

ONE

‘Go on, Portia! SHOOOOOOOOOOT!’

Portia had no time to think about it, she shot. Her powerful right foot made contact with the ball, catapulting it through the air like a bullet. The goalkeeper tried to get a hand to it, but couldn’t reach, and it landed firmly in the top right corner of the net.

‘GOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAALLLLL!’ screamed the ninety-three thousand crowd at Wembley Stadium, while the commentators raved about the skill and ingenuity of Portia Sutherland’s pace, how she’d caught the ball in her own half, and dribbled it right up the field without any of the opposing players being able to tackle her. The Brazilians looked on, dumbstruck, holding their hands out at one another in disbelief.

The referee blew for time. England had won the World Cup! The Brazilian goalie squatted down, one hand on the grass, shaking his head at the turf. Meanwhile, at the other end of the pitch, the England goalkeeper was doing cartwheels, the crowd had invaded the pitch, and Portia had disappeared under an avalanche of nine England players wanting to hug and kiss her...

The alarm went off, and the fantasy was broken.

‘Shut it, you,’ I heard her hiss. My clock had hardly finished singing *You’ll Never Walk Alone* before it was rudely silenced by a heavy thump.

‘I’ll kill you if you break that!’ I snarled. That clock was my birthday present from Dad; after my Liverpool shirt, it was my pride and joy.

Portia sighed. She was forever complaining she woke up after that goal went in. She’d been having the same dream for weeks now, becoming the first woman ever to break into the England men’s football team. Her career highlight was always the World Cup Final, and she would score the winning goal against one of the big guns like Brazil, Spain or Germany, but that was where the dream would end. There was never anything more interesting to follow, like shenanigans in the changing room bath, for instance...

I heard giggles. Slowly I pushed the duvet from my face, and turned to squint at her.

‘What’s so funny?’ I demanded.

She was already out of bed, hurrying to where her school uniform was laid out neatly over the chair. I watched as she held up her skirt with a look of sappy pride, before tutting and turning over to enjoy another five minutes snooze. I wasn’t so eager to drag my lazy carcass out of bed. *She* might have been keen to get to school, but I wasn’t. After two weeks in Year Ten I’d already had enough of all the extra homework, projects and study: it was GCSEs next year, and already they were pushing us hard over a cliff. It was too soon to rub our noses in it, I argued, but Naylor’sfield Comprehensive had a good pass rate at GCSE and A Level, so they wanted to ‘maintain the momentum’ – or at least that was what they kept brainwashing us with.

There wasn’t a single person in Year Ten these days not going round with a face like a wet week. I was annoyed as it meant I had less time for footie – Dad had seen to that - but Portia was made up, because this was her first term at a new school built next door to the Comp after her old school had closed, merging with another local primary when both school buildings were declared derelict and knocked down. Naylor’sfield Primary, supposedly no relation to the Comp, actually shared our games facilities. Girls’ football had been introduced for Portia’s year, giving the girls the chance to break into our junior team if they were good enough, same as the Primary’s boys could break into our boys’ squad. Portia had all the time in the world to play, unlike me. Games were still on the curriculum for Years Ten and above, but Dad said I had to take time out of my club football at St Domingo’s and playing for the senior girls’ team at school so I could concentrate on working for my exams instead. I was fuming.

‘I just wondering what it would be like to jump into the team bath with Frank Lampard,’ Portia replied. She fancied Frank Lampard like mad, something I couldn’t quite fathom.

‘Gross!’

'It *could* happen! I could play with the England men one day. You never know.'

'Men and women will never play footie together in a million years, and you'll certainly never share a bath with Frank Lampard!' I yawned widely. 'You'll have a separate changing room. He'll be drawing his pension by then, anyway.'

'Spoilsport!' Suddenly there was a draught as the bedclothes were whisked away from my warm, snug body.

'Hey, you!'

'It's time to get up, or we'll miss the bus - again.'

Grousing and cursing I stumbled out of bed, glaring at the little horror as I tried to remember whether I had a clean blouse or not.

'You wait till you get to the Comp next year and Lawford gets on your case 'cos you're not wearing your navy knickers in PE,' I muttered, flicking through the clothes hanging in my wardrobe in vain, 'then you won't be poncin' about in the morning dying to get to school! It's not normal! Oh, God!' There was nothing resembling a blouse in my chest-of-drawers, either. 'Portia, lend us a blouse, will yer?'

