

RED CARD

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Charlie Connor twisted his cleats in the dirt, cocked his bat high, and locked eyes with the pitcher. He had no idea that he was about to swing a baseball bat for the last time.

The next pitch was a curveball that didn't curve enough. Charlie lashed it and sprang out of the box, his eyes on the white dot rising into blue sky. Tearing around first base, he saw the ball fly over the fence. He pumped a fist, eased into a lope, and soaked in the roar from his dugout. As Charlie rounded third base, he saw his teammates hopping in unison around home plate. He pulled the helmet off his sandy mop and leaped into the scrum. Big hands rained on his thick shoulders, until he finally wriggled free. Charlie gathered his helmet and jogged over to his parents by the fence behind first base.

"Nice hit, son," Jack Connor said. "Now get home quick as you can."

Charlie squinted. "Didn't hear you once today, now you're tellin' me to hurry home?"

"I got something to show you, Charlie. Get a move on."

Jack stepped toward the lot. Charlie looked at his mom. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's been distracted all afternoon," Liz Connor said. "I better catch him, before he leaves without me. Great game, Charlie, see ya at home."

Charlie turned and Brigitte Nock stood waiting, her long blond hair sparkling in the sun. She leaned in and pecked his cheek. "That was some rocket, CC. Wanna come over, take a swim?"

"Sure, Bridgy, but I gotta go home first."

Charlie trotted to the dugout to collect his gear, the thrill of his home run stolen by his dad. Fifty yards away his mom hustled across the lot, her brown curls bouncing on her shoulders. Jack had slid into his black Mercedes. Liz got in and slammed the door. "Charlie homers to win the summer league, and you're all strung out," she snapped. "Jack, what's goin' on?"

Jack fired up the engine. “When Charlie gets home, we’ll celebrate together.”

“Celebrate? What are you talking about?”

“Twenty minutes, it’ll be worth the wait.”

Liz rolled her eyes. “You and your damn games.”

They rode in near silence until Jack pulled in front of their house, set on three flat acres in Fairlawn, Virginia. Once inside, Liz sat at the kitchen table and busied herself with the last empty squares of a crossword puzzle. Jack fetched a can of stout and stepped out to the deck. Minutes later he was on his last gulp when he heard Charlie pull in. Jack stepped in and sat with Liz. Charlie walked in, put down his bag, and slid his six-foot, one-inch frame into a chair. “Okay, Dad, what’s goin’ on?”

“Remember your soccer game against Reston last month?” Jack asked.

“Course, scored three goals. What about it?”

“You recall the guy filming the match?” Jack asked.

“He said he was with some club in England, but you didn’t believe him.”

A playful grin lit Jack’s face. He took a letter from his shirt pocket and held it up. Charlie and Liz recognized the logo, a red dragon leaning its head into a soccer ball, over the letters BUFC. Burnchester United, the top team in England, the world’s most famous club. Jack read out loud.

“Dear Mr. and Mrs. Connor, Burnchester United Football Club hired a videographer this summer to shoot elite club matches around the U.S. Only one player caught our eye – your son. We are impressed with Charlie’s speed, quickness, and agility, his ball skills, and his aptitude for the game. Alex Charnock would like him to visit Burnchester the third weekend in August. He will be one of twenty recruits trying out for five open positions on our academy team. Please send your phone number to the email listed below. Alex will call you Monday, August 13, at noon your time. Martin Brewer, Academy Team Manager, Burnchester United Football Club.”

Jack set his eyes on Charlie. “Burn U, Charlie!”

“Somebody’s playin’ a joke, Dad. I mean, they see me play once and they wanna fly me to England?”

Liz spoke. "These are the best soccer minds in the world, Charlie. They can watch a match for ten minutes, peg every player."

Charlie blew out a long breath. "What if I try out and they like me?"

"They'll ask you to stay," Jack said.

"What about school?"

"You'd go to school at their academy."

"I'm sixteen years old, not movin' to England."

"England's in your blood, son," Jack said. "You and me, both born there. Heck, you even have English citizenship." Jack stood. "I'll pop Alex an email. We'll hear him out, no harm in that."

Jack rested a hand on Charlie's shoulder. "That was some home run, Kid, great way to end your baseball career."

"Say what?"

"It's time to go all in on soccer, Charlie. I should've stopped your baseball years ago. Your buddy Kit quit baseball and now he's the starting keeper on the U.S. under-twenty team. You know why you're not in the national team pool? Some blockhead at U.S. Soccer doesn't like you playing baseball."

"Sure, Jack," Liz cut in, "never mind that you cussed out the coach three years ago after Charlie didn't make the Olympic Development team. Or that you're still bitter about being cut from the national team yourself."

Jack ran a hand over his short red bristles. "Look, Charlie had a bum ankle at that tryout. Hell, back then he was five-foot-three, now he's a man. But screw U.S. Soccer, Burnchester knows talent when they see it."

