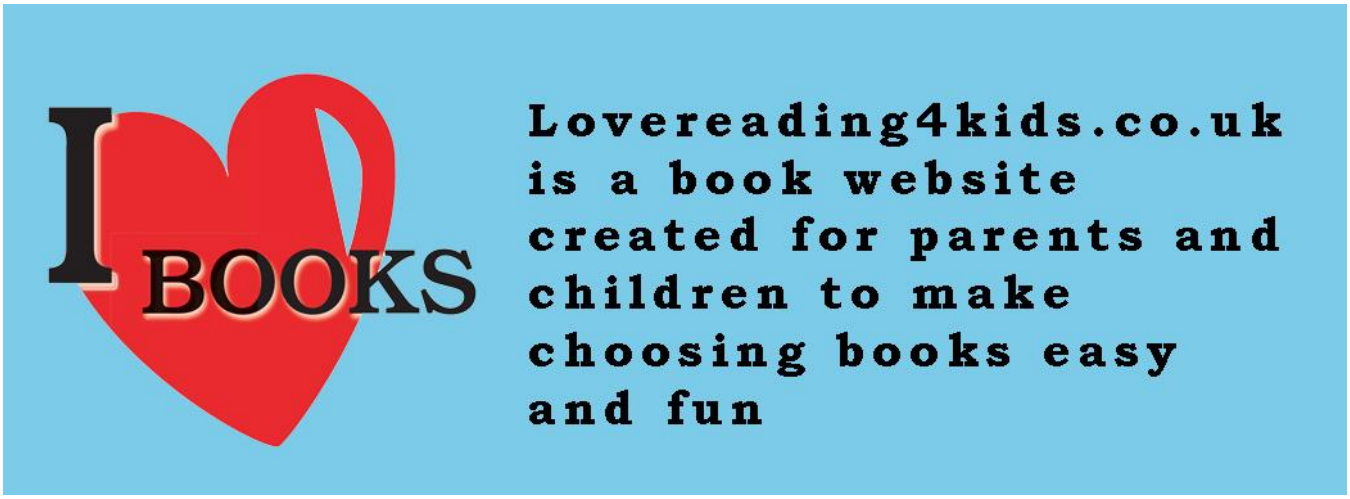


Opening extract from

Legends' Lair

Written by

Joe O'Brien

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DEDICATION

For all the football friends I have had the privilege to share the beautiful game with.
You're all LEGENDS!

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A big thank you as always to all the booksellers, librarians and everyone dedicated to the world of children's books, for the support and enthusiasm that plays a huge part in writer's books reaching the hands of readers.
Thank you to all my readers. You are the reason I write.
I would like to thank my two favourite footballers, Jamie and Tamzin, for all their smiles, hugs and unconditional love and support to me as a dad and a writer.
Finally, I would like to thank my wife and best friend, Mandy, for her unrivalled support and encouragement.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

One of the greatest footballers of all time, Pele, once described football as 'The Beautiful Game'. I started playing the beautiful game at a very young age and to this day I still enjoy kicking a ball around with some of the friends I made when I was a young boy. As a token of appreciation of our life-long friendship, I have named some of the characters in the book after them.

Football is not just about kicking a ball. It's about friendship, being part of a team, helping others both on and off the playing field, respecting oneself and others too, building confidence and challenging oneself to new goals, but most of all football is about enjoyment and having fun.

I hope you find all of these attributes in my book and enjoy reading *Legends' Lair* as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Joe O'Brien



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CHAPTER 1

ON THE VOLLEY

Charlie Stubbs had one passion in life – *football*. Charlie cared about football more than anything else in the world. Everywhere he went, he took his ball with him – after all, what was the point in going somewhere if you couldn't kick a ball when you got there?

Luckily for Charlie, his dad felt the same way. Charlie and his dad couldn't be closer; they were so tight that Charlie's mum called them the *Super Glue Two.*

Charlie's dad always met him at the school gates every Friday. It was their special thing. They would drop into the park on the way home for a kick about, before picking up a fish and chippy.

