

CHAPTER ONE

KICK-OFF



It was the last day of the school holidays and it was raining so hard it came down like white sheets. If they had a choice, most kids stayed home. But not the FAB club. They donned welly boots and raincoats and put up umbrellas. Then they ran to join each other at the clubhouse, splashing through puddles and jumping over flooded drains.

Ravi was the first inside, as usual. He insisted on the password before he opened the door to anyone.

“Snotty nose,” said Toby.

“I know,” said Ruth, “I can’t reach my handkerchief. It’s in my trousers underneath my waterproof ones.”



“No,” said Toby, and then shouted, “SNOTTY NOSE is the password.”

Ravi let them in and Jake and Nancy shook their umbrellas all over him.

“Hey, you know the rules!” said Ravi.

“And you know us,” said Jake.

Trevor changed the subject. “Does anyone want cake?”

Everyone did. They poured hot chocolate from their flasks and Trevor cut them all big slabs of banana cake with chocolate buttercream frosting.



“Can you believe our last term at Marypuddle starts tomorrow?” said Ruth.

“Yes,” said Ravi, “next year we will be at Hardy Hills School.”

“I don’t want to leave Marypuddle,” said Toby.

“Yes, Marypuddle has been great since it’s had money to spend on everything,” said Trevor.

“The playground is the best,” said Toby.

“I like all the art supplies,” said Ruth.

“Have you seen how many books are in the library?” said Ravi.

“And now we have a computer room that has computers from this century,” said Nancy.

“Plus the school meals are the best in the world,” said Jake, looking at Trevor.



“I’ve enjoyed working on the meal plans,” said Trevor, “but I’ll have to study more at Hardy Hills next year if I’m going to get good grades.” “Grades aren’t the only important thing in life,” said Ruth, as she licked the frosting from her fingers.

“Yes, there is also football,” said Trevor.

Everyone laughed.

“No, I’m serious. We should think about the Big Match this term.”

“What big match?” asked Nancy.

“What are you talking about, Trevor?” said Ravi.

“Are you guys serious?” said Trevor. “At the end of every school year, there is a football match between Marypuddle and Shiverworth School for Boys.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” said Toby.

“It’s probably because our school loses the match every year,” said Ruth.

“That’s not true,” said Trevor.

“He’s right,” said Jake.

“Marypuddle has won that match.”

Trevor smiled.



“In 1923.”



Ruth said, “Mr Penalty is desperate for Marypuddle to win, but he’s not the best coach. When he can persuade kids to play in the team, they usually just mess about and he lets them. When they play Shiverworth, they aren’t prepared and they lose big.”

“How big?” asked Toby.

Jake said, “Last year the score was 47-1 to Shiverworth.”

“At least Marypuddle scored one goal,” said Toby.

Trevor muttered, “It was an own goal. At that point, Shiverworth weren’t even trying. When

one of the team passed back to the goalie to kick it to the other end, he missed the pass and it went into the goal.”



“I remember that,” said Ruth. “Their coach was furious. I thought he was going to hit the goalie.”

“Yeah, Coach Hardnutt is a piece of work,” said Trevor. “All he cares about is winning.”

“Actually, it seems he cares more about the other team losing,” said Ruth.

“It would be great if Marypuddle could win the game,” said Ravi.

“Yes,” said Jake. “They would have more of a chance if they took the game seriously and had a team that could play together well.”

“What’s the chance of that?” asked Ruth. “Kids only volunteer to play on the Marypuddle team to get out of detention. And when they do, Mr Penalty can’t control them.”

Trevor smiled and looked at them all. “So you’re in?”

“What?” asked Ravi.

“The Big Match is only five-a-side now. Plus substitutes. We could put a team together.”

“No way,” said Ravi.

“You’re mad,” said Nancy.

“No he’s not,” said Ruth. “We could have a go at this. It would be fun. What has Marypuddle got to lose? And besides, Coach Hardnutt is a bully. And aren’t we friends against bullying?”

“Yes,” said Toby, “but some of us aren’t very good at football.”

“Then we can learn,” said Ruth. “We’ll listen to our coach and do what he says. And Ravi can read all about football and give us some tactics.”

