his mind. Like Scooby says, focusing on the bad isn't the way to go. He needs to pay attention to the present if he's going to succeed. He knows that he can do it, he has to do it. And he has to do it to make his father proud. There's no question in his mind.

“So how'd your audition go?” Scooby asks when they're outside the training grounds.

Toby looks around quickly and pulls Scooby to one side. There are still other players walking around, some too close to the pair for comfort. Toby remembers the way that they took the piss when he mentioned the auditions last week, he doesn't want to bring any more grief down on himself. They're already giving him funny looks because of his earlier Rooney impersonation. He shushes Scooby.



“Keep your voice down,” he says quietly but harshly to his friend, “I’ve not told anyone I even went to the audition yet.”

“Oh right,” Scooby whispers back, “So how did it go? Did you get the role? I’d be surprised if you didn’t, you were amazing out there.”

“You can’t tell anyone,” Toby whispers, “I got the role as the stunt double. They asked me to come back the next day though, to help with a read through. I’m thinking about auditioning for the actual role, not just a stunt role.”

“Aww mate!” Scooby cries, grabbing him in a hug, “That’s amazing! Way to go!”

Some of the other players look at them a little strangely, their eyes flicking between the hugging pair. They raise their eyebrows and wiggle them up and down. Toby glares at them until they sneer and walk away. Toby and Scooby walk towards the town centre, the weather is nice and they can’t be bothered with the bus yet. Besides they’ve got lots to talk about and the bus isn’t a good place to avoid being overheard.

“So what the hell happened to you?” Toby asks suddenly. Scooby looks at him and he rolls his eyes, “On Monday? When you froze up during the audition?”

“Oh God,” Scooby moans, “I seriously can’t believe that happened. I just went all funny in front of the camera. Everyone was looking at me and staring. I just... eurgh!”

He shivers dramatically. Toby laughs but quickly becomes serious again.

“You’re like the most confident person I know though,” he says, “Why would you get weird about having a camera pointed at you? I’d have thought you’d love it.”

“I’ve always been weird about cameras,” Scooby reluctantly admits, “Even when my mum’s trying to take a photo I’d get funny. Guess I’m just camera shy. Then, of course, it got

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worse at the audition because literally all eyes were on me, there was nothing else for them to look at. It just got way more intense than I could deal with.”

“Aww mate,” Toby says, patting Scooby on the shoulder, “That sucks.”

“Tell me about it,” Scooby says, rolling his eyes. “But you though...! Mate you were on fire! I’ve never seen you like that before. It’s like you were this whole other person and nothing could stop you.”

“I guess,” Toby says, shrugging.

He hadn’t felt like a different person, just a more awake, alive version of who he was.

“Seriously!” Scooby insists, “You were amazing. I’m seriously impressed and massively jealous. What’s your secret?”

“What’s yours?” Toby counters. “I’ve got an idea.”

“I’m listening,” Scooby says.

“I want to be better at football right?” Toby says, “And you want to be better in front of the camera right?” Scooby nods, “Why don’t we sort of trade skills?”

“You mean I teach you some of my football skills,” Scooby says, pointing between himself and Toby, “And you teach me how to be less of a dick in front of the camera.”

“I teach you to be less camera shy,” Toby corrects. “You weren’t a dick, you just froze. Being a dick would have meant being a complete moron and over acting completely.”

“Instead I just didn’t act at all,” Scooby says. He sighs, “Great...”

“Hey I think that was the better choice,” Toby admits, “I bet David’s well sick of seeing arse holes coming in and giving it way too much. And they probably get well stroppey when they don’t get the part. You handled it like a man.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Scooby says proudly, “I took it all and didn’t throw a tantrum,”

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“Exactly!” Toby points out, “You didn’t leg it, you didn’t demand another go. You accepted that you didn’t do that great and then left when asked. To be honest I think David wanted to kiss you for that.”

“Oh shut up!” Scooby says, jokingly shoving Toby in to a bush.

He runs off as Toby pulls himself out, laughing his head off. Toby races after him, also laughing. For a while they’re just a pair of ordinary teenage boys without a care in the world.

Toby knocks on the door of Emma’s parent’s house and waits. He’s arranged to see her but he really doesn’t want to. He’s completely exhausted from training and really only wants to lay down and relax. But then again he’s also brimming over with excitement and really wants to tell her about his new life plan. He hopes that she’ll be as excited as he is. The door opens and Toby smiles, expecting to see Emma. But it’s her dad instead.

“Toby!” Eric cries, “Good to see you mate!”

He drags Toby inside and slings an arm around his shoulders. Toby doesn’t particularly like it, it’s a bit overly familiar for his tastes but he bears it anyway, smiling politely at Eric.

“I’ve been telling my mates down the pub all about you,” Eric says conspiratorially, “And about how my daughter’s dating and will soon be marrying a Skelmerage Academy member and soon to be a Skelmerage player. They’re so jealous I just want to laugh. They can’t believe it really, that I’m going to have a proper football player for a son in law. But we both know that it was always going to happen don’t we mate?”



“Yeah...” Toby says quietly, “Is Emma here?”

“Oh god,” Eric says, hitting himself in the forehead with his free hand. He turns towards the stairs and shouts, “Emma! Toby’s here.”

Emma comes bouncing down the stairs and throws her arms around Toby’s neck. She kisses him, hard, but he tries to wriggle away. He hates kissing her in front of her parents, it just feels wrong. Debbie walks in to the hallway, pulling her coat on.

“Are you ready to go Eric?” she asks, checking through her hand bag. She looks up and smiles widely, “Oh hello Toby! Good to see you!”

“Hi Debbie,” Toby says awkwardly.

He tries to dislodge Emma from around his neck but it doesn’t work.

“We’re off to the shops love,” Debbie says to Emma, “Mind the rules and stay in the living room, ok?”

“No sneaking off up to the bedroom,” Eric says, pointing a finger at Toby. All joviality is gone, “I like you Toby but I remember what it was like being a seventeen year old boy. I don’t want you going upstairs at all while we’re not here apart from to pee, ok?”

“Yes sir!” Toby says firmly, “I understand.”

“Glad to hear it,” Eric says, smiling now. He pats Toby on the shoulder and kisses Emma’s cheek, “Be good and see you later.”

They head out of the door and as soon as it shuts behind them Emma is wrapped back around him.

“Let’s go upstairs,” she says huskily, “They’ll be gone for ages now.”

“I don’t know,” Toby says, a little reluctantly. “What if it’s a trap?”

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Emma bursts out laughing and Toby feels himself going red. A part of him is shouting at himself for breaking Eric's rules. But most of him is really enjoying the feeling of Emma being pressed up against him and wants to feel and see her completely naked.

“We won't be long,” she whispers in his ear, taking the lobe in her mouth and nibbling it gently, “Besides, they've been planning their shopping trip all day, they've got a massive list. We'll be done and tidied up before they're even half way done shopping, I promise.”

“Well...” Toby says, drawing the word out, “When you put it like that...”

He leans in for a kiss but Emma darts out of his arms and starts to race up the stairs. She's giggling the entire time and Toby briefly watches her bum as she runs. Then when she pauses on the landing and looks at him seductively his heart gives a jolt and he's racing after her. He catches her in the door to her bedroom and kisses her. Still kissing he slowly walks her backwards until the back of her knees hit the bed. He pushes her gently and she falls back. Within seconds he's on top of her, kissing her hard and one hand is making its way up her top. She hums with satisfaction and wraps her arms around his neck.

A little while later, though not too quickly, Toby pulls his shirt back on and sprays himself with some of his body spray. Emma comes out of the bathroom, touching up a few rogue strands of hair. She's smiling with satisfaction and Toby sits back on her bed, propping himself up on his elbows as he watches her pull her clothes back on.

“That was amazing,” he says, “Almost worth getting caught.”



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“Just be glad that we didn’t,” Emma says to him in the mirror, “Dad would have clocked you one and thrown you out completely naked.”

“Remind me not to do this again,” Toby says.

He walks up behind her and wraps his arms around her waist. He kisses the crook of her neck, where her shoulder and neck meet, a few times. He rests his chin on her shoulder and looks at her in the mirror.

“You did enjoy it right?” he asks, self conscious and worried, “I mean.. You did have an...”

“Yes,” Emma says softly. She turns in his arms and kisses him, “I did have an...”

Toby smiles proudly, puffing up his chest and standing straight.

“Right,” she says, patting his bum, “Let’s get downstairs and in the living room before they get back.”

“I thought you said they’d be gone hours?!” Toby shouts as she walks away.

“I lied,” Emma says, smiling at him slyly over her shoulder, “Now come on, living room.”

Toby shakes his head and grumbles but follows her anyway. He’s a little annoyed about how easily he had been lead, he knows that some of it is his own fault for being a teenage boy but still, she had clearly found it too easy to lie to him and he had clearly believed her like a gullible fool. He wonders what else she might have lied to him about. In the living room he sits down, and crosses his arms. He knows he’s pouting but he doesn’t care. Emma walks over and sits beside him. She throws her legs over his and snuggles up against his side. She lays her head on his shoulder.



“Oh stop sulking,” she says, “I was only a little white lie and it wouldn’t have caused any problems.”

“You said we had ages!” Toby cries, “And you said your dad would have beat the snot out of me!”

“I said he would have clocked you and thrown you out,” Emma points out. “Not the same thing. Besides, that’s a worst situation, not for sure.”

“Oh that makes me feel so much better!” he says sarcastically. “He might have clocked me and thrown me out or he might have just thrown me out and banned me from ever setting foot back in his house. That’s fantastic. Thanks a lot Emma!”

“It’s not that bad,” Emma says, throwing herself on to Toby’s lap, “We’re practically married now, it doesn’t matter that much. So how’s the Academy going?”

“It’s going fairly well,” Toby says, leaning his head back, “But I think I want to try something new.”

“Like what?” Emma asks, curiously, “Modelling or something?”

“I was thinking...” Toby says “I want to try to be an actor.”

“What?” Emma asks, laughing, “You’re joking aren’t you?”

“No,” Toby says firmly, “I’m serious. I want to try being an actor.”

“Why?” Emma asks, “That’s a bit airy fairy.”

Toby looks at Emma, she’s really not impressed. He supposed that him becoming an actor doesn’t fit with her grand scheme for her life. She’s fixed on the idea of being a WAG, his WAG, married to a rich football player. Still though, he wants to try and get her to understand him, what he loves and why he wants to change his life plan.

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“I just... I just love it,” he says, struggling to get the words out. “I really got a buzz when I stepped up and played the part of Rooney for that stunt double audition.”

“When did you do a bloody audition?” Emma asks sharply, “You didn’t tell me that,”

“I didn’t?” Toby asks, “I thought I had.”

“No!” Emma says firmly, “You really didn’t.”

“Oh well,” Toby says, “I went for an audition that the coach at the Academy mentioned to us and suggested we try, for the good of the club, you know. Anyway, I did really well and they gave me the stunt double role!”

“Oh... that’s ok,” Emma says, “But when did you play the part of Rooney? I mean, didn’t they just get you to pretend to be any player?”

“Well they did at first,” Toby admitted, “But then they needed to do another audition for Coleen’s role and asked me to stand in. And I loved it, like, really loved it and I nailed it I think. I seriously got into the role of Rooney. I’ve never felt like that before, I’ve never felt so buzzed, I’m telling you.”

“You sure it wasn’t because you were thinking that you were Rooney?” Emma says, “You know how you get sometimes.”

“No!” Toby insists, “It was because of the acting. It was like I was Rooney for a while. But I loved the limelight. All of those eyes on me, watching me, seeing me as someone else.”

“But you get the limelight when you’re playing football,” Emma says, not understanding, “Isn’t that enough? Everyone’s looking at you when you play football, shouting your name when you score. That’s limelight.”

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“Yeah I know,” Toby says reluctantly, “But it’s not the same. They watch the match and then they forget all about me. Football limelight, it’s just not the same.”

“I know!” Emma says urgently, “It’s better!”

“Not really,” Toby says “It’s not the same at all though.”

“But acting isn’t you!” Emma insists, “You’re a footballer, not an actor.”

“I can be a footballer and an actor,” Toby says, holding his hands out. “It’s not that much of a problem.”

Emma climbs to her feet and starts pacing across the living room floor. She’s wringing her hands and truthfully her face looks a little frantic. Toby watches her pace, her speed increasing, faster and faster.

“It’ll get in the way of your training,” she says quickly, turning to look at him, “You’ll be acting all the time and you’ll miss your training.”

“No it won’t get in the way,” Toby says, he’s already had this argument with himself. “I can put the hours in to my training when I’m not acting.”

“But the hours will clash,” Emma points out, “You’ll be trying to train and act at the same time but it just won’t work. What if you’ve got a match when you’re supposed to be filming?”

“I’ll work around it,” Toby says sharply, “People work two jobs around each other all the time. Anyway you should be pleased that I’ve found something that I really like. Aren’t you happy for me? I’ve found something that I love more than anything and that makes me really happy.”

“Of course I’m not pleased,” Emma cries out, “The training program, the Academy, that thing you’ve worked so hard to get in to, you need to give it one hundred percent! Hell

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you need to give it one hundred and ten percent, everything that you can give! You're putting your career at risk, you're putting our life together at risk all because you're chasing some dream that probably won't work."

"It shouldn't matter what I do babe," Toby says, "If you love me and I love you we can be happy regardless of whether I'm a footballer or not."

"I want you to be a footballer," Emma says sharply, "I need you to become a professional footballer, not some part timer. I want you to become a professional footballer so we can be rich."

"Yeah I know," Toby says with a sigh, "But what about what I want? You want me to be a footballer so we can be rich, but what if I want to be something else so I can be happy?"

"You've always wanted to be a footballer," Emma says, shaking her head, "It's what you've wanted since you were a little kid. Everyone knows that."

"No, I haven't wanted to be a footballer for years," Toby says, "My dad wants me to be a footballer. I went along with it, to keep the peace. I just agreed that I wanted to be a footballer to please my dad, that's all."

"Oh give over," Emma cries, "That's not true! You're just changing the past to fit the present. You're twisting everything to suit how you're feeling now, not sticking to the truth. We all know you've always wanted to be a footballer. You've got all those pictures of yourself in football kits since you were a little kid remember?! Why else would you have those unless you really wanted to be a footballer?"

"Every little boy likes football," Toby says, standing up as a surge of anger fills him, "And every little boy played in football team because they like it and find the game fun. But

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not every boy wants to make it their profession. Just like kids play soldiers, it doesn't mean that they want to become soldiers! And anyway, you're not listening to me!"

"I'm listening!" Emma says, "But you're talking complete and utter bollocks. I mean seriously? Where's this coming from?!"

"It's somethings that's been building for ages," Toby says, "I've just found another option now, something that actually makes me happy."

Emma glares at him and then seconds later she starts to shout at him. It doesn't stop. She keeps coming up with reason after reason for Toby not to go in to acting and stick with football. Toby's already had most of these arguments with himself, thought of ways around potential problems. He wouldn't have gone on to search for the audition if he hadn't. He is that sort of boy, man really, who likes to make sure that everything that could go wrong is thought of. He likes to look to the future, plan for all eventualities and he likes to be prepared.

They just keep arguing and arguing though. The more into the argument they get the more Emma keeps throwing up problems that are related directly to her, how she wants to be with a footballer, how she doesn't want to marry an actor who's never actually had a starring role in anything. She points out over and over how actors never make any money unless they get really famous, how actors live in bed-sits and do all sorts of drugs. Toby tries to counter these ideas, insisting that even if that's most actors it's not him and tells her over and over that he wouldn't do that. He tells her that he would get any job he could in order to support them as long as he got to act as well. But Emma isn't having it. She yells at him, screams at him.

And then the front door opens.

"We're home," Debbie calls out, sounding a little tipsy, "How are you both?"



“We’re ok,” Toby says. He smiles but it feels wrong. “I’m gonna have to go now I’m afraid.”

Eric looks at him and frowns. Toby knows that he can tell there’s something wrong. He brings to mind a happy person, someone without a care in the world and gets in to character, calling on the memory of being Rooney to help him through. He tries desperately not to put on a Liverpoolian accent.

“You’re leaving?” Eric asks, sounding genuinely disappointed. “I was going to get us all chips.”

“Sorry Eric,” Toby says with an apologetic smile, “I’ve just had a really long day and I need to sleep. You know how it is with training.”

“Of course, of course,” Eric says quickly, “You need to keep your strength up if you’re going to impress those scouts I suppose. I hope we’ll be seeing you again soon.”

“Hopefully!” Toby says, smiling widely, “If things don’t get too busy with football and stuff. It really depends I suppose. The coaches are pushing us pretty hard.”

“Of course my boy,” Eric says.

He claps Toby on the shoulder and holds the door open. Toby smiles at him and waves as he walks out of the bottom of the front garden and on to the street. As soon as Emma’s house is behind him though the smile drops away. A knot of guilt settles in his stomach, making him feel uneasy about lying to Eric and Debbie. He’s not tired at all, in fact his entire body is humming with energy. But it’s angry energy, the sort he used to have when his mum first left. He wants to hit something, kick something, just do something violent to get rid of it.

He thinks of Emma and the argument that they had. She just doesn’t understand him, he realises with a sting and the rise of bile in his throat. He is really happy that he’s discov-



ered acting and learned how much it means to him, but all Emma seems to care about is that she won't be married to a footballer. He can't believe that she is that shallow, that she could be that shallow. He thought that she was better than this, that she actually loves him and cares about him. She's the one person that he expected and relied on to understand him and what he's going through and now she's turned around and shown that she actually isn't that person. He can't understand how he could have been that wrong.

He thinks back to the scene that he acted out with Fiona, of how supportive Coleen had been in it. Even if it wasn't completely true, Coleen, as a character, had stood by Rooney whatever his choice, because she loves him, she'd even agreed to move to Manchester because it is what Rooney wanted. But Emma hadn't shown any of that willingness, she'd not shown any of that support. Toby feels tears prickling at his eyes and wipes them away harshly with the sleeve of his jumper. He feels betrayed and let down.

Worst of all he feels like everything that he knew and thought was real has just been a complete lie. He has confided in Emma, told her things that he's barely able to say to himself and she had mocked him for it! The memory of her words turns the betrayal in to anger, burning hot and raw in the pit of his stomach. He knows that he's probably going to be on his own after this. He's not going to have anyone there to back him up. Although maybe Scooby will, he probably gets it in some way. Arjan definitely will. Toby decides that he needs to talk to his best friend about this. He wants at least one person who will back him up, whether or not they agree with what he's doing. Arjan knows all about following dreams and reaching for goals that make you happy.





## Chapter 10

Thursday rolls around. It has come too slowly and too quickly for Toby. He feels like he's been waiting his entire life for this moment but the minute the day ticks over from Wednesday to Thursday he also feels like it's come too fast. He's nervous, brimming with excitement but also questioning whether or not he's actually got the talent to do this. He thinks that he does and he knows that if he doesn't at least try then he'll never know for sure. He wants to try. He has to try.

When he leaves home that morning he has his football kit in his bag and he waves goodbye to his dad like he does everyday. Anthony encourages him to have fun at training and to work harder than ever. Toby doesn't correct him, doesn't say a thing to make it seem like he's doing anything but going to training. But instead of turning left at the end of the road to get the bus to the Academy Toby turns right, heading towards the train station instead. Within moments he's on the train but he can't help but feel like he's doing something wrong. He can feel eyes on him, watching him and judging him. It's different to when he was in front of the camera, more malicious somehow. He keeps expecting his dad or the coach to turn up suddenly, pop out of nowhere and drag him back to training at the Academy.

Each shout makes him jump. Even when he gets on to the train and it pulls away from the station he's looking everywhere, searching for a familiar face that should be filled with anger. It's only when he gets off at the station near the studio that he takes a deep breath and begins to relax. No one can stop him from auditioning now, they can't drag him back and

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make him miss the audition. The next train back to Skelmerage isn't until the auditions are over. He's stuck here until then and that idea fills Toby with a sense of relief.

He takes a deep breath and heads towards the studio. There's a bounce in his step now, a spring that makes him feel like he's walking on air. He can't believe that he's actually here, about to audition. His blood is racing, every inch of his body is tingling. He stops outside the studio and looks up at the sign on front. His heart skips for a moment and he can feel something fluttering in his stomach. He smiles broadly and takes a deep breath. Finally he steps inside the studio and follows the signs for the audition.

There are a few auditionees already waiting. They're sitting on some of the chairs, shifting and looking around themselves uncomfortably. Some of them are talking to each other in quiet voices. They all look up as Toby walks in and he falters for a moment. Then he takes a deep breath and carries on walking. He signs up at the table that's been set up and is handed a script. He looks around for a seat and picks one that isn't near anyone else. He takes it and begins to look at the script.

He stares at the words in amazement. It's the exact same script that he read with Fiona. It's the same script that he's practiced with at home. He knows this inside out and he knows exactly how he wants to act it. He looks through the script and glances at some of the other actors that are all waiting to go in. Some of them are looking at their pages nervously, their mouths silently reading the lines. Toby sits back in his seat and crosses his legs, trying to hide his smile. He's fairly certain that he has the advantage here. He knows the words and he knows how the scene should go.



One by one the auditionees are called in to the room. None of them come out again and Toby wonders if they leave through a different door, just so that the other actors don't get scared off. Either that or this is some elaborate trap for serial killers to find their victims. Toby chuckles to himself at the thought, the laugh high pitched and nervous. He can feel the butterflies getting fiercer in his stomach and he starts thinking of how he might escape if it is serial killers. It helps with his nerves.

“Toby Arnold?” the woman with the clipboard asks.

Toby looks up sharply and nods. He climbs to his feet and grabs his bag. He's sure that he recognises the woman, he wonders if she was at the studio in Skelmerage, that would certainly explain it. He follows her in to the casting room, legs shaking so bad he almost expects them to give out at any moment. He can't see the people sat in the chairs at the end of the room, the receptionist is in the way.

“Toby Arnold, reading for the role of Wayne Rooney,” she says to the people in the chairs.

When she moves out of the way Toby spots David and Fiona, both looking at the scripts. Fiona looks beautiful but bored, haughty like she did the last time that he saw her. David looks stressed, his hair is a mess and there are empty coffee cups all around him. His left leg is jumping up and down. Toby takes a deep breath and calms himself. He clears his throat. They both look up and their eyes widen.

“Toby!” David says loudly, “What on earth are you doing here?”

“Trying out for the role,” Toby says with a shrug and a lopsided grin. “I enjoyed it so much last time I thought I'd give it a proper go, you know.”

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“So...” David says, leaning forward and grinning, “You want to be the stunt double and the lead actor then?”

“Yes,” Toby says quietly. His eyes drop to the floor, “I thought I’d give it a go, you know, see if I was good enough.”

“Ambitious,” David says, nodding “I like it. Well you already know Fiona, she’s going to be here to read the part of Coleen. It’s the scene that you’re familiar with.”

Fiona smiles tightly, clearly still unimpressed with Toby but she walks around the side of the table to stand beside him anyway. He quickly drops his bag on to the floor and holds his hand out for her to shake. She looks at it and her lip quirks upwards. It’s the side of her face that is hidden from David, the producer can’t see the disdain for Toby that’s written all over her face.

“Ok,” David says, “Off you go.”

Toby nods and fumbles with his script for a moment, trying to find the first page. They’re all out of order and he tries desperately to find the page that he needs. His hands are shaking, he’s completely aware that all of David’s focus is on him. He needs to nail it. He starts to read. At first he falters, his voice cracking and his hands shake so hard that he almost drops the pages. When Fiona speaks, perfectly channeling Coleen, he calms down. He feels his heartbeat slow and everything around him starts to fade away. He forgets that he’s in a casting room, in front of David. Instead he’s in the living room, their living room at Everton, talking to the woman who loves him and who is willing to support him no matter what. He is Wayne Rooney.

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David watches and is actually amazed. He can see the chemistry between Toby and Fiona. There hadn't seemed to be any when they first stood side by side but as soon as they started to read the chemistry had appeared. He feels like he is truly watching a couple who has been together for years, not two strangers who barely know each other. It's extraordinary.

They reach the end of the script.

"Ok, thank you," David calls out.

Toby jumps when David speaks. He's confused and disorientated for a moment and then he looks at Fiona. She's just Fiona again, not Coleen. He looks at David, the shaking returning.

"Toby, as you know this is only the first audition," David says, leaning forwards on the table and steepling his fingers together. "Your audition was far from perfect but to be honest that's not so surprising. However I really do think that there's something there. I think that you could be a good actor. But before we continue I need to know a few things. Have you ever acted before? Done any form of acting in any capacity?"

"No," Toby says bluntly, knowing that there's no getting around it, "I've never done anything like this before, ever."

"Ok." David says. He nods and makes a note on some paper beside him. "So why now? Why have you decided to try acting now?"

"I just want to do it," Toby says with a shrug, "I realised that I really enjoy it and thought I'd try and see at least."

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“Ok... ok...” David says slowly. “I’ll make a deal with you. If you enrol in a ten day masterclass with the National Association of Performing Arts, or NAPA as we call it in the business, and bring yourself up to speed with acting in general you can have a second audition. How does that sound? Will you do that for me?”

“Yes,” Toby says quickly, “Of course I will.”

“Good,” David says, smiling broadly now, “When you enrol please send me the email confirmation of your enrolment. That way I can see that you’re taking this all seriously.”

“Ok,” Toby says. He nods eagerly. “Yeah, I can definitely do that for you.”

“Wonderful,” David says happily, “Now though I’ll give you some feedback. You need to focus on toning down your acting. It’s a bit pantomime at the moment, a little over the top and extreme for film. Also you’re a little stiff. You need to tell the tutor that I’ve said this, it’ll give them something to focus on. I want to see something much more natural from you next time. I want a real performance, believable, like you’re actually Rooney, not Toby.”

“Ok,” Toby says eagerly, nodding like a dog toy, “I’ll focus on all of that, take it in mind and try to focus on fixing that.”

David nods. He holds out his hand and Toby stumbles forward. He grabs the producer’s hand and shakes it eagerly.

“Thank you David,” Toby says, “Thank you so much.”

He follows Fiona out of the room. He watches her backside as she walks. It hasn’t helped that Fiona had looked really fit today. With how gorgeous she is it had been really difficult for him to get in to role, to focus on playing the part of Rooney. He realises that he

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needs to zone out his surroundings more than he already does. He needs to cut out everything but what is going on when he's acting. Otherwise he'll never give that perfect performance, the performance that he needs to give.

His heart is still racing though, even as he continues to follow Fiona out of the studio. He can't believe that he's actually gone through with this, that he's actually got an offer for another audition. All he needs to do is to follow the requests that David's made. He's riding high, his entire body tingling with the realisation that he's actually done it, he's actually done an audition and he'll be able to get the part that he really wants. And as he watches Fiona he realises that some of that was partially down to her.

"Hey Fiona!" he calls out, racing to catch up with her, "Listen I was just wondering if I could have your number?"

Fiona looks at him, blinking. She looks amazed and surprised that Toby's asked for her number. He actually can't believe that he's asked for it himself, it was a spur of the moment thing, something that he didn't think through. This is totally unlike him.

"Ok," she says slowly, "I suppose so. I suppose you want some help with your acting."

"Yeah," Toby says quickly, "Yeah, totally, help with my acting."

She holds out a card and Toby takes it eagerly. He slips it in to his wallet and smiles at her as she walks away. He walks towards the train station whistling. He still can't believe he's just done that. His entire afternoon feels like a dream.



## Chapter 11

Later that afternoon he is laying on his bed, watching a film. Everyone is still out, doing their own things. As far as they're aware he's still at training. He plays with Fiona's card, twisting it between his fingers absentmindedly. He keeps glancing at the card, he wants to ring the number. He knows that he shouldn't, that it's a very, very bad idea. He has Emma, he doesn't really need help with acting, not yet. But the other part of him wants to call her. He can feel the need to call her bubbling up in his stomach. It's making him uncomfortable, making him unable to sit still and shift from side to side. The need to call Fiona is making his fingers itch, twitch and just keep moving. He can't even focus on the film, his gaze keep flicking to the numbers on the card. Finally he dials in her number. It rings.

"Hello?" Fiona says within a couple of rings,

"Fiona hi!" Toby says brightly, "It's Toby, from the audition earlier."

"Oh Toby," Fiona says, "Hi. How are you?"

"I'm good, I'm good," he says.

He searches for something to say, anything to breach the awkward silence that it threatening to take the call to a hang up.

"Did you want something?" Fiona asks.

"Oh! Yeah!" Toby says quickly. He stumbles over his words, his ideas floating around each other and banging against themselves, "I just wanted to say that I didn't know



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that you were going to be there today. At the audition. I don't want you to think I'm a weird creepy stalker or something."

"Right," Fiona says. He can practically hear her nodding, "Yeah, David wanted me to read the lines. He wanted to see me with the potential lead role actors so he could see how we fitted together and stuff."

"Is that usual?" Toby asks, "Having the lead female with the lead male auditioning together?"

"Oh totally," Fiona says quickly, "It's actually pretty normal. Especially once they've cast one of the roles. They generally want to make sure that the two actors actually work together, that they have that chemistry with each other."

"So..." Toby says slowly, "What did David think about me and you? Does he think we've got that good chemistry?"

Fiona laughs lightly.

"He said it could work," she admits, "that's one of the reasons why he put you through to another audition. But he wasn't too impressed with your acting if I'm honest. It was a bit stiff and wooden, didn't feel right really. But the chemistry was there at least. I think that you really need to work on your acting if I'm honest."

"That's why I was calling actually," Toby says, "I was kind of hoping that you might do some practice. Like if you would be able to help me practice my acting and give me some pointers before I sign up to NAPA or what have you? I can come to you."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Fiona says slowly, "I don't want you to think I'm leading you on or anything."

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“Oh come on,” Toby goads, “I’m asking you to help with my acting, nothing else, no funny business.”

“No,” Fiona says with a laugh, “Guys always say that and then one thing leads to another and things go really wrong. And then I never see them again.”

“I’m not like that,” Toby says, “I’ve already got a girlfriend. I’m not interested in that. I swear. I really want this role, I really want to act and I honestly really hope that you can help me.”

They keep talking for a little longer, Toby trying to get her to help him, Fiona repeatedly refusing.

“I’m serious Fiona,” Toby says eventually, all joking gone from his voice, “I really want to give this acting thing a proper shot and I really just want you to help me with my acting.”

“Ok,” Fiona says with a sigh, “I’ll help you. When were you thinking?”

“Tonight?” Toby suggests.

“Hmm,” Fiona says slowly, “Let me jut juggle a few things around. Can you come to me for about eight pm?”

“Yeah,” Toby says quickly, “Text me your address and I’ll be there.”

She gives him her address and promises to text it to Toby as well. He hangs up and smiles broadly.

As it gets closer to six pm, the time that Toby normally gets home from training, he races out of the house, kit bag in hand. He runs down the streets and around the block. He



hides and waits, checking his watch for the time that he normally gets home. As the time finally clicks around when he would be usually arriving home he heads towards the house.

He lets himself in like normal. He hangs up his bag and slides off his shoes.

“Hey Dad!” he shouts, “I’m home!”

“Where the hell have you been?” Anthony shouts, storming down the hallway. His face is red.

“I’ve been at training,” Toby says. His heart skips a little and the fluttering returns to his stomach. This time though it isn’t nerves, it’s something else. “Where else would I be?”

“You’re a liar,” Anthony spits out, “You’ve not been at training at all.”

“Yes,” Toby says, “I have.”

He squares off with his dad, standing toe to toe with him. Toby stands up straight, shoulders pushed back and chest puffed out. He’s surprised to realise that he’s actually taller than Anthony now by a good few inches. He wonders when that happened.

“No,” Anthony says, poking Toby in the chest, “I know for a fact you haven’t been at training today.”

“Oh yeah?” Toby says recklessly, “How do you know that?”

“Because your coach called.” Anthony says.

Toby steps back a few steps, stumbling on his discarded kit bag. Anthony smiles maliciously, it’s a scary expression on his face.

“Oh yes,” Anthony says, “He called and asked where you were. Said you hadn’t turned up to practice. I asked if he was sure and he confirmed that you weren’t there. That you hadn’t been there all day. So, I’m going to ask you again. Where. Have. You. Been?”



“Just out,” Toby says with a shrug. “I wanted to get away from training for a while and do my own thing.”

“Toby!” Anthony cries out, “You’ve worked so hard to get in to the Academy! You’re just throwing it all away. Were you with Emma? Is that what you’ve been doing?”

“No I wasn’t with Emma,” Toby says, rolling his eyes.

“So if I call her she won’t try and lie to me then?” Anthony says, waving his mobile phone at his son, “I told you it was a bad idea to get involved with her. She’s distracting you from your career and your training. You can’t let yourself get distracted. This is what you’ve dreamed of for years.”

“It’s not Emma!” Toby shouts. “I was just busy doing something else.”

“What?!” Anthony shouts, demanding, “Exactly what was so busy that you missed a day of training?! You’re going to be a professional footballer, you can’t just wander off when you feel like it and pick and choose when you train, it doesn’t work like that.”

“I had something important to do,” Toby says. He looks away and crosses his arms. He knows he looks like a sulking toddler but he just doesn’t care right now. “Something more important than training.”

“There’s nothing more important than training,” Anthony hisses out.

He grabs Toby by the upper arms and drags him away from the wall he backed himself up against. He shakes his son, hard.

“I’m not going to let this happen,” Anthony hisses, “I’m not going to let you throw away your chances of success for some ridiculous reason.”

“Let go of me!” Toby cries out, waving his arms around to try and break his dad’s grip, “I’m nearly 18, I’m an adult. I don’t have to answer to you any more!”

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“Yes you bloody well do,” Anthony says. He lets go of Toby and steps back, crossing his arms over his chest, “While you’re living under my roof, eating my food and using my electricity you have to live by my rules. And right now my rules are that you go to training and nothing else!”

Toby says nothing. He just glares at his father. White hot anger runs through his body. Anthony just continues to stare at him, his face stern and commanding. Slowly though his body relaxes and a look of worry appears on his face.

