# Kick Off
# By Dan Freedman

## Chapter 1
## The Trial

Friday 21 July – Last Day of Term

KINGFIELD SCHOOL
UNDER 14s TRIAL MATCH
60:00 MINS PLAYED
BLUES 1 REDS 0
WALSH, 22

This was it. This was Jamie's chance to prove himself. This was what he'd waited six months for. Kingfield School didn't know who Jamie Johnson really was. They didn't know the kind of talent he had.
Now he could show them.
Dillon Simmonds had no idea who he'd been messing with. Jamie could shove all his stupid words back down his big, fat, spotty mouth with one goal today.
That was the plan anyway. But these trials to see who would be in the Kingfield Under-fourteen A team next year were not going according to the script.
When he most needed his skills, nothing was working for Jamie.
There were only ten minutes left and Jamie hadn't shown a thing.
People kept hoofing the ball to him in the air. He was never going to get anywhere like that. He was a winger. He needed the ball passed to his feet.
Jamie had been in pain since the first minute, too. He was wearing a pair of worn-out old socks that had holes in them and his boots were rubbing against his heels the whole time. He'd scored some of his best ever goals in these boots, but today they were hurting him. They had sawn off all the skin on the backs of his heels. He was sure he was bleeding.
Jamie bent down and undid his laces. Maybe if he re-tied them looser it wouldn't hurt as much.
He had just done up his laces and was getting ready to stand up and get back into the game when he suddenly felt a knee jar right into his ribs. It knocked him sideways on to the ground.
"Oi, Ginger Minger – what you doing on the floor? Had enough, have you?" sneered Dillon Simmonds as he jogged past. They both knew full well that it was him who'd knocked Jamie over, and that he'd done it on purpose. You could see it in his evil smile.
"Shut your face, Simmonds – you fat numpty," said Jamie, getting to his feet.
Jamie knew that Dillon wasn't really fat. He was pretty much all muscle. But he also knew that Dillon hated being called fat so it was a good way to wind him up.

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"Talk to me when you've actually touched the ball, Ginge," Dillon shouted back, laughing as he went.
Jamie jogged back to his position on the left wing. He was shaking his head. The sad thing was, for once in his life Dillon actually had a point. Jamie had hardly touched the ball all game and he knew it. Mr Marsden probably didn't even know he was on the pitch.
But then, out of nothing, it happened. A chance!
The goalkeeper on Jamie's side belted the ball forward. It was a huge kick and when it hit the hard dusty ground, it bounced so high that it went over the whole of the opposition defence.
Jamie spotted what was going to happen before anyone else on the pitch. He dashed after the ball and was way too quick for any of the defenders to keep up with him.
It was just him against the keeper. He was in.
Latching on to the ball, he steadied himself as he waited for it to drop.
One sweet strike from his left foot. Then Marsden would know who Jamie Johnson was, all right.
He could have smashed it on the half-volley but he let the ball bounce to give himself that bit more time.
Then he swivelled and, with his right foot planted in the ground and his left knee bent all the way back, he got ready to snap through the strike. He wanted to rifle it into the net.
But, just as he was about to crack the ball home, he was hit by a cyclone of a challenge.
Dillon Simmonds, a human truck, had driven straight into Jamie, catapulting him into the air. Jamie found himself lying winded on the ground. His dream goal had been ripped away from him.
"Get up, you diver," shouted Dillon, grabbing Jamie's shirt by the collar.
"Get your hands off me," said Jamie, desperately trying to get his breath back. Jamie wanted to knock him out but inside he was struggling just to breathe. Dillon had taken him out good and proper. It felt like someone was in his chest, strangling his lungs. The more he tried to gulp in the air, the more it hurt.
"OK, you two. Break it up," said Mr Marsden, who was quickly on the scene. "I saw what happened.
"You didn't make contact with the ball, Dillon – only the man. It's a penalty for the Reds."
Marsden handed Jamie the ball.

## Chapter 2
## On the Spot

Jamie looked around. Everyone else was just staring back at him. None of the others on his team had made a move to take the penalty. It had to be him. Jamie knew it wasn't just the keeper that he was up against now. It was every other player on the pitch. No one wanted him to score – not even his own teammates. Why would they? It was their trial too and they all wanted to get