“And I can look at the data from professional matches and see which of those tactics work best in our situation,” said Nancy.

“I like kicking a ball around,” said Jake, “but I don’t know much about real games. I’m only going to do this if we all play together.” He looked at Toby and Ravi.

They shrugged as if to say, “Why not?”

Trevor looked at his friends. “Are you in?”

WE'RE IN!



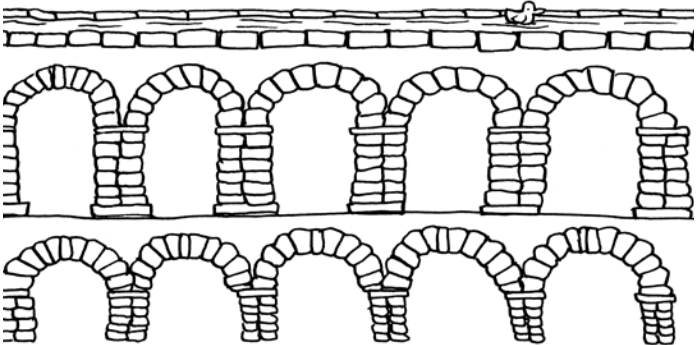
CHAPTER TWO

THE NEW GIRL

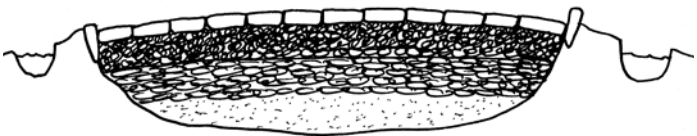


Ruth liked being back at school. She even liked history classes now. They were studying the Romans and she got extra marks in her homework when she drew pictures of Roman technology.

The aqueducts,



the Roman roads,



and how the Romans used to heat their houses.



She bet that those Roman houses were warmer than hers in the winter.

English classes were fun because she, Jake and Trevor were writing a play together. Sometimes the parts they wrote were so funny they couldn't stop giggling and Miss Nohmer would give them hard stares.



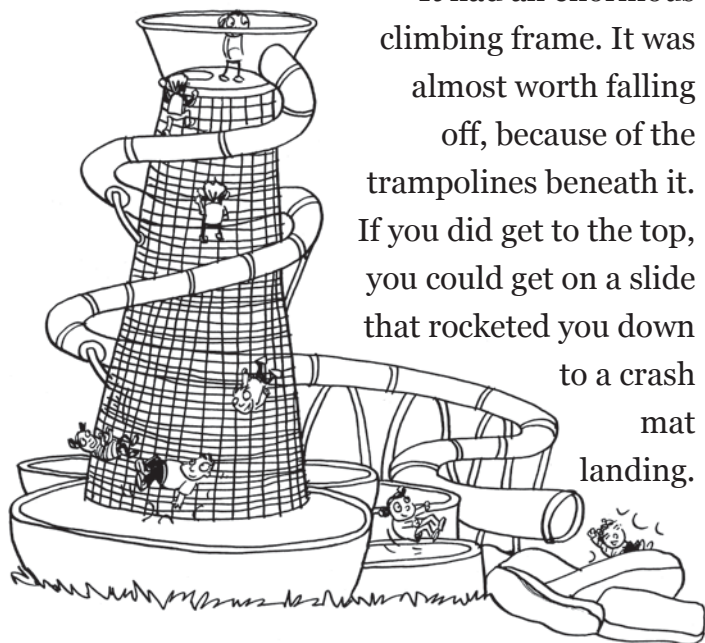
Which made them giggle even more.

But Ruth still liked Art class the best. The school had enough money to pay models for the students to draw. Her favourite model came with a couple of dogs. The kids were allowed to experiment with all sorts of materials, from pastels and charcoal to collages, watercolours, acrylics and oil paints. It was lucky that they wore artist's smocks because Ruth wasn't the tidiest of painters.

