





For my sister, Lucy Nokes

## **The story so far...**

ROY RACE IS sixteen, brilliant at football – and newly signed as a professional footballer for his local club, Melchester Rovers.

It hasn't been easy, though.

First, Roy missed out on being scouted for Rovers, as he was at home caring for his disabled dad.

However, with a little encouragement from his dad, he gatecrashed the Melchester Rovers trials anyway, and played well enough to convince youth coach Johnny Dexter to sign him up for the team.

Then, disaster struck: Rovers – currently at the bottom of League Two and with no money in the bank – were forced to sell all their players. Just like that, Roy and the rest of the youth squad were the first team, and playing in the real football league!

Incredibly, the youngsters made the third round of the FA Cup, where they faced local rivals Tynecaster – a team with billions in the bank, superstars on the pitch, and Roy's hero Hugo up front!

Rovers played brilliantly in the cup game, with Roy scoring an incredible goal... but it wasn't enough. Rovers lost, but they proved they were good enough to come close to beating the best team in the world.

And suddenly, everyone knows the name Roy Race, and what he's capable of...





THE SECOND HE heard the final whistle Roy Race slumped to the ground and closed his eyes.

He had nothing left.

All of the adrenaline and effort he had put into ninety minutes of FA Cup third round football was spent. Above the sound of the blood thumping through his brain, Roy could hear the noise of the home crowd cheering and chanting a name.

‘HUGO! HUGO! HUGO!’

Tynecaster United’s goal machine, Hugo, the most expensive footballer in the world,

had scored the winning goal with the last kick of the game, consigning Roy and his Melchester Rovers teammates to defeat.

How, Roy wondered, would it feel to have scored the winner himself?

He had been so close.

It could have happened.

It *should* have happened.



There had been a minute to go, the score one-all. Melchester Rovers, from lowly League Two, had given it everything. Roy had scored his team's goal, a spectacular left foot volley. But they needed another to win.

Tynecaster had conceded possession. Now a long ball from the Melchester keeper Gordon Stewart was arching through the evening sky. It bounced hard, spinning freakishly over the head of the Tynecaster and England centre back James Campbell to land at the feet of Roy Race.

Roy was onto it, a flash of short blond hair, using all of his outrageous sixteen-year-old pace to beat the panic-striker defender.

First touch to take Campbell out of the game.

Second touch to control the ball.

Then Roy hit it. But, not before he'd begun to lose his balance. Stumbling to the

ground he watched the ball cannon off the foot of the post and bounce to the feet of another Tynecaster defender.

The rest was history.

The rest would be read about on the backs of millions of newspapers and watched on a billion electronic devices around the world.

Campbell taking the ball out of the Tynecaster penalty area and into the Melchester Rovers half. The pass to the feet of Hugo. And Hugo's devastating goal that snuffed out what would have been one of the biggest cup shocks in football history.

Roy shuddered, still on the ground, eyes screwed tight. *What if?* he thought. *What if I'd scored and not hit the post? What if we'd won 2-1? What if...*

'The striker for Melchester Rovers?'

Someone was standing next to Roy. He opened his eyes and looked up.

‘Swap?’ the man asked, standing over Roy, holding out a Tynecaster United shirt.

It was Hugo. Medium height, short dark hair, muscular.

‘I would like to own the shirt of the man who scored that goal,’ the world’s most expensive player said.

Roy stood up. Overwhelmed, he automatically pulled off his shirt, still hearing the man’s name being chanted.

*HUGO! HUGO! HUGO!*

Then Roy remembered his dad. Danny Race, who was never out of a Rovers shirt, and too ill to watch Roy make his full debut. This shirt was for his dad.

‘Uh... no offence,’ Roy said. ‘I’m going to get this framed for my dad. Thank you, though.’

Roy felt terrible, turning down his footballing hero.

‘I understand,’ Hugo said, putting a thumb up, smiling broadly. ‘I will see you again, Roy Race. Be lucky.’

Roy was stunned. Had that really just happened? Hugo knowing his name. Hugo asking him for his shirt because of the goal he’d scored. What weird world was he living in for that to happen? And to him?

‘Oi! Race! All of you! Over here. Now.’

Roy turned to see the colossal figure of the Rovers first team coach, Johnny Dexter, herding the Melchester Rovers players to the far end of the pitch, where one stand was full of fans wearing red and yellow, the rest of the stadium deserted. Roy grinned as a wave of noise from the Rovers fans hit him. Applause. Chanting. Whistling.