“What’s going on Toby?” he asks quietly, “Is it drugs? Gambling? Sex? Just tell me and we can sort it out. I just want you to focus on playing football and doing well at the Academy.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Toby mutters, “You never understand.”

“I might if you tell me,” Anthony says, “Are you on drugs? Have you started taking steroids or something?! Do I need to get you in to rehab? You can’t have a drug problem Toby, you’re too young and it’ll screw up your entire footballing career if you don’t sort it out. None of the major teams will take on a player who’s addicted to drugs! You’ve got to stay clean!”

“Jesus Christ!” Toby cries, flinging his arms up in the air, “That’s all you actually fucking care about isn’t it?! That I become a professional footballer! This is why you won’t understand. You never listen to me, you only hear what you want to hear.”

“Then tell me why you weren’t at training!” Anthony shouts, “You’ve worked your entire life for this opportunity and now you’re just throwing it away!”

“I give up!” Toby yells, “I can’t deal with this right now. I’m going out!”

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He turns and throws the door open. It slams against the wall with a loud clatter and shakes in its frame. Toby storms through it, grabbing it and slamming it shut behind him. The bang is loud, it makes the entire house shake and there's a finality to it. Toby walks towards the street, his long legs easily eating up the path between the door and the front gate.

Anthony stands there, mouth hanging open in shock. Toby has never spoken to him like that, never used those sorts of words and he's certainly never stormed out of the house. Normally, when they argue, which rarely happens, Toby will storm upstairs and lock himself in his bedroom with the music blaring and a film on TV. But today he's actually walked off.

Anthony knows that something's going on, that something's not right with his son. But he can't figure out what. Toby is lying through his teeth about something, not telling him the truth. Anthony wonders how long it's been happening, how long Toby's been lying to him. It was really only luck today that caught him out. The fact that Toby hasn't bothered to set the record straight, hasn't told him what is actually going on makes a cold knot of dread settling in Anthony's stomach. He feels a little sick and just wants a cup of tea. Maybe a beer actually.

"Daddy?" Rebecca says quietly, "Where's Toby gone?"

Anthony looks up. Rebecca is looking at him from the landing above. He wonders how long she's been there, how much she's heard. She's too smart for her own good sometimes. He smiles but it feels forced, too big for his face.

"Your brother's just a bit upset at the moment," he says, faux brightness in his voice, "He's gone out for a while to cool off. He'll be back soon, don't worry."



“Oh... ok,” Rebecca says.

Her head disappears. She didn't look convinced by Anthony's excuse and explanation and he can't blame her. He wants to know what's going on. As he heads to the kitchen he trips on Toby's kit bag. He glares at it before he eventually sighs and picks it up, taking it in to the bottom of the stairs out of the way - it clearly doesn't need washing.

Toby wanders the streets for a while, his mind racing with thought after thought. It feels a bit like earlier, when he asked for Fiona's number. And when he called her. It just feels weird, surreal, like he's just floating around and watching himself doing these things without actually controlling them. His dad knows that there's something wrong, Toby knows it, and Anthony's not going to drop it until he finds out what. Toby walks around, his feet just leading him while he keeps his head down and hands in his pockets. He keeps trying to figure out what to do, where to go.

He doesn't want to go home, not yet, if ever. He can't go to Scooby's house, that'll just lead to questions about where he was today. He can't go to Arjan's, he still lives with his mum and dad and Toby really doesn't want to be involved in another argument between father and son. At Arjan's that's exactly what he's going to get. There's really only one place he could go, one place where he knows he'll be at least partially welcome, even if he is early. He pulls out his phone and brings up the text from Fiona. He scrolls through until he finds her address, brings it up on the Maps app and begins to head that way.



## Chapter 12

He stops on the street and stares up at Fiona's house. This isn't what he expected. It's large, Victorian and old looking. The front garden is neatly mowed and tidy although it is littered with deck chairs. There are empty bottles stacked neatly outside the front door and if Toby listens really closely he can hear the strains of some song or other that he doesn't recognise. There are people moving around on the ground floor, he can see their shapes through the massive bay windows that cover practically the entire front of the house. He wonders if any of them are Fiona. He sighs, straightens up his jacket with a few tugs and begins to walk towards the front door.

He glances in the window, staring at his reflection as he waits for someone to answer the ringing of the bell. He wants to make sure that he looks at least vaguely tidy, he doesn't want to upset Fiona's parents if they answer. There's a silhouette coming down the hall towards the front door, getting bigger and clearer as it gets nearer. The door swings open with a creak and the shaking of glass. Toby smiles although it falters when he realises that it's not a middle aged woman on the other side of the door but a guy, probably a few years older than Toby himself is. He's got curly dark hair, bright blue eyes and he's wearing a dressing gown. He looks nothing like Fiona. Toby wonders whether he's come to the right address.

"Erm... hi?" Toby says.

"Hi," the guy says, smiling widely, "Can I help you?"

"Oh right, yeah," Toby stammers, "Erm, does Fiona live here?"





“Yeah, yeah,” the guy says, nodding quickly. He sort of squints at Toby, sizing him up, “You a friend of hers?”

“Yeah, sort of, I’m Toby,” Toby admits, grinning awkwardly, “I was supposed to come round later but I found myself free sooner than I expected. Is Fiona in?”

“Aww, she’s not back yet mate,” the guy says, rubbing his head, “But tell you what, why don’t you come in and wait for her. She shouldn’t be too long.”

“If you don’t mind,” Toby says, hesitating.

This is a strange guy, in a strange house and Toby is supposed to be meeting a girl that he realises that he barely knows. It’s not the most normal of circumstances. But the guy seems friendly enough, if a little odd, and Toby doesn’t feel a single bit of worry when he looks at him.

“No problem mate,” the guy says, “We always love meeting new people. We’re in the living room, you can hang with us until Fiona gets back, she usually comes straight in there anyway,”

Toby nods, hesitant at first but pretty quickly he decides that it’s not a problem. The guy grins wider and steps aside, waving an arm towards the rest of the house.

“Well come on in buddy,” he says happily, “Me casa est su casa and all that jazz,”

Toby steps through and looks around. The door shuts behind him and he almost misses the click of the key turning in the lock. He turns to look at the guy and sees him putting the key back on a peg beside the door.

“Bit of a rough neighbourhood,” the guy says, grinning apologetically, “Can’t be too careful. Well, that and we like to be able to hear if someone’s coming in. I’m Marco by the way.”

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He holds a hand out for Toby to shake which he does so happily. This guy seems cool enough. Toby isn't going to argue about the bad neighbourhood. One of the streets that he walked down to get here, had house after house with the windows boarded up where they'd been smashed, bins toppled over and graffiti scrawled everywhere. This street itself isn't too bad but the big houses must be like catnip to wannabe burglars.

Marco grins and slings his arm around Toby's shoulders. He leads Toby further in to the house.

"Great to meet you Toby," Marco says. He kicks open the living room door with a clatter, "Welcome to our little family."

Toby steps, or rather is dragged, in to the living room. He looks around in amazement. He's never seen decorating like it. Everything is brightly coloured and natural. There are beanbags in a few places, a guitar propped up near the fireplace, a set of bongo drums next to it. There's an entire shelf stacked full of books and CDs and DVDs. Toby's sure that he can see a few video tapes in there too. The television, wide screened and curved, looks like it's playing some cartoon or other. There are two other young people sat on the sofa, a guy and a girl, their legs twisted together and their fingers doing some sort of dance with each other.

"Guys, this is Toby," Marco says, clapping his hands together to get their attention. "Toby this is Carrie and John."

The girl, Carrie, smiles at him widely. He smiles back. He likes her already. She's got one of those small round faces and a turned up nose that makes her look like a pixie. Her hair is a wild mess, long and blonde. There are flashes of purple and blue amongst the blonde but he can't tell if it's dyed or paint. There are splodges of purple and blue on her clothes too, a long green skirt and white tank top. Her feet are bare. There are flowers twisted into the

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strands of her hair and she's wearing bracelets and bangles that jangle whenever she moves.

Toby blinks when he realises that there's a paintbrush sticking out of a knot of hair at the back of her head and that there are feathers hanging from her ears.

The guy, John, nods at Toby, smiling a little less widely before he turns his attention back to playing whatever game it is that he's playing with Carrie and her fingers. John is much more put together than Carrie, he's wearing tailored trousers, a loose shirt and a waistcoat that's hanging open. He's got stubble on his face, probably about three days worth and Toby is suddenly acutely aware that he doesn't even need to shave more than once a week. John's dark brown hair flops into his eyes and he pushes it back with a ringed hand.

"Take a seat, take a seat," Marco says, waving Toby towards one of the bean bags. "Our errant housemate shouldn't be long. She tends to be back before eight."

"Yeah," Carrie says, not looking up, "And then she's out again in minutes. I don't know why she doesn't just stay with her mum and dad, it'd save a fortune on rent."

"Have you met her parents?" Marco asks, his voice full of laughter, "They're crazy."

The conversation starts to wind towards jokes and stories about Fiona's parents that Toby doesn't get, either because he's an outsider or just too young. He just sits and looks around, half listening to what they're saying. This is beyond bizarre for him. He had been expecting Fiona to live in a small flat possibly, or maybe with her parents. Most of Toby's friends live with their parents still. He had been expecting some posh terrace house in Manchester, mum and dad perfectly dressed and unwilling to let some strange, slightly scruffy looking boy sit in their living room to wait for their daughter.

Instead Fiona's in a house share, living with people her own age and probably having loads of fun. It's strange and weird and so out of the ordinary for Toby that he doesn't know

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where to begin. A tap on his knee brings his attention back to the room. Carrie's smiling at him and holding out a spliff.

"You smoke?" she asks brightly.

Toby looks at it for a moment. This really is strange.

"No," he says quickly, "No thanks."

"Suit yourself," Carrie says with a shrug.

She slips the spliff back between her lips and skips over to settle on John's lap. Toby wishes he had tried it, even a little, but the Academy does spot drugs testing and the last thing he wants is to get thrown out of it for being high on weed just the once. It's one thing if he leaves it of his own free will to go on to something better but getting thrown out is far worse than that and would not look good for him in the future.

He's surprised though, how easily Carrie had accepted his refusal. They'd always been taught in school that people who wanted you to try drugs would keep pushing and pushing until you gave in. Carrie hadn't done that, she had asked and then walked away when he had said no. It was like she had been offering him a drink and accepted his answer straight away. Suddenly he was less nervous and felt more relaxed. Maybe it was the second hand smoke or maybe it was just because these people seemed to be genuinely cool and relaxed themselves.

"So... erm," Toby says, trying to figure out how to have a grown up conversation with people who are blatantly older and wiser than he is, "What do you guys do then?"

"Well I'm a waitress," Carrie says, "Working in a cafe that all the builders go to in the mornings and at lunch time. But really I'm an artist and a poet, trying to break out of the narrow box that society keeps trying to put us in to so I can make my mark on the world."



“Oh... cool?” Toby says.

“And I work at a cinema,” Marco says as he exhales a plume of smoke. He passes the spliff on to John, “But I’m trying to get my band noticed by one of the big labels. Even if its not the sort of music they listen to and produce normally I’d love the chance and the feedback would be awesome.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Toby agrees. He doesn’t have a clue what Marco is actually talking about. He looks at John, “And what about you... John?”

“I’m a lay about,” John drawls, holding the spliff to Carrie’s lips, “Mummy and Daddy provide everything, including this house, I collect the rent from these losers and in the meantime I’m trying to put together a few of my own creative projects.”

“Basically we’re all trying to hold down regular jobs,” Carrie says, exhaling a cloud of smoke, “Just to support ourselves while we try to break into the arts world, you understand? Well all of us except John here. He gets to keep the rent as long as he collects it so he doesn’t need a job.”

“Rich tosser,” Marco says.

Its not spiteful though. It’s said with a smile and a laugh. John looks at his friend and house-mate and smiles indulgently.

“You’re just jealous my friend,” John says, “I get to lay around all day and follow my own pursuits while you’re stuck selling sweets to snotty children and chavs,”

Marco doesn’t say anything. Instead he just grabs a nearby cushion and tosses it at John’s head. John squawks when it hits him in the face and holds his hand out to stop the spliff from getting damaged. Carrie takes it from his fingers and skips out of the way. She

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settles herself on the sofa next to Toby and smiles at him. The two guys are messing around and she sits and watches them both fondly.

“They’re always like this,” she says, “It’s so cute.”

“Hey!” they both shout, “It’s not cute!”

“Whatever,” she says in a sing song voice, “Keep telling yourselves that.”

The two guys sit back in their seats and pout. Carrie giggles and puts out the spliff.

“Did you get that fifth room filled yet John?” she asks, “Your parents left another message about it the other day.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” John groans, “Why can’t they leave it alone? It’s not like they need the money for it.”

“Well have you?” Carrie says, unconcerned, “I can’t keep putting them off for you.”

“No alright, no I haven’t,” John snaps, “I’ve been interviewing people all week but they just don’t seem to fit.”

“What kind of people?” Marco asks.

“Builders, lawyers, office workers,” John says in a droning voice as he waves his hand around, “You know the type. But they all have the wrong vibe. I don’t think they’d fit in here and I’m not having a repeat of Jason again.”

Marco and Carrie groan and roll their eyes. Toby wonders who Jason is and what he’s done to get that sort of reaction. John looks at Toby and narrows his eyes.

“I don’t suppose you might be interested?” John suggests, “Or do you know anyone interested in renting a room here?”

Toby opens and closes his mouth a few times as he thinks about it. No one springs to mind and he shrugs.

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“Ah well,” John says with a sigh, “If you do let me know.”

They lapse in to silence for a few minutes. Everyone is focused on the TV. Then Toby hears a key in the lock and the door creaking open.

“Hellooo!” Fiona cries out. “I’m home!”

The others all shout greetings but Toby just sits there, a little awkwardly. He wonders how she’ll react to seeing him here so early, sat on her sofa. He hears her footsteps, slowly coming closer to the living room door. She walks in and sees him sat on the sofa. She pauses for a moment, her eyebrows raised before she smiles. She’s just as gorgeous as she was this afternoon in Toby’s eyes. His breath catches a little.

“I see you’ve made yourself at home,” she says brightly, “You’re early.”

Toby shrugs and grins apologetically. He does feel at home though, completely relaxed and like he belongs here. Fiona disappears off in to the kitchen for a little while and he can hear her banging around pots and pans. Toby finds himself wondering why he feels so comfortable here, why he feels like he’s home. He supposes it’s because all of these people are on the same wavelength. They’re relaxed and they have the same hopes and dreams, they know where the others are coming from. They all want to be a part of the arts world and even though it’s probably just as competitive as the world of sports that competitions doesn’t seem to bother these people.

Toby tries to figure it out, why he’s so relaxed. Normally he hates new people, it usually take him a while to properly get to know them and even longer to feel properly comfortable with them. But here it’s different. He likes it here, no one’s arguing with each other or trying to compete in snide little ways. He supposes that it’s because they’re all so similar. He knows that there’s competition in the art world but it’s different in a way. Sports have only a

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few places to really show yourself off, to let yourself shine. Everyone wants one of those few places so they're all competing against each other. If one person succeeds then someone else loses out, one person's failure is another person's victory. It's win or lose, no middle ground and the critics will tear you to shreds in a matter of minutes if you make one mistake. And they never let you forget it either.

But the art world is different. Success comes from being happy with your work, not from shining the brightest. Wealth and fame are bi-products, not the ultimate aim for these people. They know and understand, that becoming famous can be a matter of chance, it's not the end goal, their reason for doing it. They want to be in the art world because they love it. They know that one person's success doesn't mean that they'll lose out. For Toby the art world suddenly seems so much more relaxed. There's no cut throat competition, people help each other and applaud each other's successes. Art touches people so much deeper than football ever could or ever has. Everyone responds to some sort of art in some way, no matter what, while football is, in comparison, only enjoyed by a minority.

Football, in comparison to art, suddenly looks so dumb to Toby, so trivial and unimportant. The art world is deeper, more important. The people, the profession, the substance of art, it's all involving, all consuming, and people seem to be happier because they're doing what they love for the sake of doing it. At least it seems that way to Toby as he watches these people that he's just met but who he likes more than he has ever liked anyone. They remind him a little of Arjan, doing what they want to rather than what society is telling them to. Just like them Arjan is following his dream. He wants to make money because he wants to be rich but he wants to be rich on his terms, no one else's. Toby thinks that Arjan would probably



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like these people even if he doesn't get the art world. They seem to have the same principles as each other.

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## Chapter 13

“Hey Toby,” Fiona says suddenly.

Toby jumps and looks up. Fiona’s popped her head around the door and is grinning at him.

“I’ve just made myself some dinner.” She says, “Let’s go up to my room and we’ll start practicing while I eat.”

“Ok,” Toby says quickly, “Yeah,”

He shoots to his feet and heads towards the door. He pauses in the doorway and turns back to these people he’s just met.

“It was nice to meet you all,” he says, smiling and waving awkwardly.

“You too mate,” Marco says, his eyes glued to the TV screen, “Come again soon.”

“It was lovely meeting you Toby,” Carrie says, smiling at him from her place on John’s chest, “I hope to see you again soon.”

“Same Toby,” John says, glancing at him and waving a hand, “Catch you later dude,”

Toby grins and waves. He shuffles in the spot for a moment before he finally ducks out of the door. He feels so awkward around these guys, not because they’re new but because they’re so cool. He just feels like a kid, a small geeky kid, around them. Fiona is stood on the stairs, waiting for him. She’s propping her head up on one arm, leaning against the banister and smiling at him fondly.



“You’re adorable,” she says softly. Then she straightens, “Come on. Practice isn’t going to do itself you know.”

Toby bounds up the stairs after her. He finds himself watching her arse as he walks. She really has an amazing bottom. Toby finds himself wanting to reach out and touch it. He has to fight the urge and his hands grip so hard on the banister that the knuckles turn white. He follows her in to her bedroom and hovers in the doorway uncertainly.

It’s definitely a girl’s bedroom. The walls are white, stark white, but the bed is covered in pillows and blankets, all different shades of purple. There are things sparkling all over the place, pieces of jewellery that Toby couldn’t name if he had to. There are skirts and dresses tossed all over the place, a dresser that’s covered with bits of make up and a mirror stood in one corner of the room. The front of Fiona’s wardrobe is covered in photographs, not a single shred of the wood beneath coming through. Toby steps closer as Fiona settles herself on the bed and starts eating. He knows that she’s watching him as he examines her photographs.

One of them is of Fiona, slightly younger, with a couple that are probably her parents on either side of her. She’s got a baby in her arms and another younger kid stood next to her. The house behind is boring and plain looking, not that different from Toby’s actually.

“That’s my parents and little brothers,” she says fondly.

Toby turns and looks at her.

“They’d finally brought that house from the council a week before I left,” she says, smiling fondly. “First house they’d ever lived in as a couple and they finally bought it after almost 20 years. They were so happy.”

“Oh...” Toby says stupidly, “I thought...”



“That I was some rich middle class snot?” Fiona asks. She laughs, “Most people do and I don’t bother correcting them.”

“Why?” Toby asks, walking towards her.

She pats the end of her bed and Toby perches himself there. He watches her as she continues to eat.

“That’s quite off putting you know,” Fiona says when she glances up and catches him. “Didn’t your parents ever teach you that it’s rude to stare?”

Toby blushes and looks away. He really was being quite rude then. He’s just finding it a bit hard to believe that he’s actually here.

“Sorry,” he mumbles. “Didn’t mean to.” He pauses, “So why do you seem all middle class?”

“Just the way things happened I suppose,” Fiona says with a shrug.

Her voice sounds different. The words are more relaxed, less short and sharp and clipped. She sounds like the other girls that Toby knows, her accent is the same as Emma’s now and it sounds completely natural. It’s just a little more refined.

“Dangers of private school I suppose,” she says with a shrug eventually, “If you’re surrounded by the middle classes sooner or later you start to pick up their way of speaking.”

“So how’d you manage to go to that arts school then?” Toby asks bluntly, “I mean, if they didn’t own their own house then your parents couldn’t have been that well off. Hell, my dad owns our house and he can’t afford to send us to fancy schools or stuff.”

“I got a scholarship,” Fiona says, putting aside her empty plate, “Apparently the scholarship people saw some sort of promise in me and decided that it was worth taking a chance. Of course the others at school didn’t see it that way. As far as they were concerned I

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was just some poor kid from the wrong side of town trying to horn in on their territory. They didn't take kindly to me starting."

"Shit," Toby says blankly, "How did you manage to keep going then? I bet they were right little pricks."

"Oh they were," Fiona says with a laugh, "But once I started focusing on the lessons and ignored everything else they started to realise that I was a pretty decent actress and apart from the money thing I was just the same as them. There were a few hold outs of course, some kids with old school parents and old money who'd always been taught to think a certain way, but they were few and far between. Once I proved my worth I think they all just backed off though. I might not have been rich but I definitely had the talent."

"Wow," Toby says.

"But enough about me," Fiona says firmly, "Let's get started on this practice."

They start to run through the script. Fiona stops him every now and then and encourages him to think about how Toby's playing the role. He starts to explain how he came to make certain choices and why he is choosing to play certain emotions rather than others. She looks suitably impressed when Toby mentions watching all the interviews and talks with Rooney that he could find to try and get his character down. She reluctantly admits that she did the same thing with Coleen's role, read and watched anything that she could find about the woman. She seems embarrassed at first but Toby encourages her and soon they're talking to each other about how different things can affect a person.

Fiona doesn't want to admit it, barely to herself, but she's actually impressed by how sensitive Toby actually is, as well as how intelligent. She thought he was just some dumb footballer but as he talks about the role and how Rooney was shaped by his life she realises

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that there's a lot more to Toby than just that. And the way that he spoke to her about her family, drew out more information from her and sympathised with her about school, makes her realise that there is a lot more to him than she first thought. He's passionate, talking with his entire body about acting and football, he's compassionate and empathetic, feeling her emotions and playing off them, understanding why she's the way she is and not judging her. He's also driven and determined, traits that she really never expected to see in a trainee footballer from the North.

Toby is also realising that he was wrong about Fiona. She's not actually that different to him and the arrogance and snobbishness that she first showed him melts away as they spend more time together. He thought she was snobby, stuck up, but as they talk, both about acting and life in general, he realises that it's just a way for her to cope with people, to keep them at a distance until she decides that she can trust them. Given her past with the art school he really isn't that surprised. She's driven too, determined to get where she wants to go and Toby completely understands that. But she's also funny, willing to have a laugh even at her own expense. Toby finds that sometimes he has to stop practicing a scene because she's making him laugh too much to continue.

They practice and practice, running through the scene over and over until they know each other's lines as well as their own. They don't need the script and Toby's almost got all of the nuances of his performance sorted.

"Don't get cocky," Fiona warns him when they take a break, "Getting one scene sorted is one thing, but you're trying out for an entire movie and when they're filming you're not going to be able to spend days learning a single scene. Sometimes you won't even get the script until the morning that you're due to shoot it."

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“Seriously?” Toby asks sharply. He winces when his voice squeaks, “Is that even allowed?”

“It happens all the time,” Fiona says with a shrug, “They’re always changing the script. It could be worse though. Have you ever seen the behind the scenes documentaries for Lord of the Rings?” Toby shakes his head and pulls a face, that sort of thing isn’t really his cup of tea, “Well you should watch them, and the films too. You’ll learn a ridiculous amount about actually being involved in a massive film and a lot of the actors talk about the choices they made when creating their characters. They used to get new pages of script ten minutes before they filmed the scene and they’d have to learn it all.”

“I’ll look in to that,” Toby says doubtfully.

He raises his hand to brush his hair from his face and freezes when he spots the time on his watch.

“Shit!” he shouts, shooting to his feet, “I’ve got to get back or my dad’s going to go mental.”

“You still live at home?” Fiona says, “I thought you lived in a flat or something,”

“I’m seventeen,” Toby says, “I can’t even get a decent paying job yet, let alone afford to rent my own place. Besides, my little sister would go mental if I tried to leave her yet.”

“Aww that’s sweet.” Fiona says.

Toby blushes and rubs the back of his head, looking at the floor. Fiona’s smiling at him like he’s her younger brother or something, a look of fondness in her eyes. She walks him to the door and they arrange to see each other again, to go over his other acting skills. Fiona has a few old scripts that she wants him to practice with. He pauses right in the open doorway, just as they’ve said goodbye. He quickly darts up the steps and kisses Fiona on the

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cheek. Her skin is soft beneath his lips and she smells like vanilla and flowers. Toby quickly breathes in her scent before racing off down the road. Fiona watches him in shock and raises a hand to touch the spot where he kissed.

Toby tries to let himself in to the house quietly. He's just hanging up his coat when his dad appears down the hallway.

"Where've you been?!" Anthony demands, "It's gone 11, I've been waiting up for hours! You've got training tomorrow!"

"I'm well aware of that thanks," Toby snaps, "I've just been out with a friend."

"You could have at least told me!" Anthony says. "Emma's been calling the house all night, apparently she couldn't get through on your mobile. And then when I try and ring you too I get no response."

"I guess I didn't have any signal," Toby says, checking his phone.

He rolls his eyes when he sees that Emma's called him eight times and left him two voice-mail messages. He shoves his phone back in his pocket. He starts to head towards the stairs.

"Where've you been that doesn't have any signal?" Anthony hisses. "All of your mates live in places with decent signal."

"I told you," Toby says, shaking off his dad's grip, "I was at a friend's house."

"Which friend?" Anthony snaps, "They better not be distracting you from training, I won't have you throwing your career and your dreams away."





“You don’t know them,” Toby says quickly, “They’re a new friend, someone I’ve only known a little while.”

“And you went to their house?!” Anthony cries, “Do you have any idea how dangerous that is? I mean, how do you know that they’re not a crazy person? Or that they’re not some sort of predator trying to groom you?”

“You have got to stop reading those novels Dad,” Toby says, shaking his head, “Besides, they’re perfectly safe and I reckon that I’m big enough to look after myself. Now, I’m going to bed, like you said, I’ve got training tomorrow.”

He starts up the stairs again, putting one of his hands on the banister. Anthony quickly covers Toby’s hand with his and holds it gently but firmly. Toby stops and looks at his dad.

“Is everything ok?” Anthony asks, “With training I mean. You’ve not really told me a thing about the Academy, or how your training’s going. You just sort of sulk around the house or shut yourself in your room. You can tell me you know.”

“I told you, training’s going well,” Toby says, trying to pull free slightly, “It’s football training, there’s not much else to say.”

“You used to talk to me about your football training all the time before you got in to the Academy,” Anthony points out, “You’d break it down, piece by piece. Now you barely say a word about training other than ‘it’s fine’ and ‘it’s hard’. You don’t talk to me any more,”

“That’s because you used to ask me all sorts of questions,” Toby says sharply, “You’d ask me to break down the practice so you could analyse my performance and if I was giving it my all. I never told you of my own free will, you’d always ask for it. Now you’re just asking if I’m a famous footballer yet or if I’ve been signed up by anyone.”

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“You can still tell me Toby,” Anthony says, his voice is a little harsh now, “You don’t need me to ask you questions about something in order to tell me all about it. I’m your dad.”

“I’m not going to talk to you about every little thing in my mind,” Toby says, “I don’t want to come home everyday and then tell you, step by step how my day was. That’s not who I am. For God’s sake, sitting around and telling your dad what you did today sounds like something out of primary school or something. I’m a freaking adult, I’m growing up and trying to do my own thing. That doesn’t involve talking to you about my life all of the time.”

“You’re seventeen!” Anthony shouts, “That doesn’t make you an adult. Just because you feel like one doesn’t mean you are one! You’ve still got a lot to learn about the world including how bad it can get. You can’t cook, you can’t wash your clothes and you don’t even know how to clean your room. You can’t look after yourself!”

“I can learn all that crap!” Toby shouts back, “You keep going on at me to act like an adult and look after myself but whenever I try to be an adult, do my own thing all you do is shout at me and want to know about what I’m doing!”

“Because I’m your dad!” Anthony shouts, “It’s my job to worry about you and want to keep you safe. I’m not just going to let you wander off and get in to who knows what sorts of trouble because I want you to be independent. We’ve been working all your life to get you in to the Academy and you’re not even taking that seriously! You’re skipping training, you’re staying out late. What am I supposed to think?!”

“You’re supposed to stay out of it,” Toby shouts. He wrenches his hand free of his dad’s grip, “You’re supposed to step back and let me live my life. It’s my life, not yours. I’ll do what I want and then deal with the consequences. By myself!”

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“Not while you’re under my roof,” Anthony says firmly, “While you’re still living here you do as I say, as I tell you to. You don’t mess around and screw up your chance at the future! You come home at a reasonable time, you tell me about your day. End of story.”

“How about end of conversation!” Toby snaps, “I’m not living with your stinking rules!”

Toby doesn’t wait for his dad to answer. Instead he storms off up the stairs. He can hear his dad shouting things after him, making his own way up the stairs but Toby ignores it all. He stamps towards his own room. Movement out of the corner of his eye catches his attention. He looks over. Rebecca is stood in her doorway, her face pale and eyes wide. Her bottom lip is quivering.

“It’s ok,” he says quietly, “Just go back to sleep,”

“Why were you shouting at each other?” she asks quietly, her voice shaking, “You sounded so angry,”

“It just happens sometimes,” Toby says walking over to his sister, “Don’t worry, it’s nothing about you. You’re still brilliant,”

Rebecca steps forwards and buries her face in Toby’s chest. Her body shakes as he wraps his arms around her and holds her tight.

“I don’t like it when you two fight,” she murmurs, her voice muffled by Toby’s shirt, “It makes my tummy hurt.”

“I’m sorry ladybug,” Toby says. He pulls back and holds Rebecca away from him, holding her shoulders gently, “I’ll try not to shout next time, ok?”

“Ok,” Rebecca says quietly.

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Toby leans down and kisses her gently on the top of her head. She turns around and goes back in to her room. He stands there and watches the door shut before heading towards his own. Anthony is watching from the top of the stairs. Toby says nothing, he just glares at his dad and shuts the door to his bedroom with a loud, final bang.



## Chapter 14

“So are you looking forward to training today?” Anthony asks the next morning as he puts a plate of toast down in front of Toby.

Toby just shrugs and starts tearing the toast to pieces.

“Come on,” Anthony says, nudging him, “You’ve got to be a little excited right? Any ideas what you might be working on today?”

“Dunno,” Toby says, his mouth full of toast, “Probably just the same thing that we do everyday.”

“And what might that be?” Anthony asks, “You’ve not exactly told me much about your training remember.”

Toby looks at his dad and his top lip curls up in a sneer. He ignores his dad and turns his attention back to his toast. Anthony slams his hand down on the table.

“Toby!” he shouts, “What have you been doing at training?!”

“Running around and kicking a fucking football,” Toby shouts. “What do you think we do?”

“Watch your language young man!” Anthony snaps, “I don’t know what you do at training, you’ve not told me a single thing about it.”

“Because it’s not interesting!” Toby shouts, “It’s boring as FUCK and I don’t wanna talk about it.”

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“Well you better start talking,” Anthony says, “We’ve worked too hard and I’m paying a lot of money for your training. I want to make sure it’s going to a good cause,”

Rebecca looks between the two arguing men, her head swings back and forth like a spectator at a tennis match. With each raised shout she sinks deeper and deeper in to her seat. But she still can’t stop watching and listening.

“You’re the one that made me try out!” Toby shouts, “You had no trouble paying it out before. You said it was worth it for my future, regardless of cost. You kept banging on about how you wish you’d had the chance when you were younger. Now I won’t talk to you about training and you’re bringing up money?”

“Then tell me about the training,” Anthony says harshly, “I want to know about the training and if it’s so boring and simple why won’t you just tell me?”

Rebecca can’t watch them any more. She doesn’t like the way her dad’s face is getting all red and crumpled. Or the way that Toby keeps snarling at Anthony. He looks like a wild animal, an angry dog or something. That isn’t the loving big brother she knows. It scares her and makes her feel sick. She focuses on her toast, trying to ignore the shouting.

“Because I don’t want to!” Toby says. He shoots to his feet and leans forwards, hands spread on the table top, “It’s just the same as any other training, it just happens to have the name of a proper football club attached. It’s the same sort of training that I’ve been doing my whole life and I’m getting fed up of you asking about it. Why is it so important to you that you know every second of my day?!”

Rebecca covers her ears, bringing her knees up to her chest. She rocks back and forth, humming to herself but it won’t stop the sound of her dad and her brother arguing from reaching her ears. She rocks and hums louder and louder.



“Because you won’t tell me!” Anthony shouts, “You’re not telling me anything about the Academy and I want to know why? Why is it so boring to you? What’s boring? Just tell me and I’ll leave off but you won’t tell me so I’m going to keep going on. So... why won’t you talk to me about your training?”

“BECAUSE HE DOESN’T WANT TO BE A FOOTBALLER!” Rebecca finally shouts.

It just got to much for her. She couldn’t take it any more and she just wants the shouting to stop. She hates when anyone argues, it reminds her too much of what life was like before their mum walked away. Toby turns to glare at her but his frown slowly fades away to be replaced by a look of pure sadness and guilt. He mouths an apology to her. She smiles back shakily.

Anthony however is looking at her like she’s sprouted a second head.

“What did you say?” he asks her quietly.

“Toby doesn’t want to be a footballer any more,” she murmurs, looking at her plate, “He wants to do something else with his life and doesn’t like football any more. He doesn’t want to play it.”

“Don’t be stupid!” Anthony snaps harshly, “Go and get ready for the club.”

Rebecca flinches and shrinks back from her father’s harsh words and quickly rushes away upstairs when he orders her to. Toby watches her go and just wants to chase after her, hug her and hold her tight. He turns back to find his dad glaring at him.

“I have to go,” Toby says sharply, “I’m going to be late to training.”

He walks from the kitchen and starts pulling his things on. Rebecca watches him from the top of the stairs. He waves at her and she smiles weakly, waving back.

