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Opening extract from

The Greatest

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To Anthony Walker

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Chapter 1
Enemy No.1

My name is Ali

My hero's name is Ali. He is Muhammad Ali. He's the greatest boxer who ever lived. His poster's on my bedroom wall.

I'm 12 years old. I live in England.

Muhammad Ali was born on January 17, 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky.

That's in the USA.

I'm a Muslim. So is Muhammad Ali.



Some people blame Muslims for all kinds of things. It was the same for Muhammad Ali. I've had to learn to fight, just like him.

I'm fighting tonight against St John's Club. They're the best club around here. I'm fighting their best boxer. That makes him the best boxer in this area. There will be three rounds. I feel sick. Yes, I'm sick with nerves.

Muhammad Ali started boxing when he was 12. Somebody stole his new bike so he went looking for a policeman. The cop was called Joe Martin. When Muhammad Ali found him, Martin was teaching boys to box. Muhammad Ali liked what he saw and joined in. One day

he would be the greatest World Heavyweight Champion ever.

Someone stole my bike too and I know who did it. It was a boy called Chris Keane. He stole it when I was riding it. He was with his gang. They pushed me off my bike and took it. The next week, I started boxing so no one would ever take anything from me again. Tonight I fight Keane. One of us will be the area champion. I hope it's me.



Keane hates Muslim kids. He hates anyone he thinks is different. He picks on kids with red hair or glasses. Most of all, he picks on kids like me. He calls me a Paki. He says I'm a terrorist. He says I'm like Osama bin Laden. But I'm no terrorist. I'm 12! I'm just a normal kid. I like football, computer games and boxing. I just want to be left alone. I want to be a man of peace. I want to be like Muhammad Ali.

I start packing my stuff. See, my hands are shaking. I look up at my poster of Muhammad Ali. 'Did your hands shake, champ? How did you feel before a fight?' I wish you could tell me.

"Are you ready, Ali?" Dad calls.

"Yes, I'm coming," I tell him.



I look at the poster of Muhammad Ali again. 'Wish me luck, champ.'

I jog down the stairs and follow Dad to the car. It's a taxi. That's what Dad does for a living. He drives taxis round town. He's been called a Paki too. He doesn't fight. He says it's best to ignore the men who say it. He doesn't like trouble. Neither do I. But I'm not going to walk away. I'm not going to let people take what's mine.

Dad starts the car. I watch the town flash by. That's the street where Keane took my bike off me. I got it back in the end. Dad sorted it out for me. He went round Keane's house and spoke to his dad. But the frame was bent. Keane did that on purpose. He wanted to upset me.



He did that all right. I felt ashamed. Dad shouldn't have to stand up for me. I should be able to do that for myself. I swore I would learn to stick up for myself. Tonight I will.

"Are you nervous?" Dad asks.

"Me? No," I say.

He knows I'm not telling the truth. My voice goes funny when I'm going to fight. It's OK once I'm in the ring. It's the bit before the fight, the build up, that gets to me. My hands go clammy. The back of my neck gets hot. Even my legs shake a bit. I feel as if I'm falling to bits. But I don't.

When I'm in the ring I'm cool. I hit fast and dance away. I've won all my fights this year. I'm like my hero Muhammad Ali – a winner. I remember what he said:

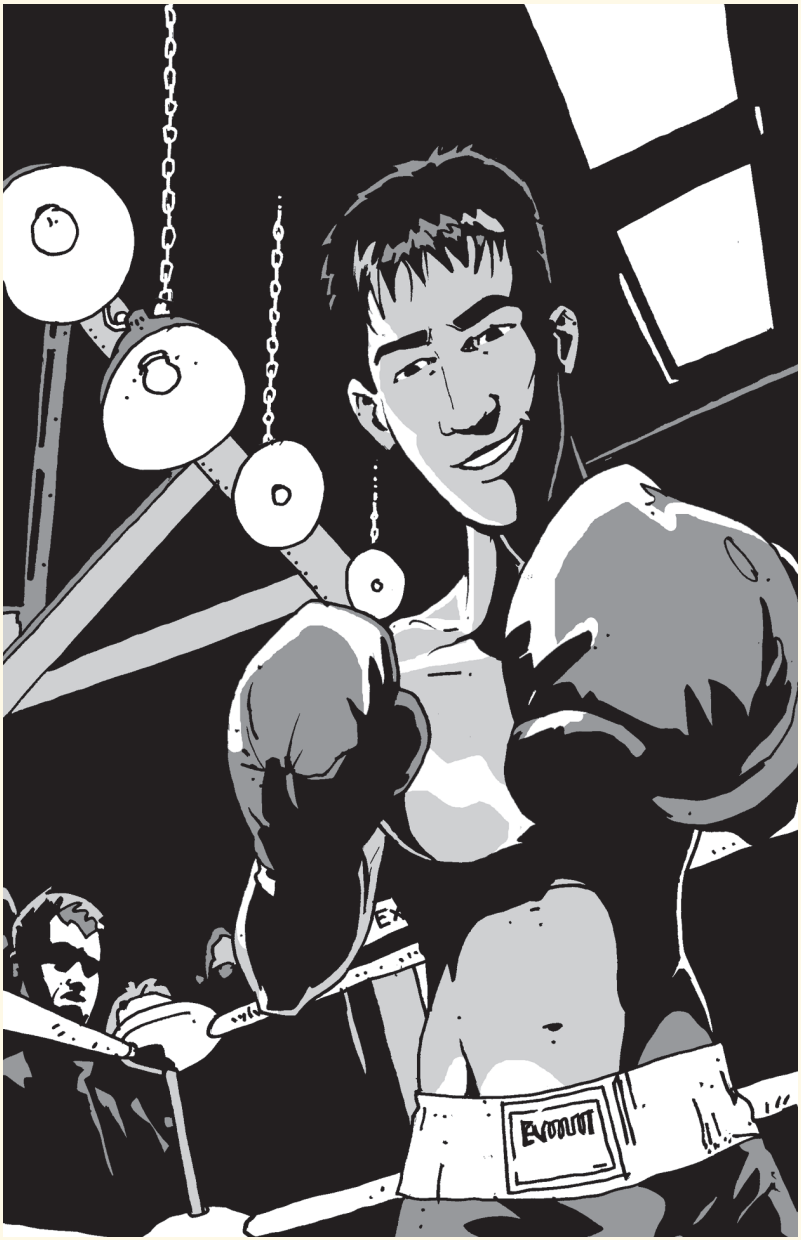
"Float like a butterfly,
Sting like a bee."



When Keane comes out of his corner, I'm going to float. When he gets tired, I'm going to sting. He won't hurt me. I won't let him.

At last, we're at St John's Hall. This is Chris Keane's home ground. He took my bike from me that time. He thinks he's hard. He thinks he can do anything to me. He thinks he's going to win.

But he's in for a surprise.


EVOLUTION

Muhammad Ali – The Early Years

Muhammad Ali was born Cassius Marcellus Clay on January 17, 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky.

At that time black people in many parts of the USA were seen as second-class citizens. They had to use different seats on the bus and in restaurants. They did not have the same right to vote as white people.

In 1954, when Muhammad Ali was 12, his bike was stolen.

He went to the police.

Officer Joe Martin said he would teach him to box.

By the time Ali was 18 years old, he had won two National Golden Gloves crowns and two National Amateur Athletic Union titles.

In 1960, when he was 18, Ali won an Olympic Gold Medal.