

Chapter One

Homeward Bound

The coach carrying the team of young footballers back to Birmingham hit a pothole, jolting Jack awake. He had been sound asleep, his head pressed against the window pane, really tired after four days at spring training camp. He elbowed Rob, dozing in the seat next to him, his dark curly head slumped on his chest.

‘What are our chances of making the team for Morocco?’

Rob groaned. ‘And you woke me up to ask me that. I was having such a great dream too.’ He pulled a bottle of water out of his rucksack and took a sip. ‘For the ten-millionth time – Andy is a definite, you are a probable, and me – well, that’s anybody’s guess.’

At that moment shouts of, ‘Shut-up, you lot, and listen will you,’ floated down the coach. Tim Woods, the team captain, climbed to his feet; his fair hair so fiercely gelled, he resembled someone who had recently escaped the clutches of a hungry, blood-sucking vampire. ‘Who’s running the sweepstake this year?’

‘You are,’ came a chorus of voices.

‘What’s it in aid of?’ Gary called from the front row, his dark hair plaited in small dreadlocks. He knelt up on the seat, oblivious to the notice above him, advising passengers to buckle-up whenever the coach was in motion.

‘Us, of course,’ half-a-dozen boys bellowed back.

‘That’s okay then. Count me in, but not Bram – he’s not allowed to gamble.’

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Bram's head emerged beside him, his doleful face framed by the patka he wore for football. 'But it's okay in't it, if I 'elp Gary? 'E's useless on 'is own.'

'Okay then,' Tim agreed. Taking a notebook out of his rucksack, he tore out any remaining clean pages waving them in the air. 'In that case, I need a quid from everyone – and no credit. And don't forget to write your name on it this year, Petey, I'm not a mind-reader.'

'Can you lend me a pound, Rob?' Andy, in the row behind, leaned forward slipping his hand through the gap between the seats.

Rob scowled. 'That makes five you owe me.' He fished in his pocket pulling out a pound coin. 'Mind I get it back.'

Andy, his round face attempting to look concerned and failing miserably, jotted the figure down on a scrap of paper. 'That's five for you, plus ...'

'Three for me,' Jack said.

'I got that,' Andy sounded indignant. 'Good job my birthday's coming up, otherwise I'd have to file for bankruptcy.'

Jack unbuckled his seat belt. Squeezing past Rob, he headed for the front of the coach. Grabbing some sheets of paper from Tim, he handed them back.

'Can we have some music?' he said to the driver.

The coach driver checked his rear-view mirror, suddenly registering that any number of boys were milling about at the back of his coach.

'That lot's supposed to be belted in,' he muttered. 'I'll get it in the neck if anyone gets hurt. What are they doing, anyway?'

Jack perched on the seat next to him, fascinated by the view through the huge windscreen. The motorway was busy with evening traffic and a continuous stream of vehicles swished past.

'It's the sweepstake. We have to choose our dream team for the

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Morocco trip. Whoever gets closest wins the lot, or a share if there's a draw – obviously.'

'Nice.' The driver leaned forward sliding a tape into the machine. 'But tell that lot to sit down, all right?'

Jack wandered back down the coach noticing that Mr Slinger, their new assistant coach, had woken up.

'I suppose you wouldn't like to put us out of our misery and tell us the team for the trip?'

Mr Slinger yawned sleepily. 'Not a chance. You've been a member of this squad, Jack, long enough to know that Peter Barnabus would have my guts for garters, if I did.'

'Oh go on, Slingshot,' a voice from nearby called.

Mr Slinger twisted sideways peering between the neck rests. 'Slingshot? Is that what I'm reduced to?'

'It's your new nickname, sir,' Leonard said from the row behind. 'We decided on it last night. It's a ... it's a ...'

'Compliment?' Mr Slinger suggested hopefully.

'Yes, sir.' Leonard wagged his head up and down eagerly. 'We gave it to you because you hit the baseball out of the field.'