‘I’m an idiot,’ Roy said to himself. ‘This isn’t about me: it’s about Melchester Rovers, the club, the fans...’

Roy jogged with the other players, Johnny Dexter and the club manager, Kevin ‘Mighty’ Mouse, down to where the Rovers faithful packed out the away end, and were doing their best to drown out the sound of Hugo’s name – which was somehow still being chanted.

‘HUGO. HUGO. HUGO.’

Lofty Peak, Melchester’s giant central defender, put his arm round Roy as they walked to thank the away fans.

‘It’s recorded,’ Lofty told Roy.

‘What?’

‘All that Hugo-Hugo-Hugo. Look, there’s no Tynecaster fans left in the ground. That noise: it’s coming from the speakers.’

Roy stared around himself and knew that Lofty was right. Dozens of speakers were booming out the name of Hugo, even though all the Tynecaster supporters were in the car park or already on the ring road home.

Roy couldn't stop himself laughing as he and his team mates went to shake the hands of some of the fans who'd come to support them. He felt good. He knew that – even though they had lost today – he and his Melchester Rovers teammates were at the start of a very exciting journey.



‘YOU DIDN’T NEED to give me a lift home, Coach,’ Roy said, looking up from his phone as the battered old Melchester Rovers minibus laboured up the steep hill lined with small terraced houses. ‘I could have walked.’

‘I did have to, actually,’ said Johnny Dexter, frowning. ‘We don’t want you walking the streets tonight. I wanted to warn you first.’

‘Warn me? About what?’

‘Fame, lad.’

Roy scratched his head. ‘Eh?’

Johnny Dexter took a deep breath, then explained.

‘This afternoon you scored a remarkable goal against the best team in Europe. Football fans in two hundred countries saw you having a chat with Hugo. Everyone in Melchester knows your name now. That means you’re famous. A famous young footballer. That means things are about to be very different. Some people will want to get close to you. If you carry on gawping at your phone like that, seeing what people are saying about you, you won’t last long, lad. Social media is a cruel world.’

‘How did you know I was...’

‘I know, Race. I know everything. And, seriously, if you want praise and criticism, you’ll get all you need from me. That goal will change you. There is no doubt it will change you. Either for the better – or worse. It’s up to me to make sure it’s for the better. And my first job is to deliver you safely to that woman right there.’

The minibus had stopped. Johnny Dexter was pointing through the passenger window. Roy turned to peer out of the window to see a woman standing on the doorstep, a tea towel slung over her shoulder, her mid-length blonde hair tied back.

‘My mum?’

‘Your mum,’ Dexter cautioned. ‘And above and beyond everything I’ve said about becoming a footballer, your bottom line is to do everything your mum says. You might think you’re flying in the next few weeks. She’ll be doing her best to keep your feet on the ground. So you listen to her. First, second and third. Understood?’

Roy nodded and grabbed his kitbag and a plastic bag off the floor. ‘Thanks for the lift, Coach.’

‘No problem. And Race?’

‘Coach?’

‘Get some sleep, some rest and eat well. And take your mind off that cup tie we just lost. We need to concentrate on the league now. We play Weston Villa on Sunday. If we lose that as well, you might as well hang up your boots.’

ROY TRUDGED SLOWLY to the front gate of his mum and dad’s terraced house, legs still stiff from his efforts on the pitch. But, even though Rovers had lost, he was smiling. It was hard to believe what had happened to him recently.

It had been so fast. Passing his trial for the team he and his dad worshipped, Melchester Rovers. Being offered youth terms. The whole first team being released, meaning the youth team became the first team. Including Roy. Then his debut, his first goal, the cup

tie on national TV. And scoring in that too, wearing the shirt he and his dad had loved all their lives.

He grasped the plastic bag tighter as his mum hugged him on the doorstep.

‘I’m sorry we couldn’t be there, love.’

HOME LOOKED SMALLER to Roy that evening. He’d spent the day at Tynecaster’s Tayir Stadium where every room was enormous. Even the away dressing rooms had been bigger than all the rooms in Roy’s house put together.

Roy allowed himself to be hugged by his mum, then went through to his dad in the front room, wheelchair crammed between the sofa, an armchair and the TV. Dad looked tired and thin like he always did these days, but he was smiling.

