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SATURDAY

PITCH INVASION

It was half-time in the City versus United game. Nil–nil. Sitting in the stands, Danny was waiting for the usual kind of thing that happens at every football stadium the length of England.

Garish adverts for club merchandise.

The offer of a City credit card.

Announcements about an expensive dinner where you can meet City stars from the past.

All coming over the tannoy. All at deafening volume, so it was impossible to have a conversation.

But today, for once, half-time was different.

Dad picked up on it immediately.

'What's going on, Danny?'

A group of fans were clambering over the advertising boards and on to the pitch. And a strange silence had fallen across the stadium.

'I'm not sure,' Danny said. 'A pitch invasion?'

'Hooligans?' Dad suggested.

'No. It's not like that,' Danny said.

'A protest?'

'Maybe. There's about twenty of them. And they've got . . . they've got a banner.'

'What does it say?' Dad asked.

Danny couldn't read it yet. He waited as the pitch invaders unfurled it. He wanted to be the first to see the banner, so he could tell his dad what it said.

Danny and his dad came to every City home game. And Danny acted as commentator because, when he was younger, his dad had been blinded in an accident. He'd had to stop work, stop playing football with Danny, stop almost everything.

Danny remembered worrying if his dad would give up *going* to the football too. But on the day of the first game after he was out of hospital, Dad had stood up.

'Danny?'

'Yeah.'

'Come on, son. City are at home. What are you waiting for?'

Since then Danny had become skilled at describing live football, telling his dad just enough so that he could follow the game.

But things were different today. Normally Danny described goals, fouls and diving continentals. Never crowd trouble. Never pitch invasions.

'They've unfurled the banner now,' he told his

dad. 'And the rest of the fans are sitting in the centre circle.'

'What does the banner say?'

'Just a minute. I can't see it.'

Two men and two women were holding the banner, turning it in a wide circle so that the fans in every stand could see it. And the TV cameras. As they did this, the crowd noise started up again. It grew louder and louder. Individual cheers and shouts merged into an increasing roar. And dozens more people ran on to the pitch to sit with the protesting fans, forcing the stewards to retreat.

'"No foreign investors for City",' Danny read above the noise.

'Ah,' Dad said. And, as he did, a chant went up around the stadium.

City till I die
I'll be City till I die
I know I am
I'm sure I am
I'm City till I die.

Danny was on his feet, singing along, itching to get on to the pitch too. He had never seen anything like this at City. And he had seen a lot.

In nine years he'd been over three hundred times

since his first game in League One. He'd been five years old then. Now he was fourteen and City were one of the best teams in England. And Europe.

And it was *because* of their success that a group of money men from abroad wanted to buy the club. It was happening in a lot of places. Foreign owners coming in, trying to make money out of football clubs, risking everything the real fans cared about. The real fans knew that their club was for them. That it was about football. Not making money for people who'd never seen the team play.

That was what the protest was about.

Danny looked at his dad, who was smiling.

'What are you smiling about?' Danny asked.

'You?'

'What?'

'Dying to get on the pitch.'

'Come on, then,' Danny said, half joking, half serious.

'Me? It'd not be safe, Danny.'

Danny shrugged and watched more people running freely on to the pitch. It was a peaceful protest. The police were letting the fans make their point.

'Is it safe for you?' Dad asked.

'What?'

'If you went on, would you be safe?'

'Yes,' Danny said. 'There's loads on now. The police are just letting them do it.'

'Go on then,' Dad said, standing. 'Do it for me.'

Danny grabbed his dad and hugged him. Then he walked down the aisle and jumped over an advertising panel.

Now he was on the pitch.

And he ran. Over the touchline. Across the perfect pitch, soft under his feet. Towards the middle – and the banner. He'd never seen the stadium like this before: from the pitch. It was huge. There were other fans alongside him, waving their scarves. He lifted his scarf above his head and trailed it behind him. He looked around him. Everyone was grinning.

And he couldn't stop laughing. The feeling was amazing. He felt like he was flying. Here they were on the grass where the players ran and kicked and dived and scored.

And they were all singing: *City till I die*.

Danny sang so loud his throat ached and he knew he would lose his voice the next day. But this was important. He was a City fan. He loved the club. And, like the rest of the hundreds of fans on the pitch, he wanted it to *stay* his club. If anyone should own the club it was them: the fans.

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After five minutes of protesting the fans left the pitch. Peacefully.

And the match could start again.

The second half was fantastic. The fans' passionate reaction to the foreign takeover spilled on to the pitch. What had been a tight and tense goalless match against United was now an end-to-end thriller.

City poured players forward. Their twin strike force looked lethal. Sam Roberts, England's leading scorer, and new sensation, Ghanaian international Anthony Owusu. Danny struggled to keep up his commentary just as much as the United defenders struggled to keep up with City's strikers.

'Owusu is playing deep,' Danny told his dad. 'Roberts further up.'

And as he spoke, City's midfield dynamo launched a high cross into the United area. The ball ricocheted off a defender to Owusu, who controlled it on his knee and volleyed it with amazing power. At first the ball seemed to be going way over, but then it began to dip in a powerful arc. Half a second later it was crashing in off the crossbar and bouncing about the goal.

One–nil. An awesome strike.

Danny and his dad leapt into each other's arms as the crowd exploded. First with the loudest cheer

of the season, then with the name of the scorer. Over and over again.

Ow-usu! Ow-usu! Ow-usu!

When the fans had gone quiet enough for anyone to talk, Dad spoke.

'What happened?'

This always amused Danny. His dad would be leaping around, punching the air, screaming at the top of his voice one minute, then calmly asking to know why he'd been jumping around in the first place.

'Owusu . . .' Danny said breathlessly.

'I gathered that.'

'. . . he just blasted it in!'

'Yeah?'

Danny knew his dad needed more. So he decided to give it to him: like a proper reporter on the radio. He breathed in and began.

'City's amazing Ghanaian international has scored the goal of the season. Picking it up on the edge of the area, he took it on his knee, then fired an unstoppable volley past the paralysed United keeper. That's Owusu's twentieth goal of the season. And just goes to show that he deserved the African Player of the Year award he received only two weeks ago.'

But, as Danny delivered his commentary, his

mind was drifting elsewhere already. He was thinking about the City takeover bid and what – other than invading the pitch at half-time – he could possibly do to stop it.