Jack jabbed a finger at Charlie. "Not a word about this to anyone, not Kit, not Brigitte, not your sister. I don't want reporters crawling up our gutters, not yet anyway."

Jack stepped away but spun back. "I saw you chewing tobacco today."

"I'm tryin' to quit, but somebody always has a can."

"Didn't they ban chew in this league?" Jack asked.

“Yeah, but Coach Watkins works for U.S. Tobacco.”

“You gotta stop now, son. Gimme your tin.”

Charlie rummaged through his equipment bag. “Nothin’ here.”

Jack snatched the bag and fished out a small green can. He took off the lid to reveal an inside bare except for a few shavings stuck to the bottom. Turning the can over, he read the date. *Made August 7.*

Jack eyed Charlie. “You chewed this in three days?”

“Shared it with the guys. You think I’m bad, Kit blows through a can a day.”

“Nice deflection, son. That shit’s poison. Quit now.”

“Okay, I quit chew, you quit cigars.”

“Cigars are harmless, I don’t inhale.”

“Neither do I.”

Jack slapped the table. “Never again, got it?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

Jack walked out. Charlie looked at Liz. “Dad’s unhinged.”

“He’s very excited for you, Charlie.”

“Yeah, but no more baseball?”

“We’ll see what happens with Burnchester.”

Liz picked the can off the table. “Dad’s right about the tobacco, you need to quit now.”

“I will, promise.” Charlie got out his phone and tapped a text. *Bridgy, I’m beat, call u tomorrow.*

He stood. “I’m gonna head up, chill for a bit.”

Charlie climbed up to his room. Stepping over the shirts, shorts, and socks littering the white carpet, he scooped a hiking boot off the closet floor and fished out a tin of wintergreen tobacco. Charlie removed the lid, pinched a wad, and stuck it in his lower gum. On his desk he spotted his large orange cup with the Virginia Cavaliers logo, his spittoon. He grabbed it, pushed up his window, and climbed onto the flat roof over the family room.

This was Charlie's space, his escape. He settled into his deck chair and gazed out at his backyard. A red cedar deck ran the length of the house. Steps off the deck led to a pool – the hangout for Charlie, his pals, and now, Brigitte Nock. Past the pool a large flat lawn stretched to a stand of tall pines. In the center of the lawn sat a manicured field, forty yards by forty yards, framed by white chalk. Known as the Square, this is where Charlie had learned to master a soccer ball.

A full-sized goal stood at the far end. On the other sides sat three undersized goals, each a full eight feet high but only four feet wide. Jack had put them up years ago to help Charlie hone his aim. *Forget about twenty-four feet by eight feet, his dad had told him, your goal is four feet by eight feet.* From any angle, Charlie had learned to strike the one window beyond the keeper's reach. To the side of the Square sat a trampoline, the springs worn thin from Charlie's bicycle kicks. The hardest kick in soccer, Charlie had honed it into a potent weapon.

Charlie leaned back in his chair. The sun had sunk behind the pines, their long shadows stretching to the edge of the Square. Charlie closed his eyes. *Dad is so jacked up. When he talks about Burnchester, his eyes bulge out of his face.*

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For the next few days Charlie bounced between excitement and fear. He spent mornings pushing a ball on the Square, afternoons lounging by the pool with Brigitte. He ached to tell her about Burnchester, but he couldn't cross his dad. On Sunday night, Charlie crawled into bed and watched movies on his iPad. At last he shut off his light, but he could not shut off his brain. *I'm talking to Alex Charnock tomorrow. Pretty cool, and pretty scary.*

Charlie rose the next morning and fixed his usual breakfast, a toasted everything bagel topped with cream cheese. He stepped onto the sunlit deck and slid into a chair. After three bites he pushed the bagel aside, walked to the pool, dove in, and swam a half-mile. Toweling off, he noticed a ball in the grass. He walked over, flicked it up, and jogged to the trampoline, where he smashed ten bicycle kicks into the netting with each bare foot.

Sweat dotting his brow, Charlie went in, showered, and put on a T-shirt and shorts. He checked his watch, fifteen minutes until the call. He went down to the den, where his parents had gathered. Jack looked up from his note pad. "You look tight, Kid, relax."

"You'll handle the call, right, Dad?"

"I'll lead, but be ready for questions. Tell Alex how much you love the game, thrive on the competition."

Charlie doodled on his pad, scratched out a goal, drew a bunch of lines curving into the corners. At noon the phone buzzed, and Jack hit the button. "Jack Connor."

"Good afternoon, Jack, Alex Charnock here."

"Hello, Mister Charnock. I'm here with Charlie and my wife, Liz."

"Greetings, Connors, and please call me Alex."