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into the A team just as badly as he did. Why would they want him to steal all the glory in the last minute?
Jamie reached down and placed the ball on the spot. At first a bump in the ground made the ball roll off the spot. So Jamie picked the ball back up and stamped down hard on the spot to try and flatten it out. He could feel his heart thudding as he put the ball back down.
“Good luck, muppet,” said Dillon, standing right between Jamie and the goal. He was so close that Jamie could see the little droplets of spit coming out of his stinking mouth as he spoke. “Make sure you don’t MISS,” he hissed.
Jamie fended Dillon’s heavy frame out of the way. He needed to concentrate. But it was hard. He wanted to be decisive but he was aware of the doubts sprouting up everywhere in his mind. Thousands of questions were all closing in on him at once: Power or placement? To the side? It might go wide. Straight down the middle? The keeper will save it.
Mr Marsden raised the whistle to his mouth. The burst of noise was the signal for Jamie to step forward.
“I can’t miss, I can’t miss,” he said to himself as he walked towards the spot, head bowed.
And then everything went completely blank.
Jamie saw his feet run up to the ball but somehow he felt unable to control them. His mind and body were disconnected from each other. He was taking the penalty but he had no idea what he was actually going to do with it.
Then something very unlucky happened.
As Jamie moved to strike the ball with his left foot, his right foot went over a divot in the pitch, twisting his ankle right over.
It threw Jamie off balance completely. He started to fall over. He should have stopped, got himself together and taken another run-up. But he didn’t. He still tried to take the penalty.
As he was falling to the ground, he flung his foot towards the ball so desperately, so violently, that his left boot actually flew off his foot.
It shot right up into the air.
Jamie yelled out in horror.
His boot rocketed skywards, doing somersaults as it went. Meanwhile, the ball that should have been flying into the back of the net was rolling slowly and painfully along the ground towards the goalkeeper’s waiting hands.
Jamie could not believe it. This was his worst nightmare.
He started to hear something behind him. It was laughter. He turned around and saw that all the players on both sides were laughing. At him.
“That’s the worst penalty I’ve ever seen! You’re rubbish!” Dillon shouted, pointing straight at Jamie. “And this ginger minger thinks he can play for the A’s!”
Jamie’s blood was boiling with rage, embarrassment and frustration. The sight and sound of Dillon’s stupid, ugly, disgusting laugh was too much to take.
He shoved Dillon hard in the chest and walked away.
“Aaah,” cried Dillon dramatically. He stumbled backwards and fell to the ground clutching his neck.
Jamie couldn’t believe what Dillon was doing. He was actually faking it. He was pretending Jamie had punched him!

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"Aaah, ref!" protested Dillon, rolling on the ground in apparent agony. "He's done me, ref."
"Johnson, come here," said Marsden, beckoning Jamie with his finger. His voice was serious.
"You're not falling for that, are you, sir? He's taking the—"
"I'm not falling for anything." Marsden reached for his pocket.
"Sir! He's trying to con you. I didn't do anything!"
"Yes, you did, Jamie. I know you're upset about the penalty but you raised your hands to an opponent and you can't do that on a football pitch."
Marsden brandished the red card above his head so everyone could see. Jamie had been sent off.

KINGFIELD SCHOOL
UNDER 14s TRIAL MATCH
FULL-TIME RESULT
BLUES 1 REDS 0
WALSH, 12 JOHNSON MISSED PEN, 61
JOHNSON SENT OFF, 62

As he trudged off, Jamie tried for the millionth time to work out why it was that Dillon hated him so much. Maybe it was because Jamie was new at Kingfield. He'd only joined the school in January. Before that, he'd been at The Grove, the other big school in the area and Kingfield's fiercest rivals.
Dillon despised The Grove. Jamie knew that much because they had played football against each other every year that Jamie had been at The Grove. It had always seemed like Dillon had been on a personal mission to kick lumps out of every single Grove player in every match they had played. The Grove were a good football school, though, and Jamie had been one of their top players. In last year's match between Kingfield and The Grove Jamie had scored twice and The Grove had won 3 – 1. Maybe that was the real reason that Dillon kept trying to slate Jamie.
But it wasn't Jamie's fault that he used to go to The Grove. He'd only gone there because that's where his mum had gone and she'd wanted him to go to the same school.
He'd actually been wanting to join Kingfield for ages. Not only was it much nearer to Jamie's house but Jack Marshall – Jamie's best mate – went there too. For years Jamie had begged his mum to allow him to go to Kingfield and, finally, last October, Jamie's mum had given in and said he could join.
When they'd found out that there was a space for him to start in January, Jamie had jumped at the chance, even if it was in the middle of the school year. Jamie's mum wasn't so sure but in the end she'd allowed it, on the condition that his school work didn't suffer.
Jamie had been so excited to start and to be at the same school as Jack, but life as a new boy at Kingfield hadn't been as easy as he'd thought.
Most people already had their group of friends. It was difficult for Jamie to get on with them. Sometimes he'd got into a bit of trouble on purpose, just to get noticed by the others. Plus he'd had Dillon on his case the whole time too. It

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had started right from Jamie's very first day, when Dillon had said that Jamie couldn't play in the football match during break.
Football was what had made Jamie popular at The Grove and he needed it to do the same for him at Kingfield. He'd waited months for the day to come when he could show Kingfield that he'd got some serious talent. He wanted people to go around the school talking about how good he was. He wanted to hear people talking next to their lockers about how fast he could sprint and how he could go around any defender. He wanted all the teachers to know that he was the best left winger in the school. And, most of all, he wanted some respect.
Instead, what he had was twenty-one other boys laughing at how he had taken the worst penalty in the history of football. Great. Just great.

