

CHAPTER



The atmosphere in the stadium was electric. I've *always* wanted to say that. Commentators on TV are always saying stuff like that but I never really knew what they meant until now. My first live game among a crowd of real live people.

I'd never seen this many people in one place: a great organism vibrating together as one. The air was thick with the smell of meat pies, anticipation and human sweat. The stadium lights made everything sparkle. I had so much energy pumping through me, I could barely stay in my seat and the game hadn't even started yet.

I peeked over at my best friend, Kai, who had

the same wide-eyed expression that I must have had. His head kept swivelling back and forth like he was at the Wimbledon final. It *was* a little overwhelming. Mum and Dad were correct: there were a LOT of people here and the plastic seats were much harder than our armchairs. Plus, I had to line up for the ladies' toilets for seven minutes! I could have ducked into the male toilets with Kai and been in and out in two minutes.

But still, it felt like the right decision. This might be my only chance to see Australia play IRL.

Kai finally dragged his eyes from the field. 'Did you know that the ice creams here are 120 per cent more expensive than the supermarket?'

Part of our prize was \$50 worth of food from the kiosk EACH and Kai had spent \$43.75 straight up. He was somehow balancing popcorn, a can of soft drink, a pie and an ice cream.

'Hmm.'

'Dad would call that daylight robbery.' He unwrapped his expensive ice cream and took a giant bite.

'Lucky we're not paying then.' I grinned and

turned back to the field.

I was way too excited to eat yet and definitely too excited to think about the price of ice creams.

There was one person in the stadium who wasn't excited, though. My brother, Novak. He was wearing his usual black fedora and an expression that suggested he was about to be fed to the lions, gladiator style. Did he not realise he was about to witness some of the greatest soccer to be played on Australian soil? He was definitely not part of the great organism.

I still couldn't believe he'd agreed to come. I'd tried a bunch of times, but hadn't been able to convince Mum and Dad, and Kai's dad was working, so I'd begged Novak to take us. I thought he'd say no for sure, but he'd just paused and asked if they sold hot chips with chicken salt at the stadium. I wasn't one hundred per cent sure about the chicken salt, but obviously I said yes immediately. Then he'd shrugged and said, 'Okay, it will be fun to hang.' So weird!

But now Novak had finished his hot chips with chicken salt (they did have it) and he didn't look

like he was having any fun hanging out. He would occasionally peer out from beneath his hat, before scurrying back under like a nervous squirrel. And at times his right hand would jiggle as if he was strumming an invisible guitar. Probably regretting trading a jam session for greasy chips.

But forget Novak! Our seats were incredible. There was only one row in front of us and it was filled with people wearing suits and an air of importance. Probably sponsors or officials or something boring like that. We were one row away from being official and boring!

The crowd started to roar and I turned to see the players running out of the tunnel.

I grabbed Kai's arm. 'There's Alex Burr! Look! Right there. In the golden boots. She's right in front of us!'

Kai nodded without taking his eyes from the field.

'And there's Ferguson from Canada! And Chang!' I couldn't believe I was seeing these players in the flesh.

The next person I spotted made me gulp.

Coach Jorge, the Aussie coach, standing on the sideline right in front of us with his arms folded and perfectly gelled hair. We were only metres away from him. I thought I could almost smell the mint of his chewing gum. If I tried hard enough I might even be able to hear him whisper secret tactics to the players!

One of the suited men in front of us turned around and smiled. 'Looking forward to the match? You'll enjoy the half-time show. They even have fireworks.'

I nodded. 'Yep! I'm excited to see if Coach Jorge utilises Ellie Moy's left foot in a 4-2-4 formation and whether he relies on the offside trap to catch the Canadian strikers out, which obviously happened a lot against Japan in 2023.'

The man blinked several times in quick succession, then turned back to face the field without speaking. I tapped him on the shoulder.

'I like fireworks too though,' I assured him.

Before he could respond, everyone around us stood up. For a moment it felt like we were sinking, and Kai and I jumped up on our seats to

see what was going on. Novak stood like the rest of the crowd. He looked in almost physical pain as he took off his silly hat and leant away from the guy next to him, as though being a sports fan was contagious.

After the Welcome to Country, a woman in a long sparkly dress came out and sang the national anthem. We were so close it was as if she was singing just to me! I sang at the top of my voice while Kai mouthed the words. Novak didn't even pretend to sing (probably trying to prove some point, known only to him).

