

**ME AND
AARON RAMSEY**

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Chapter 1

Between everything, it had been a difficult week. Thank God for football at weekends.

There was a tournament on that Saturday, and I love tournaments because they mean that you can watch *and* play footy all day, for the whole day, from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon. I'd been hoping that I'd make it into the first team this time, but it was the seconds again.

'Don't lose heart, Sam,' said Merv, the coach, when he saw me looking a bit down after he read out the teams. 'A bit of work on your passing, and you'll make the first team by the summer.'

I'd been working on my passing for months, I thought, and it didn't seem to be improving at all. But I didn't say anything, just nodded and gave a small smile. That's what football's like. You have to accept that it takes a lot of hard work to do something that looks easy.

At least Mo and I were on the same team. Mo's my best mate, and he's never in the first team – and he

doesn't care. He says he prefers to watch football than to play, but he comes to training and plays because all his mates do.

We were running laps around the pitch to warm up, half watching the other teams arriving and doing their stretches and stealing looks at one another, sizing up the competition, trying to work out who was going to be tricky to beat. The food van had just opened, and I could smell onions frying even though it was only ten in the morning.

'I'm starving,' Mo moaned. He's always eating, but is skinnier than anyone else I've ever met.

'Didn't you have breakfast?'

'Of course I did. Four Weetabix and toast. But the smell of those onions is making me think about burgers.'

See what I mean?

'Look,' I said, a few minutes later, short of breath after all that running. 'The Felin players have arrived.'

The team from Felin had won every tournament and championship since I could remember. Mo and I watched as they gathered in a ring around their coach. They were wearing red shirts with the logo of a local building company splashed across the chest, while every other team depended on cheap, coloured vests to tell the difference between one team and another.

‘You’d think they were playing in the FA Cup,’ sighed Mo, with a small smile. ‘And look at the coach!’

Their coach was a middle-aged man in an expensive tracksuit, and he was barking at the players with a face like the end of the world. Felin was notorious because of this man. He couldn’t have taken it more seriously if he’d been managing Wales against France in the finals of the Euros. I didn’t know him at all, but from what I’d heard no one had ever seen him smile, even though Felin were doing so well in every league. I wasn’t even sure if the smile muscles in his face were still working.

Our first game was against Caernarfon’s first team, and although they were good, we were better. I wasn’t anywhere near the ball when the only goal of the game was scored, but Mo got an assist, and I think I did okay as part of the defence.

Tournaments are way easier when you win your first game, and if you have supporters in the crowd. Dad was there, of course – he never missed a game – and Mum had said she’d come down for the finals after Mattie’s swimming lesson. But Dad never missed a second of play. He lived football. He wasn’t interested in anything else, not really.

He stood next to Divya, Mo’s mum. Unlike her husband, she was a massive football fan. Henry,

Mo's dad, had no interest at all, and when he did come down to see a game, he'd stand there watching everything with a slightly bewildered look on his face. But Divya was different. She was a tiny woman with a wide smile, but she turned into an absolute beast when she was watching footy.

'Why does she have to be so *loud?*' asked Mo when we were playing our third game. Divya had been screeching from the sidelines since the very start – *Come oooooon!* or *Get on it!* or even *What's the matter with you? Crush them!* The parents from the other teams sneaked looks at her, some of them smiling or smirking and some of them horrified. I liked Divya. She worked at the university, which was a respectable and important job according to Mum, but she never acted respectable or important around me.

Dad came over with a burger from the van for me during the lunch break.

'Ketchup, no onions,' he said, handing me the food, and although I knew that the burgers from the van tasted like damp cardboard I still ate it because I was starving. 'You're playing well, Sammy.'

'I haven't scored, though,' I replied, my mouth full.

'That's not what it's about, is it? It's about playing as a team.'

I nodded. I'd heard it all a thousand times before. It was something adults said to make kids feel better about being a bit rubbish at sports, although everyone knew all that mattered was scoring goals. Dad knew that better than anyone. He was one of Llanfor's top scorers when he was younger.

I knew exactly what was coming next. It was like a script he had.

'And don't be afraid of the other team. When you're in defence, go for them, Sam.'

I nodded again, even though I knew I'd never be as bold as he wanted me to be on the pitch.

One weird thing about being in a tournament is that our first and second team always come up against one another sooner or later. Of course, we're used to this – we do it at the end of every training session – but it still feels odd being properly in competition with one another. We're all friends off the pitch – well, maybe not friends, but we get on. But when you're playing against somebody you know well, you have to think of them in a slightly different way. You have to consider where their weak spots are, and how you can use what you know about them against them.

I think our team played better in that game than in any other that day. The first team felt they didn't really

have to try that hard, because they already knew they were better than us. And it made them a bit lazy.

I scored a goal!

Well ... technically, I scored a goal. Dad yelled *Yesssss!* from the sideline, and Mattie, who had arrived with Mum, celebrated so loudly that you would have thought I had more talent than Bale and Messi combined. The truth is, Mo kicked the ball at me that little bit too hard (that's his trouble – his left foot is, if anything, *too* powerful) and instead of receiving the ball and aiming for the goal I turned away as if someone had kicked a hand grenade in my direction. But the ball struck my leg, and somehow bounced off me and straight into the goal.

