



ROY RACE RAN steadily, picking his way down the hill from his house to warm up his muscles.

When he was on the canal path at the bottom of the hill, he went for it: half a mile of flat track to stretch out his legs before he reached Mel Park, dodging overgrown summer bushes as he sprinted. He enjoyed the rush of air past his ears as he ran hard. His legs felt good. His body felt good. He'd kept himself fit during the close season.

He was excited, too. Today the team would find out where they'd be going on the Rovers' pre-season tour.

Roy finished with a quick sprint across the car park at the front of Mel Park, the Melchester Rovers stadium. That box of yellow and red corrugated iron with a floodlight sprouting in each corner. And, there, he saw a queue of people at the ticket office.

A queue, because today was a big day. Every other year of his life he'd been in that queue, breathless with anticipation as he waited to collect his season ticket to watch his heroes, the Melchester Rovers players.

Now Roy *was* one of those players. And he still couldn't believe it. Every day he woke up unable to accept it was really happening to him.

Slowing to a jog, making sure he didn't trip on any of the tufts of grass or crumbling tarmac in the car park, Roy remembered a conversation he'd had with

his teammate, Paco Diaz, when they'd achieved promotion from League Two just eight weeks ago: their hope that Paco would be allowed to wear the eleven shirt and Roy the number nine.

Roy smiled as he approached the players' entrance. It still looked shabby, still needed a new coat of paint. He wondered why the door – like the car park – had not been tidied up during the summer.

He had a good idea why. The Melchester Rovers owner and chairman – Barry Cleaver – was the reason. He was tight-fisted, and would rather the players walked in through a shabby door than spend a few quid on a pot of paint.

Near the players' entrance there was a man with a small girl waiting in the shadow of the main stand, staring hard at Roy. Roy expected to be asked for an autograph.

That was what sometimes happened now. And he was all set to be friendly and smiley, especially towards the child.

But the man did not want an autograph.

‘Come to clear out your locker?’ he said, scowling at Roy.



‘Eh?’ Roy asked.

‘I said,’ the man growled, his voice rising even more, ‘have you just come by to collect your things?’

Roy sighed. This again. How many times did he have to tell people?

Throughout the summer break – after Melchester Rovers’ playoff promotion from League Two – there had been rumours about Roy and Paco Diaz leaving Rovers.

Roy had even been introduced to the Tynecaster owner, Julio Garcia, and told him straight. No way he was leaving Mel Park. Not ever.

So why were people still asking him?

Roy took a moment to remember what his coach – Johnny Dexter – had said to him about the club’s supporters: *Whatever they say to you, be polite and respectful. One day they’ll love you, the next they’ll hate you, but*

*every day they pay your wages. They are the soul of the club.*

But still, Roy reflected. Shouting something like that? In front of a child?

He chose his words carefully, expressing them calmly. ‘I’m one hundred per cent Melchester Rovers,’ Roy said. ‘I love this club. I’ve been coming as a fan all my life. I’m not leaving. We’ve just been promoted to League One. Why would I leave?’

‘Not what it says on here,’ the man said, stepping backwards, holding his phone up.

Roy shrugged and gazed across the car park in despair. He hated this so much: that anyone could question his love for Melchester Rovers.

Roy turned to go. He would try not to let the man and what he said worry him. As he pushed on the players’ entrance door, he noticed a shiny red Aston Martin in the

reserved parking bays. It was a car he'd seen before.

It belonged to football agent Alan Talbot.

The sight of that car *did* worry him. Alan Talbot was a man Roy did not trust. And he always seemed to be around just before trouble arrived.