'Pass it, Da!' Charlie called out as he ran toward the goal.

SWISH

Charlie's dad swung a beautiful ball into the box.

SMACK

Charlie caught the ball on the volley with his right foot and clattered it off the left post, into the goal.

'Goooooooooal!' Charlie celebrated. He ran around in a circle and then dived into a slide, eventually rolling over on his back, staring up at the sky.

Charlie's dad was in stitches. 'You're a spacer, son, d'you know that?'

Charlie's dad lay down beside his son and they both breathed in the smell of the freshly cut grass and stared up at the clouds passing over, each letting their own thoughts come into their heads and then drift away into the calm blue sky.

It was certain that the two were thinking about the same thing – football. Charlie was thinking how great it would be if he scored a volley just as good in his match tomorrow against Broughton United in the last game of the season.

His dad was thinking how great it would be if he somehow, magically, found his way into Old Trafford Stadium on Sunday.

Charlie rolled his head over to one side and smiled at his dad.

'I got it from you, Da.'

'Got what from me?' his dad asked.

'It must be in the genes.'

'You've lost me, son.' Charlie's dad was confused.

'You said I was a spacer. I got it from you!' chuckled Charlie. 'It must be in the genes.'

Charlie's dad laughed. 'You can't go wrong so, son. I only wear the best of jeans.'

Charlie pushed his dad and the two began to wrestle.

That's the way Charlie and his dad were. They were more than just father and son. They were pals – best pals.

Charlie was an only child. He was born in Dublin, where his mum and dad were from, but six years ago, when Charlie was six, they moved to Salford, in England, just three miles north of Old Trafford in Manchester.

The move was very tough on Charlie. He had great friends and family back in Dublin, and starting all over in a new city and a new country was a monumental task.

But there was one big bonus that came with the move; Old Trafford was just three miles away and Charlie and his dad were Manchester United fans.

'Big game on Sunday, Da,' said Charlie, sitting back up.

'I wish we could go, son,' said Charlie's dad.

'I know. United v City – home derby. It's gonna be classic.'

'What score d'you think it'll be, son?'

'Three nil United, Da.'

'I hope so, son,' smiled Charlie's dad. 'Are you excited about your match tomorrow?'

'I'm mad for it. We can't win the league, but if we beat Broughton we can finish second.' Charlie jumped up and ran over to his ball. 'Come on, Da. Hop in goal and I'll have a few shots on ya!'

Charlie's dad was a bit slow getting to his feet.

'You all right, Da?'

'I'm grand, son – brand new!' smiled Charlie's dad. 'Just got a bit dizzy there. Tell you what – one of the lads in work was telling me the other day about some Brazilian fella who holds the Guinness world record for keepy-uppies.'

Charlie's eyes lit up. 'How many?'

'Fifteen thousand, I think he said.'

'What? No way! *Fifteen thousand*?' Charlie gasped. 'He must have been at it for weeks.'

Charlie's dad shook his head. 'I'm sure he said he did it in two hours or something like that.'

'Two hours. Who was he? Was it Neymar? Was it Oscar? He's deadly at doing tricks.'

Charlie's dad shook his head again. 'No, he wasn't a professional. He was just some fella from Brazil. You know what they're like in Brazil. They play football in their sleep.'

'Have you got your watch?' Charlie clipped the ball up between his two feet and started doing keepy-uppies.

'Go on,' smiled his dad. 'But we haven't got two hours. Your mammy will be looking for her chippy so you'll have to keep it going as we're walking.' Just then his phone rang. He glanced at the screen and smiled at Charlie, who was switching the ball back and forth from left to right foot. 'Speak of the devil,' laughed Charlie's dad. 'How are you, love? We won't be long …'

Charlie was counting his keepy-uppies while his dad spoke to his mum.

