

Eddie Kaulooya

Ace and the Misfits



"A story that will boost your spirits and give you the confidence to be yourself."

—Kevin heronJones,
author of *Not Talking about You*

*Ace and the
Misfits*

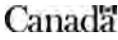
Eddie Kaulooya

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This book is dedicated to the many journalists in Uganda and the East African region who put their lives on the line to report on crucial and significant stories. It is also dedicated to organizations like the Journalists for Human Rights that work to help develop and train journalists across the African continent to tell our stories.

CHAPTER 1

SOME NEWS TO SHARE

Kind words do not wear out the tongue.

– Liberian proverb

A few inches taller and none the wiser, the now twelve-year-old Patrick “Ace” Katumba could feel the rush of adrenaline coursing through his legs. Ace was the nickname his mom gave him, not particularly for his sports skills, but after a Ugandan comic book hero, *The Fearless Night Ace*, whom Ace admired and dressed up as when he was young.

He had to set aside all his fears and worries to make it happen. Ace pushed himself off the ground as high as he could, twisting his entire body like a figure skater. He stretched out his left foot, and with all his might volleyed the soccer ball into the opposing team’s net.

As soon as he landed back on his feet, he heard the cries of victory flooding the soccer grounds. Ace’s

teammates rushed to pick him up from the grass and carry him on their shoulders.

“We won! Your leaping dragon kick finally paid off!” shouted one of the boys.

“Manchester United can keep its players! Kampala has its Ace!” screamed another.

Ace for his part roared to the crowds and pointed at Zzabu, his mother, a stylishly bespectacled, forty-something woman with glowing brown skin in a matching jeans uniform, and his sister, Olive, who was tall, slender, had golden-coloured braids, and dressed in all white.

“Ace, Ace, he’s our man! Ace, Ace, show them all!” the crowds chanted gleefully.

The chanting and cheers continued right up to the award ceremony where the city’s mayor, a fancily dressed middle-aged man with greying hair and rich ebony skin, got to present the trophy and take pictures with the winning team. The mayor quickly pulled Ace to his side and shook the young man’s hand like he had just solved the problem of world hunger.

“Superstar!” the mayor yelled. “How does it feel to be a champion? We all want to know, Ace! We all want to know your secret!”

Ace’s sense of joy and excitement quickly fell, replaced by fear and anxiety.

“I ... I ...” Ace trembled as the words failed to come out of his mouth.

“Superstar!” shouted the mayor again. *“ACE! ACE!”*

Before he heard his name being called again, Ace felt the cold splash of water hit his face. He opened his eyes to see two people standing above him with a look of concern. He was daydreaming again. It had become more frequent since his father’s passing. The dreams were always different but provided a reality free from the anxiety and secrets he bore alone.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” said Rodney, a short and scruffy boy covered in dirt and mud. “We’re losing the match and you are here daydreaming. Get up already!”

“Get away, Rodney!” screamed Ronan, a towering figure with a defined athletic build. “Aren’t you the one that kicked the ball off his head with your two left feet?” He bent down to Ace’s level and showed two fingers. “Ace, we need you to get up and score two more goals before the lunch bell rings. We’ll take you to the school nurse afterward, and you can daydream there, okay?”

“Two ... two ... goals,” Ace said weakly as he brought himself up from the ground. He suddenly realized that he was in his school uniform: short-sleeved white dress shirt, navy blue tie and navy shorts, and black shoes.

“Yes, Ace! Okay, people. The superstar is back! Someone tell the Grade 6 kids to collect some tissues for their tears, after our Grade 7 team wins. Let’s go, Ace!” Rodney insisted.

“I really don’t feel so great ... I need to sit down for a

bit,” Ace said while touching his bruised head.

“Rodney, this is the last time we let you do free kicks. We’ve lost three players already this semester, and now we’re about to lose our fourth player and star striker. Treat that ball like you do your math homework — run away!” Ronan gestured at Rodney.

“Flap your gums again, Ronan, and I’ll use my two left feet to drop-kick you! I’ve taken out four players. Don’t tempt me with a fifth!” Rodney smirked, raising his palm with all five fingers stretched out.

