

Contact

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This novel is set in the future where touch is forbidden, and everyone must wear non-contact (NC) suits. But Cal and his friends are tired of playing by the rules. They want to feel alive. In this section, they organise a real-life game of football.

'Is it safe to play?' Andrew asked.

'Course it is,' Cal said, and he began to take off his NC suit.

The others looked around before they did the same.

They always waited for Cal to take off his NC suit first. He and Andrew had been the first ones to play football without their suits. Then Tariq and Jenna had joined in – and then, over many months, their numbers had grown to ten true and trusted friends.

Cal kicked off his NC suit and stood in his shorts, NC boots and a T-shirt. The others did the same. Cal took a deep breath and raised his hands to the sky. The air dancing over his skin felt like a whisper from heaven. A slight breeze blew. It was amazing to think that, a year ago, Cal hadn't even known how good a breeze could feel as it sighed across his face.

Cal and the others stood in a circle, hand in hand. Cal marvelled at the feel of real fingers. Not virtual fingers or fingers enclosed in an NC glove but real live fingers! Clammy, sweaty, warm, soft, wonderful fingers! Even the best NC suit couldn't match that feeling of contact.

'Ready?' Cal asked everyone.

They all nodded.

'All for one and one for all and no one must know!' they all chanted. 'Let's play!'

Tariq threw out the ball – it was a home-made one they'd made out of scrap plastic packed with soft wadding – and the game began.

Real tackles. Contact!

Real elbows. Contact!

And then Andrew scored a goal. Everyone gathered round him to pat him on the back or hug him or lift him into the air, even the players on the other side.

Cal beamed at everyone as they ran up and down the pitch. It was like being truly human for one afternoon a month. Only on this wasteland pitch did he feel alive. He loved its rough, broken surface – nothing like the perfect green grass of the virtual pitch. The result didn't matter. The game did. No screens, no computer programs, just real kids! Cal felt sure that flying and swooping and soaring couldn't be any better than the contact of real football.

Chapter 5, 'Kit' – Chapter 6, 'Pitch'