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“Oh so you’re actually going today then?!” Anthony shouts after his son “Should I be calling the coach and seeing whether you’re actually there or should I just believe you this time?”

Toby rolls his eyes and mutters at his dad to ‘do whatever’ under his breath before he heads out of the front door. The door slams behind him again, shaking in the frame.

“Alright you horrible lot, listen up!” the coach shouts as he walks on to the pitch.

They’re in the middle of training. Toby arrived late because of the argument with his dad and he knows that Scooby wants to ask him about it. The other guy keeps looking at him and raising his eyebrows in question. Scooby’s also bouncing around more than normal, running faster, playing harder, he’s like a man possessed. He keeps smiling widely, Toby’s noticed, when he thinks there’s no one looking. The trainees all gather around the coach as he reaches the centre of the pitch.

“Gather round, gather round,” the coach says needlessly. He waves his hands around in the air to bring them in closer. Some of the players are still jogging over slowly, “Ok, I’ve got a very important announcement to make today so gather around,”

“Where were you yesterday?” Scooby whispers in Toby’s ear.

Toby jumps, he hadn’t even realised that Scooby had gotten so close.

“I’ll tell you later,” he says quickly, feeling the coach’s eyes on him, glaring.

“If I can have silence please?” the coach calls. The whispers die away, “Now, I’ve got something very important to tell you all, something very special.”



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He looks around, soaking in the eager faces of the young men who are all staring up at him. He can't hold back his wide smile any more.

“Now this doesn't happen often so I want you all to know,” the coach says, “We are incredibly proud of this young man and couldn't have hoped for a better deal for him. One of you has made it early in to the squad's first team.”

A smattering of applause breaks out but most of the players are looking around at each other, trying to figure out who has broken ahead of the rest.

“Please don't worry,” the coach says, “This young man is still going to continue playing and training amongst all of you, after all, skills needs to be practiced and built up, they don't just appear overnight. But the owners and the manager of Skelmerage FC have been watching you all and they noticed this young man. He has an incredible amount of skill on the field already, even though he's so young. He has shown complete and utter discipline and determination towards improving his game and he is clearly in love with playing football. I am of course talking about Scooby!”

The boys all break in to applause. Toby turns and stares at Scooby, his mouth hanging open. Scooby is going pink but he's smiling widely. Toby smiles too and starts clapping. He claps so hard that his hands hurt and then he pats Scooby on the back, grabbing him in a hug.

“Congratulations mate!” Toby cries, “Really, well done!”

Toby gets pushed aside as the other players all come over to congratulate Scooby. He watches Scooby taking in the applause and admiration. But he's still shaking a little, especially as more and more of the players gather around. Toby remembers what Scooby said about not enjoying being in the limelight so much. When the other boy catches his eye Toby smiles and gives him two thumbs up. Scooby laughs and seems to relax a little more.



Toby watches, grinning. Scooby really deserves this, he's totally devoted to football and he's really determined to become a professional player. It looks like all of the other boys agree. Toby's surprised that he didn't realise who the chosen one was as soon as the coach started talking. Scooby is the obvious choice really, when he looks back. The guy is so focused on becoming a footballer, on playing the game well, that it really shouldn't be so amazing that he's made it on to the first team early.

"Alright, alright, break it up," the coach says, wading through the bodies to reach Scooby, "Let's focus on what we're all doing here and get back to training."

The boys slowly inch away and head back to the various pitches where they were all training. Toby hangs back, watching as the coach talks to Scooby about something. The man shakes Scooby's hand and turns to walk away. The smile drops from his face when he catches sight of Toby.

"What are you stood around for?!" he snaps, "Get back to practice."

Toby turns and begins to jog back over to the game that he was involved in, racing through tires and bouncing balls on knees in a strange sort of relay. Scooby jogs up beside him.

"So..." Scooby says, "Where the hell were you yesterday?"

"Sorting something out," Toby says quietly, "To do with that stunt double part."

"Ahh right," Scooby says. He falls silent for a moment, "So... crazy news huh?"

"Insane!" Toby says, "Seriously though, well done mate. I'm not surprised you got the spot. You're mad about the game."

"Thanks man," Scooby says, red rising on his cheeks, "I couldn't believe it when the coach told me yesterday."



“You found out yesterday?” Toby asks, “How come you didn’t let me know?”

“Well I would have,” Scooby says, “But you weren’t here. I thought you were ill or something. I didn’t wanna text you in case you needed the sleep or the rest or something. I know it’d have to be serious for me to miss training, I figured it was the same for you.”

“Oh right...” Toby says quietly, “I guess. I just had a few other things to sort out and they took longer than I thought they would.”

“Don’t let it happen too much,” Scooby warns, “You miss any more training sessions and I reckon the coach’ll chuck you out of the Academy.”

“Point taken,” Toby says.

He races off, taking his turn on the relay. He doesn’t like the fact that he’s not telling his new friend the truth, especially after they grew so close the other day. But he knows that Scooby won’t get it. For the other guy playing football is the most important thing in his life, for someone not to feel the same probably seems completely alien and not understandable to him. It stings a little, Toby realises, to know that Scooby didn’t tell him the good news as soon as he had a chance.

“Hey Toby!” Scooby shouts when they’re all heading back to the changing rooms after training, “I’m getting some of the guys together and we’re gonna head to the pub and maybe a club after that. Do you wanna come along?”

“Sure!” Toby says quickly, not even thinking about it, “I’ll head home and change after I shower.”

Scooby grins widely at Toby. Suddenly everything feels fine again.



The pub is rammed, packed to the rafters when Toby walks in. He's a little worried that he won't be able to get served but as soon as he reaches the table where Scooby and some of the other boys are sat he gets a pint shoved in to his hand and his backside pushed in to the seat next to Scooby.

“Glad you could make it mate!” Scooby shouts to be heard, slinging an arm around Toby's shoulders.

Judging by the number of empty glasses in front of Scooby, the way that he's leaning all of his weight against Toby and the smell of beer on his breath the other boy looks to be on his third or fourth pint.

“You practicing?” Toby asks loudly, trying to make himself heard over the din of the pub patrons.

Scooby blinks at him. Toby nods towards the empty glasses.

“Are you practicing?” he repeats, “For when you get famous?”

“Oh...” Scooby says. He looks at the glasses and then back at Toby, a smile breaking out across his face, “Yeah! Gotta get used to nights out after all. Not gonna meet a nice girl in the showers am I?”

“Well you never know,” Toby says with a shrug. “Although if she's in the showers and interested in you still then she must be blind.”

He takes a sip of beer while Scooby bursts out laughing, spraying beer across the table and holding a hand up to his nose.

“Not fair!” Scooby wails once he can breathe and speak again, “Oh Jesus, that shit stings.”

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“Sorry mate,” Toby says. He’s not sorry at all.

The pints keep coming, Toby handing his money to one of the older boys and staying beside Scooby. It seems that some of the other lads have the same worry that he won’t get served or might even get kicked out of the pub so they’re going to the bar for him. Pretty quickly Toby catches up with Scooby in the number of drinks that have been finished. He feels warm and fuzzy like he’s made of cotton wool and a soft cloud has settled around his head. He sits back and smiles, enjoying the feeling. He doesn’t drink much, rarely ever in fact, and he didn’t eat anything before he came out. He feels delightfully tipsy and it’s the best he’s felt in ages.

They’re heading towards a club when Scooby manages to corner Toby again. He slings an arm around Toby’s shoulders and pulls his friend close.

“So what were you doing yesterday?” Scooby asks, breathing a cloud of beer breath over Toby’s face. Toby realises that his breath probably smells just as bad so he doesn’t bother to pull away.

“I was busy,” he says quietly, checking that none of the others are looking or listening in. “I went to another audition.”

“I thought you already got the stunt double role?” Scooby asks, blinking at Toby blearily. “Or am I imagining you telling me that?”

“Nah I got it,” Toby says, “But this was for something else.”

“Something else?!” Scooby asks loudly, “What something else? Isn’t one role enough for you?”



“I don’t think so,” Toby says. He pulls Scooby in closer and starts to whisper in his ear conspiratorially. “The thing is... I think I want to be an actor and a footballer! Not just one or the other but both. So I tried out for a proper role, not just the stunt role thingy,” Scooby pulls back and stares at his friend in shock. The others drag them both in to the club, hurrying Toby past the bouncers before they can stop them. Inside it’s dark and the music is blaring. Toby can feel it pounding through his entire body. There are faces everywhere, pretty girls looking him up and down.

He edges closer to Scooby, trying to hide himself behind his friend’s larger body. They wind their way through the people and scramble in to a small booth.

“Listen, there’s something I need to tell you,” Toby says to Scooby, shouting in his ear.

“Yeah mate?” Scooby shouts back, “What’s up?”

“I think...” Toby starts. He pauses and takes a massive gulp of the pint that one of the others has just set in front of him. He can feel the alcohol rushing through his veins, making everything fuzzy and warm, “Scooby mate, I think I want to be more than just a footballer.”

“What’d you mean?” Scooby slurs, slinging his arm around Toby’s shoulders. “What more is there than being a footballer? It’s an awesome job, why would you want to do anything else?”

“I do wanna be a footballer,” Toby says emphatically, “But I think I wanna be an actor too, like... I dunno, Vinnie Jones or something.”

“You’re joking right?!” Scooby says before he bursts out in to laughter. “You can’t do both, even Vinnie don’t try to do both.”

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“But I want to!” Toby says, “I really think that I can do both and I really want to try. I’m a good actor, I might even get that proper role I went for!”

“Bullshit!” Scooby cries, “If you’re that good prove it!”

Scooby stares at Toby, watching him expectantly. All of the other boys have wandered off, drinking by the bar, dancing with the girls or slipping outside for a cheeky cigarette. Toby looks around but then just hunches in on himself.

“Come on,” Scooby goads him, “Come on, pretend to be Robert Dinero for me!”

Toby just looks at Scooby, the guy can barely focus his eyes and yet here he is, talking clearly now and sitting up straight. Toby just shakes his head, Scooby isn’t really listening, he just doesn’t get it.

“Are you talking to me?” Scooby says, gurning like Dinero, “I said, are you. Talking. To me? Come on, do it.”

“I’m serious,” Toby says, shrugging off Scooby’s nudges and shakes, “I really want to be a footballer and an actor.”

Scooby stops messing around and looks at his friend. He stares in to Toby’s eyes and Toby just looks right back at him.

“I’d tell you to give up on the idea,” Scooby says finally, “It’s a stupid idea.”

“What?!” Toby cries out, “Why?!”

“Because you’ve got talent,” Scooby says, “I’m talking real talent here for playing football. I reckon that you could go all the way to the top, just like I am. But if you’re splitting your efforts between football and acting you’re never going to be able to give either your full attention. I mean look at now. If you’d focused like I had, just paid attention and put all your effort in to playing football you could be on the first team, right next to me. But you’re

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not, you're still stuck with training and you keep missing it. Acting's already getting in the way of football and it's only going to get worse."

"I think you're full of shit!" Toby spits out, his stomach burning and his eyes stinging slightly, "You're all cocky now because you got on to the first team, you think you're better than everyone else but you just got lucky. You're jealous because I got the stunt double role and you didn't. You froze up and looked like an idiot while I was able to do it and make myself look just as good. So just because you didn't get an acting job you think no one should get one. I know exactly how you're thinking."

"I'm not fucking jealous!" Scooby snaps, "I seriously think that you've got talent, like massive talent. But you're not focusing on it or giving football your all. I'm not jealous, I couldn't care less that you got the part. I just did that audition for a laugh remember."

"Whatever," Toby says with a sneer, "You say what you want but I know the truth."

He doesn't wait for Scooby to say anything else. He just downs the rest of his pint, slams the empty glass down on the table and starts to make his way through the crowd. He feels a little sick now, partially from all the alcohol but also because of what he had said to Scooby. He knows he was in the right but it still doesn't feel great. A hand suddenly grabs his wrist and pulls him to a stop. He turns, twisting in place and gets ready to give whoever's responsible a piece of his mind. It's probably Scooby come to have another go at him.

"Toby!" Arjan shouts, "I thought that was your ugly mug."

Arjan smiles while Toby flounders, surprised to see his friend in the club. A moment later he recovers and grabs his mate in a tight hug. He holds on tightly.

"Hey, hey," Arjan says, gently patting his friend on the back, "Are you ok man?"



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“Yeah,” Toby says, pulling back and rubbing at his eyes. He must have something in them, that’s got to be the only reason they’re watering, “Just a little drunk.”

“I know that feeling,” Arjan says smiling knowingly and nudging Toby with his elbow. “You look knackered mate.”

“I’ve just got a lot of things going on at the moment,” Toby says with a shrug, “You know, with training and stuff.”

“You sure that’s it?” Arjan asks, staring closely at his friend, “I’ve known you long enough to know when you’re lying mate remember.”

Arjan has led Toby away from the dance floor, off to a quiet corner of the club. Toby’s head feels fuzzy, he’s struggling to focus a little and he can feel his emotions flipping all over the place. One moment he’s tired, the next angry, the next ridiculously happy and then the next he just wants to sit in a corner and cry. Toby glances out over the dancing bodies and he makes out Scooby’s figure, dancing and writhing against some girl. She doesn’t look interested, in fact Toby sees that she’s sneering at her friends when Scooby presses himself up against her back. He watches as she pushes Scooby away. Then he leans forwards and whispers something in her ear. Suddenly she’s all sweetness and light, hanging on to his arm and smiling up at him like he’s a god or something. Toby’s top lip curls and he growls low in his throat. Typical.

Arjan nudges Toby with his elbow and then when he looks at his best friend a bottle of water is shoved in to his hand. Toby opens it and gulps it down, thirstier than he realised. He sighs with relief and smiles at his friend.

“Thanks for that mate,” he says gratefully, “Guess I needed that more than I thought.”

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“Well I know what you’re like,” Arjan says, “You never drink enough, even when you’re training. And I bet today was no different to normal.”

Toby chuckles. A pint of beer is set in front of him by a random waiter and he starts sipping at it. Arjan raises his pint and they clink the two glasses together. They sit in companionable silence for a while, just enjoying each other’s company and watching the dancing crowd. At one point Arjan checks his phone, frowns at the screen and shoves it back in his pocket.

“Your dad?” Toby asks.

Arjan just shakes his head and glares out over the crowd.

“Is he still hassling you about going to college then?” Toby asks again, determined to push on and talk to his friend, “I mean, it was bad the other week at the market, I can’t even start to imagine how much worse it could be in private.”

“We’ve not really talked to each other since then,” Arjan says blankly, continuing to stare out across the crowd, “When I got home I laid in to him, good and proper, told him what was going on and made him listen. Obviously he wasn’t happy and now we don’t talk to each other. He hasn’t got anything to say to me and until he listens and accepts that I’m living my life my way then I don’t have anything to say to him.”

“What do you do at the kitchen table?” Toby asks, “It’s got to be hard to get the salt from each other if you’re not talking.”

“We only speak through mum,” Arjan admits, guilt filling his face. “Anything I want to say to him or have to say to him then I tell my mum and she passes on the message. I feel bad though, she doesn’t deserve that. But until my dad actually listens to me I’m not saying a



word to him. I know mum hates it, having the two of us fighting. I can hear her crying sometimes at night when she thinks I'm not listening or something."

"Shit," Toby says slowly, "I can't imagine living like that."

"I can barely imagine it and I'm living it," Arjan points out, "Why do you think I'm out so late? I don't like this place, I'm not actually looking to pull or get pissed. I just want to avoid my dad and stay out of the house for as long as I can. The clubs are the only place that I can think of that stay open long enough for me to avoid seeing dad. That and the music gives me the chance to get away from the constant pressure. I swear, it's this close to doing my head in."

Toby watches as Arjan holds up two fingers, a tiny gap of space in between them both. Arjan leans his head in his hands and rubs at his face. He sighs heavily and Toby reaches over to pat his friend's shoulder.

"So you think you might end up moving out?" Toby asks eventually, "I mean, it can't be fun living there."

"I'm gonna stay put for now," Arjan says with a shrug, "I'm out most of the day anyway, working at the market. And I don't want to try and find a flat when you never know how long I'm going to be in there for. I don't want to fanny around moving in to one place only to move out and in to another one a few weeks later. I can't be arsed with that crap."

"But what about your mum?" Toby asks, "Is it fair to keep her trapped in the middle?"

"She chooses to be there," Arjan points out, "She gets to act as middle man and talk for both of us because she wouldn't pick a side. She won't back my dad up and repeat what

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he tells me, but she also won't stand on my side either or big me up. It does my head in a little but I get it."

"Weird," Toby says, frowning at his beer. "Don't mums usually do whatever they can to keep their baby boys safe, even if that means siding against them?"

"Not my mum," Arjan says, downing the last of his pint. He motions for another one, "She won't pick sides but she does say that she can't tell me what to do anymore because I'm technically an adult. I still listen to her though. She's my mum."

"And she's scary as fuck," Toby points out. "So what are you going to do about your dad then? Do you think you'll ever talk to him again?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Arjan says with a shrug. "At the end of the day it's his choice. My life is my life, it's my own thing to do with as I see fit, not for my dad to control or run according to his dreams, ideas and ambitions. If my dad can't accept that fact then tough. Is he really a proper dad if he doesn't support me? I'm telling you Toby, you're one lucky bastard!"

"What?!" Toby asks, "Why?"

"Well your dad's cool," Arjan says with a shrug, "It's like, you want to play football for the rest of your life. It's not the most sensible career choice but your dad just keeps backing you up all of the time. He's not always pressuring you to go for what he wants, to ignore your own hopes and dreams and just focus on reaching his dreams. You're lucky."

"Yeah..." Toby says slowly, "Lucky."

They lapse in to silence again, watching over the club from their higher seats.



## Chapter 15

By the time that Toby is walking home he's swaying from side to side and everything around him is blurry. He's struggling to see straight, things keep moving around in his vision or turning in to two or three identical things. He says as much to Arjan while they share a taxi home but his best friend just laughs at him. Toby starts chuckling as well, not sure what it is that he's supposed to be finding funny but knowing that he likes the feeling that laughing gives him.

Eventually the taxi driver reaches Toby's street and drops him off at the bottom, refusing to go up and get stuck in the one way system that the council put there for some reason. And so, at one in the morning Toby finds himself staggering back to his home, weaving from side to side on the dark and empty street. Once or twice he bumps in to a dustbin, left out on the curb ready for pick up the next day. They scrape across the ground or fall over with a loud bang. A few lights come on in nearby houses and Toby squints at the windows, sure that people are looking out him, watching him. He likes the attention though, he smiles, waves and does little bows before he continues to head on to his house.

He's sure that he's as silent as a mouse when he lets himself in. He even tries to shut the front door quietly, shushing it when it bangs a little. Then he starts giggling to himself as he realises that he's talking to an inanimate object. He stumbles around, tripping over shoes and bags that are littering the hallway. It's quite dark and he's really struggling to make them

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out. He swears quietly and starts giggling again. Suddenly the light flicks on and Toby cries out, his hand shooting up to cover his eyes.

“Turn it off,” he whines. “Owww!!”

“What the hell are you playing at?!” Anthony snarls, stamping down the stairs towards his son.

Toby blinks at his dad, his eyes tearing up from the sudden light. Everything has been so dark until now and the sudden brightness is sending pain flaring down his optic nerves.

Anthony is wearing a pair of lightweight sleep pants and has bare feet. His dressing gown is hanging loose from his shoulders and the flash of hair through the gap tells Toby that his dad has nothing on on his top half. His hair is sticking up in every direction and his eyes are puffy from sleep. Anthony stops on the bottom step and stares down at his son.

“Where the hell have you been?” he demands again.

“I went out,” Toby says, pulling at his shoe and almost stumbling over, “Scooby got on to the first team so we went out to celebrate.”

“Oh so you actually went to training then?!” Anthony says, “Wonders will never cease.”

“Shut up,” Toby mutters.

“What did you say to me, boy?” Anthony asks, his voice low and harsh, dangerous.

“I said shut up,” Toby says a little louder, staring his dad in the face. “All you ever do is moan about training or talk about training or ask about training. I’m sick of hearing about fucking training!”

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“Because right now it’s the most important thing in your life,” Anthony says, “And I want you to know that, remember that and focus on that fact. You just keep fannyng around doing other stuff though and treating this all like some big game.”

“I can’t forget how important training is,” Toby say, getting right up close to his dad. There’s only an inch or so between their faces, “How could I forget how important training is when you’re reminding me three times a day, ever day?”

Anthony glared at his son. Toby breathed hard, practically panting. A rush of happiness fills his stomach as he realises that he was finally saying the things that he has been dying to say to his dad but has never had the courage to until now. He wonders how far he should go, how many truths he should spill and exactly how purple he can make his dad turn. Anthony frowns as Toby breaths on him and he makes a loud sniffing noise.

“Have you been drinking?” he asks suddenly.

All the words that Toby was about to say dry up. He freezes and stares at his dad. How did he know?

“You reek like a brewery!” Anthony shouts, “What the hell?! You’ve been at training all day and now you turn up, completely hammered. You’ve got training again tomorrow, or should I say, today. How the hell are you going to cope feeling hungover all day?”

“I’ll manage,” Toby says sullenly, “It’s not like I’m going to be the only one hungover.”

“You know I don’t like you drinking,” Anthony says harshly, “And yet, here you are, pissed as a fart and barely able to stand up. What were you thinking?”

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“I was thinking that I wanted to have a little fun!” Toby says loudly, “I was thinking that I wanted to forget all about football and training and just do the sorts of things that normal teenagers do. That includes going out and getting drunk and coming home stupidly late.”

“Being drunk and being hungover aren’t cool things to do,” Anthony snarls, “they’re for losers and layabouts. I raised you to be better than this, to be responsible and act like an adult. But you’re like a completely different person now, what the hell is going on?!”

Toby doesn’t say a word. He stares at Anthony and sneers at him. Anthony grabs Toby’s chin in a hard grip and shakes his head a little. He pulls his son closer to him.

“If you’re drunk you’re going to be crap at training,” he says loudly, making Toby flinch, “If you’re hungover you’re going to be crap at training. We have not spent years getting you to this stage in life only for you to go and throw it all down the toilet. I’ve told you before, I don’t want you drinking and if you want to drink then you can’t have too much. Alcohol interferes too much with your performance. I’m not going to let you wreck everything because you want to get pissed.”

“Oh you mean like you did,” Toby says loudly, pulling himself free of his dad’s grasp. “You don’t want me turning in to a teenage alcoholic like you did and throwing it all away. You wanted to be a football player, you could have been a football player but you went around getting drunk every night and then eventually the bottle was more important than the ball. Right?”

“You don’t know the half of it my son,” Anthony said sharply and loudly, “And I didn’t have half your talent. You’re throwing it all away and I’m not gonna let you make the same mistakes that I did.”



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“Well you see, I’m not you,” Toby says, “I’m me. I’m not going to get hooked on alcohol because frankly, I don’t really like the taste that much. And right now, I don’t like how I’m feeling while I’m drunk that much either. Everything’s all spiny.”

“If you don’t like it then why the hell did you get drunk?!” Anthony roars

“Because I want to be normal!” Toby shouts back, “I want to act like a normal teenager and go out and do normal teenager things. I want go out at the weekends and get drunk, I want to go to the cinema with my friends on a weekday, I want to spend a day or two lounging around in my room. But all I do is go to training and then go to the gym because that’s what YOU are saying I have to do.”

“I’m telling you to do these things because you need to do them!” his dad says, “Do you think Ronaldo spends days on end watching films on his sofa? Do you think David Beckham skips training because he wants to go to the cinema? Do you think Wayne Rooney goes out and gets drunk every weekend?! No! They don’t, they focus on the game and getting as good at it as they can!”

“Bullshit!” Toby shouts, “They all go out and have fun, they do things that they want to do all the time. They have time off in between training and gym sessions. For fucks sake there’s always pictures of drunk footballers in nightclubs all over the papers every week. They get to have time off and live their lives. You’re treating me like some bloody prisoner or a child who needs it’s day planning out for it so it doesn’t go crazy or something!”

“You can’t be trusted!” Anthony says harshly, “You’ve already shown that you can’t be trusted to do what you need to do. You skip training because you can’t be bothered, you go out and get drunk because you want to be ‘normal’, you plan on going to training and being a waste of space while you’re hungover. Those aren’t the signs of an adult, those aren’t

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the signs of someone who's serious about being a footballer! That's the behavior of a child, a spoiled and stupid child!"

"Fuck you!" Toby shouts. "I don't have to stay and listen to this! I can go and stay with friends or something. I've got those and guess what?! Their parents let them have friends over to stay, even during the week!"

Toby glares at his dad for a moment before spinning in place and storming over to the front door. It would be much more effective if he weren't swaying from side to side as he walks. His fingers slip and scramble at the lock to the door and eventually he gets it undone. He flings the door open, letting it crash against the wall behind it. Toby glares over his shoulder at his dad, stumbles through the door and over the front step before striding off down the street. Anthony goes to the door and watches him go, shaking his head with disappointment at his son's behavior.

It was Toby shutting the door that woke her up. For a moment Rebecca doesn't know what's going on, or why she woke up. Then she hears Toby stumbling around downstairs, giggling and whispering to himself and she remembers. Toby hadn't come home at dinner time like he usually did. Their dad hadn't been happy about it but after a phone call he seemed a bit more relaxed. Still though, Dad hadn't wanted to listen to anything that Rebecca had to say to him so she eventually gave up and went to her room. By the time that Dad came to tuck her in to bed Toby still wasn't home and she was worried.

She told Dad that she was worried about Toby and he said that he wasn't worried. But she could tell that he was, his eyes were all wrinkled in the corners, like he was crying but

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there weren't any tears. And he kept frowning at the wall, looking like he did when he was watching the football results on TV and waiting for bad news. He was actually worried about Toby even if he pretended not to be.

Now though Toby is back. He sounds a little funny, like Dad does on Christmas Day sometimes, all giggly and slurry. Rebecca doesn't care though, she's just glad that her brother's back. She sits up in bed and gets herself ready to jump out of her room at him, surprise him and make sure that she gets at least one good night hug from him.

Then she hears Dad stomping past, muttering loudly about time and drinking. She frowns and then the gap under her door starts to let light in. Dad put on the hallway light. That's when the shouting starts. It's angry, angrier than she's ever heard before. They're saying mean things to each other, such horrible horrible things. She doesn't even need to go and crouch at the top of the stairs to listen in. They're that loud that she can hear them clearly, even in her room with the door shut. Tears start to prickle at her eyes, they feel hot and itchy. There's a lump in her throat that won't go away and her mouth is wobbling. She shrinks back in to her bed, laying down and pulling the covers back over her shoulders.

She lays there, head on the pillow and listens to them, shouting at each other, arguing, calling each other names, swearing. She stops trying to hold back the tears and lets them fall. They leave trails of cold wetness in their wake, collecting under her cheek and creating a damp spot on her pillow. She doesn't care. Then she hears the door slam open and then after a little while she hears it slam shut again. Her dad's feet pound up the stairs heavily. There's no sound of her brother following and suddenly Rebecca realises that he hasn't stayed home. He's gone somewhere else. She can still hear her dad walking around on the landing, like he doesn't even care that Toby's ran away. Rebecca starts to cry in earnest and although she's

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trying to be as quiet as she can a sob still manages to slip out. The floorboard in front of her door creaks a little and she quickly rolls over on to her other side. She hears her door slowly slide open, the bottom brushing against the carpet. She holds herself completely still and scrunches her eyes shut. Even through the lids she can see the warm glow of the hallway light, bouncing off her walls and mirrors. She hears her dad sigh, and then shut the door again, leaving her in darkness once more. She breathes out quietly.

She rolls on to her other side again, facing the door and watches the gap at the bottom. Eventually the light turns off and she hears her dad start snoring a few minutes later. It's not fair! He's just gone to sleep as though nothing has happened. Toby's out there somewhere, staying who knows where, sleeping in god knows what and their dad has just gone back to sleep like it's no big deal? She starts to cry harder now. Her whole body shakes but she tries to hold in the sounds of her sobs. It's painful, all she wants to do is let the sound out, to let her dad know how much he's hurting her. But she won't. Instead she cries and cries and holds in the true depth of her hurt. Eventually blackness comes and she slips into sleep, the salt of her tears drying on her face.

Toby stumbles along, trying to think of where he can go. Normally he would call Arjan and ask to stay with him, but after what he's heard tonight the last thing he wants to do is stay there. It would only cause more trouble between Arjan and his dad and it would probably annoy his mum too. With everything else that's going on with that family Toby doesn't want to put any more strain on her. He can't call Scooby either, their argument earlier has left a bitter taste in Toby's mouth and he doesn't want to speak to him right now. He's clearly jeal-



ous that Toby has talent and is trying to ruin it for him. And he can't call Fiona either. It'd be weird to call a woman he barely knows and ask if he can stay there. Besides, the trains aren't running this late and he'd never be able to get there. He doubts that she'll come and pick him up either. He realises that he doesn't even know if she drives.

There's only one person he can call. He pulls out his phone and squints at the screen, trying to make it stay still long enough for him to find the right number. He ends up closing one eye and holding the phone close to make it look straight for him.

"Hello?" Emma's voice says at the other end of the phone.

"Hey Em," he says softly, "Listen, my dad's kicked me out and I was hoping I might be able to crash on your sofa tonight."

Emma doesn't say anything. For a moment he thinks that she might have fallen back to sleep.

"Isn't there anywhere else you can go?" she asks, "It's really late and I don't think my parents will be too happy."

"Oh come on," he whines, "Your dad loves me, he thinks I'm amazing since I started at the Academy, he keeps going on about me being the next Rooney, I'm sure he won't mind."

"Toby," Emma says hesitantly. She sighs, "Fine, come over. Don't knock on the door, just give me a ring when you're outside. I'll come and let you in."

"Thank you thank you thank you." He says enthusiastically, a little too loudly, "You're the best girlfriend ever!"

"You mean fiancée," she says, "Remember, we're engaged now."

"Oh... yeah," Toby says quickly, "Of course. You're the best fiancée ever."

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She hangs up and Toby shoves his phone back in his pocket. He rambles off down the street, swaying and stumbling. The air is helping to clear his head a little now.

By the time that Toby reaches Emma's house he's feeling a lot clearer. The fog is starting to lift and his stomach rolls with regret as he remembers how he spoke to Scooby that night. He also feels a little sick when he realises that he's essentially left home and how rude he was to his dad. Toby can't help but feel a little relieved though, he's finally gotten all of those things that were making him angry off his chest and out in the open. It's like a stopper has been released from a bottle and he's finally let the things that he hated out and released the pressure. Still though, there's a cold feeling in his chest as he tries to think of what to do next. Mostly however he's just exhausted. He wants to lie down and sleep, forget everything and just let the soft inky blackness roll over him.

He stops outside Emma's front door and raises his hand to knock until he remembers that he is supposed to ring her. He fumbles with his phone but before he has a chance to hit the call button the door flies open and Emma is there, glaring at him. She looks half asleep though so the image is less than intimidating. He smiles gently at her and reaches out to hug her. She holds up a hand though, placing it on his chest and stopping him from coming any closer.

"Why did it take you so long?" she hisses at him, "Normally you're over in just a few minutes. It's taken you half an hour tonight."

"Come on," Toby whines, "It's cold out here and I want to sleep."

"Why did it take you so long?!" Emma insists.

"I had to keep taking a piss," Toby spits out, "I've had way too much beer and I kept needing to stop and nip in to alleyways to let it all out. Happy?"



Emma looks at him for a few long minutes. Toby hops about in place, rubbing his arms while he tries to warm himself up. Finally Emma stops staring at him and smiles, reaching out to pull him to her in a hug. He sighs in relief as he steps in to the warmth of the house and her arms. The door shuts, a little too loudly for his liking.

“What happened?” Emma eventually asks as they head in to the living room, “Why did you call me? Why not one of your other friends?”

“Scooby’s not talking to me,” Toby admits, collapsing on to the sofa, “And Arjan’s got enough on without me adding extra pressure. Besides, who else would I want to call? You’re my girlfriend, I’m supposed to call you before anyone.”

“I suppose,” Emma says, sighing. She sits beside Toby, “So why isn’t Scooby talking to you? I thought you were good friends.”

“We had a stupid argument,” he reluctantly says, “He got on to the first string team, as a reserve. And I got that audition thing. He told me I should just give up on acting and focus on the football. I told him he was just jealous because he can’t act and it just sort of blew up from there.”

“Oh Toby,” Emma says softly. She reaches out and pulls his head on to her lap, stroking his hair soothingly, “How do you get yourself in to these situations?”

“What situations?” Toby asks, rolling over to look up at her, “I never argue with my friends. I think we were both just drunk and said stupid shit, that’s all.”

“I mean with the audition,” Emma corrects him, “I mean seriously? What kind of footballer acts as well? It’s not done and now you’ve found yourself stuck between the two.”

“I’m not stuck though,” Toby says, “I’m doing the things that I like, that I want to do. Why would that make me stuck? I’m lucky!”



He stares up at her. She's not looking at him, even as her fingers run through his hair over and over. The movement usually lulls him to sleep but he's too angry and confused right now, emotions running through him, adrenaline pounding so fast that the tiredness has completely disappeared. He just can't understand why she's saying this stuff, it's not what he's thinking in his head and usually she knows.

"I think..." Emma says slowly, "I think that Scooby might be right."

"What?..." Toby says. He sits up and turns to look at her, "What are you saying?"

"I think Scooby's right," she says, more firmly, more confidently now, "You should stop thinking about the acting, just ignore it all together, and focus on the football."

"Why are you taking Scooby's side?" Toby demands, "You've never even met the guy and you're agreeing with him? You're supposed to be my girlfriend and support me, not some other guy."

"You're supposed to be a footballer," Emma spits out, "That's what you've always wanted to be and what you're supposed to be. It's what everyone knows you for. Why do you think I got with you in the first place?!"