'Forty-three, forty-four, forty-five …'

'Okay, love. We're on the move. See you shortly – bye.' Charlie's dad slipped his phone back into his pocket. 'Right, son, we're off.'

'Fifty-nine – sixty. I'm counting, Da!'

'Come on, Charlie. Mammy got a call from your gran. Their plane lands at seven and we've got to pick them up from the airport.'

'We've loads of time. Seventy-one, seventy-two.' Charlie flicked the ball up into the air and began to head it. 'Seventy-seven, seventy-eight …'

Charlie's dad was impressed. He knew Charlie was a class player, but he was dazzled by Charlie's overall control of a football. Charlie was what was known in football as a complete player: somebody who had it all – the whole game.

That's why a scout from Manchester United had been keeping a close eye on Charlie all season, and this made his dad very proud. Whatever doubts he had when they first moved to Salford about doing the right thing had diminished. Charlie was happy now, that's all that mattered to his dad and as he watched his son control the ball as if he was dancing with the one love of his life, Charlie's dad's heart swelled with happiness.

'Ninety-two … All right, Da! I'm coming then. Get in goal and I'll have one last shot on ya.'

Charlie's dad stood tall and large in the goal mouth. Charlie had it all worked out. He'd drop the ball back down to his feet when he got to ninety-nine and then he'd let it rip.

'Ninety-six, ninety-seven …'

Charlie took a swift glance at the goal. He picked his spot. He dropped the ball down to his left knee on ninety-eight and then to his left foot on ninety-nine.

'A HUNDRED!!!' yelled Charlie as he switched the ball over to his right foot and swung at it.

THUMP

Charlie caught the ball nice and sweet on the volley and lashed it toward the goal.

Just as the ball reached his dad and he stretched out his hands, the ball swerved to the right and shot through the top right corner of the goal.

'Can I get a drink in the chippy, Da?' asked Charlie, as cool as a cucumber. 'I'm gaggin'.'

CHAPTER 2

HALF TIME

Twenty-two minutes past seven, the doors of Arrivals at Manchester airport slid open and Charlie's grandparents and his Uncle Tony walked through. Charlie waved his hands to catch their attention. He hadn't seen them since Christmas, when he was in Dublin for a few nights. Everybody hugged and seemed very happy to see each other again, but Charlie noticed that there was something not right between his dad and his Granddad.

Charlie remembered walking into his granddad's kitchen in Dublin and finding them having an argument.

I thought they'd sorted that? Charlie thought. *Dad said it was nothing.*

Things didn't improve on the way home in the car. Charlie tried his best to get his dad and his granddad talking, but the most he got was a 'yes' or a 'no' or sometimes he barely got a murmur.

Uncle Tony did his best to keep the spirits up. He began to tell Charlie stories of when he and Charlie's dad were small and the

things they got up to. Uncle Tony was the younger brother by two years; it was Charlie's dad's fortieth birthday and that's why they were visiting. There would be a party in the local pub tomorrow night.

Later that night, Charlie's dad and Uncle Tony went down to the local pub for a couple of pints to catch up. They had asked Granddad to join them, but he said that he was too tired from travelling.

Charlie saw this as an opportunity to have a chat with his granddad. He didn't like the atmosphere between two people that he loved so dearly and he knew that both of them were suffering.

I'll see if I can get Granddad to cheer up and be friends with dad again, Charlie thought.

Granddad was out the back garden having a sneaky smoke. He'd given up smoking years ago, but he always kept one or two in a packet for emergencies, usually if he was worried about something or he was feeling stressed.

Charlie sat up on the fence that Granddad was leaning against.

'You caught me!' smiled Granddad.

'You know them things are bad for ya, don't you, Granddad?'

Granddad chuckled and then he coughed. 'They are!' Granddad winked. 'But don't tell your gran, or this ciggy will be the least of my worries.'

