



A HARD BRIGHT moon illuminated the scene. Two figures moved stealthily, concealed by the black shadow of a long wooden fence, not far from an ageing football stadium. Its hollow, skeletal stands made strange silhouettes against the midnight sky.

It was quiet.

Quiet and late.

The sole witness to the two intruders was a lone vixen, crouching on a nearby canal bank, unused to humans disturbing her midnight world.

Both of the figures looked like young

men, athletic physiques, their heads and faces obscured. One wore a grey beanie hat, the other a black scarf covering his face. You could tell – from their body language – that they were nervous. Maybe even having second thoughts about what they were about to do.

Look closer at the eyes of one and the mouth of the other and you might recognise the two young men. A square jaw. A determined expression. A flop of blonde hair. A pair of piercing blue eyes.

Our two intruders are no delinquents. Nor are they petty thieves or opportunist burglars, making money stealing other people's possessions.

They are professional footballers.

Paco Juan Goytisolo Diaz.

And Roy Daniel Race.

'This cannot be a good idea,' Paco whispered urgently.



‘No,’ Roy replied in a low almost inaudible voice. ‘It probably isn’t.’

As Roy spoke, something white and ghostly caught Roy’s eye, swooping silently through the row of trees alongside the canal. A barn owl. Roy saw it and smiled faintly. It

reminded him of when his dad would take him and his sister on late night nature walks. When he was younger; when his dad was a big strong man and Roy was a boy. But Roy was not a child anymore. And his dad was not such a big strong man.

Times had changed.

‘This is your plan?’ Paco went on. ‘Breaking and entering? I would rather go to Germany on loan than go to prison, Roy Race.’

Roy had questioned what they were about to do a hundred times. Breaking? And entering? Into Mel Park?

It was illegal.

It was immoral.

It was irresponsible.

But did that mean it was the wrong thing to do? Because if this worked, then Roy and Paco’s world, Melchester Rovers’ world...

even the *whole* world would be a better place.

Roy coughed quietly before he said to Paco what he had said to himself over and over.

‘The media reports say that the final contracts for our transfers have gone missing. Those contracts *have* to be in Cleaver’s office. Along with, I’ll bet, proof of all sorts of dodgy stuff. If we can get in there we can, I dunno, maybe prove to the league that Rovers have done nothing wrong? Maybe we can play again!’

Paco nodded. He knew Roy was right. But that didn’t stop him being frightened.

Then – as sudden as the owl-swoop before – they both heard a noise. The crunch of stones under a boot. Roy and Paco stood rigid, peering into the shadows.

Had they given themselves away with

their careless whispering? Were they no longer alone?

A flick of gravel against the wooden fence followed. Roy took a quick intake of breath. There *was* someone there, coming at them from the dark.

Then a voice called out: 'Idiots!'