Jamie was the first out of the changing room after the game. He hated the communal showers. All the other boys were already starting to look like men. Jamie still looked like a scrawny boy. He was one of the youngest in the year too; he'd only turned thirteen in June.
But today he had even more reason than normal not to want to stick around in the changing room too long. The others had stopped laughing now, but just looking at everyone was enough to remind Jamie what a fool he'd made of himself. He had to get away.
Jamie kicked the changing-room door open and stomped out. Two of the boys he'd become mates with, Tesh Prashad and Ollie Walsh, weren't far behind. Ollie was the one who'd scored the only goal in the trials. He was lucky – that goal had already booked him his spot in the A's for next year. Tesh would be in the B's, same as usual.
"You coming down the bus shelter?" asked Tesh as they left the school gates. "We're going to get some grub from the newsagent's and then pick up the bikes."
"Some of the girls are coming down," said Ollie, putting his arm around Jamie's shoulder. "You should call Jack."
Ollie and Tesh were happy. Of course they were. It was the last day of term. The summer holidays were just about to start.
Jamie should've been happy too. But he wasn't. He felt like he hated everyone – even his mates. Most of all, though, he was angry with himself. He'd expected so much from himself. He'd really built the trials up in his mind. And then he'd delivered nothing. Less than nothing.
"Nah, I've got stuff to do," he said, wriggling himself free. He wasn't in the mood for the bus shelter.

## Chapter 3
## A New Friend

Jamie only wanted to talk to one person.
Jamie's granddad seemed to be the only one in the whole world who didn't give Jamie any grief. He never told him what to do. Jamie couldn't stand being told what to do.

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But when it came to football, Mike Johnson certainly knew what he was talking about. The Hawkstone United "Young Player of the Year" award that he'd won three seasons in a row forty years ago were all the qualifications he needed to gain Jamie's respect.
They both loved the Hawks and the fact that his granddad had played for them made him a legend in Jamie's eyes. When Jamie's dad had left home, Jamie's mum changed both of their surnames back to her maiden name of Johnson. The older he got, the more proud Jamie felt that he had the same name as his granddad.
It wasn't like Jamie's granddad was trying to replace Jamie's dad. It was more that he was always there if Jamie needed him. They were friends as much as they were family, and he'd even asked Jamie to call him Mike rather than Granddad because he'd said that being called Granddad would make him feel like a right old pensioner.
Everyone said that had it not been for the knee injury, Jamie's granddad could have gone on to become one of the best players in Hawks history. Mike still took Jamie to see the Hawks play as often as he could, and when he sat next to Mike at the ground, Jamie always dreamed that one day he would be on the pitch playing for Hawkstone and Mike would be in the stands to see him do it. If he had the opportunity to make one wish in his life come true, that would be the one he would choose.
"Anyone can miss a penalty, JJ," said Mike.
Jamie had just told him what had happened. He'd taken the long route back from school through the park. He'd thought it might give him time to think of some positives from the trial. But it hadn't worked. Jamie couldn't remember one good thing he'd done in the whole game.
"The important thing is that you have the confidence to step up and take the next one when it comes along. Football is about balls, after all."
"I know," said Jamie. "But this is more than just a mistake. I'm never gonna get in the A team now. I'll be lucky to get in the C team, I reckon."
"Hang on a minute, Jamie," said Mike, shaking his head. "The season hasn't even started yet and you're already writing yourself off, are you? The C team? You? Come on!"
"You didn't see it, Mike. It was so embarassing."
"It's irrelevant, Jamie. It's gone. What you need to do is keep your mind positive and stick at it. If everyone got what they wanted just by clicking their fingers, nothing would be worth wanting, would it?"
"Well, I don't know. . ."
"Jamie, are you good enough to get into the A's?"
"I think so."
"You think so?"
"OK, yeah. I am good enough. I'm as good as any of them."
"Right, and you've got the whole of the holidays ahead of you now. So if you want to get in this team, then make it happen."
"How do I do that, then?"
"I suggest you go back to the beginning. Let's go outside."
They went out to the small garden at the back of the house.

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“Wait here for a sec,” said Mike, walking to the shed at the bottom of the garden. He moved slowly. He’d walked with a limp ever since the operations he’d had on his knee when he was younger.
The shadows were starting to lengthen now. Jamie looked at how massive his was on the garden fence. He wondered how tall he would be when he grew up.
When he came back, Mike was carrying something behind his back.
“What’s this?” he said, presenting a football to Jamie.
“Don’t you start,” Jamie snapped. “I had a bad game but I still know what a football is.”
Jamie reached to grab the ball.
But Mike held on tightly.
“Ah, but if you want to be a real player, JJ, this has to be more than a football. It has to be your friend. From what you’re telling me, it’s not your friend at the moment.”
“What? My friend?” Jamie laughed. “How can a ball be my friend?”
“How do you make friends with anyone, Jamie? Spend some time together.”
Mike handed the ball over.
“And make sure you use both feet, JJ. That right foot’s not just for standing on!” he said, giving Jamie a wink as he went inside.
Jamie stood there.
All he had for company was a ball and a brick wall.
It was all he needed.

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