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Opening extract from

Game On

Written by

Bali Rai

Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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To the 96 who lost their lives at Hillsborough on April 15th 1989, and to their families.
And to everyone who fought for truth and justice, for so very long.

You'll Never Walk Alone.

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1. GONNA BE A STAR, INNIT!

"My son gonna be a footballer, innit?" my dad bragged.

I groaned. It was a Saturday night and I was working in my dad's chip shop. I should have been out with Hannah, my super-cute girlfriend. Instead I was stuck here, all hot and sweaty, and my dad was bragging to every single customer. Again.

"He gonna be a star, mate. Play for the England ..."

Dad put more chips into the fryer, as I turned to the next customer.

Lacey, who worked for my dad, was rolling up a portion of haddock and chips. "Are you that good?" she asked.

"I'm OK," I said. I felt a bit embarrassed.

See, a few weeks earlier, I'd been to a local football trial with my best mates Danny and Mo. And, after that, I'd been offered a second trial, this time with my favourite team. Liverpool FC. My local team, Leicester City, wanted me too. But all I cared about was Liverpool. It was like being hit by lightning.

LIVERPOOL FC.

I'd worshipped them since I was a kid and the fact I might get to play for them was all I could think of.

After I got the offer, I'd acted like a zombie clown, walking around with a permanent smile on my face and bumping into things. Every other word that came out my mouth was "huh" or "what?". It lasted until Hannah told me I was getting annoying.

Lacey handed over the fish to her customer. "Just imagine earning, like, a hundred grand a week," she said. "I'd be happy with a grand a week!"

"It's just another trial," I told her.

"Yeah right," she said, and grinned at me. "Get famous, Baljit. Then you can buy me a car. Maybe a big house, too."

"There's no guarantee I'll make it," I told her.

Only, inside, I didn't feel like that. I was going be a star player – that's what I told myself, every day. It was my dream.



Later, Hannah came into the shop. She had on a Bob Marley T-shirt, with purple jeans and purple Converse. Her hair was almost black and cut short. She grinned at me, and her honey-brown eyes sparkled.

"You look a bit hot," she told me.

"I am hot," I said. I wiped my brow. "There's people in the Amazon who ain't as hot as me. I need a shower."

Dad came out of the prep room behind the counter with a kebab order. We didn't do our kebabs in pitta bread. Ours were Indian-style – served on massive naan breads with yoghurt and

chilli sauce. We sold proper curries too – Chicken Tikka Masala and Lamb Bhuna, and that. And in the counter, next to the battered sausages and fish cakes, we had samosas.

"Hello, Hannah!" Dad almost shouted. "You come to take my son away?"

Hannah smiled. "No, I was just passing by," she said.

"Rush is over – you go," Dad said. "Me and Lacey finish up, innit?"

I sighed with relief, went through to the back and took my apron off. I could smell the grease on my hair and clothes. Hannah followed me, and we went up to the flat above the shop.

"Sorry, it stinks a bit," I said, as we walked into the living room.

"Oh shut up!" Hannah said. "You say that every time I come round. I don't care."

"Yeah, but I do," I said.

"You do what?" I heard Mum ask from the door.

"Care that everything smells," I moaned.

"Moan, moan, moan," Mum said. "Why don't you cheer up? I thought it was your dream to be a footballer. How come you're so miserable?"

"Yeah, you grump," Hannah said, and she winked at my mum.

I was hot, sweaty and stank like a battered cod, and my girlfriend and my mum were picking on me. Some Saturday night this was.

"I'm going downstairs to help your dad," Mum said.

As soon as my mum left, Hannah jumped on me.

"Hello, smelly," she said, her mouth close to mine. "Fancy a snog?"

What a really, really stupid question. Saturday night had just got a whole lot better!