Mr Slinger laughed. 'You forgot to mention the bit about the ball smashing through the windscreen of a car, or were you being polite?'

'Er ...'

'He forgot,' Jack came to his team-mate's rescue. 'And Tim's new name is Tiger.' Mr Slinger appeared puzzled. 'Tiger ... Woods,' Jack explained, 'because he drove the golf ball furthest.'

'I see-e.'

'But Leonard's still a nerd,' a voice shouted.

'That's not fair,' Andy called out, overhearing. 'Leonard's not half-bad now.'

Leonard beamed.

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'I deeply regret not attending your midnight feast, choosing instead to go to bed like a sensible person,' said Mr Slinger. 'Think what I missed.'

'We'll invite you again next year, sir,' Jack said cheekily.

'And we're thinking of changing Andy's name to Porcupine,' Tim called.

'Why?'

'Der,' chorused half-a-dozen anonymous voices.

Mr Slinger grinned good-humouredly. 'Listen you lot. I may have lost a few brain cells with age but my ball-kicking skills are still superior to yours – so enough of the cheek.'

'Because anyone *that good in goal*, will definitely be a thorn in the other team's side,' Tim said.

'Or a nail in their coffin,' Rob shouted.

'Right, got it. Any other changes I need to know about?'

'Not really,' Jack shook his head.

'I say, sir, *sir*?' Petey leapt up in his seat, waving his arm to attract their coach's attention. 'Did they tell you, we used to have a prince in our team – Saleem.'

'A real Prince, seriously, Petey?'

Rob, overhearing, put down the paper he'd been scribbling his choice of names on. 'Great striker he was too, sir. Only little, but could he run! Went like the clappers.'

'So why did he quit the team?'

'Went back home,' Petey said.

Petey, whose real name was Roger Prentice, had earned his nickname because of his outrageous hairstyles; his current version having a wide, blue and maroon stripe across the back with a deep orange quiff – like some rare species of parrot.

'We never knew Saleem was a prince till after. The club did but they never let on. Jack said he wanted to be treated like one of the

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lads. Came from some place strange, he did.' Petey scratched his head, his quiff wobbling like a jelly. 'Sultana – that's it.'

'*Sudana, you wally.* I must have told you a million times,' Jack snorted with laughter. 'It's one of those kingdoms in the Sudan,' he said to Mr Slinger.

'Wish he was still here. I'm the only Asian left in the team now,' Bram broke in.

'How come you're from Asia, all of a sudden?' Gary popped his head back up. 'And there's me thinking you're Ebrahim Patel who lives next door, and was born in Selly Oak hospital – like me.' He raised his voice slightly. 'I say, sir, when I was born – two days after Bram – mum says he took one look at my black face and screamed blue murder.'

'*No way,*' Bram shouted over the laughter. 'Me mum says it was the other way round. When you saw *my* face, you stopped breathing altogether and turned blue. Besides, you're like me,' he said reverting to his original argument. 'You come from St. Kitts. That makes you West Indian.'

'Honestly, Bram, you really are a prize git. My *family* came from St Kitts. I was born in England – that makes me English.'

'Well, I'm still Indian,' Bram said a mulish expression on his face.

'Try living there then,' Gary scowled at his friend. 'Your Brummy accent's that strong – they'll need to use a dictionary if you tell them good morning.'

Howls of laughter swept over the group of boys.

'Are they always like this?' Mr Slinger asked.

'Yep,' Jack grinned. 'But don't try insulting Bram – only Gary's allowed to do that, and he's pretty handy with his fists. Mrs Patel told us on their second day in reception – that's the first year of primary – some kid couldn't remember Ebrahim, and called him *hymn-book* instead. Next thing Gary was belting him over the head with his book bag, screaming: *you leave him alone, Bram's my friend.*'

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Mr Slinger screwed up his face.