She stops and stares at Toby in shock. She quickly covers her mouth, staring at him wide eyed, like she's trying to trap the words in her mouth before they can escape. It's too late though. Toby stares at her, anger rushing through him. His blood pounds, he can hear the beat of his heart in his ears.

"What?" Toby asks, his voice quiet and harsh.

Emma flinches slightly and looks away.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asks again.



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She takes in a deep breath and turns to look at Toby. Her face is blank, emotionless. Toby has never seen her looking like this.

“You being such a good footballer is why I got with you in the first place,” she says blankly, staring straight through him, “It was really the only attractive thing about you. I started to like you more and more but the original reason that I got with you was because we all reckoned that you could become a footballer and go all the way to the top. So I decided that you would be my boyfriend. And then you were.”

“Why would you...? Why?” he asks, shaking his head. “Why would me being a good footballer make you want to be with me? Is that why you’ve stayed with me all this time?”

“Of course not,” Emma says, her voice suddenly harsh, “I like you plenty enough now, even love you I suppose. But the fact is that back then, and ever since, since I was 14, I’ve always dreamed of myself as a WAG. I’ve only ever pictured myself as a WAG. And you were the fastest and easiest way to get that.”

Toby stares at her, his mouth falls open. The anger fades away, leaving nothing but a cold black emptiness inside. He feels sick, drained, like he’s been punched in the stomach. A knot of chilly coldness settles in the pit of his stomach and he swallows hard. Emma isn’t looking at him, she’s looking away.

“That’s why you need to keep playing football,” she says firmly, harshly, “I’m going to become a WAG, it’s my dream, and to do that I need you to become a top premieriership footballer. You’ve got to reach for the dream you’ve always had and ignore everything else, just like you always have, just like your dad and me want. Just give up on this acting crap and focus on the stuff that really matters.”

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“Are you serious?” he asks, his voice suddenly getting a little louder. Emma quickly shushes him, “Is that seriously all you can think about?! Don’t you want me to be happy? Don’t you want me to reach my dream?!” she tries to respond but Toby waves a hand to silence her, “You actually have the nerve to sit there and tell me to give up on something I want because it goes against what you want? Why the hell should I even put up with you? Do you even love me or are you just saying that to get your dream?!”

“Of course I love you,” she says.

Her voice is shaking though, uncertainty plain to hear. Anger boils up inside Toby.

“I don’t know how you can even say that to my face,” he hisses out, “If you loved me, you’d want me to be happy, you’d want me to do what I want to do and ignore your own selfish desires, just like I usually do for you. I love you with every bit of my body and heart and now I find out everything is a sham, it’s always been a lie.”

“I love you!” Emma says quickly, her voice a little clearer and firmer now. She clings on to his arm, “I really love you and I do want you to be happy. And I know that being a Premiership footballer will make you happy. But you won’t get there unless you focus on just that.”

“Oh shut up,” Toby says suddenly, yanking his arm free from her clawing grasp, “You’re not saying that to be honest, you’re saying that to please me and keep me on your side. Well you know what? It’s time for you to find a new dream, one that relies entirely on you, not someone else doing the work for you. What gives you the right to tell me to give up my dream just so you can reach yours? It’s lazy and selfish! You’re lazy and selfish!”

“How dare you?!” Emma snaps, jumping to her feet, “I don’t know why you’re saying all of this but I’m not going to listen to you any more. I don’t know how you dare call me la-

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zy! I have been there since we were fourteen. I've been at football matches, at training, I've stood outside in the wind and the rain and the snow, cheering you on, just like a good girlfriend does. And now you're calling me lazy?!"

"Exactly! You were there because it made you look good," Toby says, sneering, "You went to matches and training because it's what a WAG does. You just wanted to look like the loving, dutiful girlfriend. You weren't there because you wanted to support me, or because you liked football. You were there playing the role that you wanted. Maybe you should think about becoming an actress, because you'd be a good one. Oh wait... that'd be too much work and you'd actually have to do it all yourself. Maybe not."

Emma glares at him for a few minutes. Then she turns away, her hands by her sides. Her entire body is shaking.

"I'm not going to listen to any more of this," she says quietly, still turned away, "I'm going to bed. Hopefully tomorrow you'll be in a better mood and might actually listen to sense for a change."

Emma stomps off upstairs. Toby watches her go. He can hear her talking to someone, probably one of her parents. Then the house falls silent and he hears her bedroom door shut. He sighs and settles himself on the sofa. He wiggles around, trying to get comfortable, pulling a cushion under his head and dragging a blanket over himself. Eventually he sighs and just flops on to his back. He lays there, one hand behind his head and stares up at the ceiling.

He just can't understand it. Why has everything gone so wrong? Is he really the bad guy here? He just doesn't understand why everyone is so against him doing what it is that makes him happy. He can't understand why they're pushing their goals for him, on to him, making him reach for their goals rather than the ones that he comes up with by himself.

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With those thoughts racing through his mind he finally fades in to sleep.

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## Chapter 16

The next morning Toby wakes up and groans in pain. His entire body aches. For a moment he doesn't know where he is or what's going on. He looks around himself in confusion. Then he remembers the night before. He groans, rolling over to sit up and buries his face in his hands, elbows resting on his knees. He can't believe that he said all of those things to people that he cares about. He was rude beyond belief. He wants to apologise to Scooby as quickly as possible. Apart from that though, as he remembers what his dad and Emma said to him, he doesn't regret a thing. Those things needed to be said, he realises, and even if it took a lot of alcohol to say them he's still glad that he did.

His phone beeps and after glancing at the screen he realises that he needs to get going. The house is completely silent, no one's awake yet so he lets himself out. The door shuts behind him, quietly, an ominous click that sounds final. He walks down the garden path and glances back at the house. He's sure that he can see movement from Emma's window, the shifting of the curtain falling back in to place. He turns away. He can't think about her right now.

On the train he's raking his brain, trying to remember the monologue that he's prepared. He's on the way to audition at the National Association of Performing Arts, just like



he promised David that he would. As soon as David made the ultimatum and promise Toby had gone home and applied for the master class in acting. He'd heard back from them almost immediately, apparently David having put in a good word for him, and he'd had an audition arranged within hours. The bother of the last few days has pushed it all from his mind but he already had a monologue in mind.

His entire body still aches though, made worse with the rocking motion of the train and the knocks and bangs that he gets from other commuters. He realises that he really didn't sleep well. Emma's living room sofa has never been the most comfortable thing to sit on and sleeping on it was a complete mistake. He starts to regret not calling Arjan now, at least there he would have been able to sleep in a bed.

It hasn't helped that he's still fuming about the arguments with Emma and his dad. Everything's still racing through his mind, each and every word. The truth of his relationship with Emma stings him, makes his eyes prickle but there's nothing that he can do about it at the moment. He needs to push it from his mind. Instead he focuses on the script that he's chosen and the monologue he's planning on reading.

"Seventeen years and I've never taken a stand," he mumbles under his breath.

His mind races through the script and he learns the words that he really already knows. Now though he just needs to get the emotions right, to channel the feelings that the character is talking about and make them his own. Toby thinks that he knows how the character feels, what is going through the character's mind as he speaks. He knows because he can't help but feel the exact same way and this time, on this day for some reason the words particularly resonate within him.



The waiting room outside the class auditions is packed with people. It's just like the audition for 'England's Finest' all over again. This time though there are girls here as well. People are milling around, quietly talking to each other, talking on their phones, tapping at their phone screens, reading through scripts and mouthing words as they go or they're just staring in to space and looking terrified. Toby identifies the most with those who look scared out of their minds, his own legs are shaking like never before and he feels like he could be sick at that very moment. Then again, he realises, that could actually be the hangover from the night before.

One by one the people in the waiting room file out, answering the call of their name and never appearing again. Toby supposes that yet again they're using a different doorway to leave, the choice an obvious one as it stops the other candidates from finding out more about the process. Toby wishes that it wasn't happening that way though. He'd love to know how other people are finding their auditions and the looks on their faces when they get out. This is make or break for him, the chance to achieve his dream or just watch it tumble down around him. It's the same for everyone here and he knows exactly how they're all feeling.

Finally Toby's name is called and he stands up quickly. He stumbles past people in his eagerness to get to the room and get this over with. When he steps in to the room he's faced with a row of five people seated behind a long table. They're all watching him expectantly and he swallows nervously, trying to fight down the rising nausea.



“Toby Arnold?” the woman in the middle says. He nods. “Good. So we asked you to perform a piece from a post 1960’s script. Have you done that?” Toby nods again, “Ok, can you tell us the script that you’ve chosen please?”

“I’ve chosen the final scene from *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*.” He says, his voice shaking a little.

He clenches his fists, digging his nails in to his palm to try and calm his nerves a little. The woman in the middle of the table looks up at him sharply when he gives the name of the script. The other panel members look at each other in surprise.

“Oh...ok,” she says eventually. “We were expecting, or rather hoping for something a little more... English I suppose. And a bit more classic rather than a pop culture film. But it’s your choice.”

“It is the performance that matters at the end of the day my dear,” another panel member says from the end of the table, looking towards the member in the middle, “Regardless of the script itself, it’s the actor who gives the performance that matters, not what it is they’re performing.”

“Of course,” the woman says pointedly, glaring slightly at the man who spoke. She turns back to Toby, “Ok Mr Arnold. In your own time...”

Toby looks at them all, staring them down. He clears his throat and shifts slightly. The words are racing through his head, each sentence suddenly having a brand new meaning for him. He knows how Ferris feels, he feels it himself. Now he needs to get that feeling across in his performance. Inside Toby smiles confidently, this shouldn’t be too hard.

“Seventeen years and I’ve never taken a stand,” he says firmly, standing straighter. “Now, I’m gonna do it. I’m taking a stand against my father, against my family.”



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He remembers the harsh way that his dad spoke to him the night before, the anger and hurt that ran through him at the words. He channels that in to his voice, in to his speech.

“Against myself, against my past, my present and my future.”

He pictures Emma, the way that they first got together, the way that she was always pushing him to play football, their possible future together that had been wiped out when she revealed how deep her manipulations of him ran. He speaks a little stronger now, letting the defiance come out for everyone to see.

“I will not sit idly by as events that affect me unfold to change the course of my life. I will take a stand and I will defend it.”

He feels the calmness running through him as he remembers standing up to his dad at last. He lets it wash over him, fill him up and take over his heart. His voice grows harsh and grim, filled with determination to be the master of his own fate and not let his dad keep pushing him around any more. Toby doesn't plan on going home again, not until Anthony listens to him and accepts his dreams for what they are. He squares his jaw and goes on with the script. His voice rises, filled with the passion and emotion that is racing through him at this moment.

“When my father comes home tonight, he's finally going to have to deal with me. Good or bad, I'm taking a stand.”

He stops and stands there, slowly coming down from his high. Just saying the words out loud, even if they are from a film and not his own thoughts, have solidified his determination to do his own thing. He feels suddenly like he's found the strength to live his life how he wants to live it instead of listening to someone else.

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The panel members are looking at him, almost expectantly and he shifts, fiddling with his fingers and the hem of his shirt.

“Is that it...?” the woman eventually asks.

“Um.... Yes?” Toby says.

“Ok, thank you,” the woman says, making a few notes on the paper that lies in front of her. “Thank you for your time. You’ll hear from us within five days.”

Toby slumps in place, letting out a deep sigh. It’s over with. But their reactions weren’t what he was hoping for. Already the panel members have turned away and are talking amongst themselves. He sighs.

“Ok,” he says quietly, “Thank you for the opportunity.”

No one’s listening to him and he walks from the room in silence. His shoulders are low, his hands and arms hang uselessly by his sides and his head is bowed. He can only look at the floor as he makes his way out.

He heads back to the train station, his entire body working on autopilot even though he’s never been here. He can’t get the audition out of his head, the way that the panel members looked at him, their response when he was done, their reaction to his script choice. He wonders if he’s completely cocked it up, done everything wrong and lost every chance to get on to the master class. They’d wanted classic and British, something long with emotion probably. And what has Toby given them? He’d given them pop culture, American pop culture at that and it had been ridiculously short. There was just one emotion too, defiance. He should have shown them more. He thinks to himself, he should have given them a longer piece, something with lots of different emotions. He knows he’s shot himself in the foot now, he knows that there’s no way that he’s going to get in to the master class. He should have looked

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in to the sort of thing that they wanted, that they'd expect. He should have come up with a few other ideas instead of just settling on one, the easiest and simplest one at that.

He curses to himself all the way home. He mutters under his breath. People give him funny looks and move away, leaving him by himself.

The pub is heaving with people, they're talking and drinking, laughing and joking. Some are watching television, shouting at the rugby match that's going on. The bar staff are being run ragged, racing to fill orders. There's only one waitress on duty and she's having to rush around to collect empty glasses and take food orders. There are a ton of different smells coming from the kitchen. They're making Anthony's mouth water, even as he tries to talk to Terry.

"So how's the club managing going?" Anthony asks, taking a gulp of his pint, "Any exciting new prospects for the first team?"

"You know I can't tell you that mate," Terry says with a laugh, "Club rules and all that. Besides, knowing you, you'll try to put a bet on or something and end up getting me investigated for inside knowledge."

"I'm not a betting man," Anthony says, "Then again, Toby's Academy fees aren't cheap and I could use the money."

Terry doesn't say anything, he just looks at his friend and laughs. Anthony looks at him and then starts laughing as well. They fall back in to a conversation about other things, things in their lives that have nothing to do with football. This is a usual thing for them, a bi-monthly catch up, where they talk and share and have a bit of fun in adult company. They've

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been friends since school, they've grown up together. They got in trouble together, chased girls together, lost their virginity together, played football together. Anthony had been there when Terry got his position as manager for Skelmerage Football Club, Terry was there when Toby was born, when Rebecca was born and when Maria left them all. They've been through thick and thin together and they're as close as two men can be.

"Listen mate," Anthony says eventually, once they're both up to speed on each others lives, "I'm worried about Toby. He won't tell me anything about the Academy, I just want to know how he's getting on there."

"I couldn't really tell you Anthony," Terry says, shrugging, "To be honest I've not been paying much attention to the Academy players, not like I normally do."

"But you love those kids," Anthony says sharply, "You're normally all over the Academy training. Last year you couldn't stop talking about the new players that you were training up and how they were all going to take the football world by storm."

"I've been busy," Terry says, "It's this match. It's an FA Cup match and it's against Manchester United. I've got to get the first team whipped in to shape if we're going to have any chance of making a mark against them mate. It's massive for the club, the chance to play one of the top teams in the league!"

"Oh yeah!" Anthony says quickly, "I forgot all about it. So you're shoving the Academy to one side? Don't blame you really. Man U is the big leagues after all. Got to beat them, right?"

"I've not completely ignored the Academy boys," Terry says, sighing heavily, "And I have been checking in on Toby a little. He's practically my nephew after all. The coach has been telling me that he's a bit of a slow starter. He's not showing as much promise and skill

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as they thought he had. But he's hopeful. It's early days, sometimes the players take a while to come out of their shell."

"Shit," Anthony says. He stares at his pint and swirls the amber liquid around the glass. "I didn't realise things were that bad. I'm worried about him mate, seriously worried. We used to be close, we used to talk to each other all of the time. But since he joined the Academy he's barely talked about training, or football. All he does is sit in his room and watch films. Or he goes out getting pissed or sneaking around with mates that I don't know about."

"Seriously?!" Terry asks, "But you two... you've always been like best friends. Toby comes to you about everything."

"He used to," Anthony says, shrugging, "Now I don't have a clue what's going on in his life. I don't know what he's thinking. I don't even know for myself how Toby's finding the Academy or if he's getting on with the training at all. I just want to know if he's going to make it, if he's going to keep playing and training like we've always planned for him to."

"Well..." Terry says slowly.

The two men sit in silence for a while, staring at their pints and losing themselves in their thoughts. Anthony's picturing Toby's angry face from the other night, the words that his son spat out and the way that they left things. He wants to take it all back, really, but he knows that he can't. Mostly Anthony just wants to talk to Toby again, to get their closeness back and to finally understand what's going on in his son's head like he used to be able to.

Terry is running through the years of Academy players that he's seen. Each and every one of them he can remember, a rare talent for someone who's faced with a job like his. He can remember the success stories and the failures equally. He can pin point exactly why the

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players win or fail and he knows what's happened to all of them. He wonders whether Toby is going to fall in to the failure category or if there's more in him than anyone realises.

"Listen mate," Terry eventually says, making Anthony look up at him sharply, "I've been watching these lads go through the Academy for years, you know I have. And to be honest most don't make it. It's a simple fact. But they don't make it for a number of reasons, not just one. They might not have as much skill as the other players, they might not be willing to put in the level of commitment that's needed. They might not have the discipline to stick to the training programme, to keep going with everything. Sometimes they just have a change of heart and realise that football isn't for them. So they back out, sit back and just let themselves fail."

"And you just let them?" Anthony asks in disbelief, "You just let them fail themselves out of the Academy and don't try to push them to keep going?!"

"We can't," Terry says simply, "At the end of the day these players are still basically kids. They're teenagers, young, brash and impulsive. They're at the most delicate stages of their lives and everyone's telling them to sort out where they're going to go in the future. We don't like to or want to pressure them in to doing something that they don't want to do."

"But you're supposed to be training the future of football," Anthony points out, "You should push them to do better right?"

"Maybe but we can't force them to," Terry said, shrugging, "It's up to them at the end of the day. Like they say, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Anthony asks, confused.

"We provide the water in the form of the training and the opportunities but we can't make the boys take those chances unless they really want to." Terry says.

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“Seriously?” Anthony says, “Fine, I get it. But I know my son, I know he’s supposed to be a footballer, it’s what we’ve always wanted for him, it’s what he’s always wanted for himself. Right now he’s just a little confused and trying to figure out what he really wants. I already know that he wants this. Please mate, he’s just confused. Can you just do me a favour? Can you ask the coach to put a little more pressure on Toby, get him to drink the water like you were saying? Get him to work harder?”

Terry shakes his head and sighs heavily. He looks at his hands where he’s grasping his pint. His grip tightens and his knuckles turn white. The glass makes an ominous creaking sound. Anthony’s still talking, begging him to get his son to work harder. Finally Terry looks at his old friend.

“It won’t work like that,” Terry says with a shake of his head, cutting Anthony off mid sentence, “It never works like that. With any sport, any form of performing art in fact the student needs to buy in to it and want it for themselves. If we put on the pressure we could end up doing more harm than good. It’s why we purposely don’t apply pressure, trying too hard to get them to do what we want can always turn them away from it all together. We want the students to display their determination to us, to show us that they want it for themselves.”

Anthony just grunts in acknowledgment of what Terry is saying. He doesn’t agree with it even though he respects Terry. Anthony remembers, as he stares at his pint, how things were when he was young. Terry doesn’t understand how much Anthony wants this for Toby, how much Toby making it as a footballer means to him. Terry had made it, he’s played professional football back in the day. He’d gone on to become a manager after he got too old

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for the game. Anthony had sat on the sidelines, watching Terry's success and never experiencing it for himself.

Anthony never made it as a footballer, he would have been great and he knows it. But his father had never supported him, never encouraged him to try as hard as possible to succeed. Instead his dad had pushed him to get a 'real' job as a mechanic apprentice. Anthony refused to make the same mistake that his dad had made. Instead he wants to give Toby all the support that he never got when he was trying to follow his dreams. If Toby makes it, when Anthony never did, then that success would erase the failures of the past and start their lives all over again. Anthony vows to encourage Toby as best he can.

For a moment he wonders whether he should step back though, let Toby get on with it for himself. Then he looks at Terry and remembers what his friend said, about the players showing the club that they want it. The thought is wiped away and Anthony decides that he needs to push Toby to show the club how determined he is, to show them that he really wants to be a football player. There's a small burn in his gut, a knot of annoyance that Terry won't ask the coach to put more pressure on Toby. They're friends, they have been for a long time but Terry won't do this for Anthony. It wasn't fair. But Terry was speaking from experience, perhaps he knows what he is talking about.

"I get what you're saying," Anthony says eventually, "And I suppose that I can see where you're coming from. But I don't agree."

"You don't have to agree mate," Terry says, drinking his pint, "But that's the way we work at Skelmerage and it's not going to change any time soon. Don't hold it against me ok?"



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“Yeah, sure,” Anthony says, “We’re old friends, I’m not going to let something like this come between us, no matter how important it might be.”

Terry smiles at his old friend. Their conversation turns to other topics and by the time that the two men part ways they’re comfortable and happy with each other. Anthony’s made his decision, it’s time to put it in to action.



## Chapter 17

Toby sits in a different pub, looking around and watching all the different people enjoying themselves. There are couples here, old friends, new friends, families. All of them are wrapped up in their own little worlds and Toby is just looking in. He sighs and looks down at his pint, still a little surprised that he was actually served and not asked for ID. He must be looking older than he used to. Then again a sleepless night will do that to a person. The door opens, letting in a burst of cool air and he looks up. Emma has arrived at last. He's been waiting for a while. She walks over but today there's no smile on her face, no welcoming softness or arms held out.

"Took you long enough," he says when she's close enough, "What took you so long?"

"I was busy," she says frostily, taking a seat opposite Toby, "I have a life you know,"

"Really?!" Toby cried out, "I thought your life revolved around me becoming a footballer so you could be a WAG and spend all my money. Guess I was wrong."

"Whatever," Emma says harshly, "I'll take a white wine spritzer."

Toby stares at her for a few minutes. She won't look at him. He sighs, rolls his eyes and heads off to get her the drink. She's on her phone when he gets back, tapping away and glaring at the screen. He plonks the drink down in front of her, ignoring the liquid that sloshes out of the glass and on to his hand and the table cloth. He just sits down opposite her.

"You're cruel," she says suddenly, "I can't believe that you said those things to me. How dare you talk to me like that?!"



“How dare I?!” Toby cries. People look over and he quickly lowers his voice, leaning towards Emma, “How dare I? Are you seriously asking that? Your life dream revolves around me being successful and making all the money. You just want to ride along on my coat tails and spend it. How on earth is that me being cruel? I was telling you the truth.”

“All our life you’ve been focused on being a footballer,” Emma says, “It’s all you’ve ever gone on about. What else was I supposed to dream of being? I wanted to be with you and you’d be rich enough for the both of us. I don’t see the problem. You’re the guy, you’re supposed to support me.”

“That’s pathetic,” Toby says with a sneer, “You just want some rich husband to take care of you. Why wouldn’t you want a dream for yourself? Why wouldn’t you want to make a life for yourself doing your own thing?”

“Well I’m going to have to now aren’t I?!” Emma hissed, “You’ve got that stupid idea in your head about being an actor. I guess it’s going to end up being me that supports us,”

Toby says nothing. He just glares at Emma for a few minutes, sipping at his pint. Finally he clears his throat and puts his drink down. He leans forwards again.

“I don’t think that you’re going to be supporting me,” he says slowly. “Let’s face it. We’ve been arguing for weeks. The smallest thing sets us off and it’s not getting any better. Clearly we’re never going to agree on this and I’m starting to think that you only want me because of the chance I might become a professional footballer and make loads of money. Maybe we should just forget about the engagement for a while and take a break from each other.”

“What?!” Emma asks harshly. “You can’t be serious!”



“I am,” Toby says simply, “I’ve never been more serious in my life. The arguments are doing my head in. I think taking a break could be really good for us.”

“But I love you,” Emma says quietly, sadly, “I might have got with you for the chance of being a WAG to begin with but I really do love you. We can’t break up, we’re supposed to be together.”

“Emma,” Toby says gently, “I’m not saying that we break up for good, honestly I’m not. I’m just saying that maybe we should just take a break for a while, like a trial separation. This way we can think about stuff, you know, try and decide if we’re what each other really wants, if we’re really right for each other. We’ve been together since we were fourteen, we’re not the same people any more. And I think this could help us realise if we still feel the same way for each other.”

“I do!” Emma says quickly, “I don’t need time to think, I really don’t. I know that I love you, I’ve always loved you. I don’t need to be away from you to know that.”

“I’m sorry Emma but I can’t say the same,” Toby says quietly, “I can’t be in a relationship that I’m not one hundred percent invested in and I want to be sure that you’re the one I want to be with. I don’t want to hurt you or break your heart, that’s why we need this break.”

“I won’t let you break us up,” Emma says quickly, “It takes two people to make a relationship and it takes two people to end it.”

“For god’s sake!” Toby cries out, “I’m not ending the relationship! I’m just... pausing it for a while. So I can be sure. Just... leave me alone for a little while, give me some space and let me think.”

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Toby doesn't wait for her response. He just drains the rest of his pint and gets up from the table. Emma calls his name as he walks away but he ignores her. He walks out of the door and doesn't look back.

Anthony sits at the kitchen table, staring at the white envelope in front of him. It's 5:30 and Toby should be home by now but he isn't. Anthony found the envelope on the doormat when he got home and even though it says Toby's name on the front he opened it any way. With everything that's been going on between Toby and himself, with how secretive his son has been Anthony wants to know what this mysterious letter is so he opened it. The contents made him boil with anger for a few moments, he is still angry but it's simmering within him. He knows that he looks calm from the outside, like there's not a problem in the world. But inside he's raging, the urge to break something, to hit something is burning in him, higher and higher. He needs to talk to Toby about this but his son just isn't here.

Eventually though the door opens and shuts, rattling a little in its frame.

"Hello?" he hears Toby call. "Anyone home?"

Anthony says nothing, he just sits there, glaring at the kitchen door and willing it to open. He can hear Toby making his way down the hall, heading towards the kitchen, still calling out for people. When Toby opens the door to the kitchen he stops and stares at his dad.

Why is his dad just sitting there, staring at him? Then his eyes fall to the table and see the envelope. He stares at it for a moment before he looks at his dad.

"Sit down Toby," Anthony says.



Toby does so, settling himself and trying to look casual. His eyes keep flicking to the envelope and he sees his name on it.

“What’s this?” he asks, “Why is it open?”

“Read it,” Anthony says quietly.

Toby pulls the letter towards him. His hands shake as he pulls the letter from the envelope, discarding it to one side. He’s still shaking as he unfolds the paper and he instantly sees the letter head. It’s from the National Association of Performing Arts. He reads through it, his eyes getting wider and wider. He lets out a small whoop when he sees the final sentence. “We are pleased to accept you at our college and a welcome pack is on its way to you.”

Anthony’s been watching Toby as his son reads what is written. He already knows but he wants to hear it for himself, right from Toby. He looks pleased though, a smile spreading across his face. Anthony’s lips tighten and his brows pull together. His anger is boiling up again. He clenches his fists together so hard that his knuckles turn white. He rests them on his knees, trying to hide the depth of his anger from Toby.

When Toby looks at dad Anthony’s face is red with anger. His eyes are stern and glaring. Toby swallows fearfully and he slowly puts the letter down. For a moment he wonders how bad it’s going to get. He knows that there’s going to be an argument of some sort, his dad looks far from happy. He sighs and let’s himself relax, ready to take it.

“So...” Anthony says slowly, his voice shaking slightly, “What is it?”

“It’s from the Performing Arts School,” Toby says slowly, “I’ve been accepted on to a crash course in acting.”

“Acting?” Anthony snaps.

“Yeah,” Toby says, “Acting,”

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“Since when have you wanted to be an actor?” Anthony snarls out quietly.

Toby thinks for a moment. He’s never been asked that question, he’s never really thought about it. But the more that he thinks the more that he realises that deep down he always knew that something was missing, that he was somehow incomplete. Now though, since he got the stunt role and then tried for an actual audition, he’s felt more complete than he ever has before. The answer is so clear really, when he thinks about it.

“Forever,” he admits with a shrug, “I’ve always wanted to be an actor.”

He feels lighter somehow, saying those words. It’s like a weight has been taken from his shoulders. He’s finally said the words out loud, to someone who’s opinion has always mattered to him. He doesn’t have to hide it any more, he realises, he doesn’t have to sneak around any more and keep telling lies to his father. He smiles when he realises how much of a burden keeping all of this inside has actually been.

“Stop smirking,” Anthony snaps. “What about football? We’ve worked so hard for this and you’re just going to throw it all away?”

“I want to be a footballer as well,” Toby says quietly, “I love football, I don’t want to give it up. But I love acting too and I’m actually really good at it. I got in to the National Association of Performing Arts for God’s sake. Do you have any idea how hard that is?!”

“I don’t care how hard it is,” Anthony snaps. “You can’t do both!”

“Says who?” Toby asks defiantly

“Says me,” Anthony snarls, “You need to be determined in what you do if you want to be the best but you can only be determined in one thing at a time. Splitting your attention and your passion between two things never works, believe me.”



“That’s rubbish,” Toby says with a sneer, “It might be like that for you, but it isn’t for me. I’m going to do both and I’m going to be good at both.”

“It’s not just me who thinks it,” Anthony says, “I saw Terry the other day, you know, the manager of Skelmerage? He says -”

“He says what?” Toby interrupts, “That football is the only real path to take?”

“He said that you aren’t showing enough determination,” Anthony says harshly, “You’re not showing the coaches that you really want this. And I guess I know why!”

“So you went behind my back?!” Toby cries out, quickly getting to his feet and looming over his dad, “I wasn’t being the good little boy you wanted so you went behind my back and discussed me with Terry?! I thought we agreed that you wouldn’t do that? We agreed that you’d let me do this my way.”

“Well I wasn’t getting anything out of you,” Anthony says, “You weren’t telling me anything about the Academy. I had no choice, I had to do it.”

“You didn’t have to do anything,” Toby says harshly. “You chose to.”

He looks at his dad. Toby’s entire body is shaking. He keeps unclenching and clenching his fists. He can feel hot tears prickling in his eyes. Toby asked his dad to do just one thing, one thing and he ignored it. Toby wanted to get in to the Academy on his own, get through it on his own and he asked Anthony not to use his personal relationship with Terry to discuss or influence what happens at the Club in any way. But Anthony had done it anyway, gone behind his back and broken the promise that he had made. Toby realises that he’s been betrayed, that his dad only really cares about one thing, just like Emma. The realisation burns, makes him feel sick.



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“We’ve worked too hard for this,” Anthony says, “We’ve worked too hard for too long for me to let you just throw it all away. I’m not going to let you do that.”

“We haven’t done anything!” Toby snaps back, “I have done it all. I’m the one who went to training, I’m the one who played in match after match. It was me that practiced in the back garden, that watched videos of players over and over so I could figure out their way of playing. You didn’t do a thing.”

“I didn’t do a thing?!” Anthony asks harshly, “Who’s the one who fed you, who clothed you? Who ran you to training sessions? Who paid for those clubs, for your kit, for your boots? I’m the one who made sure that you went to training even when you didn’t want to wake up. I’m the one who kept you from playing all of those times that you hurt yourself so you wouldn’t make it worse! Don’t you dare say that you did it all by yourself because you know damn well I was there along with you.”

“Oh boo fricking hoo,” Toby says, “You did all of those things, all of the things you’re supposed to do because you’re a fucking father. It’s what fathers do for their kids. Besides, you wanted this for me, you’re the one who wanted me to be a footballer, who wanted me to do what you couldn’t. It was never a problem for you when it was working with what you wanted. Hell, you were more interested in me getting in to the Academy than I was.”

“Because it’s the only way for you to go pro!” Anthony snaps. “If you hadn’t of gotten in to the Academy you wouldn’t be spotted by any scouts, you won’t get the chance to become a premier league player. You had to get in to the Academy. I couldn’t let you fail and you got in thanks to me!”

“Oh...” Toby say. He pauses, realising something. “Oh my god.”

“Toby...”Anthony says.

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He gets up and walks around the table, reaching out towards his son. Toby backs away, holding a hand up to his mouth. There are tears in his eyes. He thinks that he's going to be sick. He doesn't want his dad to touch him right now, not at all. The truth is finally there, out in the open and he can't believe it.

"Oh... I... Don't touch me!" Toby snaps when Anthony reaches out to him, "I get it now, I really do."

"Get what?" Anthony asks quietly.

"I get everything, exactly what you've done." Toby snaps out.

"I did exactly what I had to," Anthony says, "I did what was necessary to get you where we've been dreaming of you going for your entire life."

"I can't believe you'd do that!" Toby shouts, "The only reason I'm even at Skelmerage Football Club, the only reason that I got in to the Academy was because you asked Terry. I didn't earn my place, I didn't show them that I belonged there. My place was bought, by you, because you're buddy buddy with the manager. Someone else could have had my spot, should have had my spot. But you were so focused on me reaching your dream that you screwed up someone else's life."

"You deserved a spot!" Anthony snaps, "You're a damn good footballer and you deserve the best training. If someone else didn't get in it was because they weren't good enough. If you were crap Terry wouldn't have let you in, even if I asked. You did it on your own."

"Bullshit!" Toby shouts, "That Academy is filled with players who are ten times better than I am, some of them are better than I could ever be. I got in on a favour. I didn't earn



my place and everyone at the club, all the coaches and the trainers, they all know it. Hell the players probably know it too.”

He stops and sighs. He tries to fight down the tears but it’s no good. They start to fall, streaming down his face. He shakes his head and wipes his eyes. When he looks up at his dad the anger inside him is burning white hot.

“I’m out of here,” he says quietly, “I can’t live with someone like you. I’m leaving.”

Toby walks away, shoving past his dad and storming upstairs. Anthony calls out after him but Toby storms in to his room and starts grabbing clothes. He shoves it all in to his kit bag, along with his now clean football kit. He has training tomorrow and even after all that he’s heard he’s determined to turn up and show people that he deserves his place on the Academy course, no matter how he got there. He storms back downstairs and stops to put his shoes on. His dad appears near him, between Toby and the door.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” Toby says. Anthony’s eyes brighten with happiness for a moment but Toby continues, “I’ll get the rest of my clothes then. Once I’ve found somewhere to live I’ll get the rest of my stuff and I’ll be gone.”

“You can’t just leave like this,” Anthony says, “You’re not going anywhere.”

“I can and I am,” Toby says.

They square up to each other, glaring in to each other’s faces. Toby is set, his mind made up and every inch of him screams determination to leave the house that he’s known since he was a kid.

