



THE LEEDS UNITED CENTENARY STORY

By Tom Palmer

Chapter 1



Monday 14th October 2019

Elland Road Stadium, Leeds



'If any of you get lost at any time,' Mrs Revie said in her school-trip voice. 'I want you to find your way back to *here*. This is the Internationals Board. We are opposite the Elland Road main desk, so the receptionists on duty can watch out for you. Understood?'

'Yes, Mrs Revie,' Year Six said.

That had been half an hour ago.

Looking sheepish, Meera, Kofi and Alex were standing by the Internationals Board, a long list of footballers from all over the world who had played for Leeds United engraved onto a wooden panel. The corridor carpeted with Leeds United badges.

'It's your fault,' Kofi complained to Alex.

'Why?' Alex snapped.

'You wanted to go on every bench in the home dressing room. You made us fall behind.'

Alex shrugged. *It was* his fault: but he wasn't bothered.

They were at Elland Road football stadium. His church. His temple. His paradise. And now he had sat where every Leeds player in history ever had sat, so he was happy... whether they were lost or not.

'Guys... can you smell smoke?' Meera interrupted.

The two boys shook their heads, then Kofi turned on Alex again.

'I don't know why you're so excited, anyway,' Kofi teased. 'This ground is rubbish. Like the team. Nothing like the brilliant beautiful amazing Juventus Stadium, where I've been loads of times. And...

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Leeds is rubbish too. The whole city. Not like Turin, where I used to live. Or Kumasi where I was before that. In Ghana.'

Alex shook his head. He hated this.

He didn't care if people in Leeds supported other football teams. That was their choice. That was normal. He just wished they weren't so mean about *his* team. He felt a surge of anger, wanted to lash out and shout at Kofi. *Why do you live in Leeds if it's so rubbish?* he could say. *Why don't you go back to Ghana?*

But Alex knew that saying something like that was wrong. And that it would upset Kofi, who had only moved to Leeds from Italy in the summer – and from Ghana before that. So he kept his angry stupid thoughts to himself.

'I mean,' Kofi went on, 'you'll never have a player like Ronaldo come here like we have at Juventus.'

'They might,' Meera interrupted again. 'If Leeds go up to the Prem this season, then build on it... I mean they've got a great fanbase and they used to be one of the best teams in the world.' Meera hesitated. 'Can... can you hear those noises... like booms?'

They all stopped to listen.

'Yeah...' Kofi cocked his head. 'I can... it sounds a bit like that First World War film we watched in class last week.'

Kofi was fascinated in the First World War: it was the first thing they'd done in class when he started at the school a few weeks ago.

Suddenly it was cold.

Icy cold.

Meera imagined she could see snow settling on the carpet. And that a man was coming down the corridor towards them, picking his way between coils of... was it barbed wire?

Then the man stopped. He really *was* there. Not just in Meera's imagination, but next to them, wearing a brown flat cap and a jacket to match. Two small dogs with rough coats and piercing black eyes stood just at his side. The man's face looked kind, his eyes wide open. And he was smiling. But there was something about him. Something that unsettled Meera, who continued to stare, speechless.

'And who do *you* follow, young lady?' the man asked politely.



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Meera looked at the receptionist behind the desk, who gave her a smile, then she studied the man again. What was about him? He still seemed unreal, like a projection.

Then she got it.

It was simple: she could see straight through him.

Instinctively, Meera stepped back.

'L-L-L-Liverpool,' she croaked, voice trembling, heart hammering.

'Liverpool, Leeds and Juventus,' the man purred. 'Three of the finest clubs in the history of European football.'

'Leeds?' Kofi laughed.

Alex scowled and felt the man's eyes on him, as Kofi continued to mock Leeds United.

'Not as great as Liverpool and Juventus, no,' the man said calmly, still watching Alex. 'But great on their day.'

He turned to Meera.

'Ask me,' he said to her.

'Eh?' Meera was confused. What was he talking about?

'Ask me the question,' he insisted. 'The one in your head.'

Meera sensed her two best friends were staring at *her* now. She shrugged and looked back at the old man. Yes, she did have question. But it was just such crazy a question to ask. But why not? He'd asked her to ask. So she'd ask.