‘They were only little, sir,’ Jack explained patiently. ‘Besides, Gary couldn’t pronounce his name either – so he’s been Bram ever since. Actually, sir, is it true that Barney has a letter on file from their mums, begging that you either choose both of them for the team or neither?’

Mr Slinger eyed the warring boys with new interest. ‘I’ll look,’ he said, his eyes twinkling.

‘Bram’s right. It’s a pity we lost Saleem,’ Rob confided as Jack sat down again. ‘The team’s a bit light this year.’ He checked the names on his list. ‘We could have done with him.’

Jack had never dared tell anyone of his visit to the little kingdom or how he had managed to rescue Saleem from his uncle, the evil Prince Saladin – not even Andy and Rob, his best mates. *They wouldn’t have believed him anyway, who would?*

He glanced sideways at Rob, busily munching a pack of crisps, imagining his friend’s face if he came out with the words, *You’ll never guess where I went at Christmas – to Sudana to visit Saleem. Only I didn’t go by plane – I went by camel.*

Of course, he’d have to explain how, in daylight, the camel was simply a wooden ornament, and it was only at night that it came alive. Then it could talk, fly, and walk through walls as if they were made of butter. The camel was also totally terrific, despite being argumentative and bad-tempered most of the time.

He had also met the camel’s master, a merchant called Jacob. Except, he wasn’t a merchant at all. He was a sorcerer, and a real-scary one too, who could conjure armies of fighting men out of shadows. Unbelievably weird, he always behaved in a highly suspicious manner, which left Jack wondering how he could possibly be one of the good guys – that is, until he met up with the real bad guys. Of course, having never met a sorcerer, or indeed heard of anyone who had, Jack

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couldn't say if being weird was part of the job description or not.

Still, if he came out with all that, at best Rob would howl with laughter telling him to pull the other one; at worst, he would say Jack was losing his marbles or had dreamt it. And, after all this time, Jack was no longer sure it wasn't a dream.

'*Jack?*' Andy hissed.

'What?' Jack rubbed at the glass in the window, where his breath had fogged it, catching a glimpse of his reflection with its trade-mark haircut, fair and spiky, although slightly longer than it had been a few months back.

'I can only think of fourteen names.'

Rob leaned back and snatched the piece of paper Andy had stuck through the gap.

'Honestly, Andy,' he grumbled. 'How can you expect Tim to work this little lot out? It looks like a dyslexic hedgehog wrote it, using one of its quills instead of a pen.'

'I tried, all right.'

Rob handed Jack the scruffy piece of paper, a series of holes blasted in it where Andy's pencil had scribbled names out and re-written them. Sharing the sheet between them, both boys ran a finger down the list counting.

'You left your own name out, you wally,' Rob said finally. Taking Jack's pen, he printed it on the bottom of the list.

'Pass this down,' Rob kicked the seat in front and a hand appeared. Placing their three sheets in it, the boys watched them pass from row to row until they reached Tim.

Mr Slinger stood up, hurriedly gripping the overhead rack as the driver leaned on the brakes. 'About twenty-minutes to go,' he called, regaining his balance. 'So – make sure you've got everything. Wastepaper, crisp packets, drink cartons – *and don't forget the chewing gum.*' He jerked his thumb behind him. 'Everything in the black bag

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hanging at the front of the coach, please. Now, if I'm correct you're all back to school ...when ...Thursday?

'Don't remind us, sir,' Tyrone shouted.

'Okay. So then training as normal next Monday.' Talking broke out. '*By which time*,' he continued loudly, 'letters should have reached you about the trip.' Hands flew into the air. '*Wait!* Everyone gets a letter – good news or bad. If it hasn't arrived, check the board when you come in.'

The coach slowed, approaching the narrow slip road off the motorway. It swung on to the dual-carriageway heading into the centre of the city, and the dropping-off point outside Aston Villa Football Club.