When it finished, the man in front of us started whispering to the lady beside him. Then they both turned and stared directly at us. Obviously they hadn't been taught that it was rude to stare! The lady was wearing a grey suit and bright red glasses. Her long black hair looked to have been carefully curled and sprayed, which all seemed very out of place at a soccer match. But she *was* in the boring row so perhaps she was someone important. She did kind of look familiar. Was she going to mention the fireworks as well? Or say

something about us standing on the seats? Her eyes jumped from me to Kai to Novak, who was saying something I couldn't hear over the crowd.

‘What was that?’ I asked Novak as we sat down.

‘She has a new album out,’ Novak said. ‘The singer,’ he added when I didn’t respond. He pointed at the field. ‘Heavy R & B influence.’

‘Oh, okay.’

Like I cared about the singer’s new album! I was more concerned with the game. Not to mention the lady who kept staring at us. Maybe we weren’t allowed to stand on the seats. But I couldn’t have seen otherwise. My stomach flip-flopped as the players took up their positions. This was only a friendly match but we needed a show of strength. Especially after our recent disastrous results.

The whistle blew, the crowd cheered and the lady finally turned back around as the game got underway. The Canadians started well. Their passing was quick and precise, while the Aussies looked sluggish every time they got the ball. The Aussies did a lot of defending in the first ten minutes and then *bam!* Ferguson from Canada

made a break down the right side and tapped it easily past our keeper. *Ugh*. 0–1 down! I groaned along with Kai and every other Australian in the crowd except Novak, who had disappeared, probably to buy more hot chips. Then, only two minutes later, one of our defenders scored an own goal while trying to clear a corner kick. 0–2 down! The stadium was totally *not* electric, except maybe for the few Canadian supporters in Section 234. Not the start we wanted at all.

At half-time, I watched Coach Jorge lead his players to the dressing room, his jaw tightly clenched as usual. I wondered what he might say to them. What substitutions he might make and secret tactics he'd use to claw back a victory. My mind wandered to what Mum and Dad would be muttering in their armchairs at home. They'd be thinking what I was thinking.

I turned to Kai. 'We have too many defensive players. We need to bring Burr and Moy on to put pressure on Canada. What's the point of having all these defenders on when we need to score?'

'I was thinking the same.' Kai frowned.

‘We need to move to a 4-2-4 formation asap.’

‘Definitely. Move Frederick to the midfield and they can get the ball to Burr and Moy.’

I crossed my arms. If I were the coach, I’d know exactly what to do.



As Coach Jorge marched back onto the field for the second half, I cupped my mouth with one hand and called out, ‘Hey, Coach, bring on Burr and Moy!’

‘Stop it!’ Kai gave an embarrassed laugh and grabbed my arm.

Coach Jorge didn’t respond. Maybe he hadn’t heard me.

‘Move Frederick to the midfield!’ I yelled louder this time.

Kai sank down in his seat. ‘I don’t know you, okay?’

I poked my tongue out at him and he grinned back at me.

The lady in the grey suit turned around and stared at me again. What? I was only trying to help. And Coach Jorge hadn’t heard me anyway.

The referee blew the whistle and the second half began. I was surprised to see that Coach Jorge hadn't made any changes to the team! Did he even *have* secret tactics? I bounced up and down nervously in my seat. I could think of half-a-dozen things I would do, but he was just staring straight ahead.

With twelve minutes of the match remaining, Coach Jorge started pacing up and down in front of us. At least he wasn't staring into space anymore. Actually, now he looked like he might have a heart attack. I didn't want him to have a heart attack. We needed him. He was the best coach since Coach Simic took the Aussies all the way to the World Cup semifinals. He was also the only coach we'd had since then. Maybe he just needed a few suggestions?

I turned to Kai. 'The other option is to put Moy into the midfield.'

Kai nodded, and the lady in front of us looked over her shoulder at us yet again. Geez, these people were kind of annoying. Maybe Mum *was* a bit right. Maybe it is better watching the games at home, without all the distractions.

But, you do get to see things at the stadium that are never shown on TV. Like the way the goalies pace back and forth, eyes darting, even when the action is at the other end. The way the players on the bench bounce their knees, impatiently waiting for their chance. The way the crowd groans or cheers as one. When else do you ever have tens of thousands of people expressing the same feeling at the same time?

Kai turned to me with a mouth full of popcorn. ‘We need to attack the left side more. Their goalkeeper misses far more on that side.’

‘You’re right. And we could utilise Moy’s left foot there. Worked well against Indonesia last year.’

This time the lady swivelled her whole body around so that she was looking directly at me and Kai, her eyebrows furrowed. Was she going to tell us to be quiet? Or get mad at us for standing on the seats?

Instead, she reached into the pocket of her jacket, handed me a business card and said, ‘I want you to call me on Monday.’