

1

The Accident

“When we’re done shopping can I go to Dylan’s house?” Abbas Wassef asked his mother.

“Help me get the groceries home. You can go then,” Abbas’s mother replied in Arabic. They walked down Grandview Boulevard, a busy street in their south Burnaby neighbourhood.

Abbas and his mother, Amira, weren’t the only ones there who spoke Arabic, or any number of other languages. The sidewalks were full of people from a dozen different countries: Iraq, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and even other people from Syria, like the Wassefs.

Abbas loved shopping with his mother on Grandview Boulevard. It was much better than taking the Skytrain to the large grocery store at Metro Mall. He liked going into the *halal* butcher shop to buy chicken or lamb or to the greengrocer to get fresh fruit and vegetables. There was something about the small stores that reminded him of Syria.

Abbas knew every centimetre of the street,

Golden Game

every face, every odour. He knew they were almost home when his nose picked up yummy spicy smells from the Indian restaurant and his eyes saw the bright posters in the windows of the Filipino corner store.

Next door to the restaurant and corner store was the Persian bakery. Abbas's mom wanted to buy some *nan-e-barbari*, tasty Persian flatbread. It was to go with the shawarma they were having for dinner. Abbas's mouth watered. Mr. Mohammadi, the baker, made all sorts of amazing bread, cakes and treats. And he usually gave Abbas free samples.

Just before they reached the bakery, a terrible screeching sound filled the warm spring air. Abbas jumped as he heard glass breaking, the crumpling of metal and the shouts of startled people on the street.

A small red car and a large truck sat tangled together in the intersection of Salisbury and Grandview. They were surrounded by broken glass, and smoke was rising from the engine of the car.

Suddenly Abbas couldn't breathe. His heart thudded in his chest and his legs felt as if they were made of rubber. He fell to his knees, his head swimming. In a daze Abbas watched the driver, whose head was bleeding, climb out of the car.

Hall 2 of the Burnaby Fire Department was only half a block away. Abbas heard the sound of a siren as a fire truck pulled out. But Abbas wasn't looking at the fire truck or the accident, not anymore.

The Accident

Instead, he stared up into the air. His gaze went past the tall cherry trees with their pink blooms, past the roofs of the buildings.

“Where are the planes?” Abbas cried, his eyes searching the blue sky.

His mother knelt and held her son tightly. “It’s okay, Abbas,” she said soothingly. “There are no planes. It’s just a car accident. We’re safe. Everything will be all right.”

2

The Invitation

“Great save!” called Dylan West, one of Abbas’s soccer teammates.

“Thanks,” Michael replied. He was the goalkeeper for their team, the Grandview Eagles, and he was on fire, stopping every shot that came his way.

It had been more than a month since the Eagles had defeated Regent Heights, Dylan’s old school, to win the Burnaby School District Championship. But the boys still played soccer together every day at lunch. Today they played one of their favourite games. They pretended it was the final match of the World Cup. The game was tied and in penalty kicks.

“Now let’s see you stop *me*, Michael!” laughed Claude.

Claude was a midfielder and Dylan was a striker like Abbas. Claude and Dylan were Abbas’s best friends, not only on the team but in school as well. Claude placed the ball carefully on the penalty spot on Grandview’s

The Invitation

bumpy dirt field. “Top right-hand corner,” he said, lining up his kick.

“Nice of you to tell me,” said Michael, bouncing up and down on the goal line.

Claude grinned. “It doesn’t matter. I have a feeling I will score. And when I do, Congo wins their first World Cup.”

The other boys groaned. “You and your feelings!” said Mo. “You can’t always be right.”

“Just watch.” Claude stepped up to the ball, raised his right foot and kicked the ball as hard as he could. The ball curved toward the top right-hand corner, like Claude said it would. It just missed the net, going above the crossbar by a couple of centimetres.

“I knew your feelings weren’t always right,” Mo said with a laugh.

Claude laughed right back. “Maybe, but that’s the closest any of us have come to scoring on Michael today.”

“Your turn, Abbas,” said Jake, rolling Abbas the ball. “Let’s see if Syria wins the World Cup this year.”

Abbas took the ball. Today was Tuesday, four days since the accident on Grandview Boulevard, but he was still on edge. He’d not slept well since that day, and felt like he could snap for no reason.

“Are you feeling better?” Claude asked. Abbas nodded absently and forced a smile onto his face. All his friends had noticed he hadn’t been himself. Abbas

Golden Game

had told them he was sick. It wasn't a lie, exactly. But he couldn't even explain to himself why he felt so strange after seeing the car accident. So how could he explain it to his teammates?

Abbas kicked. It was an awful kick and he knew it as soon as his foot struck the ball. He watched as the ball spun harmlessly to the left, missing the goal by three metres. The funny thing was that Abbas didn't really care. All of a sudden soccer didn't mean so much to him.