“You’re still a kid,” Anthony says, stepping forwards.

“I’m almost eighteen,” Toby says.

He darts past his dad and opens the door.

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“Where are you going to go?!” Anthony shouts out, “Who’s going to be thick enough to take you in?”

“I’ll find somewhere,” Toby says over his shoulder. He doesn’t look back in to the house, “Despite your best efforts I do actually have friends that care about me as a person, not just because I’m going to help them reach their dreams.”

“You can’t go,” Anthony says again, weakly now.

“Yes I can,” Toby says, stepping through the door. He pauses on the front step and looks at the road in front of him, “Find someone else to live your dream. I’m done.”

He walks away. The door slams behind him and so does the gate. Toby makes his way down the street. He feels both heavy and light at the same time. It’s all a mess.



## Chapter 18

Toby keeps walking down the street, even as he realises that he has no clue about where he's going to go. For a moment he instantly thinks of calling Emma and asking her if he can stay. But then he realises their conversation earlier, what she revealed that morning and the truth of how she was just using him. He doesn't want to talk to her, he realises, he doesn't even want to see her. Then Fiona's face flashes in to his mind. He wants to talk to her, he needs to talk to her. He starts juggling his bags as he scrambles to find his phone.

"Toby hey!" Fiona says happily when she picks up, "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing ok," he says quietly, "Just a little tired. How about you?"

Fiona starts rambling on about her day so far. He listens attentively, actually enjoying hearing her talk. He wonders for a moment why he hasn't just come out and told her what's going on. He doesn't know why. But for some reason he wants to keep it a secret for now, the fact that he's left home and has nowhere to go. So he doesn't say a word.

"So..." he says slowly when Fiona stops talking, "What are you up to now?"

"We're having a night in at the house," she says happily, "Oh you should totally come along! It'll be great. We can get pissed and relax and not have to worry about idiots in clubs and getting all dolled up. We would love to have you there."

"Are you sure?" he asks hesitantly, wondering if she's just being polite.

"Of course I'm sure silly!" she says, "I wouldn't have asked you if I didn't want you to come along. Oh, bring some booze too, whatever you want to drink."

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“Sure,” Toby says quietly, “I’ll see you soon.”

She hangs up before he’s barely finished talking. He looks at his phone and smiles, shaking his head. He tries to figure out how he’s going to get to Fiona’s with his bag and booze and very little money. He knows that he’ll be able to figure something out.

When he reaches Fiona’s house he’s expecting pounding music and people all over the place. He expects to hear laughing and shouting and screaming . But it’s quiet in the house. The living room light is on, shining through the curtains but everything is quiet on the street. He double checks the address for the house, wondering whether this is in fact the right place. It is and he eventually knocks on the door. Fiona peeks around the bay window at him and smiles, waving merrily. She shouts at him to let himself in, her voice muffled through the glass. He nods and does as she’s asked him to.

She’s in the hallway by the time that Toby’s managed to get through the front door. He’s got his kit bag, complete with clothes in his left hand, awkwardly shaped and banging against everything that gets too close. In his right hand is a Londis shopping bag, bulging and full of cans of beer. Fiona looks at the kit bag as he puts it down and grins.

“Are you moving in?!” she jokes, raising one hand.

“What?” Toby asks, distracted. He looks up and follows her gaze. “Oh that, long story.”

“Never mind that,” she says. She rushes forward and grabs his arm, “Get your bag of booze, we’re having fun in the living room.”

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He smiles and follows her, stumbling a little as the cans shift around and throw him off balance. Fiona flings the door to the living room open and waves her hands around.

“Look who’s here guys!” she cries out, “Toby’s come to join us.”

The group all cheer and hold up their drinks by way of welcome. He waves back, grinning and smiling. He spots Carrie and Marco, curled up together on the sofa. John is sprawled across the floor, a bongo drum between his legs. They’re passing a spliff between themselves again. Toby takes a seat but declines the weed when it’s held out to him. He relaxes a little as he settles himself down, looking around and feeling completely at home. John starts tapping a rhythm on the bongo drum and Carrie starts reading some of her poetry. Toby sits back and lets the rhythm wash over him, the words and verses sounding almost like some ancient chanting.

Toby lets his head fall back and sips at his beer can. He’s not felt so relaxed in ages. He feels completely at home. There’s no pressure, no expectations, no things to do. They’re all sitting there, just being themselves and doing what they want. No one is telling anyone what to do, they’re just having fun together. Toby sighs happily. He hadn’t realised how tense he had been before, now he feels a dozen times lighter, despite everything that has happened today. He glances at Fiona and she smiles at him before she starts laughing as Carrie begins to do a strange dance in the middle of the living room. Toby watches and starts to laugh too.

The entire experience is surreal, like nothing that he’s ever experienced before. There is no music blaring, nothing really playing in the background except for some soft chime music, like he’s heard a few times in hippy shops. It’s calm and relaxing, soothing and just there in the background. He sighs happily.

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Suddenly Fiona gets up and starts to recite a monologue. Toby thinks that he recognises it from a film that he's seen but he's not sure. She's giving it her all, really feeling the emotions and conveying them across. He realises that she's practicing her acting. Once she's done they all applaud and then Marco gets up. He's clutching some papers and he begins to read from them. Toby is on the edge of the seat as the story that Marco is telling them deepens. He wants to hear more and he groans in disappointment when Marco winds down to the end of the story that he's written so far.

“Sorry mate,” Marco says cheerfully when Toby tells him this, “I've only gotten that far. I'll let you hear the rest when it's finished.”

He then quickly shushes Toby when he tries to argue and points at Carrie. She's reciting some of her poetry now and again, they applaud when she's finished. Toby doesn't enjoy it quite as much as he enjoyed the story but he applauds anyway. He has never really understood poetry if he's honest with himself. They all start singing while Toby looks on, not knowing the words to the song. He enjoys it anyway and just sits back, relaxing and listening to the melody. He's surprised by how much he's enjoying himself, how relaxed he is. He knows that he should be worried, trying to find somewhere to stay but right now, with the gentle music, the beer in his stomach and the company he is in, he just can't find it in himself to care.

Not once has sports been mentioned, not a single kind of sport. It's a new experience for Toby. He's never been to a party where sports wasn't being discussed somewhere in the building. It's a strange change of pace but he's surprised to find that he actually likes that fact. There's no pressure on him and he's happier than ever that he took the chance to actually talk to Fiona about more than just acting.



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Eventually the older people stop performing and singing and they just sit around talking. Toby mostly listens to the conversation, popping in with an opinion or a thought here and there but usually waiting until he is asked what he thinks. These people are talking about things that he's never given much thought about before, his entire being having been focused on football until this point. It's opening his eyes and making him realise exactly how big the world actually is. He sits there and soaks it all in.

“So John,” Marco says at one point, “Have you managed to fill that room yet?”

“No,” John says with a groan, “And my parents are going on at me to get someone in there. They're really not happy about the idea of a room sitting empty when it could be making them some money.”

“I bet,” Fiona says as she sips at her wine, “Why is it taking you so long anyway?”

“Because no one seems right!” John cries out, “They're all too stuck up or stuffy or just not interested in the same things that we are. I've tried to tell my parents that we need some one who can actually talk to us all and spend time with us but they're just not listening.”

“What are you going to do then?” Carrie asks. She's sitting next to Toby, braiding the longer bits of his hair, “I mean, are you going to have to try and find some students or something?”

“Maybe,” John says. He sighs and rubs his face, “I just want someone to appear and take the room off my hands.”

Toby looks at John and then at the others. Suddenly it's like a light bulb goes off in his head, a bright flash of inspiration hits him. He's got nowhere to stay. He likes these peo-

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ple and he has more in common with them than he ever thought. They have a spare room going.

“Can I have it?” he asks.

They all fall silent and just look at him. They look at each other and then they all look at John. He sits there for a moment and looks at Toby, staring at him for a long moment. His face looks serious and his brows are frowning. Toby wonders whether he might have misread the situation. Then suddenly John smiles.

“Of course you can!” he says.

Toby smiles as well and laughs for a moment. The others cheer and Carrie squeals, throwing her arms around Toby’s neck. Her sudden weight makes him tumble sideways on the sofa and he automatically wraps his arms around Carrie to keep her safe. He lies there, twisted awkwardly and looks at the young woman. She smiles at him, grinning widely and then starts to shower his face with little kisses.

“I’m so happy!” she cries out between kisses, “This is going to be great.”

Marco laughs and walks over. He leans over them and grabs Carrie gently, pulling her to her feet. She grins and giggles at him. He reaches out a hand to Toby who takes it. Marco hauls him to his feet with surprising strength.

“Glad to have you with us mate,” Marco says with a wide grin.

Then he reaches forwards and grabs Toby in a strong hug. The others laugh at Toby’s surprised face. Normally his friends aren’t quite this friendly and he’s not completely sure what to do. After a moment of panic he decides to go with it and hugs Marco back, throwing in a slap to the shoulders to make sure it stayed manly. Or at least as manly as a hug between two men can get.

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“Group hug!” Carrie cries.

She flings her arms around the two cuddling men. John and Fiona laugh as well and quickly scramble to their feet and hurry over. Toby finds himself squashed between the four other people and he likes it. Finally though they break away and go back to their seats. Carrie settles herself beside Toby and returns to plaiting his hair. They start to talk about other things and time quickly flies by as they get steadily drunker and sillier.

“Well I think I’m going to have to call it a night,” Fiona says eventually, “I’ve got to be up sort of early tomorrow,”

“Yeah me too,” Marco says with a groan as he climbs to his feet, “Busy people have to be served coffee you know.”

“We should probably all head to bed,” John says roughly, stifling a massive yawn. “It is kind of late.”

Carrie just nods and gets to her feet as well. She kisses everyone on the cheek, saying goodnight and heads out of the door. Marco and John quickly follow. Fiona smiles at Toby and drags him to his feet.

“Come on future roomie,” she says happily, “I’ll see you out.”

Toby laughs and follows her in to the entrance hall. He heaves his back on to his shoulder, surprised by the weight. He forgot how heavy it could be. Fiona’s watching him, stood close by. He steps closer and closer. They just look at each other for a few long moments. Toby’s gaze drops down to her lips. Maybe he can stay here tonight after all. It wasn’t



agreed or discussed if he could take the room straight away after all, let alone if he could stay that night. He doesn't want to presume anything. He looks at Fiona again, seeing how beautiful she is, remembers how much he likes her and he decides to go for it. He leans towards her, his eyes beginning to drift closed as he gets closer and closer.

Then he feels a hand on his mouth instead of Fiona's lips and his eyes jerk open. He looks at her and frowns. Her hand is still on his mouth.

"No kisses." she says firmly.

"Please," he murmurs gently, kissing her palm "Please."

She looks at him and smiles softly. She moves her hand, wrapping it around the back of his neck instead. He smiles and leans in again. Their lips touch, brief and soft at first. Then Toby slants his head slightly and covers her lips with his. He kisses her hard, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulls her close to him. Her hands bury themselves in his hair, getting caught in the braids that are still there. She pulls away and they laugh. Toby rests his forehead against hers and kisses the end of her nose.

"Can..." Toby starts to say. He hesitates before taking the plunge, "Can I stay with you tonight? In your bed."

"No Toby," she says softly. "It's too soon."

She reaches up and brushes her fingers against his lips. He kisses them again. He starts to talk again but she moves her hand and covers his mouth again, silencing him. She shakes her head.

"I don't want to move too quickly," Fiona says, "We might be working together and I don't want to ruin that or make things awkward."

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“But,” he starts to say and then realises that his words are muffled by her hand. He steps back. “But I’ve left home, moved out completely. I’ve got no where else to go.”

“You’re an idiot,” Fiona says. Her words are softened by the soft smile that crosses her face. “You have your own bed. Right here. Remember?”

“Oh yeah,” Toby says, “I didn’t want to just assume...”

“Nonsense,” she says quickly, coming over all posh again. Toby grins at that, “Come on, I’ll show you where your room is.”

They head up the stairs and along the landing. Fiona slowly opens the door to one of the rooms, revealing a blank walled space with an empty, unmade bed in the centre. There are no curtains on the windows and it’s filled with orange light. Fiona flips the switch and heads inside.

“I better grab you some sheets,” she says, frowning at the bed, “You can’t sleep on just the mattress.”

“Sorry to put you out like this,” Toby says when she returns with the sheets, blankets and a pillow, “I know it’s a bit unexpected.”

“It’s cool,” she says as she quickly makes up the bed, “You needed a place to go after all and you already said you wanted to live here. Besides, we don’t mind someone staying in the room for a couple of nights if they need to. And we like you so that’s a plus.”

“Yeah...” Toby says with a grin.

He flops down on to the end of the bed and sits there, rubbing the back of his head with his hand. Fiona sits beside him.

“Shit,” he says suddenly, eyes widening, “I actually left home. I actually moved out.”



“Kind of hits you doesn’t it?” Fiona says, “Don’t worry, I felt the same when I first left home. Then again by the time I moved in here I was sort of used to it.”

“Oh my god I left home.” Toby says.

He rubs his face with his hands and leans his elbows on his knees. He stares at the floor.

“Just speak to John in the morning,” Fiona says, rubbing his back gently. Toby turns and looks at her, “About rent and bills and stuff. He’s not that bad and to be honest I just think he’s going to be glad that this room is finally filled.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Toby says. He gives a soft laugh, “Jeeze, I’ve moved out.”

“Toby,” Fiona says quietly, “You didn’t... well you didn’t kiss me just so that you could have a room for the night did you?”

Toby looks at her. He doesn’t say a word, doesn’t try to say anything specific with his expression. She stares right back at him, her eyes searching his face for something. She smiles and they both start laughing quietly.

“Good night Toby,” she says, getting to her feet.

Toby stands and follows her to the door. He reaches out gently when they’re at the threshold and takes her wrist, pulling her back. She complies and looks up at him. He leans down and gently kisses her on the mouth. It’s short and sweet, barely a touch of lips against each other. He pulls back and smiles.

“Good night Fiona,” he says quietly, “Sleep well.”

She smiles at him and heads off to her room. The entire time she keeps glancing over her shoulder at him and smiling. He watches her go, leaning against the door frame until eventually her bedroom door shuts behind her and she’s gone from his sight. He sighs and

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heads in to his own room, shutting the door quietly. Maybe today hadn't ended so badly after all.



## Chapter 19

Toby wakes up with a groan and rolls over, trying to get as far away from the bright sunlight as he can. He decides that maybe he is part vampire, the sun makes him hurt all over. He briefly wonders why he left his curtains open last night when he knows that the morning sun always wakes him up too easily. It's shining right on his head and he can't escape. Eventually he can't fight back the light and he blinks himself awake. For a moment he is confused. This isn't his bedroom, he can't remember where he is. Then it all comes back to him in a rush of images and words and he remembers. He groans and rubs his eyes, leaning his head on his legs. The memories of the fights that he had the day before and the fact that he's left home makes his head pound, adding to the pain that's already there thanks to his morning hangover. He knows that he shouldn't have drank so much last night.

He finally gets out of bed when the pressure of his bladder gets too much. He smiles as he looks around the room and he realises that it's his now, properly his. There's a swing in his step as he heads to the bathroom and it's even stronger by the time that he comes out. He can smell coffee and bacon brewing from somewhere downstairs and he decides to follow his nose, his stomach growling hungrily. He still feels a little sick and his head is pounding but he knows that a good bacon sandwich will work wonders. As he reaches the kitchen door he can hear pots clattering and the sound of soft jazz playing on the radio. He can't hear voices though and he wonders who's in the kitchen.



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It's John, stood by the oven flipping bacon in a pan. He's wearing a frilly pink apron and a pair of boxers.

"Nice apron." Toby says as he heads in to the kitchen. "Very you."

John looks over his shoulder and grins at Toby. He hands the younger boy a mug and nods his head towards the kettle.

"Help yourself," he says, "And don't diss the apron. It's the best present that I ever got."

Toby laughs and then groans. He pours himself some tea from a pot and adds his milk and sugar. He feels quite a lot sicker now and his head hurts. It seems that he's been caught in another wave of his hangover. He settles himself down in a chair and rests his head on the cold table. Eventually he pulls himself up and takes a sip of his tea, groaning again but this time it's in pleasure.

"Yeah, I know the feeling," John says. "We got a little carried away last night."

"That we did," Toby says, drinking more, "Are those things always that mental?"

"Not really," John says, shrugging, "Normally we don't drink quite as much. Good night though right?"

"The best," Toby says with a wider grin. He's starting to feel more human, "I can't remember the last time that I had such a good time in a house."

"My friend," John says, turning to the table with two bacon sandwiches on plates, "You have not lived a good life if that is the case."

John puts one of the sandwiches in front of Toby and then takes a seat, digging in to his own with relish. Toby pauses and looks at the sandwich.

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“Eat it loser,” John says, “If you’re anything like me you need a decent breakfast when you’re hungover.”

Toby laughs and starts to eat. He groans in pleasure as the salt and the grease hit his tongue. For a while the kitchen is filled with only the sounds of eat and drinking, the occasional moan as the two men enjoy good food. When they finally finish their breakfast Toby pushes his plate away, leans back and rubs his stomach.

“That was so good,” he says happily, “I can’t remember the last time I had a bacon sandwich so good.”

“Just what you need the morning after the night before,” John says as he wipes his mouth, “It was a good night before though wasn’t it?”

“The best,” Toby says with a laugh. He hesitates for a moment. “But is it really ok that I’m taking the room?”

“Of course,” John says, frowning in confusion, “You’re a cool guy and like I said last night, I’ve been trying to fill that room for ages. You’re welcome to it. All I need is like... £100 a month or something? Just so I’m making a bit of money off it. I know you’re barely out of school and you don’t have a job yet so it’s cool.”

“Wow,” Toby says, surprised, “Thanks mate.”

John grins at him and then takes the dishes away, getting them all cleaned up. Toby is about to get up and help when his phone rings. It’s Emma. His head starts pounding again. He groans, this time with annoyance. Dealing with her is the last thing that he wants to do, he’s barely started feeling better from his hangover and arguing with her again is going to make it so much worse, all over again. There’s nothing for it though.

“Hello,” he says blankly, “What’s up?”

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“Where were you last night?” Emma snaps.

“Well good morning to you too Emma,” Toby says sarcastically, “I’m good thanks, how are you?”

“Cut the crap Toby,” Emma says harshly, “Just tell me where you were last night.”

“I was at a friends,” Toby says, frowning now, “Not that it’s any of your business since we’re on a break.”

He looks over at John and rolls his eyes. John smirks and nods, clearly he knows the feeling well.

“You don’t know anyone who lives in Manchester,” Emma says sharply, “So where were you?”

“How the hell do you know I’m in Manchester?” Toby asks loudly. He feels a cold chill settle in his stomach and the nausea starts to rise again.

“I followed you,” Emma says, “I was-”

“You what?!” Toby shouts, “What the hell do you mean that you followed me?”

“You didn’t come home!” Emma shouts back, “You went to Manchester on the train and then you didn’t come back. What were you doing Toby?”

“What?!” Toby asks, quieter now, “What’s wrong with you? I don’t have to answer to you any more, you’re not my mother, or my girlfriend now. It’s seriously creepy that you followed me.”

“Who is she?” Emma snaps, “Who’s the girl you spent the night with?”

“What are you talking about?” Toby asks confused.



“You’ve got to be with a girl,” Emma says quickly, “You’ve not been answering my calls, you’ve been distant with me, you wanted to take a break. What else am I supposed to think? What are you up to Toby?”

“You followed me to Manchester!” Toby shouts again, “You have no right to tell me how to live my life.”

“You’re my boyfriend!” Emma shouts back, “I have the right to know if my boyfriend’s cheating on me don’t I?”

“Look, I don’t want to talk to you about this right now,” Toby says as he glances at the clock. He sighs, “Emma, I’ve got training, I’m going to be late as it is. I’ll call you tonight.”

“I’ll believe that when I actually get the call,” Emma snaps.

She’s about to say more, Toby just knows it. If he lets her keep talking they’ll be arguing for hours. He wasn’t lying when he said that he was going to be late for training either. He hangs up, cutting Emma off mid sentence. He sighs, rubs his face with his hands and heads up to his new room to start getting ready.

His hangover is almost completely gone by the time he reaches the Academy. The fresh air and the walking really helped to clear his head and despite one particular sticky moment on the train, when a baby’s nappy exploded in the toilet of the carriage and filled the area with the stink of poop, he feels much better. He changes in record time and he’s out on the pitch within moments. He spots Scooby straight away and heads over.

“Hey mate,” he says quietly, “Can we talk?”



Scooby looks up. He looks really serious, a frown on his face. It smooths away into blankness though and Scooby just nods. The pair head over to the fence around the training pitches and Toby leans against the fence.

“Listen mate,” he says, “I’m really sorry about the other night. I shouldn’t have said what I did. It was your night for celebrating your success and I probably ruined it.”

“Nah,” Scooby says with a shake of his head, “You didn’t ruin it, you just said some stupid shit while you were drunk. It happens to all of us at one point or another.”

“I really am sorry though,” Toby says insistently, “I was a complete dick and I feel so bad about it.”

“Relax,” Scooby says, “Don’t worry about it. I get it, really I do. There was something bugging you and I said some mean things too, we were as bad as each other.”

“You were a bit harsh,” Toby says with a grin, “But then again I suppose that I probably needed to hear those things. It wasn’t the first time I heard them and it wasn’t the last either. I just... I guess I’ve just got a lot of stuff going on in my head right now and I got a bit confused and upset.”

“It happens,” Scooby says, shrugging, “Let’s just forget about it. We’re good mates, even though we’ve only known each other for a while. Our friendship is too deep for us to fall out over some drunken argument.”

“Yeah,” Toby says. He brightens up and smiles at last, “Yeah, you’re right. You don’t hold that crap against me and I don’t hold it against you. Besides, I still need your help with my game.”

“Sure thing,” Scooby says, laughing, “Your volleys are shit.”

They start to head off towards one of the pitches.

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“By the way,” Scooby says as they walk, “If it had been you stealing my girl or something it would have been a whole other story. I don’t give a shit about that bros before hoes crap.”

“True that,” Toby says, laughing loud.

They spend most of that day of training practicing Toby’s volleys. Scooby is really skilled with them, able to control the ball like it’s just an extension of his own body. Toby’s a little envious really, when he sees the ease with which Scooby demonstrates. He gets more and more annoyed when he tries it himself, after Scooby makes it look so easy, but he just fails. Scooby’s actually a better teacher than Toby expected. He takes things slow, explaining things step by step and showing Toby every part of the move. By the end of their training session for the morning Toby doesn’t have it down quite as well as Scooby does but he’s much better. They break for lunch and have a bit of a rest.

“Mate,” Scooby says, as they eat, “I really need you to help me.”

“What’s up?” Toby asks, looking at his friend.

Scooby doesn’t reply. He just sits there, staring at his sandwich. There’s a frown on his face and Toby doesn’t like it. He’s usually so happy, all smiles and friendly banter. To see Scooby looking so serious... it makes Toby uncomfortable and gives him the sense that something is wrong in the world. He wants to help straight away, even if it is to try and get that look off Scooby’s face.

“Will you help me with the acting thing?” Scooby eventually asks.

“What acting thing?” Toby asks, confused.

“You know... the scared thing I’ve got going on,” Scooby says in a whisper.



Toby looks at him for a moment, seriously confused. But then he remembers the audition a few weeks back and the way that Scooby froze up and turned in to a completely different person.

“I’m scared mate,” Scooby admits, “I might end up playing for the first team in the match coming up and I know there’s going to be cameras there. It’s Manchester United for fuck’s sake, there will be cameras, no doubt about it.”

“Just think of the game,” Toby says, shrugging, “Treat it like any other match and you’ll be fine.”

“I know I won’t be though mate.” Scooby says.

He looks at Toby and he realises that the other boy is actually on the edge of tears. He’s struggling to admit this to his friend. And just like that Toby knows that Scooby is completely petrified. And Toby knows how much strength it’s taking Scooby to admit this to him.

“It’s all going to go wrong,” Scooby whispers. “Even now, just thinking about playing and about all of those cameras... it makes me want to run away and throw up. But I can’t even move. I just know that there’s going to be the whole world watching and they’re going to see me and I don’t think I’ll even be able to step on to the pitch.”

“Jeeze,” Toby says slowly, “I didn’t realise it was that bad.”

“Please,” Scooby begs, “Please will you help me out with this? Will you teach me some of your magic or something and help me get through this?”

“Of course mate,” Toby says, patting Scooby on the shoulder and rubbing his back, “Of course I’ll help you. This is your big chance, a once in a lifetime opportunity to live the dream. I’m not going to let your stupid head screw it up.”



Scooby grins at Toby at that and suddenly the world is back to normal. They spend the rest of the afternoon running laps and doing some defence work. Despite the fact that both of them usually play up front the coaches insist that everyone work on all areas of the game, even if it isn't their strong suit. Toby knows that's because sometimes people are better suited for different positions than the ones that they've always played and they would never know until they try it. He's happy that he's fairly decent in defence, that his dad made him practice and play in different positions.

A pang of sadness hits him when he thinks about his dad and he just freezes. A shout and a nudge from Scooby gets him moving again. As they continue to play Toby is surprised by how much he actually misses his dad already, and Rebecca. But he knows that can't go back, not yet. He focuses on the game again when Scooby shouts at him and they play better than they ever have. Toby even tries a few of the volleys that his friend has taught him and is over the moon when they actually work and turn the game in his side's favour.

After training Scooby and Toby head to a nearby cafe and hang out for a while. They talk about Scooby's problem and Toby tries to find out exactly why Scooby is so scared of the cameras. It's not really clear but he thinks that he knows how to fix things for Scooby and make it all a little easier on his friend. He's actually surprised, in truth, that he knows the tricks that he tells Scooby, he didn't even know that he knew those things.

"The thing you've got to remember is," Toby says, "Not everyone's going to be as football mad as the people in the stadium. They're all there to watch the match and watch their team win. They're the hard core fans and they're watching you in person. The people at home, watching on the TV, they're not the super fans. They're the ones who watch maybe



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just because they like football or there was nothing else on. They're not watching you, they're just watching grown men chase a ball around a field,"

"Are you sure that you love football," Scooby jokes.

"Yes I'm sure," Toby says, smiling, "Anyway, just forget about the cameras and everyone who's watching you. And if you can't do that then think of someone, anyone, that whenever they're watching you play a match, when they're there in person, that makes you play extra hard and the best that you can. You try to show off for them really, show them that you're a really good, serious footballer. Is there anyone like that for you?"

"Yeah..." Scooby says after a moment of thought. He looks at Toby and smiles, "Yeah, there's someone like that. My granddad. He gave me my first pair of boots and took me to watch my first game."

"Well there you go," Toby says with a grin. "Now, when you're playing and the cameras are all focused on you, don't imagine that there's all these people watching. Imagine that each and every one of those cameras is sending the picture straight to your granddad and he's watching you, where ever he is and cheering you on."

Scooby thinks for a moment and then he smiles.

"You know what mate?" Scooby says, "I think that could really help. Do you have any other ideas or advice?"

Toby start reeling off suggestions and Scooby listens closely, right on the edge of his seat. Eventually though it's time for them both to go home, demonstrated when Scooby gets a text from his mother, wanting to know where he is. When they part ways they're good friends again, their bond reformed and stronger than ever. They've both realised that they need each

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other really, need to be able to lean on and depend on the other if either of them are going to be at all successful. Toby walks towards the train station, and his new home, with a smile on his face.

His phone rings just before he gets in to the station itself. He groans when he sees that it's his dad. Probably trying to get him to come home. He sighs and answers it any way, despite knowing that there'll probably be another argument and demands for him to return.

"Toby?!" Anthony says quickly, "Toby is that you?"

"Yeah Dad, it's me," he says with a sigh. "Who else would it be? "What do you want?"

"It's Granddad," Anthony says.

Toby's blood runs cold and he stops walking. People tut and glare as they walk around him.

"Is he ok?" he asks quietly. He tries to prepare himself for the worst but he knows that anything his dad tells him is going to be bad.

"He's in hospital," Anthony says, "They say he had a fall or something. He's ok for now,"

"Oh thank god," Toby says, "When can I go and see him?"

"He's in Ward E6," Anthony says, "Visiting hours are between 6:30 and 8:30pm. I'm going to be there at 7:30. Try to get there as soon as you can."

"Sure," Toby says with a nod even though his dad can't see him. "I'll get there as soon as I can."

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Toby hangs up and turns on his heel. He strides towards the bus stop, feet moving quickly. He needs to get to his granddad as soon as he can. His heart is racing and he flings out an arm to stop the first bus he sees. He has to get to his granddad.



## Chapter 20

Toby races down the hospital corridor, taking in the smell of disinfectant that fills his nose. His dad said that Granddad is ok but Toby is still filled with doubts. If he's being kept in the hospital he can't be that ok. He follows the signs for the ward, getting lost a few times and having a couple of helpful nurses point him in the right direction. He bursts on to the ward, in to the little section that his Granddad is put in, fully expecting to see the old man lying down and filled with tubes.

But Granddad is sitting up, happily chatting away to the person in the bed next to him who actually looks like he should be in the hospital. Toby walks closer and sees that his granddad is a little paler than usual but nothing else looks to be wrong. Granddad looks over and when he spots that it's Toby a wide smile spreads across his face. Apparently the old guy is just as happy and cheerful as ever.

“What happened Granddad?” Toby asks as he gets closer.

He reaches down for a hug and is surprised to feel that his granddad feels as solid and as strong as ever. As he sits down though he notices that the man's arms are shaking slightly.

“I'm fine,” Granddad says, waving his hand around, “It was nothing. Just a silent stroke.”

“A stroke?!” Toby shouts, startling a few of the other occupants and earning a warning glare from a passing nurse. He lowers his voice and leans in closer to his grandfather. “A stroke isn't nothing! It can kill you.”

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“It was a silent stroke,” Granddad says, “They’re nowhere near as dangerous, they just make you go a little funny for a while. I’m fine. They’re keeping me in to do a few more checks but I’ll be back home before you know it, you wait and see.”

“It makes you go funny?” Toby asks, “Well we’re not going to really notice a difference are we? You’ve always been funny and weird.”

Granddad laughs loudly, drawing a few inquiring looks. Toby chuckles along with him before his smile drops and he takes his Granddad’s hand in his.

“You’re ok though?” he asks worriedly, “You can walk and everything? Still remember us all?”

“Who are you again?” granddad asks straight faced. He can’t hold it though and he starts chuckling. “I’m fine Toby, don’t worry yourself. They’re just doing some further checks and then I can go home. But what about you? How’s football going?”

Toby breathes a sigh of relief but doesn’t answer his granddad right away.

“It’s ok,” he eventually mumbles, “You know, football-y.”

“Hmmm,” Granddad says, leaning forwards, “You don’t sound too happy about it. What’s wrong?”

Toby looks at his granddad. He knows that he can probably tell the old man everything. They’ve always been close, he’s always felt comfortable confiding in his granddad. He takes a deep breath and goes for it.

“I’ve left home,” he spits out. Granddad’s eyebrows rise in surprise and Toby rushes on, “Me and Dad have been arguing loads lately and I just had enough. So I left.”

“Arguing?” Granddad asks, “About what? You’ve always been so similar. Then again, that could be the problem I suppose.”



“He found out that I want to be a footballer,” Toby says. He takes a deep breath again, “And an actor.”

“An actor?!” Granddad says, “Wow! That’s brilliant. Why would you fall out about that?”

“You know Dad!” Toby says with exasperation, “His dream is for me to become a footballer, and only a footballer. Anything else is wrong. I’m to be a footballer and that’s it, just like he always wanted to be.”

“Oh I remember your dad wanting to be a footballer,” Granddad says, laughing, “He was football mad that boy. Do you know I was the one who talked him out of it?”

“Really?” Toby asks, “I never knew that.”

“Oh yes,” Granddad says, “I said that he couldn’t be a footballer, he had to be something else.”

“What did you want him to be?” Toby asks, then he jokes, “An actor?”

“No! A mechanic,” Granddad says, “That was probably just as bad for him really. The thing was I wanted him to do what I did, what everyone was doing back in those days. I wanted your dad to stop dreaming and start bringing in some money with a proper job,”

“It was kind of a silly dream back then,” Toby says, “I mean, they didn’t exactly make as much as they do now. Hell I think they only made average wage back then. He probably would have made more as a mechanic to be fair.”

“I made a mistake Toby,” Granddad says, “I should never have pushed him to do what I wanted him to do.”

“So...” Toby says, “You wish you’d let him follow his dream instead?”



“Of course I do!” Granddad says firmly, “Dreams are important things. They give us something to work towards, a bit of happiness and hope if we’re bored or sad or tired. It makes everything that we do worthwhile because we’ve got the possibility of something else out there, waiting for us. At least if I’d let him go for it, even if he failed, he’d be off your back now instead of trying to make you in to the footballer that he wanted to be.”

“I suppose,” Toby says with a sigh. “What should I do Granddad? I don’t want to fight with Dad.”

“Follow your dream Toby,” Granddad says wisely, doing his best impression of Mr Miyagi, “If you want to be a footballer, do it. If you want to be an actor, do it. If you want to be both, do it. If you want to be an estate agent...”

“Don’t do it,” they says together.

They both laugh and Toby can’t help himself. He leans over and gives Granddad a big hug. Just getting all of it out there, everything that’s going on in his mind, has made him feel a lot better. And hearing one of his own relations, especially one whose opinion matters to him so much, encouraging him to go for it has made him feel a lot more secure in his choices.

“Will you talk to Dad?” Toby asks Granddad eventually, “I’ve tried but I can’t make him understand.”

“You leave your dad to me,” Granddad says, patting his grandson’s hand kindly. His gaze flicks over Toby’s shoulder and his smile widens, “Argh, talk of the devil.”