Jack squinted at the clock on the panel above Gary and Bram. If a bus came along straight away, he'd be home in time for tea.

Chapter Two

An Eagerly Awaited Letter

Slightly later than usual on Monday morning and half-asleep, Jack dragged himself downstairs, a pile of books nestling under one arm. The first two days of the new school term had been ghastly, their year-eight teachers repeatedly delivering the same message – with exams less than two months away, school had just got serious.

Jack's mobile gurgled into life. Clutching the books to his chest, he was searching for it in his jacket pocket when the letter box clicked open and a flood of envelopes shot noisily through the slot. Startled, the books slid from under his arm and crashed down the stairs, landing in a heap at the bottom. Ignoring them, Jack hastily pressed the button on his mobile displaying a text from Andy.

“do u no if u r in the team? i am.”

Leaving his school books where they had fallen, Jack grabbed the letters and, holding them at arms length as if they were a pair of socks he'd worn for a week, tore into the kitchen.

His mother was eating toast and marmalade, and reading the newspaper; his younger sister, Lucy, still upstairs getting ready for school. Jack dumped the letters on the table.

‘Andy's in,’ he announced waving his phone in her face.

She pushed his hand away. ‘But you expected that, Jack. You must have told me, at least a hundred times over the past few days, what a brilliant goal-keeper he is.’

‘I know,’ he said through gritted teeth. ‘But that means there's only fourteen places left and there's *thirty* of us wanting them.’

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Folding her newspaper, Mrs Burnside flicked through the mail, separating the glossy advertising leaflets for recycling. Jack couldn't bear to look. He hid behind the cereal box, pretending to read the writing on the side of the packet – the letters blurring and running into one another.

'Hurry up!' he groaned.

'It's here, Jack,' she said after a long silence. She held up a white envelope, the club's logo embossed on it.

Jack reached out with trembling fingers, his hazel eyes miserable-looking. 'But what if it says no?'

His mother patted his hand in a comforting manner. 'Then it says *no*. But you're not going to find out unless you open it, are you?'

Anxiously, Jack slit open the envelope addressed to: *Jack Burnside, 137 Greenhill Road, Quinton, Birmingham*. The single-sheet had been typed on the club's letterhead. Feeling sick, he skimmed over the first paragraph.

'Mu-um!' He leapt to his feet knocking the pile of envelopes off the table. '*I'm in! I'm in! I'm in!*' Grabbing his mother by the waist, he whirled her round the kitchen.

'That's fantastic, Jack,' she panted when eventually he let her go. Hugging her side, she leaned against the table to get her breath back. '*Well done!* When do you go?'

Jack quickly re-read the letter. 'Er ... Tuesday evening. We fly back the following ... Tuesday morning. Wow! We miss a whole week of school. *Fabulous!*' he beamed. Remembering it was already Monday, he quickly added, 'Not this Tuesday though – *next Tuesday!*'

'Thank goodness for that. Well, I'm off to phone Dad to give him the good news. I told him I thought you'd make it.'

Jack's dad, an engineer, worked overseas with an oil-exploration company, and only managed a trip back to England every six months

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or so. At first Jack had missed him dreadfully. They both loved football and always went to watch whenever Aston Villa was playing at home.

‘How is he?’ Jack tore his eyes away from the letter, the magic word Morocco pulsating like the lights of a disco, conjuring up images of fame and fortune.

‘He’s fine, misses us of course. Says it’s no longer cold at night in the Sudan. Apparently, it’s hot all the time – night and day.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ Jack spoke without thinking.

‘What do you mean, *you know*? Come on, Jack Burnside, what have you been up to?’

Jack smiled innocently. If his mum knew of his Christmas adventure, she’d have kittens. ‘Looked it up on the Internet,’ he lied.

‘Wow, you have been busy. First football – and now the Internet. I shall have to watch you,’ his mother teased. ‘*And bring your washing down*. If this weather carries on,’ she pointed to the rain-streaked windows, ‘it’ll never be dry in time.’