"Wow, you must really be sick," said Junior. "That was the worst kick I've ever seen!"

Before Abbas could reply he heard a familiar voice calling the team. "Grandview Eagles!"

"Coach T!" The boys forgot all about the World Cup and ran toward their coach.

"How are you doing?" asked Dylan as the boys swarmed Coach T. They'd seen him just twice since the soccer season ended. Coach T was busy, because he wasn't just their coach. He was also a school Liaison Officer with the Burnaby RCMP.

"I'm fine, boys, how are you? Hey, Abbas! Second place in that big tournament for Syrian kids at BC Place. Not bad! What was the name of the team that beat you?"

Not long after Grandview won the school district championship, Vancouver hosted a large soccer tournament for Syrian refugee students. Abbas had

The Invitation

been asked to play on the Herons, a team made up of Syrian refugees in Metro Vancouver. They came in second, losing in a shootout to a team from Toronto.

“The GTA Gazelles. Victor, an old friend from Syria, was on that team.”

“The goalkeeper, right? I saw your interview. You looked great on TV!”

“What are you doing here, Coach T?” asked Jun, one of the team’s best defenders. “Shouldn’t you be at the high school, arresting teenagers for skipping class or something?”

Coach T laughed. He was clearly very excited for some reason. “You have all been given a very special invitation. And I’m here to deliver it personally!”

“Have you heard of a company called Electronic Arts?” Coach T asked.

“Have we heard of EA? Yeah, they make video games! *FIFA*, *NHL*, *Sims* . . .” said Michael, counting titles on his fingers. “They’re like the most famous company in the universe!”

“Don’t forget I’m old,” said Coach T. “When I was your age we didn’t have Xboxes, cell phones or even the internet.”

“No internet? What did you do for fun? Play with dinosaurs?”

“Very funny, Claude. Dinosaurs were before my time. I played with woolly mammoths and sabre-tooth cats. Now are you guys going to make fun of an old

Golden Game

man or do you want to know about the invitation?”

“Invitation!” they all said at once.

“Okay then,” said Coach T, rubbing his hands together. “A couple of days ago I got a call from a man named Jon Lutz. He is the vice president of Electronic Arts in Canada. They have a game studio right here in Burnaby. Did you know that?”

The boys shook their heads as Coach T went on. “Jon read about the Grandview Eagles winning the school district championship and he was really impressed. He wants to meet you and give you a tour of the EA studio.”

“Are you serious?” said Dylan. His jaw dropped.

“Us? Going to EA?” asked Carlos.

“One hundred percent serious,” said Coach T, grinning. “Principal Bhullar has the permission slips in her office. If you want to go, that is.”

“*If* we want to go? Are you crazy? Of course we want to go!” said Jun.

Even Abbas, who’d been feeling off since the accident, was excited. He didn’t have an Xbox or a PlayStation but a couple of his friends did. FIFA was his favourite game of all time.

“Then get your permission slips from Ms. Bhullar, go home and get them signed by your parents. EA is sending a bus for you tomorrow after school.”

3

Best. Trip. Ever.

The next twenty-four hours crawled by for the team. They thought they would explode with excitement when classes finally ended and a small yellow bus showed up at Grandview Community School.

“This is going to be so awesome!” crowed Dylan.

“How long will it take to get there?” Michael asked.

“It’s a short drive,” said Coach T. “We’ll be at EA before you know it.”

Within fifteen minutes the bus turned onto a street by the British Columbia Institute of Technology. It stopped at a gatehouse that had *Electronic Arts* written above it.

“The Grandview Eagles here to see Jon Lutz,” said the driver.

“Welcome,” the security guard said as he lifted the barrier. “Drive to the front door. Someone will meet you there.”

“Pretty high security,” said Abbas.

“No kidding,” said Claude. “I guess they don’t want anybody stealing the next edition of *Plants Vs. Zombies!*”

Golden Game

The bus stopped in front of a large building made of steel and glass. Two men and a woman stood waiting by the front doors.

“Welcome to EA,” said one of the men. He was thin, wore glasses and was dressed in a casual shirt and jeans. He spoke with an English accent. “My name is Jon. I read about you in the newspaper and I wanted to congratulate you.”

“My name is Wendell,” the woman said. She was blonde and had a big smile on her face. “This is my assistant, Anthony.” She introduced the young brown-haired man standing next to her. He carried a bunch of lanyards and nametags in his hands.

“Welcome, guys,” Anthony said. “We have ID cards for each of you. Put the lanyards around your necks. You need to wear them while you’re here.”

“And one for you as well, Constable Whitebear,” said Wendell once each player had his. “Now are you ready to have a tour?”

“Yes!” they all shouted.

Wendell grinned. “Then let’s go!”

“We just finished renovating the place,” Jon said as the team entered a large lobby. “What do you think?”