Toby turns around and sees his dad and Rebecca walking in to the section of the ward. Rebecca darts away from their dad and rushes over to the bed. She gives Toby a quick hug before she clambers up on to the bed and throws her arms around her granddad, hugging him



tightly. Granddad hugs her back, grinning widely. He winks at Toby as Anthony gets nearer and then looks up at his son.

“How are you Dad?” Anthony asks.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Granddad says, he turns to Rebecca and smiles at her, “My goodness, look at how you’ve grown. You’ve got your mother’s eyes you have. How’s the singing going?”

“It’s going really well!” Rebecca says happily, “Do you want to hear it?”

“Maybe another time my dear,” he says kindly, “Right now though I’m dying for a cup of decent coffee. Hey! Dying! You get it? I’m in the hospital but I’m not actually dying,” Everyone groans and rolls their eyes, “Anyway, you wouldn’t believe the rubbish that they’re serving us here. Tastes like dishwater. Toby do you think that you could go down to the coffee shop downstairs and get me some decent coffee? Take Rebecca with you while you’re at it and get her some Fruit Pastilles too.”

“Sure Granddad,” Toby says smiling.

He gets up and takes Rebecca’s hand. Granddad winks at him as he heads out of the compartment. His Granddad isn’t exactly subtle sometimes but at least it’s only Toby and Granddad that know he is after some privacy so he can talk to Anthony. Toby is filled with a rush of fondness and love for Granddad and decides to get him the best coffee he can find, even if it means going down the street.

Anthony takes Toby’s empty seat and stares at his dad.

“Oh stop looking at me like that,” Granddad scolds, “I’m fine for now.”



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“Dad...” Anthony says.

“Leave it!” Granddad says. “Listen I need to talk to you. Do you remember when you were sixteen?”

“A lot happened when I was sixteen,” Anthony points out, “You’re going to need to be a bit more specific.”

“When you wanted to pursue a football career,” Granddad says. The light starts to dawn in Anthony’s eyes and Granddad continues, “You were obsessed with becoming a professional footballer. But I managed to convince you to take that apprentice job at the local mechanics instead?”

“Yeah I remember,” Anthony says. He looks somber for a moment before he starts laughing, “Cor, did we ever argue. I think we went an entire week without talking to each other at one point.”

“Yes, we did argue,” Granddad says. He takes his son’s hand, “Look, I don’t know how long I’ve got left on this planet. I’ve had a good innings but this silent stroke has put me on the radar. I’m probably going to have another one at some point and this time it could actually kill me.”

“Stop saying that Dad,” Anthony says, “Why are you talking like this? What’s going on.”

“Listen,” Granddad says, “I don’t want there to be any regrets or secrets between us. I want you to know that I made a mistake back then.”

“What do you mean?” Anthony asks, “What mistake?”

“Making you take that apprenticeship,” Granddad says, “I should never have done that, I should have let you go for it and been there to pick up the pieces.”

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“You were looking out for me!” Anthony insists, “You wanted to make sure that I had a future for a long time, not just until I turned thirty or got too old. You were doing what any dad would do.”

“It was a mistake Anthony,” Granddad insists, “One that I’ve had to live with all of my life. I would do anything to change what I did.”

“Nah,” Anthony says, “Forget it.”

“I can’t forget it son,” Granddad says, “I made a mistake and it haunts me.”

“It’s in the past now,” Anthony says, shrugging, “You can’t change it so there’s no point dwelling on it. Anyway, why are you going on about this now? It was like... forty years ago.”

“Because I want to make sure,” Granddad says, “I want to make sure that you don’t make the same mistake that I did. I don’t want you to live with this same regret and feel guilty everyday. I want you to learn from my mistakes and do it right.”

“What are you talking about?” Anthony asks, laughing, “I don’t get you at all.”

“Toby,” Granddad says.

“What about Toby?” Anthony asks, all amusement gone from his voice now.

“You’re on the way to doing what I did,” Granddad says, taking his son’s hand in both of his, “Can’t you see? You’re making the exact same mistake as me. You’re making him follow your dream, not letting him follow his own. It’s wrong and if you keep on this path it will end badly for both of you.”

“It’s different now Dad,” Anthony says, pulling his hand away.

“How?” Granddad asks harshly, “How on earth is you making Toby do what you want instead of what he wants different to what I did?”

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“It just is,” Anthony says. He looks away for a moment and then turns back to his dad, taking his hands, “Toby is too young to really know what he wants. I’m encouraging him to do something that anyone else would give their right arm to do.”

“That sounds very familiar Anthony,” Granddad says. “I believe that I said the exact same thing. But what you’re doing is in your opinion. It’s true that you might give your right arm to be a footballer but it’s not everyone else’s dream. Not everyone wants to be a footballer or just play football. Most want to do other things.”

“Were you talking to Toby about this before I got here?” Anthony asks, sitting back.

“Yes,” Granddad says firmly, “He was upset and I listened to him. Something that you should be doing, I might add.”

“You have no business talking to him about this,” Anthony snaps, “He’s my son. I tell him what to do. I don’t want you filling his head with rubbish.”

“He told me he left home,” Granddad bursts out. “Can’t you see that you’re just going to push him away if you keep doing this? It’ll only get worse.”

Anthony doesn’t say a word. He just looks away and won’t meet his father’s eye.

“You forget Anthony,” Granddad continues, “We didn’t speak for two whole years. It was only your mum, God rest her soul, who got us back together on speaking terms. I can’t see Maria helping things along like your mum did, can you? She hates your guts.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Anthony says, waving his hand around, “Look, this isn’t the time to be talking about this. You need to be focusing on getting better.”

“I’m fine,” Granddad says. “And we need to talk about this now, before things get any worse.”



They don't have time to say any more. Toby returns with Rebecca, a cup of hot coffee in his hand. He hands it to his Granddad who starts drinking it down quickly. He hisses softly as it burns his tongue slightly but makes a small noise of contentment.

“So...” Granddad says once he's drank his coffee, “What are you all up to tonight?”

Rebecca and Anthony both share their plans. Then it's Toby's turn.

“I thought I'd go and see Mum,” he says quietly.

They all look at him in surprise and shock.

“Why would you go and do that?” Anthony asks harshly, “She's not your mother really.”

“She is my mum,” Toby says sharply, “Even if she's not been around that much she's still my mother. With everything that's happened with Granddad I just want to go and see her, let her know I'm ok and make sure that she is too.”

Granddad doesn't say anything but he nods. He understands, he would do the same thing in Toby's shoes to be fair.

Maria, Toby's mother isn't the best mum in the world. She's actually an alcoholic. Once upon a time she was a determined young woman with a dream of her own, much like Toby. She wanted to be a dancer and she could have been. She was at the top of her game, one of the best dancers around and well on her way to becoming a professional who's name was known by everyone in the business and those enthusiasts and devotees who love dancing. She was driven and she was determined to manage to make it in the big time. She didn't even

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let something like having a child stop her, continuing to dance while Anthony looked after baby Toby at night.

But those dreams were all put to bed when she had a terrible knee injury. The truth was that she could have returned to dancing once she recovered and had rehabilitation. But she got hooked on her painkillers, taking them even after the pain from her knee when away. After Rebecca was born she started to suffer from post-partum depression and was placed on Valium to make things better. Pretty soon she was spending every day on a cocktail of prescription drugs and barely looking after her children at all. Everyone told Anthony to leave her, to take the kids and run. But he wouldn't listen. He loved her, he was deeply devoted to her and the thought of leaving her made him want to curl up and cry.

She was still ambitious though, always dreaming of returning to dancing. Anthony however had no other ambitions for himself, he just wanted to see his kids do well and kept pushing Toby, even as a child, to play football. It was this lack of ambition that drove Maria mad. She got fed up with it and one evening, completely off her head on her usual cocktail of drugs she up and left, leaving both of her small children in Anthony's hands.

Anthony was devastated but all of their friends breathed a deep sigh of relief. They rallied around him and helped him through the hard times. As the children got older everyone began to see how driven and determined they were and they put that all down to Maria's genes. They saw the lack of personal ambition in Anthony and knew that the kids didn't get their drive from him. But in their eyes it wasn't a bad thing for Anthony to have no dreams. He was focused on the kids, on making sure that they had the best life that they could get. Once the divorce went through this devotion to his children won Anthony full custody of

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them. Maria only gets to see them at the weekends, if the children want to see her but they very rarely do.

She's an alcoholic now, having replaced the drugs with alcohol. It's a bit better, at least Toby thinks so, but in the eyes of the courts it's still not good enough so she has very little chance of ever getting custody of her children. It doesn't seem to bother her, at least not to the outsider, but those close to her know that she's aching for her children inside and trying to cover up that pain with booze. Toby, as he has gotten older, tries to go and see her more often than he used to but even those visits are growing few and far between now. He's almost an adult and has his own life after all. But he wants to go and see her tonight, things with his Granddad reminding him of exactly how fleeting life can be.



## Chapter 21

Toby stands outside his mum's flat, takes a deep breath and knocks on the door. He can hear thumping and a bit of swearing. Bottles clank together and he can hear cans rustling around and scratching the walls. Eventually the door opens and he's face to face with a bleary eyed Maria. She looks at him for a few moments before she smiles widely and throws her arms around her son.

"My little baby!" she cries, "Aww, my little baby's come to see me. Come in, come in, ignore the mess,"

She practically drags him in the flat. She stumbles as she walks and she probably would have fallen over a few times if Toby wasn't there to hold her up. She leads them in to the kitchen, probably the only place in the entire flat that isn't a complete mess or filled with empty bottles and cans. She wobbles and sways a bit as she stands there, looking at her son and when she speaks she sounds a little slurred. Toby's used to it though. He usually comes to see her in the evenings and it's almost always guaranteed that she'll be pissed by then. Despite all of the alcohol in her system though she can still read her little boy well and knows instantly that something is wrong. She liked to think of it as a mother's instinct, still alive and kicking despite everything.

"You look like you've got the world on your shoulders," she says, "What's wrong?"

"You heard about Granddad?" he asks, sighing heavily and taking a seat at the table.

"He's in hospital."



“Yeah, I heard,” Maria says softly. She comes up behind Toby and runs her fingers through his hair. “But I know it’s more than that. There’s something else wrong and it’s with you.”

“I left home,” Toby admits, “Because of Dad.”

“I don’t blame you,” Maria says, slurring heavily, “What’s he been doing to you now?”

“He keeps hassling me about football,” Toby says harshly. He starts to rant, “He keeps going on and on about me becoming a professional player stuff. He wants me to keep practicing and showing them how much I want it even though I don’t. He’s just trying to control my life and butt in where he’s not wanted. I just had enough!”

“Typical!” Maria says. She settles herself in to one of the kitchen chairs, wobbling and swaying slightly, “He can’t sort his own life out but he’s more than happy to try and sort out other people’s. That’s why I left him you know? Left your dad. He’s got no ambition of his own and keeps trying to live off other people. He’s got no get up and go, won’t get up off his fat, lazy arse and become someone all by himself.”

Toby doesn’t say a word, he just traces patterns on the table top. This is nothing new that he’s hearing. He’s well used to Maria slagging Anthony off by now, she pretty much always gets on to the topic whenever Toby comes around. He knows what she’s saying and kind of understands where she’s coming from but it still hurts a little. He’s asked her before, once or twice, not to talk about his dad like that but she never listens or remembers. So now Toby just sits there, not really listening. He still likes his dad, even if they don’t see eye to eye. He doesn’t want to become like his mum and just be a dad hater all of the time.



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“Do you know what your dad’s problem always was?” Maria continues, not even noticing that Toby isn’t actually listening, “He listened to his dad too much. Your granddad? Oh he was a controlling bastard, you wouldn’t believe it. Your dad’s dad had so much influence over him it was unreal. He’d say jump and your dad would ask how high. It would have been ok if his dad was a clever bastard but he was far from it. Your dad was just too stupid to realise it and listened and did what he was told now matter how stupid the idea was.”

Toby winced at the dig at Granddad but let it go. Maria is pissed, he’s willing to overlook it. She always says more than what she thinks, the alcohol exaggerating her emotions, mild dislike and annoyance with a person turning in to hatred, a small bit of happiness turning in to overwhelming joy like she’s won the lottery. She won’t remember saying any of what she’s said in the morning though so Toby just lets her get on with it. There’s no point trying to stop her. Toby gets up and gets a soft drink from the fridge, she always has some there, waiting for him just in case. He tells her his current favourite whenever it changes and despite everything she always makes sure that she has a few cans of it in the fridge for whenever he comes round. The cans have even got a post it note on them with his name on, each and every single can, as though to ward off anyone else who might try to take one. She asks him to get her another beer and he does.

She makes him a late dinner, swaying a little as she does so. It’s the best that she can manage but Toby wolfs it down. Even though it’s only oven food and slightly burnt he enjoys every bite. There’s just something about the fact that his mum has cooked for him, even if she doesn’t really want to, that makes him feel loved for just being a son and no other reason. They sit there and talk for a while afterwards, catching up on the things in their lives that are going on. There’s nothing really happening in Maria’s life so she doesn’t have much to say

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but she keeps asking Toby about his life, and about Rebecca. He finds himself telling her everything, about Scooby, about training, about the stunt double role, about Fiona and about his sudden drive to become an actor. He even tells her about Emma and what his possibly soon to be ex-girlfriend has been doing. She reacts in all of the right ways and even gets excited when he tells her about becoming an actor.

Even if she won't remember it all in the morning Toby is still smiling when he leaves. As he heads back to his house share in Manchester he feels happier. He's exhausted of course, it's been a long day and he still doesn't have many of his things at his new place. He decides not to go back to his dad's that night. The rest of his things can wait until another day.

The next day Toby is due to go to his acting classes. He's excited, he can't believe that he's finally going to have the chance to be treated like a serious actor. But he still has training. The classes don't start until 4pm though so he can attend part of his training and then bunk off. He doesn't want to tell anyone where he's going, or why he's leaving suddenly so in the middle of a game, when some of the players, including him, are being made to stand on the side lines and watch he quietly slips away. No one is paying him any attention, all eyes are fixed on the pitch and he makes his escape from the Academy without anyone spotting him.

Well almost no one. Scooby happened to catch sight of him slipping in to the changing rooms but didn't say a word. He just gave Toby the thumbs up and turned back to the game, shouting at those who were playing. Toby had told Scooby about getting in to the Na-

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tional Association of Performing Arts when they had made up and his friend had been really excited for him. Apparently he is still excited and wants to make sure that Toby can do what he wants, even if they don't agree on it.

When he gets to the college and makes his way to the classroom there are already several other people there. It looks like he's one of the last to arrive and he takes a seat quickly. The tutor, or at least, someone who looks like he could be a tutor, walks in and throws his briefcase on the desk.

"Hello everyone," the tutor says, "My name is Gavin and I will be your course tutor. Now, before we begin I want you each to stand up and say why you are here. Share it, no matter how ridiculous you might think it is. Remember, you are all here to improve your acting in some shape or form, no one is better than anyone else. If you were you wouldn't be here at all."

The class laughs quietly and then they look around at each other. No one really wants to go first.

"Come on people," Gavin cries, "You're supposed to be actors, you're supposed to want people to look at you. Someone go first!"

"Ok," one of the people says, standing up. "I'll go first."

They all turn in their seats to look at the man who spoke.

He's a young man, he looks barely old enough to be out of school, let alone part of an acting class. Toby realises, as he looks around, that there are people of all different ages here. Maybe he isn't the only one who's only just discovered his desire to act. He glances at Gavin, the tutor and sees him smiling wide.

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“Wonderful,” Gavin says, “Why don’t you stand up and tell us your name.”

The guy looks around uncertainly, glancing at all of the other class members. Gavin waves his hands at the man, encouraging him to stand up and speak.

“Ok.” The guy says, climbing to his feet, “My name’s Tom and I’m here because a casting director said that I lacked emotion. I want to learn how to put more emotion in to my performances.”

Gavin nods.

“And the next person?” he asks.

Now that someone has already stepped up people are more comfortable with it. One by one they all rise and share exactly why they’re there. Some are like Tom, trying to put more emotion in to their acting. The answers and reasons are all a little different though and Toby listens carefully to each person.

“I want to look like a natural,” One person says, “An agent said I looked like a wooden puppet so I want to sort it out.”

“There’s no tone in my voice,” another says, “I want to learn how to put tone in when I’m acting and how to make sure that I’m using the right tone.”

They keep going around the class, in a circle. Eventually it’s Toby’s turn. He takes a deep breath and stands. Everyone’s looking at him and just like that it’s like the stunt double audition all over again. He’s the centre of attention, all eyes are on him and his entire body starts to buzz and vibrate with excitement.

“I get really involved in my roles,” he starts, “But I’ve been told that my movement on stage is too stiff and fake. I need to be less pantomime if I’m going to make it as a professional actor.”

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Gavin nods and they move on to the next person. Eventually they are all finished and Gavin stands up in front of everyone again.

“I trust that everyone heard what each other had to say clearly,” he says then looks around the room. Toby nods and sees dozens of other heads bobbing in agreement. “Good, I’m glad. If we all know why we’re here we can keep an eye out for each other’s weaknesses and point out when we’re falling in to those traps again. Thank you all for sharing.”

He walks to the front of the room with a poker straight back. He looks around at everyone, each person craning forwards. Toby sits on the edge of his seat, leaning forward. It feels like the entire room is waiting for Gavin to say something incredible.

“Right,” Gavin says, clapping his hands together. It makes everyone, including Toby, jump, “I want everyone to forget the reasons why we’re here. Not one of these reasons that you have given will be helpful to you in this class. They might be the reason that you’re here but they will not be solved until you remember one thing. Acting is about you.”

The class members look at each other in confusion. Toby can’t really understand what’s going on but there is something at the back of his mind, urging him to keep listening. There is something here, something important that Gavin is telling them that he needs to remember. At least, that’s what Toby’s gut is telling him. He listens to it, he always has, it has never once steered him wrong.

“If you want to act you have to essentially be yourself,” Gavin continues, starting to walk back and forth in front of the class, “You might be a different version of yourself, maybe a little more timid, a little louder, a little arrogant or more self doubting, but at the end of the day, you are the character. If you can’t be you in a scene then you will always be considered a poor actor.”

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The class listen closely. He pauses, possibly for effect. He looks at them expectantly. They all turn and look at each other. Their expressions are full of doubt. Toby knows how they feel. This guy seems nuts to him. It's a bit of an off the wall theory, nothing like what he's read before during his short bursts of research online. But then again Gavin must be credible. After all, Toby and everyone else did walk in to a building with a massive sign on the front of it saying The National Association of Performing Arts. Toby knows that Gavin must know what he's talking about. Otherwise, how would he even still have a job? He turns to Gavin, along with the others. Gavin smiles and returns to his speech.

“Acting, at the end of the day, is very simple,” he says, pacing back and forth once more “I know that we make it seems hard and mystical and full of secrets but really, it's not. Anyone can do it really, most just choose not to or can't understand or commit to what it takes to be a good actor.”

Toby sits back in his seat and takes out a notebook that Carrie shoved into his bag that morning. He starts to make notes, realising that he's going to want to remember this all later. Gavin glances at him, catches sight of the notebook and the man's grin grows wider. He nods to Toby and Toby smiles back a little hesitantly.

“To be a good actor you need to understand a few things. You need to understand the scene that you are in completely. It isn't just your role that you need to understand but the entire scene. The playwright has put you, your character there for a reason and you need to understand exactly what is in the scene, as a whole. Don't focus on just your role, your part. Know the entire scene, what other characters were saying before you appeared and what they may not be saying to you. Remember what you know already, as a person in the story that is

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being told. Allow that to shape your performance. You can't react to information that you don't know yet."

Toby scribbles all of this down. He thinks that he knows what Gavin is trying to say. He needs to treat the scene, not like something that he is playing a part in. He needs to play it like it is real life, as though he is not Toby, the want to be actor, but he is Toby in whichever role the writer had put him in. It is part of his life, an everyday moment, not something that is planned out on paper with everything revealed eventually. Toby's hand is hurting and he stops writing so he can shake out the cramp. Gavin grins even wider and chuckles a little bit.

"The second thing that you need to understand is the emotion," Gavin eventually says. "How can you show the audience what you're feeling? They can't see inside your head, they don't know what you're thinking or feeling. So you need to show them this emotion, whether it's through the way that you stand, how you are now talking or just the expression on your face. Of course in order to do that you need to understand the emotion that your character is feeling at that very moment and recreate it for everyone to see. You need to understand what emotion you're experiencing, why you are experiencing it and then you need to recreate it for the wider audience."

"Voila," Gavin says, throwing his arms out wide, "If you can do those two things then you won't even think of yourself as acting a role. You will BE the role, you will BE the character. And that, my friends, is when you will give your best performance. You must be the character and the character must be you. Without that you will never seem completely natural, part of the moment, it won't be a person's life that you're acting in but it will be YOUR life. Forget that this is a story that you're just playing a part of. This IS your story, this IS your life. I want you to all think about that for a few moments."

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Toby sits there and realises exactly what Gavin is saying. Part of him knew this before, he thinks, it's why he completely immersed himself in the scenes with Fiona. But he didn't understand it properly before. And finally it clicks, he understands what it was that Gavin was telling them about forgetting the reasons why they are all here. Acting isn't about addressing what is wrong in the performance, it's not about seeing what you are bad at and then fixing it. It isn't like football or playing music. Toby knows football, he knows that if you're poor at heading then you do more heading practice, just like he did with Scooby earlier. And he knows from listening to Rebecca sing and practice that if you're struggling to hit a certain note you keep practicing over and over again until you can hit it.

But acting isn't like that. You're not doing something. You're being a completely different person. Acting is about becoming someone else, for a while at least, about being them with their history and their personality while also being yourself. It's the combination of two people within yourself, Toby realises. He has to be both himself and Wayne Rooney when he's acting. Before he's been Toby playing Wayne, even if he has used some of his own experiences to bring forth the right emotion. But he's never actually been Wayne and Toby at the same time. To be a great actor, Toby realises, you have to go to the core of yourself, at least that's what Gavin is trying to tell them. You have to know and understand yourself and bring that in to the performance.

He hasn't done that, even though he's tried in his own way. He's been too focused on what other people might want, what they're looking for in the character. He hasn't paid attention, or at least not enough attention, to the character itself, to how Wayne would have been feeling in those scenes, to what might have been going through his head in those moments. From now on he needs to let go of all of that, stop trying to go for what the casting directors



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and producers might want, or what he thinks that they want. Instead he needs to go for what he wants, play the role how he wants to play it, how he would react if it were actually him. Toby sees now that he has to be himself, fully emotionally engaged with the character, feeling what Wayne feels and at the same time, feeling what Toby feels. If he's going to be Wayne he needs to go all the way and fully submerge himself in the scene.

Toby blinks in surprise, he'd been doing it already without realising it but he had never been able to give it his all. Now he knows why and how to change that. He looks up. The room is filled with quiet whispers and murmurs as the other students talk about it amongst themselves. He glances at his notepad and is surprised to see that while he's been thinking he has actually made notes about his thought process. Toby's eyebrows raise. He's never done that before, made notes without even thinking about it. He glances up at Gavin who is still looking around the room. Their eyes meet and Gavin smiles again.

"Ok, everyone," Gavin says, clapping his hands to get everyone's attention again, "Now you understand you probably have a few questions. For one, you're probably asking, how does one go about achieving this acting greatness? Am I right?"

A few heads nod, including Toby's own. He knows what he needs to do, that he needs to basically be the character, but he doesn't quite know how to do it.

"Well, I will tell you," Gavin says, starting up his pacing again, "It's all about emotional memory. You will depend on your ability to recall emotions that you have experienced yourself and experience them again while you are a part of this scene. I know it won't be easy, few of us have actually experienced anything like some of the characters in film have experienced. You just need to think of what you've seen and experienced and felt in your life that is in any way similar to the context of the part and bring it in to the scene. You might be

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in a scene where you've just lost a parent but you may not have had to experience that loss yet. So you think of how you may have felt when you lost another loved one, perhaps a friend or grandparent. Then you bring forward that emotion and try to amplify it up a little bit. You let the emotion out, let the feelings run loose. Think about it, a moment in your life and a scene that you might be called to act in that is somewhat similar.”

Toby thinks back to the only scene that he has ever been in, the one that he first auditioned with Fiona for. He runs through the scene in his mind. It's about Rooney, making a difficult decision, perhaps the hardest decision of his life, to leave Everton and go to Manchester United. Everton, after all, has 'brought him up' like a father would his son. Everton has taught Rooney everything that they know and shared experiences that have helped to shape him. But now Rooney, the son, no longer needs Everton, he has grown out of everything that Everton can teach him so he needs to leave for something better and to become his own man at last.

He realises that this is very similar to the same relationship between Toby and his father. Just like Rooney, his dad has taught him everything that he knows, has helped him to become a man. But now Toby needs to move on and learn other things that his dad can't teach him. Just like Rooney ended up leaving Everton behind, Toby has to leave his father behind and start to live his own life. Toby needs to bring those emotions up, to bring out all of the hurt and annoyance and joy and love. He needs to bring them all out, recall exactly how he felt and reacted, how he still feels when it comes to his dad. And then he needs to experience them all over again. He needs to let himself feel them completely, down to his very core and then let them come out in his acting. It was going to be painful, very painful, he knows it.

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“Alright then,” Gavin says, getting everyone’s attention again, “It looks like we’re almost out of time today. Next week you’re going to be sharing your past experiences and how they can be applied to different scenes, hopefully in a variety of ways. But for now I’ve got a worksheet for you to look at and attempt to fill in.”

He hands out a large chunk of paper and the students start to take them off the top. It’s several sheets of paper stapled together, Toby realises when he takes the pile. He takes a booklet and hands the rest on. He glances at the sheets and then looks at it a little more closely.

“On these sheets you will find a number of things,” Gavin says, looking at his own work sheet, “Most of these are emotional experiences that, according to scientists, most people will have experienced by a certain age. I want you all to study this sheet, very closely, and then mark off the ones that you have experienced for yourself. If you haven’t had some of the experience for your age bracket then I want you to go out and experience life!”

The class laughs at this and then the bell sounds. Gavin wishes them all good bye and then disappears out of the door. Toby watches him go. Several of the other class members are talking between themselves, about the list, about the lesson and about their careers so far. Toby keeps out of it, instead sitting there and looking at the list. It’s quite a big one and according to this there are several that he should have experienced already, despite not being quite eighteen. There’s falling in love, breaking up with a long term partner, betrayal by a best friend. It’s all quite heavy stuff, the big things that can really shape who a person is Toby realises. He feels a little inadequate, all too aware that many of these things are things he is yet to experience. Then his eyes fall on two experiences that are right next to each other. Be-

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coming independent and breaking free from a parent. Toby realises that he's already part way through those ones.

But then he catches mention of a football match on, tonight, a big one. He realises that he won't be working on the list at all tonight as he remembers. It's the FA Cup Fourth Round Match. It's between Skelmerage and Manchester United. It's live on BBC One. Toby very rarely misses football matches and he definitely isn't going to miss this one. Scooby's a reserve, he's worked hard and he's full of dedication. There is no way he's going to miss possibly seeing one of his best friends play a massive football match like this. Toby grabs up his bag and races out of the door, heading straight for home, his new home.



## Chapter 22

He's on the train back to his house when the call from his Dad comes. Toby sighs, he's not sure if he wants to deal with this right now. Then he catches sight of his workbook, sticking out of his bag and he realises that it's not just something that he should do, it's something that he needs to do. He answers the phone.

"Toby?" Rebecca asks, "Toby is that you?"

"Hey Becks," Toby says fondly, smiling, "How are you doing ladybird?"

"I'm ok." She says, sounding a little sad, "When are you coming home? I miss you."

"I know," Toby says, "I miss you too. But I'm not coming home for a while yet. Listen, can you put Dad on? I need to talk to him."

"Sure thing," Rebecca says happily, "He's the one who called but said that I should speak to you first so I could actually talk to you before you get all grumpy and mad at Daddy."

"Well that was very smart of you," Toby says, "And I'm glad that you did. But I really need to speak to Dad so can you put him on?"

He can hear murmuring on the end of the line, a little bit of rattling as the phone's headset is passed between hands. There's a small note of anger forming in his stomach, resentment, betrayal and sheer fury twisting and turning together. He takes a deep breath, counting backwards from ten to calm himself.

"Toby?" Anthony says eventually. "Toby, is that you?"

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Toby is about to rail at him, to yell at him but his dad sounds so hesitant, so nervous, so... not himself, that Toby pauses.

“Yeah it’s me,” he say, instead of yelling all the hurt words that he was going to.

“Why did you put Rebecca on first? Were you trying to guilt me in to coming back?”

“No!” Anthony says quickly, “Of course not. She just misses you and I thought that you might like to talk to her before we spoke. You know she doesn’t like to use the phone without permission.”

“And she’s terrified of trying to call me and getting the wrong number,” Toby finishes. He can’t help but laugh, “She’s a mad one.”

“Yes,” Anthony says fondly, “She is indeed. But I love her anyway.”

“What did you want?” Toby asks, “It wasn’t to talk about Rebecca I know that much.”

“The match is on tonight,” Anthony says quickly. “I was wondering whether you might want to come over and watch it with me, like old times?”

“No,” Toby says, “Sorry but I can’t. I’m watching it at my new home, bonding time with house mates and all that.”

“Oh. Of course,” Anthony says, disappointment clear in his voice, “Stupid of me to ask really. Where are you living now anyway?”

“With an actress I met at an audition,” Toby says, “It’s a house in Manchester, a few other people live there too. Listen... I know you’re not happy about this but could you drop off some of my stuff to my new home? I’m just... sort of running out of clothes and right now all I’ve got in my football gear and a few shirts.”

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Anthony doesn't respond straight away. He's still there though, Toby can hear him breathing.

"Ok," Anthony says eventually, after what feels like hours of waiting, "I'll trying to bring it round after the game. Rebecca will probably pack some stuff up if I ask her to. You don't mind her going through your things right?"

"Nothing there I don't want her to see," Toby says, shrugging even though his dad can't see him, "I don't need much, just some extra clothes. I'll come and get the rest at the weekend or something. You can meet my house mates properly then."

"Yeah... sure," Anthony says. He doesn't sound convinced at all. "Well, I'll see you later Toby."

"See you later Dad," Toby says. He's about to hang up but stops, "Hey Dad?"

"Yeah?" Anthony asks.

"Thanks for this," Toby says.

He hangs up.

The game is only a few minutes away from kick off when Toby reaches the house. He rushes to put his things away and then races back down to the living room. The others are all sat around, patting drums or strumming on a guitar. Marco is scribbling away in an over sized notebook, mug of tea balancing precariously on a knee.

"Hey guys," Toby says, hovering in the doorway "You all good?"

"Toby!" Carrie cries out, "Come and sit next to me, there's space."

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Toby smiles a little and makes his way across the living room. He snags the tv remote as he goes and settles himself beside Carrie. She's instantly leaning against him and playing with his hair. Toby hesitates for a moment, wondering what the hell is going on and then he spots the braids in Marco and Fiona's hair. Apparently it's his turn.

"Hey, is it ok if I put the football on?" he asks eventually, watching the clock tick closer and closer to kick off, "I mean, I know you're not in to football but my mate might be playing and I really want to watch."

"Course mate," John says, waving a hand at the TV. He doesn't even look up from his guitar. "Knock yourself out,"

"Thanks," Toby says, smiling widely.

"Which match is it?" Fiona asks as the commentary begins.

"It's Skelmerage versus Manchester United," Toby says. Fiona looks at him a little blankly. "Manchester United is the team that Rooney plays for, you know, the character I auditioned for? And Skelmerage is the football club that runs the Academy that I'm training with."

"And your mate," Marco says, "He's in the Academy for Skelmerage too?"

"Yeah!" Toby says, "But he got called up to the reserves because of so many injuries and illnesses. There's no guarantee that he'll play tonight but if someone gets hurt he may get the chance to."

"Is that normal?" Fiona asks, watching the commentary and diagrams come up, "An Academy player playing properly?"





“Not really,” Toby says, “I mean, compared to most of the premiership footballers we’re all just amateurs. But Scooby’s been called up to play in the main team so you know, chance in a life time.”

“He’s that good?” Marco asks, “An amateur playing on the main team, he’s got to be good right.”

“He’s amazing,” Toby says, eyes now fixed on the screen, “He loves playing football and being a premiership footballer is his dream. He’s not letting anything get in the way of that.”

“Well, I don’t know why anyone would want to play football for a living,” Carrie says. Then she glances at Toby, “Sorry Tobe, but I don’t. BUT he’s going for his dream and he’s reaching it so I’ll give him props for that. Good for him.”

“Which is why we’re all watching the match,” John says firmly. “We might not get sports but Toby’s mate is doing something he loves and going for his dream, just like us. Besides, Toby has to cheer on his club after all.”

“Thanks guys,” Toby says, grinning at them all. Then the whistle blows for kick off and his eyes flip back to the screen.

He watches closely. At some points he holds his breath. He starts to mutter ‘come on, come on’ when one of the Skelmerage players gets close to the goal. He can hear the others doing it too, once he explained which colour Skelmerage are playing in. They all groan when the goal is missed. Toby slumps back in his seat. They all sit and watch, cheering and shouting together. It’s more violent than other games he’s seen before. Players are tackling each other almost recklessly, almost like they’re more focused on doing damage than actually getting the ball off each other. Before half time one player from Skelmerage has already been

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sent off, a tackle gone wrong that almost broke one of the Man United player's foot. The replay proved the player hadn't even been aiming for the ball and the referee wasted no time in holding up a red card. By the time that the half time whistle blew Toby is almost completely exhausted.

"Is football always like that?" Carrie asks in amazement, "I can't remember it being that fun to watch when I was a kid."

"No," Toby says, shaking his head. He's still shocked by what he's just seen, "Sometimes it can be really good, other times it can be really boring. It just depends on how the teams match up against each other."

"This is funnier than I expected," Fiona says, snuggling up beside Toby, "When it looked like the ball was about to go in and then the keeper jumped on it and was all like 'you shall not pass!' that was brilliant."