When Portia had become my stepsister just over a year before, she'd been a podgy little brat with an eating disorder: bottom line was she ate too much. Then she really did have an eating disorder. She suddenly decided one day she'd had enough of being fat, so she gorged on food in secret and threw it all back up, until I found out. Bulimia, they called it. Dad had taken her to a child shrink, and a dietician from the hospital had designed an eating programme for her. Dad was a charge nurse in our local hospital and knew all the right people. Since then Portia had slimmed right down, losing almost three stone, and we were just about the same dress size now. I had never been on the large side myself, so I knew her blouse would fit me all right. She'd joined St Domingo's and that had helped her to get in shape. She'd become as mad about football as I was, but she was still only a beginner and nowhere near regular first team selection standard yet. The reason she wanted to join the club was so we could have something in common, make us better friends.

Poor Portia. She had more chance of knitting fog. I still couldn't bring myself to like her too much. As far as I was concerned she was an intruder in our house. I didn't like the way she called my dad 'Dad' or 'Daddy Dave'. It made me want to puke in disgust.

Our relationship had got off to a bad start and had never really improved in my eyes. I hated her and her mum, Shelley, coming into my life not long after I'd lost my real mum and sister Katie in a car accident, so I wasn't sorry when Shelley walked out on Dad after only a few months of marriage. She'd suffered a nervous breakdown after losing his baby, another thing I'd been glad about, although I'd also felt a bit sorry for her and for Dad, who'd been gutted, too. Shelley had changed overnight, withdrawing into herself, becoming less gobby, and letting herself go in the looks department. Dad had hoped that if she and Portia went to stay with her parents for a while she would get over the shock, but she decided to stay away for good, finding her own place to live at the other end of Liverpool. That had been the only annoying thing about her leaving: she'd made me and Dad up sticks from our old house to live in Naylor'sfield to be near her family when they married, meaning I'd had to change schools. Not that I was complaining these days, like, but all the same...

Then, one sunny morning at the end of July, Portia turned up on our doorstep with her suitcase. I knew she was coming, but I wasn't happy about it. In fact, when Dad had tried to break it to me gently that she was moving back in, I threw a hissy fit to end all hissy fits.

'What the hell for!' I stormed angrily. 'You and Shelley are getting divorced. Portia isn't *our* responsibility, she's hers!'

Dad watched calmly while I paced the floor with my arms folded and my face like thunder.

'Shelley can't cope with her,' he replied with a shrug, 'and I did legally adopt her, so...'

'What do you mean, Shelley can't *cope* with her? She spoils her rotten!'

'You know how Shelley has changed.' Dad's face suddenly looked sad, but it wasn't the same type of sadness I remembered it being when Mum and Katie had died, somehow it was different. Years later he told me it was more to do with regret that his short marriage hadn't worked out as well as he'd hoped, that and the fact that his new baby had died. He'd got over Shelley fairly quickly; it was just that after Mum had died he'd been lonely and wanted someone in his life. For a few months Shelley had made him feel wanted. 'She's in and out of hospital with depression,' he went on. 'She can't even look after herself these days, never mind her daughter. She knows that, so she wants us to give Portia a stable home environment. Anyway, someone responsible needs to keep an eye on Portia's diet, and that someone isn't Shelley!'

Grudgingly I knew he had a point. 'She could've gone to live with her grandparents,' I mumbled, flopping into an armchair in annoyance.

'She didn't want to go to them. She wanted to come here, and start at the Comp with you next year. You know how she looks up to you.'

'But she's such a pain in the arse!'

He laughed. 'Now, come on, Gem, she's not as bad as she used to be.'

And grudgingly, again, I had to admit that he was right. Portia of the present day was a slight improvement on the Portia of old. Less of the spoilt brat – she had to toe the line with Dad – but still a bloody nuisance all the same, always hanging around, always insisting on playing footie with me. I wasn't chuffed about her sharing my room, either, but her old room had a bad crack in the wall, and she couldn't move back in there until the repairs were finished. Portia didn't mention Shelley much, she didn't even talk about the visits she made home. She had never really liked her mother, so it was no surprise she found it easy to leave her when the opportunity came.

'What have you done with all your blouses?' she wanted to know now. It always made me want to laugh when she stood there with her hands on her hips. She had to do as she was told in our house with Dad in charge, but she still fancied herself as a bossy little cow sometimes.

'Dunno.' My voice was lame and unsure. 'They must still be in the wash.'

'Oh, 'ey, Gem!' she wailed as she marched to her drawer, from where she took out a crisp, clean blouse. 'You were supposed to have finished the washing. Dad said...'