“It’s so cool!” gasped Mo. All the other boys agreed. Ahead was another security barrier. To their right were two large doors.

“These rooms are new,” said Jon, opening the first door. “We call them Right Brain and Left Brain.

Best. Trip. Ever

Right Brain is a theatre and Left Brain is a conference room. Left Brain is pretty boring, but I think you'll like Right Brain."

Abbas couldn't believe his eyes. If Right Brain was a theatre, it was the best theatre he had ever seen. It wasn't that big, but it had about thirty large comfortable leather seats facing a huge screen at the front.

"We use this room to play games, to watch sports and show movies," said Jon. "When the European Championships were on, you couldn't get a seat in here."

"You let your employees watch soccer at work?" asked Claude in disbelief.

"Of course," said Jon. "We make video games about sports after all. You have to like video games and sports to work here."

"I do! Can I get a job here?" asked Alvin.

Jon laughed. "Learn how to code and we will talk."

"Okay, Eagles," said Wendell. "The tour starts now. Follow me."

"Coach Whitebear," Abbas heard Jon say before he left on the tour. "Would you mind chatting for a moment? There's something I want to speak to you about."



"Coach, you gotta see this place!" said Alvin when the boys got back from the tour. "We played *Madden* on a screen thirty metres tall!"

Golden Game

“They have a weight room and a sauna and a basketball court and a soccer field and so much cool stuff!” added Jun.

“We saw where they make games,” said Dylan. “Wendell showed us how guys wear special suits so the computers can copy how they move.”

“And we went to the cafeteria and ate donuts,” added Claude. “Best. Day. Ever!”

“Claude ate about two dozen donuts himself,” said Steven.

“You’re one to talk,” Claude laughed. “You had three dozen!”

Jon turned to Coach T. “Well? What do you think? Will you take me up on my offer?”

Coach T looked at the happy faces of his players. “Yes,” he said. “I think it would really make their day.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Junior, confused.

“Make our day? Nothing could make our day more!” said Mo.

“Actually something could,” said Coach T. “Gather ’round, boys. Jon has something he’d like to talk to you about.”

“I’m the chair of the board of directors of Canada Scores,” said Jon when he had the boys’ attention. “It’s a charity. We focus on soccer, poetry and leadership skills.”

“I know Canada Scores,” said Abbas. “It’s a soccer program at Grandview for the younger kids.”

Best. Trip. Ever

“Speaking of soccer,” said Jon. “Have you heard of a tournament called the Top Flight Invitational?”

“No,” said Dylan. “Why?”

“Top Flight is a big week-long tournament held at the end of May in Toronto. It is two tournaments, actually. The best U-14 soccer players are invited — sixteen girls teams and sixteen boys teams. Top Flight is run sort of like the NCAA basketball tournament in the USA.”

“You lose once and you’re out, right?” said Abdul. He was almost as big a fan of basketball as he was of soccer.

“That’s right,” Jon said. “Each team is guaranteed four games. But you have to win every game to advance to the final at Varsity Stadium, at the University of Toronto. If you don’t win, you are relegated to exhibition games. Top Flight means the very best after all, and only the very best team will win.”

“What has this tournament got to do with us?” Abbas asked.

“More than you think,” said Jon. “A friend of mine runs a Canada Scores chapter in Toronto. He is also the organizer of the Top Flight Tournament. He’s invited you to play in it. The board of directors of Canada Scores had a chat at our last meeting and we would like to pay for you to attend. We’ll cover the hotel, airfare and food. What do you think? Do you want to go?”

4

Abbas's Problem

The boys were still grinning from ear to ear on the bus ride home. It certainly was the best day ever. One more chance to play together. And best of all, they would be playing in a superstar tournament in Toronto! Everyone was thrilled — except Abbas.

Abbas knew he couldn't go. The Top Flight tournament sounded great and the thought of seeing his friend Victor again was terrific. But the problem was in the very name of the tournament.

Flight.

Playing meant going to Toronto. Going to Toronto meant getting on a plane. And Abbas getting on a plane just wasn't going to happen.

All around him the rest of the boys chatted excitedly about the trip. Abbas said very little, lost in his own thoughts as the bus drove back to Grandview.

"Still sick, eh?" said Dylan. "How many donuts did you eat?"

"Too many." Abbas had only eaten one. The reason

Abbas's Problem

he felt like he was going to throw up had nothing to do with food.

Ms. Bhullar was waiting as the bus pulled up. "Hi, Coach T," she said as the team stepped off the bus. "Anything interesting happen at Electronic Arts?"

Coach T grinned. "When did you learn about the Top Flight tournament?"

"About two weeks ago," she said. "Jon called me and asked what I thought about the boys going. I ran it past the school board and they were as excited as I was." She held out a stack of papers. "Today's Thursday. These permission slips need to be signed and handed back to me by Monday morning at the very latest."