"We were thrilled to get your letter, Alex," Jack said. "I've followed Burnchester since I was a kid. Liz and I went to a bunch of matches while I was in graduate school in London."

"Glad to hear it, Jack," Alex replied. "Charlie, we were quite taken by your play. Could you tell me about your soccer background?"

"I've been kickin' a ball since I could walk, sir. Guess it's in my genes."

"Jack, Liz, did you play?" Alex asked.

"I was an All-American striker at Colgate University and hold the school record for most goals in a season," Jack boasted, as if reading off a press release. "Almost made the U.S. national team, but I didn't have Charlie's speed. He got that from his mom. She was a sprinter in college, ran like a hunted deer."

Liz leaned over the phone. "Alex, can you tell us about next weekend?"

"We've invited twenty players, five of whom will be selected to join the academy," Alex began. "We run each player through drills on Saturday, play a match on Sunday. The match will be filmed by cameras that move on cables above the pitch. The cameras allow us to track each player through the entire match."

Charlie stared at the phone, mesmerized by Alex's accent. Alex went on. "Our players are with us nine months a year. During the week, they attend school and train. On weekends they play matches against academy teams run by other professional clubs."

"Alex, what percentage of your academy players go on to become professionals?" Liz asked.

"Roughly two out of three," Alex replied. "Seven of the eighteen players on the current Burnchester United roster rose through our academy. Many more academy graduates go on to play for other professional clubs. Forgive my lack of modesty, but our academy is the model others try to emulate."

Charlie nodded along. *Man, this guy is smooth.*

Liz asked, "The other invited players, where are they from?"

"We scout on five continents," Alex replied. "Most of this year's recruits are from Europe."

"Your letter said Charlie would be the only American," Liz followed. "Americans are not especially popular outside the U.S. How would Charlie be received at Burnchester?"

"Times have changed, Liz," Alex said. "Several Americans play in the English Elite League, play quite well, I might add."

"But Charlie would be the first American invited to try out for your academy."

"That's true, but we've never seen a Charlie Connor before."

Charlie grinned. Liz reviewed her notes. "Charlie turns seventeen next month. He'll start his junior year in high school. How would you structure his education?"

"We design a flexible curriculum," Alex said. "Our teachers all have master's degrees, most hold doctorates. I think you'll like our school."

Alex described the school and then asked if the Connors had further questions. Jack motioned at Liz and Charlie, who shook their heads. Jack spoke. "Alex, may we talk this over and call you tomorrow?"

"Of course. Should any questions arise, call me any time."

Jack ended the call. "Reaction?"

“I can’t believe I just talked to Alex Charnock,” Charlie said.

“He’s an old pro, has all the right answers,” Liz added.

Jack stood. “I say we go. If they like Charlie, we consider it. If not, it’s a free trip to London.”

Liz looked at Charlie. “What do you think?”

“I wanna see how I could do. But it’s scary. I mean, if I make the team, you wouldn’t make me go, right?”

“Course not, Kid,” Jack said. “Look, I’ll call Alex tomorrow and tell him we’re coming. And remember, we keep this to ourselves.”

“How do we keep this from Morgan?” Liz asked.

“Got it covered,” Jack said. “Mom’s keeping her an extra week.”

“You arranged that before we spoke with Alex?” Liz asked.

“I was pretty sure Charlie wanted to go.”

Liz leveled her eyes on Jack. “Remember, Jack, this is Charlie’s tryout, not yours.”

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Charlie spent the next few hours training on the Square, pretending he was decked out in Burnchester red. After a shower he was sprawled on his bed when his phone dinged, a call from Brigitte. He let it go. *Dad would kill me if I told her, and I know I would.* Charlie’s eyes ran to the photos on his desk. In one he stood with Kit – his neighbor, teammate, and best pal since kindergarten. They could pass for brothers, both tall and sinewy, both with thick blond hair and hazel eyes. Charlie and Kit had vowed to win scholarships to the University of Virginia. Someday, they hoped to wear their country’s shirt. Kit was already in the national team pool, Charlie was not. Perhaps Charlie’s day would come; he knew his dad would not rest until it did.

Charlie eyed another photo, showing him and his sister Morgan in their soccer uniforms. He had taught her the game on the Square, and the sport had kept them close ever since. Charlie wanted to tell Morgan about the letter; he knew she would be proud. He also knew that she would not want her big brother moving to England.

That night Charlie climbed onto the roof, sat, and stuck in a fresh wad. Watching the sun edge below the pines, he reflected on the call. He liked Charnock. He wanted to try out, see how he measured up against the best players in the world his age. But questions hovered. *This is happening so fast. I mean, do I really want to do this? Could I move to England, on my own? Leave my family, Brigitte, and Kit?*

Charlie flexed his lower lip, squeezing the tobacco against his teeth. He hit on an idea. *If Burnchester doesn't feel right, I'll tank the tryout. Nothing Dad could do about that.*