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Opening extract from

Blindside

Written by

Aidan Chambers

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1. The Harriers

The hot water struck Nate's body and he tensed and whistled with the pain. He added a touch of cold to make the shower cooler. As he stood there, with the water drumming on his skull, he smiled at the memory of the run. He liked to win, even if it was only a training run. He had been at least 100 metres in front of Jed.

Now Nate could hear Jed struggling out of his running gear in the changing room. Nate broke into a rowdy song that bounced off the tiles of the shower room. He thought again of the day when he would run against better men than this club ever took on.

Jed pranced in, with his hands clasped and his knuckles white. He was shivering from the cold. His skin was covered in goose-bumps and mud

was caked on his legs. He tested the water with his foot.

"God! You've got it hot!" he said. "Put some more cold on."

Nate laughed. There was always a pantomime about the hot water.

Jed dithered. "Come on, mate. Some cold!" he said again.

Nate flicked water with the flat of his hand and Jed yelled.

"Get in and stop mucking about," Nate shouted.

Jed sprang in like a swimmer into the deep end. Nate laughed at his moans.

Out in the changing room, panting voices discussed the run. The others were coming in. Their bare feet flapped on the wooden floor.

"Freezing cold out there today," Jed said. His skin was turning red. Hot water spouted off the end of his nose.

"But good," Nate said. He rubbed himself with the flat of his hands. A shower always relaxed him, made him feel good. Jed looked at him as the water flattened his blond hair and streamed down his long limbs. Both their bodies steamed.

"You're too good a runner for this club," Jed said.

Nate shook his head. He never knew what to say when people praised him. "I know!" he said, and laughed.

Charlie splashed into the shower next to Nate. "Has it been a year already since your last bath?" he said.

Always the same jokes. Always from the same people. It was one of the things Nate liked about the club.

*****

Later on the changing room was crowded with hot bodies. The air was sour with sweat and people's socks were stinking.

Nate towelled himself dry as fast as he could and dressed. He combed his hair. It wasn't dry yet. Water dripped onto his neck and collar.

Ivor the club captain came in.

"I'll tell you what, Nate," he said in his Welsh accent, "you keep goin' in this form, boyo, and they'll snap you up for the National Cross Country this year."

Nate packed his bag to avoid answering. There was no need for the captain to tell him. He knew. But Nate was glad he had said it. It made it seem more likely to happen, not just a private dream of Nate's own.

"You'll have to keep off the girls then," Charlie said.

"It's the fried chicken you need to keep off, Charlie," Nate said. "You've got a right gut on you already."

He slapped Charlie's stomach hard. Charlie gulped and doubled up. The others laughed.

"You're getting lanky, Nate," Taylor said. He was another of the lads – a good runner, but not

as good as Nate. "Too tall," Taylor went on. "You want some body on you. A bit of fried chicken wouldn't do you no harm – you'd feel stronger for it."

"Don't you go corrupting him," Ivor said. "Nate's OK. He's in fine fettle."

Taylor laughed. "He's a skinny kid, not a racehorse," he said.

Nate had had enough. He slung his bag on his back and slipped past Jed.

"See you, Ivor," he said. "So long everyone."

They all yelled back.

"See you Thursday," the captain shouted.

Nate waved and closed the changing-room door behind him.