“Oh, you wanna go now!” Ronan said, about to pounce on Rodney before Ace stood between them.

“Ronan ... Rodney.” Ace looked at his friends. “Can we go sit somewhere? I’m a bit dizzy.”

“Like right now? How about we win the match and then sit down?” Rodney suggested.

“Rodney!” Ronan slapped the back of Rodney’s head.

“Don’t tell me you’re happy we’re losing two nothing to the Grade 6 crew. They’re literally afraid of the ball. Whatever, man, we can move Ace to the bench over there.” Rodney pointed at a nearby wooden seat where some girls had been playing.

* * *

At the bench, Ronan handed Ace his bottled water. “Bro, what’s happening to you today?”

“Just today?” Rodney blurted. “Talk about the semester. This guy used to be the top of the class, but even Sleepy Fred has better grades. Ace, you won’t come and play PlayStation on the weekends. We aren’t winning because we don’t have our star striker. Tell us the truth. Have you joined the basketball crew? We won’t get mad. I promise.”

“What’s wrong with the basketball crew? My brother plays with them,” Ronan responded, sounding annoyed.

“Need I say more? Your brother couldn’t catch a ball to save his life,” Rodney said with a smirk.

“Bro, you’re just jealous because your short self couldn’t make the cut,” Ronan replied.

“They can’t handle my short-king energy!” Rodney said while beating his chest.

“I guess the Grades 5 and 6 have you handled, seeing as we keep losing when you’re on the field, short king!” Ronan chuckled.

A smile appeared on Ace’s face, but it was short-lived. He sighed deeply, which grabbed the attention of Ronan and Rodney.

“There’s something I have to tell you both,” started Ace. “Something I’ve been keeping a secret for too long, and I can’t anymore.” Ace sighed again.

“Sweet mahogany, he joined the basketball crew! I knew it!” Rodney jumped off the bench dramatically.

Ronan rolled his eyes. “Rodney, quit being a fool and let him finish.”

Ace laughed loudly. "I'm going to miss you both a lot."
"What do you mean, Ace?" Ronan asked.

Rodney groaned. "Oh man, not again. The last time he got like this was before the Christmas school play. The guy had only one line but he froze like a popsicle and fainted in front of everyone. Please don't tell us you're freaking out about another class presentation?"

"Were you raised in a bush, Rodney? Shut up and let the man talk. Ace, please continue and ignore the short king."

"I'm not supposed to say anything, but my mom is moving my sister and I to Canada. I don't know why exactly. She just said with Dad gone, it'd be safer for us ... That she could support us better there than in Uganda. We'll be staying with my Uncle Jackson somewhere called Toronto. You can't say anything, okay? If anyone asks, tell them she got a new job or something over there ..."

Ace stopped to look at his friends' blank faces.

"So ..." Rodney gestured with his hands.

"So ... We'll be moving to Canada this June," confirmed Ace. "My mom is going to let the school know closer to the date. She doesn't want anyone to know. Olive and I also can't go visiting like we used to. My mom wants us to focus on our books this semester. I think it's stupid," Ace finished sadly.

"I don't get it, man," Ronan said. "You're one of the best in our grade when it comes to all the classes, even math

and science. Parents can be dumb sometimes. I think they just don't like it when we have fun. I'm sorry, Ace."

"This sucks, man. It's worse than joining the stupid basketball crew!" Ronan cried. "How long will you be gone for?"

"I don't know, man. My mom just told us that Canada is going to be our new home. She said it was something my dad and her wanted before he passed away. I don't know if I'll be back to visit at all."

"Whatever happens, there will always be a place for you here, Ace. I don't care where you are in the world — you'll always be our friend. Those Canadians better get ready for the tornado called Ace!" Ronan chuckled with a couple of tears on his cheeks.

"Ace?" Rodney asked. "Are you still dizzy, or are you ready to win us this game before the lunch bell?"

Ace smiled. "I think we can turn this game around now."

"That's what I'm talking about! Oi! Grade 6 crew, get ready to shed some tears. We have our Ace card, a.k.a. Tornado Ace, back on the field!"