"You heard Ms. Bhullar!" Claude took the papers and passed them out. "They might be due Monday but I have a feeling that we'll all bring them in tomorrow!"

Abbas took his permission slip. He stuffed it into his backpack and turned away, heading toward home.

"Hey, Abbas," Dylan asked, "You want to walk together? Give me a minute. I have to get something from class."

"It's okay," Abbas said. "I don't feel good. I just want to get home."

Leaving the team behind, Abbas walked across the gravel field. He headed onto Grandview Boulevard and toward the basement suite he shared with his mom in an old stucco house on Linden Street.

Golden Game

“How was the trip?” his mother asked. She was in the kitchen cooking dinner. The food smelled great. But with his stomach in knots there was no way Abbas could eat.

“Good,” Abbas said, hoping mom his would believe it.

“You don’t sound good,” Amira said worriedly.

“I think I ate too many donuts,” Abbas repeated the same story he told Dylan on the bus. “I’m going to lie down for a bit.”

Abbas took off his shoes and walked to his small bedroom just off the living room. Shutting the door behind him, he dropped his backpack onto the floor. The thing felt like it weighed a ton even though it only held his soccer cleats, his school planner and the permission slip.

Abbas flopped onto his bed. The walls of his room were covered with posters of soccer players. They were all there: the Whitecaps, but also Cristiano Ronaldo and Gareth Bale from Real Madrid, Abbas’s favourite team.

At Grandview there were kids from two dozen countries. But no matter where they came from they were either fans of Real Madrid or Barcelona. On the field they pretended they were Lionel Messi, Neymar, Gareth Bale or Cristiano Ronaldo, scoring the winning goal to win the league title, the UEFA Championship or the World Cup.

Abbas's Problem

It was Abbas's dream to become the first superstar from Syria to play in Europe. He wanted it not for himself but for his mom. She had had a very hard life. Abbas wanted to look after her, to buy her a nice house, to give her everything she'd never had.

Amira had lost a husband and two sons, Abbas's dad and brothers. They'd drowned trying to leave Turkey, to go to Europe to make a better life for their family. Abbas wanted to make it for them as well.

He slammed his fists down onto the mattress in frustration. The Top Flight Tournament was a golden opportunity. It could be the very thing he needed to take his play to the next level. Abbas should have been excited. Instead, he felt like throwing up.

If he couldn't get on a plane to fly to Toronto how on earth could he ever get on one to fly to Madrid, Barcelona, Paris or London? The answer was that he couldn't. His dreams would never come true. He would be a failure.



"I'm open! Pass the ball!" yelled Junior, streaking down Grandview's dirt field toward the goal.

"Here it comes!" said Abdul. He lifted the ball high into the air with a powerful kick.

The ball bounced once. Junior chested it down to his feet and in one swift motion drilled it above

Golden Game

Michael's outstretched hands. The ball zoomed into the back of the net.

"Abbas!" shouted Michael, booting the ball into the air. "It's coming to you!"

Just as the ball was about to land a siren started wailing. A fire truck pulled out onto Grandview Boulevard. Suddenly, for Abbas, the game, the field and the whole Grandview team seemed to disappear.

Abbas forgot all about soccer. All he could see was a collapsing building and a street full of burning cars. The cries and screams of people filled his ears. Abbas put his hands to his head, trying to block out the terrible sounds.

The images vanished almost as soon as they came. His head swimming, Abbas found himself back on the field. The sound of the siren was disappearing into the distance. The ball was bouncing on the ground in front of him.

"What's wrong, Abbas?" asked Alvin. "You just froze."

"Nothing! There's nothing wrong!" From out of nowhere Abbas's anger exploded. He shoved Alvin as hard as he could, pushing him down onto the dirt field. "Leave me alone!"

"Abbas! You stop that!" Ms. Shirley, the noon-hour supervisor, ran over. "Come with me to the office right now!"

In a daze, Abbas followed Ms. Shirley into the school, as the boys on the team watched in disbelief.

Abbas's Problem

Ms. Shirley walked Abbas into the office. "You wait while I get Ms. Bhullar."

"Abbas! What's going on?" asked Ms. Bhullar, hurrying into the office. "Ms. Shirley said you pushed Alvin. Is that true?"

At first Abbas did not reply. He just sat there, his body feeling numb. "I . . . I guess so," he finally said.

Abbas had no idea why he'd pushed Alvin, or what had happened to him on the field. He couldn't have been seeing things, he couldn't have. The burning buildings and cars, the screams, they weren't real. Was he going crazy? Only crazy people see and hear things that weren't there.

"Getting into fights on the playground is an old habit I haven't seen in a very long time," Ms. Bhullar said. "I'm calling your mom. Something's going on with you and I think you may need some help."