It was a fluke. But a goal is a goal.

If it had been us that won that game – us, and not the first team – we would have been through to the final game of the tournament, and we'd have played against Felin. That would have been quite something, because the second team never beats the first team. And I did think, just for a while, that it was going to happen because, after I scored, Dyl scored with an incredible goal from the halfway line, and the first team started getting twitchy. But I think that spurred them on to make more of an effort, because soon afterwards they were blasting goals into the net as if

they were cannons. It was 5-2 in the end, and we had no games left. The only thing left to do was to stay to watch the first team in the final.

‘You scored!’ said Mattie, clutching my leg. She was only four years old, and could be a bit embarrassing sometimes, but not today; I was too tired.

‘Well done, love,’ said Mum, with a weary smile, trying gently to prise Mattie off my leg. ‘Watch out! Sam’s all muddy!’

‘Nice one, Sammo,’ said Dad, and he actually looked proud too, not as if he were just saying it to be nice. ‘Not everyone could have scored from there.’ We both knew that even Mattie could have scored, and she might have actually got a better goal, but it was still nice to hear him say it.

Mo and I got a hotdog each to chew on as we watched the final between our first team and Y Felin, although we both knew what the result would be: Felin won – of course they did – 3-0, and it would have been four if the ref hadn’t given an offside when there wasn’t one. So neither of our teams won, but I’d been able to play football all day, and I’d scored a goal.

‘Well done, lads,’ Merv said, as we were all saying goodbye afterwards. ‘You tried your best, and you played well. Plenty of practice and we’ll beat them.’

Some of the others nodded, still disappointed, but proud that we'd come close to winning. 'I've printed off dates and places for our next few games, and I've emailed your parents too.' And he handed out flyers.

Mum was chatting to one of the parents at the other end of the pitch, so Merv gave Dad our flyer. I swallowed hard, watched Dad glance at the paper before folding it into tiny quarters and shoving it into his pocket. He didn't blush, but I did.

Nobody outside our home really knew the truth about my dad. It felt disloyal even to think about it. Merv was one of Dad's best mates, yet he didn't know.

Dad was really good at hiding it, you see.

'Off you go then!' Merv said, breaking my train of thought. 'See you all in training!'

All in all, it had been a good day.

We walked home with Divya and Mo, seeing as we lived on the same street. As we were leaving the football ground, a player from the Felin team passed us – he'd scored two of their goals, but for someone who'd done so well, he didn't look very happy. He was walking with a man – I guessed it was his dad – towards their shiny red four by four, and he'd changed his shirt from the Felin colours to a Juventus football shirt, with RAMSEY written on the back.

Ramsey. Aaron Ramsey. My favourite player in the world.

As the boy climbed into the car, the father barked, 'Don't get mud everywhere. I've only just had the car valeted.'

The boy completely ignored him and climbed into the car, his football boots caked in mud. As Mo and I passed, he looked at us from our heads right down to our trainers, and he smiled a cruel sort of smile. You'll know exactly what I mean when I say that. Some people can make a smile seem like an ugly, unkind gesture.

Mo swore under his breath, but I just turned away. I knew that the boy, whoever he was, wasn't worthy of wearing the shirt that was on his back, because Aaron Ramsey would never, ever smile at someone in that mean, horrible way.

That's when Divya first mentioned the trip.

'I've been thinking,' she said, walking alongside Mum and Dad. 'Wales are playing England in Cardiff in a few months. It's a friendly.'

'Oh yeah?' said Mum.

'I was thinking it might be nice to take the lads.'

Mo and I looked at one another, wide eyed. Seeing Wales play?! In Cardiff City Stadium?

'Oh, go on! Please please please!' I said immediately,

knowing I'd be getting on my parents' nerves but not being able to hold back. 'I've never seen Wales play! Please!'

Mum and Dad exchanged a glance, and I saw Mum raising her eyebrows a bit. I knew what that meant...

'Yessss!' I blared, and Dad's face broke into a huge grin.

'Providing it's not stupidly expensive,' Mum said, a warning in her voice. 'And on the condition that you work really hard at school, okay?'

'I always work hard at school!' I smiled at her brightly.

'Well, yes, you do – and that's why I'm agreeing to this. Only you and Dad, and maybe Divya and Mo...?'

'Great!' Divya beamed. 'I'll keep an eye on them, don't you worry.'

'Why can't we go?' moaned Mattie, in that sulky voice she has when she's tired. 'I want to go and see the football!'

'I promise that next time, you and I will be going, and Dad and Sam can stay at home and clean the house from top to bottom!' Mum reached out to hold her hand. 'Don't worry, sweetheart, we'll do something special together while they're away.'

A match! A real match, in a big stadium, with actual heroes playing on the pitch. I couldn't believe it.

I was going to see Aaron Ramsey!

As we walked home, I barely noticed the way Mum and Dad were so far away from one another – Mum on one pavement, grasping Mattie’s hand, and Dad on the opposite side, looking at his phone. I was concentrating on chatting to Mo and Divya about football.

If I’d have known what was about to happen to us, I would have paid more attention. But I didn’t know. No one expects terrible things in their lives – I thought everything was going to be okay.

I was so wrong.