"Yeah!" Carrie cries out, "And all those muscular legs and tight bums running around in short shorts are great to watch too."

She winks at Fiona and they burst in to giggles. Marco catches Toby's eyes and rolls his eyes. His notebook is sitting, forgotten on the floor. He's slumped back in his seat, eyes flicking to the half time match review.

"I think we need beer for this next half," John says, "My mouth's getting a bit dry from all that shouting."

Toby laughs, eyes fixed on the screen. John returns moments later with several bottles of beer. He hands them out and then darts back to his seat as the second half kicks off. It starts off slowly and Toby takes a little time to explain what's actually happening and some of the rules to his house mates. He wants them to understand why he shouts at the referee or

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yells at the players rather than them just thinking that he's a mad man. But the game quickly picks up and there's no more time to explain. Two more players are sent off, one after the other. One is from Skelmerage, the other from Manchester United. More injuries go around and substitutes are bought on by both teams in droves. In the last fifteen minutes three of Skelmerage's players go off, badly injured. Two limp off, helped by the first aiders but one has to be carried off on a stretcher. Carrie looks at them worriedly and Toby has to reassure her that it'll be ok.

He's so busy talking that he doesn't hear the names of the substitutes. It's only when he glances at the screen as the substitute players come on that he sees Scooby there. He shoots to his feet, almost tossing Fiona on to the floor.

"There he is!" Toby cries, pointing at the TV, "That's my best mate from the club, that's Scooby!"

He bounces up and down for a moment and finally settles when Fiona yanks on his shirt and drags him back on to the sofa. He doesn't sit back though like he was before. Instead he sits on the edge of the seat, leaning forwards and staring at the screen. He doesn't talk about the game, he barely acknowledges his house mates now. He's just cheering Scooby on, shouting at him to run faster, clapping when he gets the ball. When Scooby almost manages to score but it gets deflected at the last moment he drops his head in to his hands and groans in misery. He throws himself back on the sofa and whimpers.

"Cheer up," Fiona says, "There's five minutes of stoppage time left."

Toby sits up quickly. He shushes Carrie when she asks where the extra time came from and stays focused on the TV. By the time the match ends Scooby is covered in mud and

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grass stains. Toby squeals when he sees his best friend shaking Wayne Rooney's hand. He sits back and grins.

“My mate shook Rooney's hand,” he says quietly. “Brilliant,”

“Well, that was a good game,” Marco says. “When's the next one.”

“It's not for a while yet,” Toby says, “They've got to play each other again because they drew. And this time... They're at Old Trafford.”

“Wait what?” Carrie asks, “I'll be the first to admit, I don't know much about football but isn't Old Trafford Manchester United's home ground?”

“Yeah,” Toby says smiling, “Yeah it is. And Scooby's going to get to play there!”

For the first time in a while Toby rushes to training at the Academy. He can't wait to see Scooby face to face and talk about the match. He wants to find out all the details, especially what Rooney's like up close and in person. Scooby is surrounded by the other Academy members when Toby arrives in the changing rooms though so he's forced to just wait until he can have a moment with Scooby. All of the boys are talking about the game, not a single one of them missed it even if they don't support Skelmerage or Man U. It was one of their own playing and they all wanted to see how good Scooby was amongst professional players. They dissect Scooby's performance amongst themselves, and with Scooby, picking apart why several shots at goal missed and whether the sending off of various players was right or not. They talk about the injuries that happened too, begging Scooby to tell them exactly how bad

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the injuries are. Scooby soaks it all in as Toby watches, his friend is surround by the other players, all asking questions at once, all shouting to be heard over one and other.

“Ok that’s enough,” The coach shouts as he enters the changing rooms, “I gather that you all watched the match last night from the way you’re acting. Glad to see you supporting your other team members. That’s what we like to see at Skelmerage.”

The academy members scatter, taking seats on the various benches around the room. Scooby rushes over to sit beside Toby and they share a grin. The coach clears his throat as some of the others keep talking. Scooby nudges Toby with his shoulder and flashes him a wide smile when Toby turns to look at him. There is another cough and the two boys notice that silence has fallen over the other trainees. They look at the coach intently.

“Now that I have your attention and you two have stopped having your moment,” he says, standing in the centre of the changing rooms and turning in a slow circle as he talks. The boys all giggle at his comment but quickly stop when he glares at them.. “I have some very important news to share. If you saw the match you will know that it was a vicious game. There were yellow cards, red cards, fouls, penalties and a lot of dirty play. We lost several good players in that match because of mistakes and bad tackles. Due to all of the injuries and suspensions that happened last night we are now FIVE men down on the first team.”

The boys all break out in to whispers, looking at each other excitedly.

“And as you all know,” the coach continues, “We are starting to pick some of our best players to step in and help out our team. After discussions with the managers, the players, the team owners and the other coaches here at the Academy we have settled on three of you to be substitutes for the replay at Old Trafford in a few weeks time.”

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The boys all start to talk over each other now. They're all buzzing, vibrating with excitement. Even Toby feels butterflies in his stomach, despite knowing that he's unlikely to be chosen. It's Old Trafford after all, one of the most famous football venues in the entire world. Even if the chosen players don't actually get to play they will be there, seeing it live and in person from the perspective of a player, not a fan. More importantly, Toby realises, they'll have the chance to be on TV, broadcast live across the globe so they can be seen by millions of people. It's a chance of the lifetime and all of the academy members are itching to be the chosen ones. Slowly the conversations fade in to silence and they all turn to look at the coach again.

"It wasn't an easy choice to make," the coach says, "Each and every one of you is a good player, one of the best. You wouldn't be here if you weren't. But we only need three of you so we've chosen the three that we all agree are the best players in the Academy. You will be continuing to train here, at the Academy, in the morning to improve your masters of core skills. But in the afternoon you will be heading over to the team training grounds and training with the first team. It will be hard. You'll be amongst some very good players who have a lot more skill and experience than you. You will be expected to keep up, to work as hard as they are to become a part of the team. There will be no time for slacking. But make no mistake, they want you there and you will be able to learn a lot from them. I want you to listen to the first team and hopefully learn something new."

The coach looks around the room, Toby following his gaze. The other academy members are all looking at each other, trying and failing to hide their smiles. Toby's knee is bouncing and he can't keep it still. The coach pulls out a small piece of paper. All the boys crane in closer to hear what is being said.



“Scooby, you’re still on the first team reserves,” the coach says, “I want you to show the others the ropes and stop them from cocking up too much.” Scooby nods, “Ok, the three of you that have been chosen to substitute for the replay are... Ricardo, Jonathan and Toby. Stay behind when training breaks for lunch and we’ll take you over to the training ground.”

The boys all burst out into conversation as soon as the coach leaves the room. Toby’s just sat there, not really sure what’s going on. Scooby nudges him and he slowly turns to look at his friend.

“Mate...” Scooby says, his smile getting wider and wider, “Mate, you’ve made it.”

“Made what?” Toby asks.

Scooby bursts out laughing and claps his friend on the back. They hear a loud whistle and a lot of shouting and suddenly the boys start to pour out of the changing rooms and towards the pitch. Scooby pulls on Toby’s arm and he mechanically follows his friend.

Toby can’t believe it. He never expected to be chosen, apart from deep down in a tiny corner of his heart. He never thought that he was one of the better players. He just figured that he was somewhere in the middle of the ability range of the Academy members. He knew that he wasn’t terrible, the worst player there, but he had never entertained the thought that he was in the top ten players at the Academy, let alone one of the top three. Toby glances at the other two boys who have been chosen to substitute. They both look a little shock, an expression of blank disbelief on their faces that probably matches the one on his own. They’re smiling though, slowly, as the realisation that this is really happening manages to sink in. The same smile starts to spread over Toby’s face too. He’s made it.



## Chapter 23

Training with the first team is even harder than the coach made it sound back in the changing room. Toby is dripping with sweat by the time that the afternoon training session is finally wrapped up. Toby stands there, legs bent and weight on his knees as he pants for breath. The other players from the Academy are in similar shape, even Scooby. They're all grinning though and when Toby catches Scooby's eye he starts to laugh. Pretty soon all four of them are laughing together, in between big gulps for air. Finally Toby can't hold himself up any more and he collapses on the ground, flopping on to his back and staring up at the sky. He hears several other thumps nearby and a bit of shuffling as the other three boys do the same. He leans his head back and looks at them all upside down. They start to laugh again.

"I'm glad to see that you're having fun," the coach says.

He looms over them, casting a shadow across their faces and they try to fight down their laughter. He looks stern for a moment, frowning at them all, but then he begins to smile.

"You should be having fun and enjoying this moment." He says. He crouches down and sits on the grass with a groan. The boys all sit up and look at him. "You're all having the chance of a lifetime, one that doesn't come along that often at all. You've all been chosen to be here and you should be proud, soaking in the experience. But I need you to take this seriously as well. I was proud of you all today. You completely focused on the training and didn't let yourselves get distracted. You should show everyone, the other academy members



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and the first team players, that you belong right here amongst them. And that's the thing I need you to remember."

He stops smiling for a moment and looks at them. He's somber and stern, looking them right in the eye. Toby fights back the urge to look away and stares right back. The coach stares down the other three, Scooby just smiles. Eventually he nods and sits back a little.

"This is a very important opportunity, for all of you," he says solemnly, "There is a very real probability that you might get to play. There have been a lot of match bans for players and a lot of injuries that have taken out more players than normal from our first team and from our substitutes. We're turning to you boys in the hopes that you might be the key to us winning. I want you all to take this very seriously. The replay is going to be televised. Of course it is, it's Old Trafford. And I know, from experience, exactly how scary that can be. It's going to put additional pressure on you, knowing that all of those eyes are going to be watching."

Ricardo and Jonathan share worried glances. Toby has to duck his head to hide his grin. Clearly they hadn't even thought about the cameras at all. He glances at Scooby who's just nodding. He's been there, he knows what it's like so at least some of the pressure is off there. Toby is glad that his tips were able to help his best friend and he finds himself smiling. Scooby catches his eye and winks.

"I don't want you to think about that," The coach says quickly, catching the worried expressions on the faces of two of the boys. "I want you to completely forget about everything but the game. You need to give your best performance, play the match of your career. Forget you're in Old Trafford, forget you're playing against Manchester United. Forget about

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the crowd there, cheering and shouting, forget about the cameras and the millions of people watching at home. Zone them all out so that you can give it your best. It's just you and the ball, playing football like you love. It's just like any other game, important yes, but not life and death. Unless that's how you treat every match you're in, in which case, go ahead and treat it like that."

The boys all laugh and relax a little. They lay back in the grass and listen to their coach as he continues to speak. He's smiling a little now, the stern and serious part of his talk almost over.

"It's just you, the ball and each other," the coach says kindly, "Just like at training. Don't look at the cameras either, and for God's sake don't pull a face at them. Keep your eyes on the ball. And for the love of God don't get starstruck and go all useless!"

The boys laugh and slowly climb to their feet. Ricardo and Jonathan help the coach to his feet and they head off to the changing rooms, talking about the upcoming match. Scooby holds out a hand to Toby and hauls his friend to his feet. They walk to the changing rooms in silence.

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As Toby showers he thinks about the speech that their coach has given them. It's similar to him somehow, familiar in the way that some places can be when you've only been there drunk and finally go there sober. He knows the message that the coach is trying to say but can't figure out how. Then it clicks, like a light bulb switching on. It's the same thing that Gavin was teaching at the acting class. Playing football, at Old Trafford, is like acting. He has to throw himself in to the role, completely submerge himself and act as if that is his entire

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being. In the case of the replay, the role is that of a true sportsman. He isn't just pretending to be a footballer, which it feels like he was slightly until now. He needs to completely be a footballer. The game has to be all that he eats, drinks, thinks and sleeps. It needs to be a part of him, part of his very being. He needs to treat the game like it's a matter of life and death, like every game is a matter of life and death. Toby glances at Scooby and realises that's how his best friend sees every game. He needs to see football the way that Scooby sees it. Toby needs to play football, treat football, the same way that he used to, back when football was his entire world. He smiles as he remembers the feeling. He has to hang on to it.

Then he remembers what else the coach said about getting starstruck. He realises, right then, that he's going to get to see Rooney, in the flesh. He could actually have the chance to stand right in front of him, speak to him. The exact same man that he keeps auditioning to be, that he's focused on becoming for a film. Toby pauses as he washes his hair, hands and head covered in suds. He stares at the tiled wall as a thought hits him. What if he actually gets to be on the pitch with Rooney? What if he tackles the other man, his hero? What if he gets past Rooney and manages to make it to goal? Toby whimpers slightly as he realises the enormity of what he's involved with. He might have the chance to play football against the legend himself.

"Oh shit!" Toby screeches as the bubbles run down his face and hit his eyes.

He shoves his head under the water and tries to rinse away the shampoo. For the time being all thoughts of Rooney and professional football are gone as he tries to wash away the stinging in his eyes and nose. Scooby's laughing at him from the next cubicle.



For Toby it feels like no time before the day of the rematch arrives. Training has gone by in a blur, he's barely been able to spend any time with his house mates, arriving home late and exhausted, shovelling down a plate of whatever Carrie or Fiona gives him before trudging off to shower and then go to bed. He's spent the last week or so finding piles of neatly folded clean clothes on his bed every time that he comes home. Breakfast keeps sitting in the oven, waiting for him every morning. Carrie keeps meeting him at the door just before he leaves for training to shove lunch in to his hands. The day of the match, before he leaves to get the team bus over to Old Trafford, all of his house mates appear to give him hugs and wish him luck. John even makes him write down the time of kick off and the channel it will be on. The four of them wave him off as he climbs up the steps to of the coach. He's smiling the entire way to the pitch.

In the changing room, moments before Skelmerage are due to go on to the pitch and start warming up he gets texts from his house mates and his dad. They're all watching, waiting to see him on TV. He's grinning as he walks out and completely blocks out the sounds of the crowds booing Skelmerage.

The match passes by in a blur. The home crowd boo a lot of the time, unless one of their own players gets hold of the ball and makes a rush at goal. That's when the Skelmerage supporters, fewer in number though they are, start to boo. Everyone saw the last game, no one was happy with the outcome. Toby spots the bright yellow jackets of security and police patrolling the stands, keeping the peace between the two increasingly hostile groups of fans.

On the pitch though there's no such safety barrier. The rematch is even more violent than the first match. There are whistles blown time and time again as yellow cards are

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flashed, penalties are taken and free kicks are argued over. The crowd is an angry roar in the background. Most of the Skelmerage players, and the Manchester United players, have some blood on them. They're dirty, sweaty, covered in grass and mud. By the time that full time rolls around it's still nil-nil. All the substitutions have been made, Ricardo and Jonathan are both on the pitch, playing hard alongside Scooby. Scooby has been playing his heart out, even better than last time. He was put on within seconds of the second half starting. Two of the players have been sent off, they're sitting near the coach, scowling at the pitch. No more players can be sent on, their limit is reached and the seconds are ticking away until the end of the match and the last whistle. Toby sits and watches.

"We have 30 minutes of extra time," the guy on the loud speaker says.

Toby's eyebrows raise and his eyes widen. He glances over at one of the more experienced players who took a seat beside him. The guy came off during the first half, a weak ankle having been twisted too far during a pivot for the ball. He's been whispering commentary to Toby for most of the match, telling him small tricks that the other players are doing.

He claps Toby on the back, "You better go and get warmed up."

"Why?" Toby says.

"If one of our midfielders gets injured you're up. You want to be ready. With this match you just know it's going to happen sooner or later."

Toby looks at Bill, trying to figure out if the older man is messing with him. He's just watching the game though, staring intently at the ball being smacked back and forth across the pitch. Toby glances over at the coach who's staring at him. From the way that the guy is frowning Toby figures that he's probably been looking at him for a while. Then the coach

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makes the hand signal, telling him to get warmed up. Toby glances at Bill and sees him smirking and watching him out of the corner of his eye.

“Told you so,” Bill murmurs, almost too quietly to hear.

Toby rolls his eyes and goes to warm up. He’s smiling the entire time. As he jogs up and down the lines he watches the match. As he stretches he watches the match. As he bounces a ball around a few times he watches the match. And then a mid-fielder goes down. A Manchester United player ploughs in to his feet, studs slamming in to ankles. The Skelmerage player falls forward, tumbling in the air and crashing to the ground. He doesn’t move, his face is filled with pain and he’s gasping for breath. The Manchester supporters start booing, convinced that he’s faking it. The ref and the player responsible are arguing with each other nearby and the first aiders rush over. Scooby and Ricardo are hovering nearby, shooting dirty looks at the guilty player and glancing over to Toby.

“Arnold!” the coach shouts, “Get ready to go on!”

Toby nods and heads over to the tunnel, eyes fixed on the knot of people near the middle of the pitch. The mid-fielder is stretchered off, groaning in pain as he passes Toby and Toby can’t help but feel a little sorry for him. That was a hard tackle. Then his name is called out by the commentator and the coach is next to him.

“You’re on!” the coach says.

Toby jogs on to the pitch and stares around him in awe. The whistle goes though before he can look around any more. The match has started again and he needs to focus.

There’s ten minutes left of the game. Toby’s managed to touch the ball a couple of times but he’s not gotten close to any of the players really. Scooby’s too good, he gets eve-

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rywhere and Toby spends most of his time racing up and down the pitch, just trying to be there in case. Most of the time he's just been passing the ball from one of his team mates to another. He's done no dribbling, no tackling and not even had the chance to shoot at goal. But his heart is racing and he still can't believe he's at Old Trafford, playing in a match against Manchester United. The ball goes out across the back line and the flag goes up. It's at the Skelmerage end of the pitch, a corner kick for Manchester. One of the players heads over to take it, in no particular rush as he clearly uses the opportunity to have a quick breather. Toby heads in to the box, surrounded by other players as they jostle each other for position. Then he catches sight of him, Wayne Rooney.

Toby tries desperately to see him as just another player on the opposite team. He tries to ignore the all too recognisable face, the familiar build clad in red. But his mind keeps going back to the fact that he is playing football right beside the subject of his audition. This is the very man who Toby is going to be pretending to be during the football scenes and might actually get to be for the entire film. It's heady and incredible and Toby is startled as the whistle blows and the crowd start to cheer.

The ball soars up in the air and begins to fall. It's so close to Toby, so close to Rooney. Toby jumps up in to the air as high as he can. He wants to get it before Rooney does, he needs to get it before Rooney does. The entire world begins to go in slow motion as the ball gets closer and closer. Each movement, each sound gets slower and slower.

Toby's head reaches the ball. It's his first proper touch. His first chance to touch the ball and make a difference. All the heading practice with Scooby is going to pay off. He beats Rooney to the ball, jumping higher than him. His head hits the ball, smacking it out of Rooney's reach. It's heading towards the far post. Toby watches it as he lands. The crowd are

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holding their breath. The players are holding their breath. They all think it's going to hit the post and go out across the back lines again. It'll just be another corner. But the ball is spinning. Toby spots it as it hits the post. The ball rebounds, not going the way it was supposed to. It hits the inside of the post and goes in to the goal, past the line, past the keeper. The Skelmerage keeper stands there, watching the ball slack jawed. It's an own goal.

The world bursts in to movement and sound again. The Manchester team celebrate, the fans are celebrating. The Skelmerage players groan, throwing their heads back. The fans start to boo. No one is looking at Toby. He drops to the ground and stares at the grass. The Manchester United players celebrate, grabbing each other and jumping. They move around him like he's not even there. The Skelmerage players move out of the way, sliding past the celebrating players, not even glancing at Toby or touching him. The ref is blowing his whistle, trying to get the game going again. Toby just kneels there, in the grass. His first goal in professional football was an own goal.

Manchester United are 1-0 and it's all surely through for both teams. But they have to play the last ten minutes. The Skelmerage players try even harder, making attack after attack on the Manchester goal posts. But they keep getting repelled. Manchester are barely making any more attempts on goal. They're just playing with the other team. Toby races around the pitch, determined to make up for his mistake. But the other players ignore his shouts, the Manchester players don't even bother to guard him. He doesn't get to touch the football at all.

When the final whistle blows and the game is over Toby heads straight for the changing rooms. He doesn't want to have to deal with it any more. The crowd boos as he leaves the pitch and he collapses on a bench in the visitor's changing room. He can hear the announce-



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ment already going. Manchester United are going through to the next round. Skelmerage FC are out entirely. All because of one goal. Toby's goal. The own goal.

Toby leans forwards and puts his head in his hands.



## Chapter 24

A day later Toby is sitting in the manager's office at Skelmerage. He looks at his dad who is sat right next to him. The moment that Toby arrived after getting the call to come in Anthony was on his case. Now though, sat in the office, across a big desk from Terry the manager and his coach, Anthony has shut up and Toby sighs a little in relief. But it's short lived and shallow though. Toby has never seen Terry looking so serious, or the coach. They're both frowning and there's a look of pity in Terry's eyes, directed right at Toby, that he's not sure he likes.

"Toby..." Terry says slowly, "Toby, this is really difficult for me to say. I'm not happy to be saying it but I have to. I'm afraid that... I have to suspend you from the club."

"What?!" Anthony cries, jumping to his feet. "Why?!"

"It's out of my hands Anthony," Terry says, holding out his hands as if to prove it, "I have no choice but to do this."

"Of course it's in your hands," Anthony snaps, his face starting to turn a very angry shade of red, "You do have a choice. Hell you have the ultimate choice. You're the manager for Pete's sake."

"I don't have a choice this time," Terry says sternly. He looks at Toby, "I was visited by the police today Toby. Apparently a large bet was placed by a Far Eastern punter just at half time. The bet was that an own goal would be scored in extra time, by Skelmerage. Now, as you can hopefully understand, they're investigating foul play."

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“What?!” Anthony roars. “They think my son is involved in some sort of betting scam?! How dare they! They have no right to do this.”

“They have every right,” Terry says firmly, “This was a very unusual bet and for a very large amount of money. They’re going to be looking as deeply as they can in to what exactly is going on. We all have to co-operate with the police during their investigation. I’ve been told to suspend Toby until it’s over, both by the police and by the Football Association.”

Terry picks a small card up from his desk and reaches over the table towards Toby. He holds it out and Toby takes it, his hand shaking hard.

“Toby,” Terry says, looking him in the eye. “I really am sorry about this.”

Toby nods, not trusting himself to speak. He glances at the card and frowns. It’s the card of a police officer, a detective. The telephone number has been circled with a hand written message saying “please call”.

“That’s the number of the detective in charge of the investigation,” Terry explains. “They want to speak to you. Toby...” Toby looks up, “You need to call them. Today. The sooner that they can speak to you and get digging then the sooner that they can clear all of this up. If you work with them it’ll be over quicker.”

“This is a joke right?!” Anthony shouts, “He makes one mistake and suddenly he’s a criminal? That’s it, I’ve had enough, I’m not listening to this any more. Toby, come on son, let’s go.”

He puts his hand on Toby’s shoulder and squeezes hard. With his grip he pulls Toby to his feet. Toby winces with the pain and strength in his dad’s hand. They walk to the door,



Toby glances at Terry one more time. The coach looks torn, like he wants to say something but can't quite bring himself to say it.

"Toby," Terry says, just as Toby is about to walk through the door and out of the office. Toby stops and looks at the manager, "Use this time wisely. Think about what you want to do from now on. No one else. Just what you want. And call the detective."

Toby nods and follows his dad out. He doesn't have much choice really, Anthony has a firm grip on his shoulders. Toby puts his head down and walks as his dad rants about the unfairness of it all. He thinks he knows what Terry is trying to say. That it's time to step away from his dad and follow his own wants. Terry must know that Anthony is pushy, they'd been friends for years. Toby realises just how brilliant Terry is, and how strong. He's something else entirely. The fact that Terry said those words, in front of Anthony despite being good friends, says so much more than what he actually said. Toby realises that Terry is ready and willing to sacrifice his friendship with Anthony for Toby. He's willing to risk a decades old relationship to make sure that Toby actually does what he wants.

"Toby," Anthony says, catching his attention. Toby looks at his dad, "This isn't over you know. We're going to get a lawyer and then you're going to call the detective. You're not speaking to anyone without someone who knows what they're doing there. I'm not having your future thrown away because of one little mistake."

"Leave it alone dad," Toby says with a sigh. They stop beside Anthony's car and he glares at his son, "If I go in with a lawyer it's just going to make me look guilty. I'm just going to call them, talk to them and tell them what happens. Loads of the lads were there, they'll be able to vouch for me. And besides, Scooby knows I'm crap at headers, he'll tell them that."

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He turns and starts to walk away.

“Where are you going?!” Anthony shouts after him, “The police station’s in the other direction and so is the house.”

“I’m going home,” Toby says with a smile, “My home that I made for myself. I’ll text you when I get in.”

He walks away, ignoring the shouts that Anthony sends after him. He just wants to be alone, to think and figure things out. Now that football is out of the way he needs to decide what he’s going to do, just like Terry said.

When he gets to the house he’s surprised to see that he won’t need to call the detective after all. There’s a police car outside and two men are on the doorstep of the house, talking to a worried looking Carrie. She catches sight of Toby and her eyes widen. The two men turn and look in his direction too.

“Toby Arnold?” The older of the two asks. Toby nods. “I’m Detective Inspector Marks, this is Detective Simpson. We were wanting to speak to you about the match.”

“Sure,” Toby says, nodding, “come in.”

He walks in to the house, squeezing Carrie’s hand gently. She watches, her face etched with worry as the two detectives follow him through to the kitchen.

“I was just about to call you Detective,” Toby says over his shoulder as he sets to making the tea. “I just finished talking to Terry, the manager over at Skelmerage and he told me I was suspended. He gave me your card and told me you wanted to speak to me.”

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“Do you have a problem being suspended?” Marks asks, “I mean, isn’t football a big deal for you?”

“It was,” Toby says, shrugging as he puts the mugs down in front of the detectives, “But lately I’ve started looking in to other things and found something that’s much more of a big deal to me.”

“You’re not angry about being suspended then?” Marks asks, his eyebrows rising in surprise, “I was informed that playing professional football was your dream. It must sting a bit to be investigated for match fixing mustn’t it?”

“A little” Toby admits, “But playing football stopped being my dream a while ago. Now I want to act. Sure, I’m going to miss playing football for Skelmerage and I’m going to miss training a lot but I get it. You can’t have someone playing football who might be willing to take a dive.”

“Did you?” Detective Simpson asks, “Did you take a pay off to lose the game Mr Arnold?”

“No,” Toby says, smiling and laughing, “I’m just really, really crap at headers. Can I ask exactly what makes you think I did it on purpose?”

The two detectives share a look and eventually DI Marks shrugs and smiles at Toby.

“Basically a sum of money was bet on events occurring as they did and the man was very happy to collect,” he explains. “Shortly after half time a very large sum of money was placed as a bet by a foreign man. He bet that Skelmerage would score an own goal in extra time and Manchester would win 1-0. When that actually happened the betting agency had to pay an even larger sum of money out. And because it happened exactly as the gentleman said you can understand how it might look to us, I’m sure.”

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“Wow.” Toby says, blowing out a quick breath, “And you guys think this foreign guy paid me to throw the goal? It must have been a lot of money,”

“Try three quarters of a million pounds,” Detective Simpson says, “Payouts that big automatically get flagged and sent to us. We reviewed the bet and discovered exactly how correct it was.”

“Toby!” Fiona cries out as she enters the room, “Oh my god, I’m so sorry about what happened!”

“It’s ok,” Toby starts to say.

He can’t finish his sentence. Fiona throws herself in to his arms and his mouth is smothered by her hair for a moment. He hugs her back tightly and pulls the hair out of his mouth.

“I’m so sorry to hear about that goal,” Fiona says when she pulls back, “You must be so upset.”

“A little,” Toby says quietly. “But then again, it’s my own fault. I got cocky and tried to do more than I could. At least now I have more time to focus on my acting. We can practice again.”

Detective Simpson clears his throat with a quiet cough. The couple turn and look at him and Detective Marks who is grinning at them both.

“Is that all Detectives?” Toby asks as the minute stretches on. “Any more questions that you need me to answer.”

“No, I think that’s it,” Detective Marks said, flipping through his notebook. “If we have any thing else to ask we’ll be in touch.”

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Toby nods and before he has a chance to offer to show them out Carrie appears and leads them away. Fiona watches them go before she turns and looks at Toby, worriedly.

“What was that about?” she asks once the front door closes, “Why were you talking to the police?”

“A dodgy bet was place,” Toby explains, “They think I was paid to throw the goal. Of course I didn’t and wasn’t though. They’ll figure it out eventually.”

“Oh Toby,” Fiona says softly. “I’m so sorry.”

She doesn’t wait for Toby to respond. She just grabs him and hugs him tightly, pressing him against her body. Toby thinks about arguing, telling her that he’s ok and it’s not the end of the road but he’s enjoying the hug too much so he takes it for a while before hugging her back.





## Chapter 25

The next few days Toby found himself more relaxed than he had been for a while. It didn't escape his attention that whenever he left the house he was followed by police officers in an unmarked car or plain clothes officers that couldn't seem to blend in right. But he didn't care. He understood why they were doing it and figured that letting them do whatever they wanted was the best way to prove his innocence. He was sleeping in more, going for a run now and then with a house mate, and he was getting to spend a lot more time with all of them. He hadn't felt so relaxed since he could remember. He wasn't focused on football, all day everyday. He didn't have his dad constantly going on at him about training and recent matches.

Instead he threw himself in to his acting. He attended each and every class at NAPA, he roped in his house mates to help him with his homework, whether it was reading a monologue in different tones and letting them guess the emotion he was portraying or dragging them around Manchester trying to cross things off of his emotional experience list. He focused entirely on his acting, not even flirting with any of the girls in his class. He made every lesson on time and often had the homework done on the same day that it was set.

“Come on Fiona!” Toby cried one day in the kitchen, “Let's practice again. I need to get this right. And you always like acting things out.”



“There’s such a thing as too much practice,” Fiona says with a smile while she prepares dinner, “If we keep practicing you might burn out. It’s not good. And you don’t want to screw everything up.”

“Ok then, if that’s the problem,” Toby says, “We don’t need to practice the Rooney script. We can work on something else from my classes.”

Fiona stares at him for a long moment. He smiles at her, just keeps grinning and waiting for her to reply at last. Eventually she sighs and rolls her eyes. She returns his smile.

“Fine,” she says, “We’ll practice one of your assignments from class then.”

Toby cheers and pumps his hands up in the air. He grins and laughs while Fiona giggles. She shakes her head and goes back to preparing dinner. Toby leans against the counter and watches, occasionally stealing a bit of food only to get his hands slapped by her.

The next few days are filled with acting practice. Fiona and Toby spend a lot of time together. They don’t just practice acting though. They also spend time talking more, getting to know each other. Toby answers questions from the two detectives whenever they come around or call him in to the station. Toby learns more and more about Fiona than he ever expected. He discovers that she’s got a thing for Jason Stratham and loves watching old science fiction movies, mostly to laugh at the bad acting. Toby starts to realise that he really does like Fiona, a lot more than he ever believed possible. He likes her more than he ever liked Emma and begins to see that what he felt for her had been a young love type of thing, nothing true or



burning that he had simply fallen in to. With Emma it had started to feel like a habit. With Fiona it felt different, completely new while still a little familiar.

But Toby isn't sure how Fiona feels about him. When they act together she seems to be better than ever before, she's even said as much. She's said that she's never acted as well or as deeply as when she's acting opposite Toby. He's sure that there is something between them both, chemistry and a spark. But he can't feel any signals, any sign that she's interested in him right back. The question keeps going around his head, making him wonder and think. It keeps him awake at night, leaves him tossing and turning in bed. It gnaws away at him, when he's in the shower, when he's going to class, when he's staring at a random television match. Finally he has enough.

"Fiona," he asks one day, "Do you actually like me?"

"What?!" she asks sharply "What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean..." he says, then he hesitates, "Nah, forget it, it doesn't matter."

"No," she says firmly, "It does matter. If you've brought it up it's got to be important."

Toby shakes his head and tries to focus on the script that he's trying to practice with. She rounds the table that they're sitting at and pulls the script from his hands.

"We're not practicing again," she says slowly and quietly, "Not until you tell me what's going on in your head."

Toby looks up at her. Her face is set and solid. He knows that she probably won't budge, he's seen that expression on her face before, mostly when she's demanding food money from the other house mates. He sighs and throws his head back, rubbing his face and refusing to meet her eyes.



“I suppose...” he says, hesitating and eventually looking at her, “I just, I was wondering why you’re helping me. I mean, I think there’s something there, between us, definitely friendship at least, but it sort of feels like you keep helping me for your own sake not because you actually like me.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Fiona asks, sinking back on her heels, “Why wouldn’t I help you? You’re my friend.”

“I know but...” Toby looks away and groans in annoyance, “You said it yourself, I bring out the best in you when it comes to your acting. I can’t help but feel that you only like helping me because of that.”

“You think far too much,” she says smiling, “If I didn’t like you I wouldn’t help you. No matter how much better you make my acting.”

Toby hummed neither agreeing nor disagreeing. He squeezed his lips together, trying not to say anything. He wanted to argue, needed to argue but something was telling him that if he kept pushing he might end up just driving Fiona away. He felt her hand on his cheek, warm and soft. She pulled his head to face him.

“Hey,” she said gently, “I really do like you. Even if you weren’t a good actor I think I’d like you any way. I’ve told you things I’ve never told anyone else, not even Marco, Carrie or John. You know me better than anyone. Please. Believe me.”

Toby stares at her, looks her right in the eye. She is a good actress, one of the best he’s ever seen, on or off screen. For all he knows she is acting right now. But something, a little voice in his head, the hairs on the back of his neck, something is telling him that she was telling him the truth. He eventually nods and smiles. A smile slides slowly across her face and she sits back again.

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“Good,” she says, getting up, “Now, let’s practice. And this time try to pretend you are actually a middle aged woman in the middle of a divorce.”

He grins and glances through the script again.

“That’s it,” Toby says when he returns home, “I’m done with classes. They’re all over.”