* * *

As Peter Barnabus had predicted, half the squad arrived on Monday night sporting sappy smiles and spent the entire briefing session patting one another on the back. The remainder wore expressions of doom and gloom, as if the world had ended and they had only just heard about it.

Barney had been coach to the junior squad at Aston Villa for so many years that even dads remembered him, although twenty years ago he had possessed more hair and less of a scowl. As usual, he tackled the subject head-on.

‘I expect some of you are feeling pretty miserable right now,’ he said, ‘except for Brendan, who’s been selected as reserve. He’s busy

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praying that one of the team catches a mysterious illness before next week, so he can take their place.'

The joke fell flat, greeted by a mournful shuffling of feet.

'Remember lads, the side I've chosen is for this trip only. It doesn't make the slightest difference to your future. All it means is, that today – at this moment – there are fourteen boys who are fitter and happen to be playing better than some of you others. So get over your disappointment – and go out there determined to show me I was *wrong* not to choose you.'

Barney then directed his attention to the other half of the team – ignoring their beams of delight.

'You lot, don't go thinking this is a holiday. In a minute we start training and I shall expect one-hundred percent from every man in this squad. And remember, when you go abroad you are ambassadors for the club – so mind your language. Right! I'll hand you over to Tim.'

Flummoxed at having to stand up and address the team, Tim cast around for help. Not seeing any he blurted out, 'It's the result of the sweepstake – OK. Only one winner – that's Andy.'

Mouths fell open with astonishment. The names of boys most likely to win had included Tim and Jack, but definitely not Andy.

Andy beamed, his face beetroot red.

'He was the only one that got all the names right – including ...' Getting into the swing of his speech, Tim paused for dramatic effect, 'Including selecting Marco for the team.'

Heads snapped round searching for Marco, who had hidden himself at the back. Chosen as striker for the Midlands Cup squad, he normally played in the under-thirteen group, and few of the older boys knew him.

'But that's not fair,' Petey burst out indignantly. 'He wasn't even at camp.'

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‘Only because he was on holiday in Italy with his family,’ Tim said.

‘Did *you* know that?’ Gary accused.

Tim shook his head. ‘Here you are, Andy.’ He held up a bulging plastic coin-bag.

‘Good job Andy doesn’t have to share it then,’ Rob called out. ‘He’s got a list of creditors as long as your arm. And, in case you’re wondering, I’m first in line.’

Andy grinned. ‘Right ho! Thanks – never expected it.’ He waved the coin-bag in the air, his eyes glowing with delight. ‘Pay you all at the end.’

‘How could you think of Marco and not tell Rob and me?’ Jack grumbled, on the way back to the dressing room at the end of the session.

‘You saw my list.’ Andy took off his gloves, slapping them against his thigh to remove any loose dirt.

‘Yeah, but we couldn’t read your writing,’ Rob complained.

‘That’s your problem, nothing to do with me.’

‘But why him?’ Jack pursued his grievance.

‘I figured the team needed another striker.’

Startled Rob and Jack stopped dead.

‘Come off it, you two.’ Andy grinned, his rotund face glistening with sweat after their energetic training session. ‘Wha’d’ye think I do when the ball’s wandering around at the top end of the pitch? Anyway Bram’s happier playing left wing – and you never play well with Leonard, so there’s no point choosing him.’

‘Is it that obvious?’ Jack said bitterly.

‘Only if someone guesses you don’t normally go around fouling your own side.’

‘I didn’t,’ Jack protested. ‘I slipped. In any case, it’s not my fault if the Nerd wants to hog the ball.’

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‘Anyway,’ Andy shrugged. ‘So that left you and someone else as striker. I guessed Marco.’

Rob patted him on the back. ‘You’d better watch all this thinking, Andy, you’ll end up as captain if you’re not careful.’