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Opening extract from

Striker Boy Kicks Out

Written by

Jonny Zucker

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To the inspirational Mr Simon Putman and all of the fantastic staff and pupils at Deansbrook Junior School



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STRIKER BOY KICKS OUT

Jonny Zucker

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CHAPTER 1
Passport Fear

The heat and humidity of the Spanish night hit Nat as he stepped out of the plane. He loosened his vertical green-and-white striped Hatton Rangers Football Club tie, and walked down the steps. It was three years since he'd last visited Spain, but this trip would be very different from that time.

A ripple of excitement unfolded inside him.

"Keep moving, lads," shouted Stan Evans, the Rangers assistant manager. Nat strolled across the tarmac to the terminal building with his two best mates – tall central-defender Emi Adeyo and right-back Kelvin Bartlett.

They passed through the sliding glass doors of the terminal building, climbed two flights of stairs and walked down a long corridor – its walls covered with Spanish flags.

At passport control, Nat hung back with Stan as planned. When everyone else had gone through, Nat and Stan deliberately approached a female customs official,

in the hope that she'd be less likely to follow football than her male colleagues. Evans explained to her in basic Spanish that Nat was a youth team player who had come along for the experience. She held out her hand.

Nat unzipped his jacket pocket and handed over his passport. He gulped nervously as she checked his face against the photo. It showed a boy with light green, almond-shaped eyes, a snub nose and an l-shaped dimple on his chin. His hair was closely cropped, a marked change from the long mane he'd sported until he'd joined Rangers.

The official looked from the photo to Nat and back again. His insides doubled over in anxiety. Was she a football fan who followed the English Premier League? Had she recognised him from his three appearances as a substitute? The wait was agonising, but finally she stamped the relevant page and arched an eyebrow for him to proceed. He walked through quickly, relief coursing through him, slipped the passport back into his pocket and refastened the zip.

It was critical that none of the other Rangers players ever saw Nat's passport. To them, he was Nat Dixon, a sixteen-year-old professional footballer. His passport, however, told a different story. It revealed that his real name was Nat Cartwright. And that he was only thirteen.

The only people who knew the truth were Nat and his father Dave, Stan Evans, and Hatton Rangers manager Ian Fox.

"Well done," said Evans, his clear blue eyes smiling with satisfaction, his steps affected by his slight limp, as he rejoined Nat after being waved through. They hurried to catch up with the rest of the Rangers party.

"You alright, mate?" asked Neil 'the Wildman' Duffy, the club captain, when he saw Nat approach. The Wildman was the sort of player anyone would wish for in the heart of their defence – built like a mountain, with an apparently endless supply of strength and bravery.

"Yeah," responded Nat, placing a protective hand over his jacket pocket and the passport inside.

"Good," replied the Wildman. "Although I'm warning you, getting back into training will be a shock to your system. You'll feel your joints groaning tomorrow night."

Nat smiled. This was typical of the Wildman – he told things as they were, without intending to frighten or undermine anyone. It was one of the qualities Nat liked best about him.

It was hard to believe that the last game of the season, a three-two victory over Manchester United which had saved the club from relegation thanks to Nat's last-minute strike – had been just three weeks ago. Nat and the rest of the Rangers players had expected to turn up at Shelton Park, the Rangers training ground, for the first session of pre-season training this morning, yet here they were in Spain. Life could deliver great surprises.

"Look sharp, lads!" called Ian Fox, marshalling his

troops in the direction of the baggage reclaim carousels. Fox, with his black hair streaked with grey, his sharp, angular nose and thin lips, could look and act harshly, at the best of times. But he was a good man, you just had to try not to get on his bad side – something Nat had done in the past, to his regret.

Twenty minutes later, everyone had their luggage and they walked out into the pale yellow lights of the arrivals lounge. Several people stood behind a metal barrier holding up placards. A man in a dark blue suit with a chauffeur's hat held a sign reading HATTON RANGERS. A woman in an orange skirt and top held up a piece of cardboard with the word ADEYO, and a small, nut brown man with wispy grey hair had a piece of paper marked BARTLETT. Further down stood a young man of about seventeen, with dark brown eyes and long brown hair that was held in place by a thin black headband stretching across his forehead. His features were flat, as if someone had hammered them into place. The sign he was holding read DIXON.

"Your carriage awaits you," said Stan Evans, nodding in the direction of Nat's sign. "Get a decent night's sleep and we'll see you in the morning."

Nat nodded and went over to Emi and Kelvin to say goodbye. As the three youngest players in the squad, they'd been given the short straw when it was discovered that the hotel the club had booked couldn't accommodate the entire squad.

"I can't believe we miss out on the hotel," sighed Kelvin.

"Don't worry," said Emi, "we'll still be spending loads of time there."

They all shook hands and headed off to their respective greeters.

Nat's Spanish adventure was about to begin.