'Em, Granddad, can I ask you a question?' Charlie asked.

'You just did!' smiled his granddad.

'Nice one!' giggled Charlie. He knew this wasn't going to be

easy, but he was determined to get to the bottom of whatever was driving a wedge between his granddad and his dad.

'Why didn't you go out with Da and Uncle Tony?'

Granddad sucked in a big mouthful of smoke and as he exhaled, Charlie could almost feel the tension in the air.

Granddad looked at Charlie. 'I'm jaded, Charlie.'

There was silence for a moment or two. Charlie wasn't sure how to approach things, after thinking about it he figured that the only way he was going to get the truth from Granddad was to ask him out straight.

'So you and Da aren't talking. What's that all about then?'

Granddad pressed his cigarette against the fence to put it out. Charlie could see that his hand was trembling.

Charlie reached over and put his arm around his granddad's shoulder.

'You all right, Granddad? You have me worried for ya.'

Granddad patted Charlie on the back. 'I'm fine, kid.'

'You haven't answered my question!'

'You ask a lot of questions for a youngster.' Charlie raised both eyebrows as if to say, *I'm still waiting!* 'Ah, you know, sometimes Charlie, people who love each other very much, have different opinions and well, sometimes they just don't agree on things and well, you know …' Granddad was finding it difficult to answer Charlie's question.

'Is it to do with the fight you and Da had back in Dublin?' Charlie asked.

Granddad blushed. 'I'm sorry, Charlie, that you saw us arguing. You should never have seen that.'

'Relax, Granddad' said Charlie. 'It's no big deal. People argue all the time. This one time, me and another fella off the team had a big scrap on the pitch. We're both centre-mids and we weren't getting on for a while. It was over something really stupid in training; an argument. We were fairly good pals up to that, not best friends like or anything like that, but we got on all right. Anyway, we were both taken off by the manager and didn't play for the rest of the game. We lost that match. Thinking back now, if we hadn't been fighting I know we would have won that game. We were both unhappy and everyone on the team was unhappy so we shook hands at the next training session and got on with it.' Charlie tapped his granddad on the arm. 'Sometimes, Granddad, if you want to be happy again, and everyone around you too, you have to just get over it and get on with it.'

A big smile beamed across his granddad's face; Charlie could see all the stress and anguish lift.

'Come here, you, and give this foolish old man a hug,' said Granddad.

Charlie could feel granddad's heart beating against his chest. He loved his granddad to pieces and his daddy too.

HALF TIME, Charlie thought. *Need to speak to dad to get FULL TIME on this problem.*

CHAPTER 3

MATCH DAY

Match day and Charlie was out of bed at the crack of dawn as they were every Saturday morning during football season. His grandparents were in the kitchen with his mum, making a big Irish breakfast.

'Aw, that smells delicious,' Charlie licked his lips as he strolled into the kitchen.

'How are you, pet?' asked Charlie's gran. 'Come and give your gran a big hug.'

Charlie threw his arms around her. It didn't bother Charlie to show affection. He had grown up in a loving environment and was never embarrassed to dish out the hugs.

'All right, Granddad?' Charlie winked.

Granddad winked back.

'What are you two up to?' smiled Charlie's mum.

'Nothing, Mam. Dad not up yet?'

'He's in bed, the lazy sod,' said his gran.

'Couple of beers too many,' smiled Granddad.

'Not for much longer!' laughed Charlie. 'No lay-ins on match day.'

Charlie ran upstairs, grabbed a hold of his dad's bed covers and with one big *SWISH* he blasted a draft right up under the duvet.

'Oh my head!' groaned Charlie's dad.

Charlie dived onto the bed. 'Come on you – up for the match.'

Charlie's dad turned over, both hands to his head. 'What time is it?'

'Quarter to eight,' said Charlie.

'What time is your match?'

'It's at half ten, but we're meeting at the pitch at half nine.'

