

## ***BAD NEWS***

Kofi tried to identify every change of landscape he saw from the plane.

He recognized the edge of the Sahara Desert. Where the land changed from the lush greens and browns of Ghana to a uniform yellow. Sand. It was a dramatic difference. And it went on.

He wasn't sure, but he may have fallen asleep over the desert, because it passed quickly. Quicker than he had expected to cross what he understood was such a vast expanse.

Then he saw mountains, then sea. And then land. And he knew the land was Europe. Spain probably.

The southerly tip.

He gazed down at the sea. This sea was famous. Many people in Ghana talked about passing over it. In small boats at night. To Italy. On to England or Germany. He wondered if there were any Ghanaians on the water now. Or waiting at its edge to sail tonight. Going in search of work. Of money. Of a better life. Of something to send home.

And here he was flying with a passport and a ticket to a job that would pay him more than any of those down there on the sea would earn in their lives. Put together.

That was the point in the flight when nerves began to get the better of Kofi. That was when he thought of his mother.

What would she be doing now?

Would she be making a meal for the rest of his family?

Would she be looking out towards the city? Or watching aeroplanes?

Would she be thinking about him? About how he was getting on?

And he knew what he was feeling.

Homesick.

But not just homesick. Frightened too. He was about to go to a continent that was very different from his own. Where everyone had money. Where footballers like Michael Essien and Cristiano Ronaldo walked the streets.

Then – over what Kofi thought must be France –

the plane began to descend. And he knew that in less than an hour he too would be walking the streets of Europe.

Kofi was very nervous when, at the airport, he approached passport control. His mother's cousin had warned him that it would not be easy. That he must remain calm. And proud of who he was. A Ghanaian. A successful man.

'They are very careful about people coming in from Africa and other countries,' Raphael had said. 'They check your papers. They look you up on their computers. They want to make you feel that you do not belong among them.'

It was not as bad as Kofi thought it would be. He

expected the police to be asking him questions. But it was just a man behind a glass screen. And he had been very polite.

'What are you coming to the country for?'

'To play football,' Kofi had said. 'For City FC.'

The man had smiled then, briefly.

'Where will you be staying?'

'With Jonathan Shearer. My agent. He is here ahead of me. Then I will buy a house to live in.'

'How long do you intend to stay?'

The questions had gone on for five minutes at most. Kofi could feel other people watching him. Some of the airport staff and passengers from the plane. He tried to feel proud, like his mother's cousin had told him to. But a part of him felt

uncomfortable. To be asked so many questions. As if he didn't belong.

Out in the airport, free from any more barriers, the only strange thing for Kofi was all the white faces. Only one person in every ten was black. The rest were white. Kofi had seen white people before. But you only ever saw one or two at a time. Never hundreds of them.

It made him feel uneasy somehow. Conscious that he was black.

When they had spoken in Ghana, Jonathan Shearer told Kofi that he would meet him – with a limousine car – at the airport. To take him to a hotel suite he had booked for him. He said that Kofi should come out of the arrivals part of the airport

and he would see him.

Shearer told him that he would get there in good time. That he would be sure he was not late.

But when Kofi came out of arrivals he saw no Jonathan Shearer. Only a forest of people, some holding signs with names on them: STERLAND, FAIRCLOUGH, WHITE, DORIGO.

Kofi waited next to a drinks vending machine. He noted the time: 17.54.

He looked around him, at the new world he found himself in. Apart from the white faces, he was most struck by the clothes people wore. Some were obviously very rich. Very fat. Dressed in woollen coats. But Kofi did not feel cold. It was the same temperature here as it had been in the airport in

Accra and in the plane.

What else was new?

The adverts on the walls. All behind glass cases.

The covers of newspapers. Nothing like at home.

There were shops selling food and drink.

McDonald's. He had heard of McDonald's, but never had their food.

Lots of colour. Lots of light.

He was taking in his new world.

Time passed.

Kofi had been trying not to look at the clock. But he couldn't help himself.

Now it was 18.21.

Where *was* Jonathan Shearer?

Kofi wondered what would happen to him if the

agent never came. If he was left here in England with no ticket to go home. With no money. But he pushed the thoughts away. There was no reason to make up such terrible endings like that. Shearer had been delayed. That was all.

At 18.54 Kofi drew the mobile phone that Raphael had given him out of his pocket. He had been here an hour. He would call Jonathan Shearer. Find out what the new arrangements were.

He keyed in the number: 07375 842312. A UK number.

At first there was no sound. Then it began to ring.

Once. Twice. Three times. Then a click.

'Jonathan Shearer.' A low, confident voice.

'Mr Shearer,' Kofi said, filled with happiness to

hear his agent's voice, 'it is Kofi. I am in England. Waiting at the airport.'

'Kofi?'

That was all Shearer said. Just his name. Then silence again.

'Mr Shearer?'

'Kofi?'

'Yes?'

'I have bad news.'

Kofi felt his legs go weak. As if he had just seen a snake in the grass, too late.

'City have pulled out,' Shearer said. 'I'm sorry. They no longer require a winger. You need to go home.'

'But, Mr Shearer ...' Kofi started talking. He

hoped that if he kept talking it would not be true, that he could change things. 'I am here. I have no money to go home. No ticket. I will play well for them. I will give them everything. I ... Mr Shearer?'

The line was dead. A high-pitch squeal in Kofi's ears.

Kofi redialled. Jonathan Shearer had been cut off. He must have been about to say he had made a mistake. There was no way he would have brought Kofi to Europe unless he had a place in the City team.

But when he phoned again there was no reply. Just the high-pitch squeal again.

Kofi rang every five minutes. For an hour. Each time trying to breathe deeply. To overcome his



panic.

But each time it was the same noise.

And Kofi realized that he was on his own in a strange country, with nothing.

He sat on the floor. His legs had finally gone beneath him. And although he tried to think about what was happening to him and what he should do next, he could not. His mind was frozen.