'Stuff Dad!' I snatched the blouse from her ungratefully. 'I can't remember to do everything while he's off gallivanting on one of his conferences. I don't know why Lizzie couldn't have done the washing, anyway.'

Lizzie Cassidy was looking after us while Dad was away in London for three days. She was Portia's long lost half-sister, a product of Portia's mum's teenage pregnancy at thirteen, and also my football coach at St Domingo's; kind of complicated to explain to anyone who asked, but she and her twin brother Tom – my PE teacher at school – were family, sort of. They were lovely, nothing like Shelley or Portia at all.

'Dad said you had to do it. I heard him. He said Lizzie wasn't our "oh" something.' Portia frowned, trying to remember what it was Dad had actually said to me before departing for London.

He'd said, 'Now, remember, Gem, Lizzie's only staying because you need a responsible adult to keep an eye on you and Portia while I'm away. She's not our au pair, so don't treat her like one. She's just doing us a favour. Don't forget to put a duster round the furniture and vacuum the carpet, and whatever you do make sure you get the washing finished. You've let all your clothes pile up again. Oh, and don't forget to feed the fish, and make sure Spartacus gets fed twice...' Spartacus was Dad's pride and joy, a sort of miniature shark-type thing he usually cooed at and told his problems to at least five times a day. I'd forgotten what species Spartacus was and I didn't care. To me he was just a thug with scales, fins and a tail, who swam around the tank terrorising the other fish.

And I'd said, 'Yeah, OK, Dad, ta-ra.'

He was still yapping while I was trying to shove him out of the door.

'It doesn't take much effort to stick some washing in the machine and switch it on,' I remarked now as I put on my dressing gown and hunted around for my wash bag. 'It wouldn't have killed Lizzie to have at least offered.'

'She has to go to work!'

'And I have to go to school!'

'Well, you should take more care of your stuff, then, shouldn't yer? You shouldn't get so mucky and have to change every day.'

I ignored that. 'Why can't *you* do the washing once in a while?' I looked down at the clean blouse now lying on my bed. 'I washed and ironed that blouse, *you* didn't. Not much has changed, has it? You know how the washing machine works. Since you came back to live with us you still don't pull your weight, you lazy cow.'

You what?' Portia looked outraged. 'I washed the dishes last night!'

I nearly screamed with laughter. 'Is that what you call it? You rinsed one plate under the cold tap!'

Portia made a growling noise before snatching up her shower stuff and uniform. 'Up yours! An' I bags the first shower!'

The room shook as the door slammed behind her.

I laughed to myself as I pulled clean underwear from my drawer and managed to find a passable skirt, or at least one with only a minor stain on it. I'd loved having Dad to myself when Shelley and her brat had done one, but I'd also missed sparring with the said same brat. It wasn't difficult to get one over on her!

After getting my clothes together I studied myself in the mirror. My hair, which I'd chopped off and dyed black just after Dad had married Shelley (I'd changed my look completely back then, wearing black clothes and chains and belts, trying to convince myself I was a Goth, which I wasn't really, I'd just done it to wind Dad up), had returned to its original dark brown colour. These days I tied it back in a short ponytail. I was bored with it now: it made me look too girly-girl, like Portia. I was nothing like her! I fancied getting it cut short again. I suited it black, too...

I glanced at the clock.

'*Twenty-past eight?* Oh, my God, I haven't even had a wash yet! *Portia!*' I flew out of the room, crossed the landing and banged on the bathroom door. Inside the shower was running and Portia was murdering a One Direction song. 'Hurry up, will yer! I've got a tutorial at quarter-to-nine!'

When I got no answer I thought about using Dad's en suite shower, but decided there was only time for a quick splash in his sink instead. I'd never dressed so fast in all my life!

I legged it down the stairs. Portia was already dressed and in the kitchen, sipping her tea and chatting to Lizzie (who was still in her dressing gown, lucky cow), as though she had all the time in the world. Despite the fact that Portia had been chivvying me around she seemed in no hurry to finish her breakfast. I found out why when I checked the kitchen clock: it was forty minutes slower than my bedroom one *and* my watch! It wasn't half-past eight, it was only twenty-to!

'What the - Did you muck around with my alarm clock and watch?' I demanded, interrupting Portia in mid-natter. She shrugged.

'So what if I did?'

'So you got me out of bed too bloody early!'

'We've only just been catching the bus on time lately. It's your fault we're nearly always late, so I thought we'd make it if...'

'I'll swing for you, so help me God!' I ranted, dragging back a chair and plonking myself down on it. 'I haven't even had a shower, just a splash in Dad's sink!' It suddenly occurred to me then that I hadn't even looked at his alarm clock to check the time, probably because I assumed I was already late. 'You wait, brat, I'll get you back!'

