



CHAPTER ONE

Jackson Mbemba looked over the balcony outside his parents' flat.

They lived on the third floor and the view wasn't great.

Looking down, he could see the huge round bins where everyone on the estate put their rubbish. The bins were overfull and surrounded by plastic bags of extra rubbish.

It was a mess.

A young woman was carrying a small crying child across the cracked concrete.

Somewhere out of sight, a man and a woman were swearing loudly at each other.

Two figures lurked in a gloomy doorway. Members of the estate gang, no doubt.



Jackson hated this place.

His parents had moved the family here four years ago when Jackson was signed by Stanford Academy. Before that, they had lived in London where Jackson was at the Charlton Academy.

Jackson knew that Stanford was a step up — they were a Premier League club — but he missed London. He missed his friends and he missed the estate where he used to live. People were so friendly there. They were always in and out of each other's flats and they shared what they had.

Here, the estate looked similar but the people couldn't be more different.

Jackson was only on the estate on Sundays now. The rest of the week he stayed in digs nearer the Stanford ground with a woman called Mrs Earls, who had looked after a lot of young footballers.

Mrs Earls said Jackson was better off away from the estate. It was trouble, she said.

And she was right.

The gang made trouble for everyone. That's why Jackson had to make it as a footballer — to get his family out of this dump. His mum and dad had worked so hard and given up so much for him. Now, it was time to pay them back.

Jackson had been delighted when the manager, Ron Grant, had told him that he'd made the First Team squad for the pre-season tournament. But that was just the start.

Jackson needed to make an impression, to grab this chance by the scruff of the neck and win the pro contract that would change his life. His whole family's lives.

Jackson was three and his sister, Marissa, was just a baby when they left their home in the Congo to come to England as refugees.