“Did you quit?” Carrie asks, not glancing up from her painting. “You know you shouldn’t quit things.”

“I didn’t quit Carrie,” Toby says, grinning, “The classes are finished. I passed and I got a really high grade. I can go in for the audition again.”

“That’s great,” Fiona says, coming over and hugging him, “I guess all of that practice really paid off then.”

“Yes it did,” Toby says, grinning even wider and holding his arms around her waist, “And I have you to thank for it. I called David and got a second audition. It’s in a couple of days.”

“Oh my god!” Fiona cries. She leaps in the air, arms locked around Toby’s neck, “That’s fantastic! We better practice that scene again then. Put everything you know to the test and make sure that you can get it down properly. I really don’t want to have to act opposite anyone else but you.”

“Thanks,” Toby says with a laugh. Fiona leads him from the kitchen and he glances at the others as he passes through the doorway, “No pressure there then.”



In Fiona's room she pulls out the script and thrusts it at Toby. She orders him to read through it and says they'll take it from the top. She sits on the edge of the bed, waiting while he learns his lines again. He doesn't really need to read the script again, the words are etched in to his brain. He glances through for a few seconds before he tosses the script aside. He sits beside Fiona, takes a deep breath and then grips her hands in his.

"I don't know what to do," he says quietly, feeling every inch of confusion and worry, "I can't decide between staying with Everton or going to Manchester."

They slide in to the scene, moving through quickly. Toby feels each and every emotion. He's no longer playing Rooney, he is Rooney. He is actually torn between staying with the team that's raised him and the team that could make him in to his own man. He remembers how he had to turn away from his father, make his own choices even if they didn't mesh with Anthony's. He remembers the fear and the worry, the constant questions in his mind over whether or not he's doing the right thing. Fiona isn't Fiona any more. When he looks at her he sees Coleen. She's every bit as beautiful to Rooney as Fiona is to Toby. He pulls on the belief and strength that she gives him, the belief that he can do the right thing for himself and the strength to stand by him, regardless of his decision.

"That's it then," he says with a big sigh, "We're going to Manchester."

Fiona/Coleen smiles and giggles a little. Toby as Wayne returns it and they hug tightly. They hold their hug and slowly fall back in to themselves. They pull back from each other but don't let go. Toby looks Fiona in the eyes and smiles gently, the corners of his mouth only turning up a little.



“That was amazing,” Fiona says quietly, brushing her hands through his hair, “I completely forgot who I was there. I wasn’t Fiona any more, I was Coleen. That’s never happened to me before.”

“It was brilliant,” Toby agrees, “I knew exactly what he was feeling, exactly how he must have been thinking in that moment. It was like I was making the exact same choices, like I had had the exact same experiences. I pulled in all of those emotions and made them part of Rooney.”

“Those acting classes really paid off,” Fiona says quietly.

She licks her lips and her gaze drops to Toby’s mouth for a split second before returning to his eyes. She gently brushes the hair back from his forehead again and leans in closer.

“I’m so glad I got suspended,” he murmurs.

He leans forwards and covers Fiona’s mouth with his. He kisses her gently and softly, soaking in the feeling. His hands move of their own volition and find their way in to her hair. He holds her head tightly in his hands and kisses her hard. She moans gently in the back of her throat and her lips open beneath his. He slides his tongue in to her mouth, pressing it against hers. A shock jolts through him, a deep burning dagger of desire. He breaths deeply through his nose and shifts closer. Their thighs press against each other, heat radiating from both of them.

Hands wander as they kiss. Buttons are flipped open, zippers are slide down. The slow sound of fabric sliding over skin fills the room. Their lips part and press together again, over and over. They shift, pressing themselves against each other. Clothes get tossed aside and they move slowly up the bed. Their hands just keep pressing against skin, sliding all over. Toby grabs at whatever piece of Fiona’s body he can find. He can’t believe that she’s in

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his arms, that he's finally got permission to touch her and hold her in the way that he wants. He rolls them over, laying on top of her. His weight settles between her spread legs comfortably. He hisses and jerks as her nails run down her back. He kisses her again, hard.

His nerves are singing, every inch of his skin is tingling where it touches her. She leans towards her bedside table and reaches in to a drawer. She pulls back, a foil wrapper in her hands. He takes it from her gently, kissing her mouth.

“Are you sure?” he asks quietly, his voice shaking.

She just smiles and nods at him. She pushes him away slightly, wiggling around to remove her underwear, the last barrier between their bodies. Toby falters a little as he looks down at her, this gorgeous creature spread out beneath him, waiting for him. She giggles a little and covers her body with her hands, self consciousness making her cheeks turn pink. He quickly tears the packet open and slides the condom down his length. He leans forwards again, elbows pressing against the pillow on either side of her head. After a bit of awkward fumbling he gets himself in to position. They both moan loudly as he presses in to her. He holds it for a second, just hovering over her and looking in to her eyes. Then she digs her nails in to her back and her heels kick at his buttocks. He presses forward, burying himself completely. He gasps with pleasure.

They lay side by side, gasping for breath. Fiona's hair is a mess, tangled and knotted. She raises a weak hand to push it away from her face and lets it drop beside her head. Toby glances at her, his entire body still shaking.

“That was incredible,” she says slowly. “I've never felt anything like that before.”



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“What can I say?” Toby pants out, “I’m good.”

“Cocky arse,” she says, weakly smacking him on the chest.

He laughs and catches her hands in his. She rolls over, pillows her head on his chest, right where his shoulder joins and sighs. Toby keeps hold of her hand, cupping it gently. He leans down and kisses Fiona’s head gently. She hums in contentment and they lay there in silence. After a while he can hear Fiona’s breathing level out, the steady rise and fall of her ribs and the occasional snuffling noise telling him that she’s fallen asleep. He puts his free arm behind his head and stares at the ceiling. He’s tired too, sleep is pricking at the back of his eyes. But he’s still soaring high, even though his body aches. He can’t believe what’s just happened. He can’t believe how good it felt.

Toby’s been having regular sex for a few years, always with Emma and he thought that he loved her so it was ok. But what he has felt with Fiona, the way that they seemed to fit and move together, it had never been like that with Emma, especially not when they first started having sex. With Fiona it had felt right and natural, even if it had been unexpected. With Emma though it had begun to feel forced, unnecessary, like he was just going through the motions.

He realises that he needs to speak to Emma. He hasn’t thought about her once, not since he told her that they were going on a break for a while. He knows that for what it is, a lack of interest in her. Her admission had hurt him, the truth that she’d only gotten with him because of his skill at football and her support for him being a footballer had been so that she could become a WAG had hurt him. She’d used him, at the end of the day, Toby realises that. Maybe she did really care about him, maybe she still does. But Emma hasn’t called him at all

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since he walked away so Toby wonders if she actually cares about him as a person or just for what he represents to her.

He doesn't know where this thing with Fiona is going either. It could be just a one night thing, something that happened just because they were both so energised by the scene and their emotions were spiraling around everywhere. Or it could be the beginning of a relationship between the two, something real and true, motivated purely by the desire and like for each other, no other reason. Toby doesn't know which way it's going to go. To tell the truth he doesn't really mind although he would like to be with Fiona he thinks. He's just happy that what happened has happened and he has had the chance to experience it.

Regardless though, no matter what happens with Fiona, he needs to talk to Emma. They're not a couple any more, not really. They've been going through the motions for months. There's no closeness between them and they just follow the same routines with each other, day in and day out. They've grown apart, become two different people. Toby needs to end it between them, now.



## Chapter 26

It doesn't look like anyone's in at Emma's when Toby goes around the next day. But when he knocks at the door she opens it quickly.

"I saw you coming," she admits, smiling shyly. "I was hoping you'd turn up soon."

"How've you been?" he asks, shifting from foot to foot and looking at the wall just over her shoulder.

"I've been good," she says, "Really good. Do you want to come in?"

Toby nods and she steps aside. He brushes past her in to the house but she stops him, a hand on his chest. He looks down at her, her eyes are wide and pleading.

"I saw the match," she says, "You played really well. I don't even care about the own goal. You were brilliant. My lucky number eleven."

"I was playing as fifteen," he says quietly.

"Oh right," she says quickly, "Of course, silly me. Lucky number fifteen."

She smiles at him and shuts the door. They stand there, shuffling around in the hallway.

"We need to talk," Toby says when the silence begins to make his nerves itch to do something. "Is anyone else in?"

"No," Emma says quickly, shaking her head, "They're at a car boot, they'll be a while yet."

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Toby nods and heads in to the living room. He takes a seat on the sofa where he spent the night, sitting right on the edge. Emma sits next to him, their knees and thighs pressing together. She puts her hand on top of his, where they're clasped together in his lap.

"I'm so glad you came," she says, smiling at him and trying to be coy. "I've missed you so much."

"Then why didn't you message me?" he asks, perhaps a little too harshly. "You didn't delete my number so why didn't you get in touch if you missed me that much?"

"I..." Emma splutters, "I didn't know what to say."

"Well I do," Toby says. He pulls his hands free but Emma just puts her hands on his knee. "We need to talk and talk now."

"Are you wanting to get back together?!" Emma asks excitedly, "Oh I'm so happy."

She throws herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. He gently unwound her arms from around his neck and pushed her carefully away.

"No," he says quietly, "No, I need to tell you something."

She sits back and her face changes completely, her smile falling away and a stern, dangerous look fills her eyes.

"What do you need to tell me?" she asks quietly, her voice vibrating.

"I've been seeing someone else," he says, not looking at her, "I've not slept with her. I've been seeing her to help me with my acting but we've got closer than I expected. And last night I slept with her. I met her before we started our break but I never cheated on you. I swear. It was her house I stayed at when we argued."

"You slept with her?!" Emma cries. "How do I know that you didn't sleep with her sooner than you said?"



“Because I didn’t.” Toby says firmly. “I swear I didn’t. I’m sorry that I lied to you about where I was and why I was in Manchester. I should have been honest. There was just so much going on that I needed some time for myself.”

“Ok,” Emma says, nodding her head. “I understand that. And I can see why you didn’t just tell me. I forgive you.”

She smiles at him and reaches for his hands. He pulls them back.

“Why won’t you hold my hand?” she asks quietly, “The break is over isn’t it? We’re back together again, right.”

Toby shakes his head quietly.

“No,” he says. “We’re not back together. We’re never getting back together. It’s over.”

“What?” Emma asks, “We can’t be over, we’re meant to be together.”

“No Emma,” Toby says, “No we’re not. Emma, you basically used me, made me fall in love with you only for me to find out that it’s a lie.”

Emma stares at him for a few long moments. Then her bottom lip begins to shake and quiver and her eyes fill with tears. Slowly her face collapses. She begins to sob, loudly. The sight of her so upset tugs at Toby’s heart for a few moments. He wants to wrap his arms around her, hold her close and tell her everything is going to be ok. But he knows that isn’t the right answer. He knows that’s just going to make her more confused. He climbs to his feet and heads to the doorway. He pauses there and looks back at her.

“I’m sorry.” he murmurs quietly.

He turns and leaves, Emma stays sitting on the sofa, crying in to her hands.



Toby's phone rings as he's heading back to the train station, ready to catch his train back to Manchester. He answers it without glancing at the screen.

"Toby?" Anthony says, "Oh thank god you're taking my calls at last."

"Hey Dad," Toby says with a heavy sigh. "What's up?"

"Look... I, I," Anthony stammers for a few moments. "I know that I've been hard on you and maybe I've pushed you too hard. But I'm glad that you're doing well for yourself."

"Thanks," Toby says with a smile, "That means a lot to me."

"I know," Anthony says, "And I should have said it to you sooner. Listen though, your sister really misses you. I really miss you. And with everything that's going on at the moment I was kind of hoping that you'd come home. I mean, with the accusations of you throwing the game and everything you need to be with your family right now, people who love you and will protect you."

"Dad," Toby says before he stops. "Thanks, really, thank you. It means a lot to me that you're worried about me. But I can't come home yet. I need to do this. I need to strike out on my own. I can't really explain why but I just feel like this is something that I need to do. I will come back though, maybe in a few weeks?"

"Of course," Anthony says. Toby can hear his voice cracking and the disappointment, "I understand. Just remember that you've always got a home with us."

"Thanks dad," Toby says, smiling wider now, "I needed to hear that."

They make small talk for a while before eventually Toby hangs up. He's outside the train station and he looks up at the sign. He knows that he should probably go home, he's just

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not quite ready to. And he also doesn't want to go back to the house with Fiona is right now either. He feels like he needs to be alone, the crush of people all around him are starting to make him nervous and he's sure that he can see a couple of blokes looking at him and scowling. They're probably fans of Skelmerage and recognise him from the match. He sighs, shrugs his shoulders and turns away from the station.

He wanders that streets, not really going anywhere, just letting his legs take him where ever they want. It's not too cold, not too warm and it's actually quite pleasant, wandering around, walking past people without having to talk to anyone. He's just a face in the crowd, a nameless passer by. He catches snippets of conversations, happiness, sadness, frustration, anger. He listens to the stories that other people are telling, the things that are going on in their lives that feel like the centre of the world to them. They couldn't care less about his problems, the things that are disturbing him. They're focused on their own lives and they all act as though Toby doesn't exist. He takes a deep breath and sits on a bench, watching and listening to other people going by. It becomes a little clearer. Then his phone rings again, interrupting his solitude.

"Hey Arjan!" he says happily, "How are you?! I've not spoken to you in ages, where've you been mate?"

"Busy," Arjan says quickly, "Guess what?!"

Toby quirks a brow. Arjan sounds excited, ridiculously excited, like Toby's never heard him before. He can't stop the smile that crosses his face when he hears his old friend.

"What?" he asks.

"I got a shop!" Arjan blurts out, "A proper shop."

"No way!" Toby says, "That's brilliant. Where is it?"

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“In the shopping mall,” Arjan says, “Next to Marks and Spencer's.”

“Oh wow!” Toby says, “Way to go mate. Can I come and see it?”

“Of course!” Arjan cries, “Why do you think I’m telling you? It’s quite quiet right now, I’d love you to come and see it.”

“I’ll be right there,” Toby says.

He hangs up and rushes towards the shopping mall. He blends in to the crowd easily, falling in to step amongst them all. He’s still smiling and suddenly everything seems better with the world. Arjan deserves the shop, it’s all his best friend has ever worked for. And it gives Toby strength, realising that Arjan’s made his dream a reality and hasn’t let anyone else stop him, no matter what.

It doesn’t take long to reach the shopping mall, Toby weaves in and out of distracted shoppers easily. He stops outside the shop beside Marks and Spencer's, just where Arjan said it would be. He can see his best friend in the shop, talking to a couple of customers. Toby stands outside though, looking at the windows and the displays. It all looks so professional, he can’t believe that Arjan’s managed to do this all so quickly. There are posters in the windows, professionally printed. There are even the names of major phone networks on the posters, their logos. Everything looks so amazing, so neat. He can’t believe that this is a real shop, backed by real networks. As Toby takes a couple of steps closer he can see the various phone models in the window and lining the walls. There are recognisable models and makes there, some reaching in to the several of hundred of pounds. Toby just looks at it and blinks.

“Hey!” Arjan says, poking his head around the door. He’s grinning widely.

“Hey!” Toby says after he jumps. “Wow, well done mate!”



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“Thanks,” Arjan says. He comes out of the shop and stands beside Toby, crossing his arms over his chest and staring at the display, “I can’t believe this is actually happening,”

“You can’t believe it?” Toby says, “Should I be worried?” they laugh together. Toby calms and looks at the window, nodding, “Seriously though Arj, well done. You deserve it.”

“Come on inside,” Arjan says, slinging his arm around his friend’s shoulders, “I want you to see it all.”

They walk in together and Toby slowly wanders around the shop.

“This is incredible,” he says, touching some of the various phones, “Are you really working for the networks?”

“Yeah,” Arjan says with a laugh, “Turns out they’re all too happy to work with the smaller businesses. I offer contracts and pay as you go sims. The networks are sending me actual mobiles and I’m still selling all of the accessories too.”

“Can’t turn your back on your roots ay?” Toby says, grinning widely. He stops and stares in to the back where he can see Arjan’s dad stocking the shelves. “Wow. He’s changed his tune.”

“Yeah,” Arjan says with a laugh, “That’s because he’s seen how much I’m making,”  
Toby laughs.

“Seriously?” he eventually asks, “You’re making that much that he’s actually happy about this?”

“Yeah!” Arjan says loudly, “I’m making like twice the salary of a doctor already. I’d never have got even close to that for years. Now, instead of moaning about how I’m letting down the family name and not making something of myself in a respectable career he’s going around telling everyone how well I’m doing. He’s calling me his business man son.”

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“Sounds like he’s proud of you,” Toby says. His heart hurts a little and he stares at a football themed phone case that he turns over and over in his hands. “Glad he’s happy now.”

“I know right,” Arjan says. “It’s great for business too. All of his friends keep coming in, asking for a family discount and stuff. Even Mr Ranjeet from the corner shop came in to get some cheap models for his paper boys, so he can get in touch with them.”

“Wow!” Toby says, looking at Arjan “That’s pretty impressive. Good job that you didn’t listen to him about going to college then.”

“That was never gonna happen,” Arjan says with a laugh. “It just ain’t me. He’s still suggesting I take a night class in business or something but I can find out everything I need to know from the internet. Push comes to shove and I’ll do an open university course or something. Learning isn’t me, we both know it.” Toby nods and grins a little. “But what about you? How’s the football going?”

“You don’t know?” Toby asks, looking at his friend quickly. “You didn’t watch the match? See the game?”

“When have I had time?!” Arjan cries. “Look at this place, it didn’t just pop up. I’ve been working eighteen hour days, seven days a week since I realised I was outgrowing the stall. Why? What happened?”

Arjan comes a little closer to Toby and looks at his friend. Toby stares right back, looking Arjan in the eye. Arjan frowns, worried and puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Dude,” Arjan says, “What happened?”

“I got suspended,” Toby says. Arjan’s jaw drops, “They think I scored an own goal on purpose. Some guy placed a load of money on it happening and then it did so the guy got a



massive pay out. And because the bet was so specific and own goals hardly ever happen they looked in to it. The police are involved and everything.”

“No way,” Arjan says, “You ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Toby says with a smile, “It’s not the end of the world. At least football isn’t the be all and end all of my life. I’m focusing on my acting thing for now, getting really good at my craft you know. I’ve got an audition tomorrow and everything.”

“Wow!” Arjan says, “That’s cool man. Good luck!”

“Thanks.” Toby says. He sighs, “It’s just the stupid investigation. I didn’t do anything but I can’t stop thinking about it. I mean, what if I did something and somehow it links me to this guy even though there isn’t really a connection. I could go to prison I reckon.”

“Nah,” Arjan says, “They don’t lock you up for that sort of thing. Besides, we might make jokes about the plod being useless but they’re not going to put you in prison without at least a little evidence. And, if like you say, you didn’t do anything wrong then you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“True,” Toby says as he nods his head, “I did talk to them right away and I’ve told them everything that I can.”

“There you go mate!” Arjan shouts, “They’ll see that you’re trying to help and that you’re not the bad guy and they’ll leave you alone. And in the mean time you just focus on your acting and nail the audition.”

“Yeah,” Toby says, laughing.

He feels lighter now and he hangs around for a few hours. He just talks to Arjan and Arjan talks to him. Several times people come in for phone contracts. Arjan handles those while Toby looks after the other customers, the ones paying cash or card for a few accesso-



ries. As the time passes Toby starts to see that he's really enjoying himself. Toby watches Arjan work his customers and sees that his friend is a complete natural at this. People leave smiling and happy, they crack jokes and laugh together. Once or twice people come back that were there only an hour or so before hand to buy more things. Arjan is in his element, something that he's created with his own two hands. Toby's on the edges, looking in and he realises that he wants the same confidence and happiness in what he does.

"Sorry mate," Toby says eventually, "I got to get back. Marco's cooking dinner and he makes a mean carbonara."

"No problem," Arjan says, hugging Toby, "Don't be a stranger mate. And if you ever need anything just come and find me. I don't think I can give you a job just yet but I might be able to find something for you to do."

"I'll bear that in mind," Toby says laughing, "But don't hold your breath."

"Yeah whatever," Arjan says, "I'm serious though, you know where I am if you need me. I'm always there for you. And it was a lot of fun hanging out with you today. I think that old lady fancied you, you know."

"Nah," Toby says, "She was eyeing you up. She seems the sort to like the exotic ones."

"Shut up!" Arjan says with a laugh. "Get back to your awesome actor life."

Toby laughs and heads out of the shop. It has been nice to spend some time with Arjan and see how the other man has made something of his life. Toby starts to realise that if Arjan can do it that so can he.

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On the train home Toby's phone rings yet again. Toby looks at it and phones at the screen when he doesn't recognise the number.

"Hello?" he asks, "Who is this?"

"This is Detective Inspector Marks," a deep voice says from the other end of the line, "Am I speaking to Toby Arnold?"

"Yes sir," Toby says quickly, "Is everything ok?"

"Yes, yes," Marks says, "I'm just calling to tell you we've closed the case. I wouldn't normally do this or say this but it was only a matter of time. I know that you weren't really involved but we had to stick to procedure. As it is there is insufficient evidence linking you to the punter so we can't charge you with anything. And the punter isn't talking so we've got nothing. And if I'm honest I don't think you were involved either. We'll be leaving you alone from now on."

"Thank you Detective Inspector," Toby says, his smile hurting his face, "You have no idea how much I needed to hear that today."

Toby ends the call and sits back in his seat. As he watches the trees, bushes and houses go back he stares out the window, eyes looking but not really seeing. He sighs and smiles. His mind is peaceful at last and he feels like he can finally focus on the audition. There are no other things taking up his mind; not football, not Emma and not the investigation. Toby feels like the slate has been wiped clean so that he can start over, fresh.



## Chapter 27

The studio waiting room is empty when Toby arrives. He can feel his heart racing, his palms are sweating and it feels like there are thousands of insects crawling around in his stomach. He was barely able to force down the toast that Carrie handed him that morning and Marco had made a joke as he was leaving about how pale he looked. There's no turning back now, Toby knows it. He's worked too hard, practicing the scene over and over with and without Fiona's help. He sits in the waiting room, leg jiggling nervously. Finally the assistant sticks his head around the door and invites him in to the room.

He walks in, legs barely feeling up to holding him up. Fiona's already sat in one of the chairs in the centre of the room. The producer, Richard, and some of the other important people are already behind the table. Toby is struck with the sense of déjà vu and for a moment doubts fill his head. He's a fraud, he shouldn't really be there. But those thoughts rush away when Fiona turns and smiles widely at him. He smiles back and heads towards the seat.

"Mr Arnold," Richard the producer says. "Thank you for coming back to us. I'm happy to see that you did what I asked and took some classes. Now let's see if they paid off shall we?"

"Thank you," Toby says, smiling widely, "Thank you so much for the feedback you gave me and for suggesting the course to me. I learned so much."

"Glad to hear it," Richard says, smiling too, "Ready when you are."

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Toby turns to look at Fiona and she's taking deep breaths, getting herself in to character. He's seen her do it before, many times. At first he had tried to do something similar too but he quickly realised that what works for Fiona doesn't work for him. Now he just lets himself slide in to character as the scene starts. Fiona looks at him and smiles again.

"Do it like the last time," she murmurs quietly.

They start. Fiona's words go through Toby's head as Fiona says her lines. The memory of the last time that they acted out the scene, just a few days before and then his mind wanders to what had happened after. He remembers the way that Fiona smelled, how she felt in his hands. Fiona nudges him and he comes out of his thoughts, attention back on the room where he is. He goes with the distraction, making it a part of Rooney's character. After all, Rooney would have been distracted with all of his own thoughts when Coleen was trying to talk to him.

The scene goes quickly, Toby is operating almost on auto pilot now. He isn't thinking about anything else but being Rooney in the scene. By the time that they are finished his heart is still racing and he feels high, floating on the air. He feels like it was one of his best performances yet and when he looks at Fiona it seems that she agrees. She's beaming, wide. Her eyes are shining brightly, with happy tears. He looks at Richard. The man is smiling too.

"Thank you so much Toby," Richard says, clapping quietly. "That was so much better than last time. It looks like the classes were the right choice for you. Thank you for auditioning, we'll let you know whether you've got the part soon."

"Oh..." Toby says. He falters for a moment, "Thank you."

He gets up and walks from the room. He glances back over his shoulder at Richard, Fiona and the others but they're no longer paying attention to him. Fiona has walked over to

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the table and they're all now in a whispered discussion. He sighs and heads out. His heart is heavy and he wonders whether being so distracted to begin with has only ruined his chances rather than helping him to give a better performance like he had hoped.

The moment that Fiona opens the door Toby is in front of her. He's been waiting for her to get back since he returned home himself. Carrie has already hit him around the head with the newspaper several times when he kept hovering around the window and John has threatened to tie him to the seat after he jumped up when he saw someone at the bottom of the drive.

"Well?!" Toby cries, barely letting Fiona shut the door behind herself. "What did they think? Did they like it? Did they hate it? Tell me?! Please, what did Richard think? He didn't say anything this time, I want to know what I did wrong."

"Toby!" Fiona snaps, her laughter ruining the illusion of anger, "Let me take my coat off."

Toby steps back and waits impatiently for Fiona to get her coat and shoes off. He's about to start pestering her again when she just pushes past him and walks in to the living room. He hovers near the sofas as she starts a conversation with John about nothing in particular. She won't look at him, what talk to him. Instead she's talking about a fish crisis in Burma.

"Oh for God's sake!" Toby cries, "Will you just tell me what they thought already?!"

"You'll find out for yourself," Fiona say, a smile on her face, "It's not my place to say and they said they'd call soon."



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“How soon?!” Toby asks, bouncing up and down, “I need to know.”

Fiona doesn't have a chance to reply. Toby's phone starts to ring. He scrambles to answer it, almost dropping it in his haste.

“Toby!” a man booms at the other end. “Toby, it's Richard, the producer for England's Finest.”

“Richard,” Toby says, going for nonchalance, “Hi, how are you? I wasn't expecting to hear back from you so soon.”

“Yeah,” Richard says. He sighs heavily, “Listen thanks so much for auditioning today. I normally wait a little longer but I thought that I'd better tell you now rather than leave you hanging too long. I mean, you're just starting out, it's not fair to keep you waiting around. Your audition was good today, really great. However, I have a bit of bad news for you.”

“Oh... ok,” Toby says. He starts to sink in to the nearest armchair. “Thanks for telling me so quickly.”

The others fall silent and look at him. Their faces are filled with worry and they all lean forward. Apart from Fiona at least who sits back and curls herself in to a ball on the corner of the sofa. She's holding a hand up to her mouth and watching Toby intently.

“I'm sorry Toby,” Richard says, sighing heavily again, “You're going to need to sort out a new schedule. You're going to have to spend the next three months with me.”

“What?” Toby asks quietly, “What do you mean?”

“You're in!” Richard cries, “You got the part! You're the lead actor in England's Finest!”

“You're kidding me!” Toby cries.

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“Nope, I never kid,” Richard says firmly, “Well apart from just then. But I couldn’t resist. You’ve got the part, your audition was amazing, one of the best we’ve seen. However. This is going to be hard work, a lot of hard work. You’re going to be filming most days, you’re going to be waiting around a lot and doing the same scene over and over. And worst of all, you have to spend most of your time with Fiona. I’m just warning you.”

Toby just sits there, not saying anything. All he can hear in his mind is ‘you got the part’. It’s repeating, over and over. A smile starts to spread across his face. He’s actually got the part.

Fiona sits and watches him. She’s been trying to hide her smile since she walked through the door. She’d known before Toby had even left the audition that he had the part, they’d just had to talk about it amongst themselves first. She had almost wanted to tell him, but had to call on all of her skills as an actress not to just blurt the news out when he asked. She could have told him, she knows that, but it wouldn’t have been fair. Toby deserves to hear it from the producer himself, not from her. She can still remember her first call to say she had her first part. It had been so amazing, hearing the news directly from one of the most important members of the crew. She hadn’t wanted to ruin that for Toby.

There is an incredible joy in hearing that news for yourself, from the producer. It is an indescribable feeling. Fiona knows how it feels and as she sits, watching Toby talking to Richard excitedly, arranging things, she knows that she made the right choice. There’s something to be said about sitting back on the side lines and watching someone receive the wonderful news that they’ve been waiting for. She’s glad that she’s getting to see for herself the smile spreading across Toby’s face, the joy in his eyes. She feels it too, not just because To-

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by, the man that she now cares deeply about, has got his first role. She can remember the happiness that she felt too and watching him brings it all back.

Finally he hangs up and looks at her. He glares and points a finger at her. She giggles and shrugs. He leaps to his feet and rushes across the room. He grabs her and lifts her in to the air. He swings her around and around. She laughs and wraps her arms around his neck. He lowers her to the floor and wraps his arms around her properly. They stand there, holding each other. She can feel his entire body shaking in her arms.

“I got the part,” he murmurs in to her hair. “I actually got the part.”

“You got the part,” Fiona says, pulling back and looking at Toby, “Well done.”



## Epilogue - A Few Months Later

The letterbox clanks as the postman puts the letters through. There is a heavy thud a few minutes later as the paper boy follows suit. Anthony groans a little as he gets up from his seat in the kitchen and he plods down the hallway to collect the post and the paper. He groans as he bends over. He feels every one of his fifty plus years and the weight on his bones has been getting heavier and heavier lately. He pats his stomach as he walks back to the kitchen and realises that maybe it's time to get back in to his walking habits. It might help him feel less sore all of the time. He takes a seat at the table again and flips the local newspaper to show the back page. There in big bold letters is the head line:

### SKELMERAGE PLAYER SOLD TO MANCHESTER UNITED

The picture below is of Scooby, smiling broadly, shaking hands with the Manchester United manager and holding up his new contract. Anthony smiles widely, proud of his son's friend. The team at Manchester United had been truly impressed with Scooby's performance at the match against Skelmerage and they'd passed on their thoughts to the team's management. The management had agreed and as soon as the transfer window had opened they'd made an offer to Skelmerage for Scooby. Anthony hadn't been surprised, Scooby is an exceptionally gifted player and the offer from Manchester United had been too good for Skelmerage to refuse.

Scooby had been all too happy to accept it, even though he was sad to leave his home team behind. The money was going to a good cause too, helping the football club to build a



new grandstand. It would be able to hold all of the new fans that had begun to attend games since Skelmerage FC had played Manchester United.

Anthony flips the paper over and he stares at the front page. The headline there is amazing too.

## SKELMERAGE BOY IN TOP MOVIE

It's all about Toby and the movie. Anthony smiles as he reads through the article. His son has actually done it, he's the lead actor in England's Finest and he's going to be a star. The film has only recently secured world wide release, Toby had called to tell him the night before. Toby is going to Hollywood, along with Fiona and the other cast members.

Anthony's smile widens. He's never felt so proud of his son. Even though it isn't what Anthony had had planned for Toby his son has gone and done what makes him happy and achieved his dream. Anthony sits and stares at the article and thinks about what his own dad said to him, back at the hospital so many months before. Maybe it's a good thing that Toby struck out on his own. He has his own dreams and shouldn't be living Anthony's any more. But maybe there's still time for Anthony to go for his own dream again. Rebecca clomps in to the room, humming to herself.

"Becca," Anthony says, turning to look at her. "What do you think about your dad becoming a footballer?"

"I think..." Rebecca says slowly, "That it was be a great idea. Go for it Dad! I can't wait to be there, at all your games, cheering you on."

"Good," he says. "Good."

He reaches for the phone, post ignored for the time being. He calls the Football Association. He wants to do this now, while his mind is still working on the idea and while he's

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still full of excitement. Within minutes he's got the number of a local team in the over fifty's league. He plans to call them in a few minutes. He was going to call them sooner but as he wrote down the number his hand had nudged the pile of letters awaiting his attention. His eye had been caught by a golden envelope, glittering in the morning sun. He puts the phone down and picks it up.

Inside is a fancy invite, beautifully hand written and covered in gold leaf. It's an invite to the premiere of Toby's film. England's Finest is plastered at the top of the letter and when Anthony holds the invite just so he can see his son's face on the paper as a watermark. Then something else catches his eye, the names on the invite. 'Anthony and Maria'. It's for both of them. He swallows heavily and his heart sinks a little.

"Oh wow," Rebecca says, reading over his shoulder, "Mum's your date? Cool."

"She'll never go with me!" Anthony cries, looking at his daughter, "She hates me and would probably rather go alone."

"She doesn't hate you," Rebecca says, "Besides, you'll never know until you ask her."

Anthony starts to panic. Then the phone rings, momentarily distracting him. The panic returns though when he sees Maria's name on the display.

"It's your mum!" he whispers to Rebecca, holding the phone away from him like it's a live grenade. "What do I do?!"

Rebecca smiles and takes her dad's hand, squeezing it tightly. She presses the answer button on the phone and guides it up to Anthony's ear.

"Hello," he says quickly.

"Anthony, hi," Maria says, sounding remarkably sober, "You got your invite then?"

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“Yeah,” Anthony say, “Yeah, I did.”

“So when are you picking me up so we can go shopping for a dress? I want to make sure I look good on your arm.”

Anthony blinks. Maria is being nice to him, friendly. She’s almost flirting with him. Is it possible that she wants him back? He has always loved her, even when she’s been at her worst. Both Toby and Rebecca have been telling him recently that her drinking has dropped loads and she’s even getting counselling. Maybe she’s finally ready to put the past behind her and start a new part of her life.

“Anthony?” Maria asks, “Are you there? Can you hear me?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Anthony says, “I got distracted by the shiny invite. I’ll see you in a couple of hours?”

“Yeah,” Maria says softly. “That will be perfect babes, that will be perfect.”

They both hang up at the same time. Anthony sits there for a few moments, completely shocked. Rebecca laughs and hugs her dad tightly. She leaves the kitchen, watching as a smile starts to spread across Anthony’s face. Maybe her mum’s coming back home at last.

THE END