Charlie's dad sat up and pulled the covers up to his chin. 'Half nine, son? That's an hour before the match.'

Charlie nodded. 'I know, but Andy wants to run through a few things with us before the game – it's the last game of the season and runner-up position is up for grabs.'

Charlie's dad smiled and shook his head. 'All right then, I'm up, son. I'll jump in the shower.'

Charlie remembered that he wanted to have a chat with his dad, about Granddad.

'Em! Da, I need to have a chat with ya.'

'Is it important?' his dad asked.

'Very.'

'Can I have my shower first?'

'Sound,' smiled Charlie. 'Sure, look, it can wait 'til later. I need

to get me head in match mode, all right?'

'Bang on, son,' his dad winked. 'Do me a favour though, will ya?'

Charlie jumped up off the bed.

'What?'

Charlie's dad had a big grin on his face. 'Go in and jump on your Uncle Tony. He's in a worse state than me.'

Father and son laughed together. That sounded like a good plan.

❁ ❁ ❁

Charlie's team were called the Salford Devils. They were in the City of Salford League under 12's division 1. It was the last game of the season and the Devils were playing league leaders, Broughton United at home.

Broughton had already won the league. They were five points clear at the top and couldn't be overtaken. Charlie's team were in second place, just one point ahead of third place, Beechfield Aces.

The Devils needed a win to secure runner-up position. A draw or a defeat could mean losing that spot to the Aces if they won their match on the far side of Salford.

Andy, the Devils' manager, had set up a few grids with his assistant, Phil. They weren't training grids, just warm-up grids to make sure that their players were on their toes and fresh for the crucial match.

'Will I call them over?' Phil asked Andy.

Andy looked at his watch. 'Give 'em a few more minutes, Phil.

Look who's over there. I wanna go over and have a chat with him.'

Andy was referring to a scout from United; the one who had been keeping a close eye on Charlie for most of the season.

The team were scattered around the pitch. Some were kicking a ball to each other. Some were having shots on the goal and the rest were hanging around the sideline chatting.

Charlie was at the top end of the pitch with his dad and his Uncle Tony. Charlie always had a few minutes with his dad, away from the team, before they were all called together. Charlie knew that his dad had been a great footballer when he was younger and Charlie buzzed off that. He loved the little bits of advice his dad would give him before each game; he had a special way of lifting his son's spirit and confidence before every game – the odd few words of wisdom in an encouraging way.

Charlie loved that. It was a special bond he had with his father.

'Hey! Uncle Tony!' Charlie called. 'Hop in goal with Da and I'll have a shot on the two of yiz.'

Uncle Tony stood beside Charlie's dad in the goal mouth.

Charlie's dad nudged his brother. 'Move over a bit, you big lump.'

'Relax,' smiled Tony. 'He'll never get it past the two of us.'

Charlie's dad smiled at Tony, 'Don't let him hear you saying that.'

Suddenly, Phil blew hard on his whistle. Charlie looked around and saw his teammates sprint over to their coach.

'Come on, kid!' smiled Tony.

Charlie turned back and focused on the goal. He picked his

spot. That's where he would put the ball. He wouldn't ever change his mind once he had his spot picked. That's one of the things his dad taught him.

SWISH!

Charlie swerved the ball around Tony's right ear, into the top left corner of the net.

'Catch yiz in a while!' Charlie waved and ran over to join his team mates.

Tony stood still, his hands in the same position as they were before Charlie took his shot. He turned to his brother, who had a huge grin on his face.

'I told you!' laughed Charlie's dad.

'Jaysis!' gasped Tony. 'I didn't even get a chance to move. He's a class act.'

Charlie's dad nodded, pride beaming from his face.

'D'you see your man over there, talking to Charlie's manager.'

'Yeah,' Tony nodded.

'He's the scout from United, I was telling you about.'

'He's here to watch Charlie?'

'I'd say so,' said Charlie's dad. 'Fingers crossed, please God.'