

Champions League Challengers – Day 5

Alex looked down at the ground. 'Are you OK?' said Freddy, 'You look terrible'. 'No, to tell you the truth, I'm not OK. Really not'. ***** 'So what's up?' said Freddy, as Alex trudged slowly off towards his house beyond the playing fields. 'Well, y'know...' 'No. I don't know. Can I help? Anything I can do?' 'You could get me a present'. 'Eh?' Alex looked even more sad, and Freddy thought he was going to start crying. 'It's my birthday today'. 'You're JOKING! It's your birthday, and you didn't tell anyone? Well, come on. Come back here, let's tell the others'. 'No'. Alex spoke firmly and carefully, 'I don't really do birthdays... not since... well you know...' Freddy stared at his friend and saw the deep sadness etched into his face. Ever since November, when Alex had appeared at Jaz's birthday party in the most dramatic circumstances, he had retained an aura of mystique about him. A look on his face and the way he behaved that said I'm Alex, don't mess with me. But that same look often seemed to be indicating I'm kind of lonely, and maybe a bit scared. When he got on the football pitch, Alex was different, full of confidence, flowing moves and intelligent passing. But off it, Wednesday 21 March 2007 Champions League Challengers 138 there was something sad about him. Even though he was a little older than them, he often looked like he needed looking after. 'So what do you want to do, then?' said Freddy. 'I dunno, I guess I'll just go home, have some tea, y'know' 'Why don't I come with you?' Freddy said, without really thinking. He'd only been to the house once, and had briefly met the lady who looked after Alex, but it was a very short visit. Come to think of it, he didn't really know much about Alex at all. 'You want to come over?' said Alex, doubtfully. 'Yeh, why not? I just need to tell Mum' 'OK. Come then. I'll phone Jan'. Alex's features perked up for the first time in what seemed to Freddy like weeks. He smiled weakly from beneath his shock of blonde hair. ***** Freddy passed by his own house to say that he would walk home with Alex. When he came back out to the street, Alex was talking busily into a mobile phone. Why did he have a phone? It's not fair! When I'm twelve I want a phone, too, thought Freddy frustratedly. And what a phone it was! It had a set of glowing lights on the front, and didn't seem to have any buttons to press at all, just a cool black screen. Alex coolly flipped it shut. 'Prototype' 'Proto? what?' 'It's a prototype, a new phone that is not for sale yet. I'm just testing it out'. Why's HE testing it out? thought Freddy. ***** Champions League Challengers 139 They reached the house, which was not far from Hardy's, up the hill and beyond the pitch. Alex went up to the front door and held his phone up to a small black box on the doorframe. The door opened instantly and noiselessly. Freddy stared. 'Oh hi, Alex, how are you? Had a good birthday?' Alex grunted and threw his bag in the corner. The voice was that of Jan, who Freddy had met just before Christmas when she had come to watch part of one of their matches. Alex had once explained that Jan was his friend, but was also the person who looked after him now that he was on his own. Freddy looked around the big entrance hall. The house was old on the outside, but quite modern on the inside, with lots of glass and mirrors, and polished wood. The floors were also shiny and the whole place looked very very clean. A single birthday card stood on a glass shelf in the open-plan sitting room. 'So guys, whaddaya doin' here?' asked Jan pleasantly. Her accent was a bit like Lisa off The Simpsons. 'How's soccer goin', Freddy?' 'Football's fine, thanks', corrected Freddy, 'you know we might be going to the Champions League?' 'You're gonna play in the soccer finals, WOW!' It was clear that Jan did not understand that much about football. 'Not play, no', explained Freddy patiently, 'but if we win our league, we could get free tickets to Athens'. 'Cool, free seats in the bleachers for the ball game at the play-offs!' 'She means free tickets in the stands at the final', muttered Alex, smiling to himself, 'you do know she's American?' 'Yes I had realised that', replied Freddy, smiling back at Alex. 'You guys should do a tour, we love our soccer in the US. I could fix you up with a few games' Wednesday 21 March 2007 Champions League Challengers 140 'Great', said Freddy unconvincingly. Jan went on, staring out of the window for inspiration. 'Yeah, just imagine that, I could set you up one vacation with a few games against some elementary school freshmen. Imagine you guys jogging out in front of a hundred thousand fans at Yankee stadium. You're dressed in your brand new uniform and sneakers...' Freddy looked at Alex who smiled again (that was three times in one day). 'She means she could set us up one holiday with some

games against some primary school kids. She think we could play at one of the big stadiums in New York. She'd get us new kit and boots'. 'Ah, thanks', said Freddy, laughing. Alex and Jan laughed too. It all sounded a bit far-fetched, but it did lodge an idea somewhere in Freddy's mind. He would come back to that one later.*****He spotted something small, black and shiny lying on the coffee table in front of him. Reaching down to it, he said to Alex, 'Hey what does this do?' 'NO!, Whatever you do, don't touch THAT!' replied Alex, jumping over the sofa to where Freddy was picking up the object.*****