'Are you a ghost?' Meera said.

'I am,' the man replied calmly. 'And I'm here for a reason.'

Meera felt her two friends push themselves back against the internationals board. Their eyes were huge now. Alex was trying to cough. They'd both seen straight through the man, too, realising there was something amiss. Very amiss. Now he'd said he was a ghost. And the corridor had gone ever colder.

Silence.

Then they heard more booms and smelt fire or fireworks. A draft of cold wind tunnelled up the corridor.



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‘Don’t worry,’ the ghost said. ‘Those noises you can hear. The smoke. The barbed wire. They are from my past. You’ve heard of the Great War?’

The three children nodded.

‘World War One,’ Kofi said, his voice cracking with fear in his dry throat. He was still backed up against the international board.

‘You said,’ Meera began. ‘You said... that you are here for a reason...’

‘That’s right,’ the ghost replied, his eye twitching. ‘I wonder... well... the reason I am here... is... I wondered if you three would accept a challenge?’

None of the children replied.

The ghost tried again. ‘To investigate three mysteries.’

‘What sort of mysteries?’ Meera was intrigued now.

‘Three mysteries related to Leeds United that I need you to solve.’

‘Why?’ Alex asked.

‘It’s a test,’ the ghost replied. ‘And... you’re the children of Leeds, aren’t you? And I’m here because it’s the centenary of Leeds United this week. It’s a big moment. I need to know the future is going to be okay for the club. And for the city.’

Again, none of the children responded.

‘But maybe the children of Leeds *aren’t* up to it?’ the man suggested. ‘That’s my worry now. Maybe the children of London or Liverpool or Manchester are better than you?’

‘We’re up for it,’ Meera stepped forward. ‘The children of Leeds are up for anything.’ She glared at Kofi and Alex, who both stepped forward too, but not as close to the ghost as she was.

‘What do we have to do, then?’ Kofi asked.

‘I’ll set you three mysteries,’ the ghost said. ‘You have to solve them and say what you’ve learned.’

‘That’s all?’ Alex added.

The man nodded.

‘What do we win?’ Kofi butted in.

The ghost laughed, his shoulders shaking. ‘You want a reward? Of course you’ll need a reward. How about... how about a season ticket to watch the football team of your choice this season?’



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‘How can you buy us season tickets?’ Meera snapped. ‘You’re a ghost.’

‘I have ways,’ the ghost smiled.

‘But a Liverpool season ticket?’ Meera asked.

‘A Juventus season ticket?’ Kofi said.

‘Here? Every week?’ Alex gasped. ‘At Leeds?’

The man nodded. ‘Yes. If that’s what each of you choose.’

They sat at the back of the coach on the return journey to school, swinging round the roundabout under the M621.

‘Tell me what he said again,’ Kofi asked Meera. ‘The first mystery we have to solve.’

Meera tried to remember what the ghost had said word for word once they had agreed to his challenge. ‘He said we have to find the 1950s Ronaldo,’ she replied. ‘He heard you saying you like Juventus and Ronaldo, I suppose.’

‘By midday tomorrow?’ Kofi added.

‘That’s what he asked,’ Meera frowned.

Alex had not said a word since they’d left Elland Road. He’d been thinking about the ghost man. Just who was he? There was something in the back of his mind – out of his reach – that made him think he knew who the ghost might be.

‘I don’t get it,’ Kofi said, interrupting Alex’s thoughts.

Alex breathed in. The idea of winning a season ticket to watch Leeds was thrilling. His mum would never be able to afford that. But another thought was even more incredible.

The man. He *was* familiar.

‘What’s up?’ Kofi asked.

Alex frowned. ‘I don’t know who the 1950s Ronaldo is, but I think... I think I know who that ghost was...’

Can the children solve the first mystery? Who was the 1950s version of Cristiano Ronaldo? They have one day to solve it. Can you solve it before them? And has Alex really worked out who the ghostly figure is that set them their challenge?



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Chapter 1 - WORD OF THE DAY is ... instinctively