Rocky, Roy's fourteen-year-old sister, was on the armchair next to Dad, dark hair to match the dark expression on her face as she stared fiercely at the TV, not acknowledging her brother in the slightest.

Dad raised his right hand to give Roy the thumbs up. Roy went over to him, knelt down and hugged him.



‘I got you something.’ Roy put the plastic bag on his dad’s knee.

Dad used his one good arm to tip the contents of the bag out. Roy’s matchday shirt, a number nine on the back.

‘Oh my God!’ Rocky gagged. ‘It stinks. Bag it up. Or bury it. Please.’

Roy heard Mum laugh from the doorway, then saw a smile playing on Dad’s mouth. He wasn’t sure if it was the shirt that had made Dad smile or Rocky’s joke. But it didn’t matter. Roy’s dad had been ill for months. After an operation that had gone wrong, he was now half-paralysed and unable to speak more than a word or two a week. So any smile on his dad’s face was a *real* smile – and that was something to feel happy about.

Dad studied the shirt, looked into Roy’s eyes, then held it firmly to his chest.

Roy didn't need his dad's words.

'I'll get it framed...' Roy managed to say before he found he couldn't speak either.

'Come on,' Mum stepped in. 'Dinner's ready. You set the table, Roy.'

Roy noticed Rocky put her feet up over the side of the armchair and sigh.

'Yeah, Roy,' she echoed. 'Set the table.'

'Can't Rocky do it?' Roy complained. 'I've just...'

'You've just what?' Mum snapped. 'Rocky's got a maths exam tomorrow. She needs to have a chilled evening.'

Roy was going to say *I've just played in the FA Cup and scored against the best team in Europe*, but he remembered what Johnny Dexter had said to him in the minibus. He had to do what his mum told him to do. That was the first rule. Even if his sister *was* agitating for a fight.

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THEY SAT AT the small kitchen table and ate dinner. Half way into the meal, one sausage and a bit of mash and peas left on Roy's plate, Mum asked him to fill the water jug.

Roy did as he was asked and stood up to go to the sink. When he returned he saw that half his sausage was missing. He looked furiously at his sister. She was focussed on her meal, smirking, spearing peas with her fork.

Roy turned to his dad. Dad was sniggering.

Mum sighed. 'You three. Please. You exhaust me. What is it? What now?'

'Rocky's taken half my sausage,' Roy growled.

'Not true,' Rocky said.

'She did.' Roy heard his voice pitch high.

'Roy. Just calm down,' Mum said. 'You're

so hyper. You need to come back down to earth. Now, who's doing what this week?'

'School maths test Monday. Football training with Sowerby on Tuesday,' Rocky replied.

'Roy?' Mum asked.

'She took half my sausage,' Roy repeated, outraged.

'I took three-fifths of your sausage, actually,' Rocky boasted.

'Your week,' Mum said sternly. 'I want to hear about your week. Not sausage fractions.'

Roy knew he was beaten. And, anyway, he had another battle to fight. 'I... er... tomorrow I might take the day off college,' he said. 'Do a bit of recovery.'

'Haven't you got any classes at college tomorrow, Roy?' Mum asked.

'I have, but...'

‘Then college it is,’ Mum glanced at Rocky. ‘Oh... and please will you take your sister to training at Sowerby on Tuesday.’

‘Sure,’ Roy said, hoping she’d forget college tomorrow.

Roy knew why Mum wanted him to take his sister. It was Rocky’s first time with a new football team. Roy had set Rocky up with a girl from college who was in a girls’ team. Ffion, her name was.

During a friendly moment Rocky had told him that she needed him to do the things their dad used to do for her. Like find a football team. Pick her up from places after dark. Stuff like that. So Roy was determined to step in and do what his dad couldn’t.

As for Ffion, Roy didn’t know her surname. Not yet — but he intended to find out. He remembered the three times he’d spoken to her. Twice at college. Once on the

Moor. Roy smiled, then he looked up from what was left of his sausage, wondering why the room had gone quiet.

He saw his mum and his sister smirking. He glanced across the table at Dad, who shrugged his right shoulder. Roy narrowed his eyes and frowned.

What were they so amused by? Whatever! That wasn't his problem. *His* problem was whether he should do what his mum said and go to college the next day.

Or not.