Portia smirked. Lizzie found it hard to keep a straight face as she poured me a cup of tea.

'One born every minute!' she remarked.

'Don't you start, an' all!' I snapped, but Lizzie only snorted.

'Drink that, have some cereal, then go and have a shower, or you'll be on one all day,' she said with a wide grin.

She was right. I felt better after I'd eaten and had a shower, more ready to face the day, and in plenty of time to catch the eight-twenty bus. I met Lizzie at the bottom of the stairs.

'Someone's knocked for you,' she said.

'Who?'

'Tyrone.' She nodded towards the living room. 'He's in there. I'm going up to get ready for work. See you later.'

She kissed the top of my head before running upstairs. I grinned up at her then went into the front room where I saw Tyrone Collins, Portia's cousin, with one leg over the arm of Dad's comfy chair, texting someone on his iPhone. Portia was standing at the mirror tying her hair into two thick plaits. I caught her looking at me in her reflection. She grinned when I stuck my tongue out at her.

'Yo, Gem,' said Tyrone without looking up.

When we'd first met we'd hated the sight of one another. He hadn't wanted girls' footie at Naylor'sfield Comp; in fact, he'd done everything possible to put a stop to it, forming a stupid group called the Lads' Liberation Front, trying every trick in the book to stop the girls' team from being formed. After a while, though - and thanks to me saving his life when he was stabbed in the thigh - he eventually got used to the idea of girls kicking a football around the school playing field. With his own career on hold thanks to his bad leg, he became involved with his mate, Darren 'Daz' Bennett (who was doing a footie refereeing course and who had supported the girls from day one) in our training, and now he and Daz were among two of my best mates. They were in Year Eleven at Naylor'sfield and would be sitting their GCSEs for real next May.

'What you doin' slouchin' on Dad's chair?' I demanded with a swipe at the offending leg, which he obligingly moved.

'Soz. Thought you and Portia might want a lift.'

Not long after turning seventeen Tyrone had passed his driving test ridiculously early. Already he had a small car Dad had condemned as a shed on wheels. It was red, rusty and peppered with dents, and was like riding in a dodgem car. After the second outing I'd had in it - only up and down his road - I'd vowed 'never again'. Right now, though, it was grey outside and threatening rain, and what Dad didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

'Cool,' I said, getting out the fish food. Portia looked doubtful.

'He isn't allowed to drive that car to school,' she stated. 'Does Auntie Jackie know you drove here, Ty? If you get caught...'

'Soz, Portia,' I interrupted, 'you go on the bus if you want, but I don't fancy standing at the bus stop in the peein' down rain. There you go, Spartacus, you ugly spud.' Spartacus gobbled down his share of the food.

'Well.' Portia pulled a face as she put on her coat. 'All right, I'll come, only I'm not sitting in the front. I don't want to go through the windscreen!'

'You're safer in the front than you are in the back,' Tyrone said. 'The seatbelts aren't workin' there.'

That meant I was relegated to the back seat, and I soon found out that although the upholstery was ripped to shreds and it felt like I was sitting on a lump of springs, Tyrone had been joking about the seatbelts; well, anyway, I was able to fasten mine and it felt secure enough. Portia obviously didn't feel safe as she clung onto her seatbelt with both hands when the car started to move.

'Slow down! You're going too fast!' she squealed.

'Wha?'' Tyrone exclaimed. 'We've hardly moved yet, and I can't drive that fast, anyway, the traffic's heavin' out on the main road.'

We made it in one piece to the junction, where we had to wait ages before we were able to turn right: so far, so good. Tyrone was right, the traffic was really heavy, and we weren't the only ones waiting to get out, there were three cars ahead of us. As one car moved out Tyrone inched forward when the cars in front filled the gap, and we waited our turn. Portia jumped.

'Mind the back of that car!'

'Portia! She was making *me* nervous!

'I don't like this!' The seatbelt was unbuckled and flung over her shoulder. I howled in pain as it caught me square in the eye. 'I'm getting out of here...'

'Portia, not while the car's movin'!' cried Tyrone over my yells. He slammed the brakes on, the worst thing he could possibly have done.

We screamed in unison. The impact from the car behind us made me jolt forward, jarring my neck, which was bad enough, but I was more concerned about my poor eye. With one hand behind my neck and the other covering my sore eyelid I swore angrily, and it took me a moment to realise that Portia wasn't in her seat.