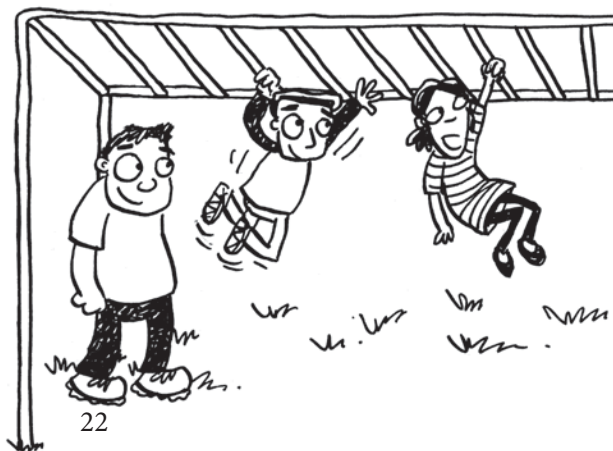


All of the club members were doing better in their classes. The school had the most up-to-date textbooks, which they could borrow all term. And they were able to help each other with their homework when they met in the clubhouse.

But let's be honest, the best time they had at school was when it was break time and they could meet up in the playground. The playground was now awesome.



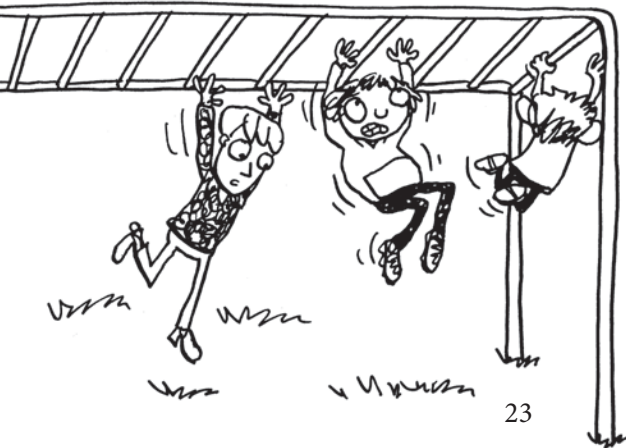
It had an enormous climbing frame. It was almost worth falling off, because of the trampolines beneath it. If you did get to the top, you could get on a slide that rocketed you down to a crash mat landing.



There was a skate park with skateboards and scooters you could borrow.



There were brightly painted monkey bars that were three times as long as the old ones. So far, Toby was the only one who was able to go the distance. But Ruth was getting stronger and was now falling off with only a couple of rungs to go.



One of their favourite parts of the playground was the towering whirly-go-round. They dashed over to use it during the first break. After they got off it, they were so dizzy that they collapsed in a heap. They were all laughing until the boys suddenly stopped. They were staring in the same direction. The direction of a new girl.

Ruth looked at her. She was beautiful. She had long, wavy hair and light brown skin. She was as tall as Ruth, but she moved so smoothly she seemed to float across the playground.

“Who was that?” asked Jake.

“That’s Alisha,” said Trevor.

“Oh,” said Ruth, “so you know her?”

Trevor went bright red. “No, no...er... it’s not that I know her, it’s just that, um, she –”



“She was in our French class just now,” said Ravi. “She’s flippin’ fluent. She lived in Paris for two years before she came here.”

Toby gazed over at her, all moon-faced. “She’s gorgeous, isn’t she?”

Trevor looked at Ruth and then at his shoes. “I suppose so. I mean, I don’t know. I can’t say I’ve noticed.”

“You guys are tragic,” Ruth said, before walking off.

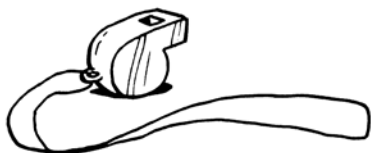
“What does she mean?” asked Toby.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Nancy, and they all went back in as the bell sounded for the next lesson.



CHAPTER THREE


TEAM TRYOUT



At the end of the first week, the notice went up about the football tryout:

Football Tryout
⚽ **Tuesday 4-6pm** ⚽

Wear your outdoor PE kit and bring a water bottle.



TRAINING

Tuesdays and Thursdays 4-6pm
Venue: Marypuddle playing fields
See you there!
Mr Penalty

“This is going to be fun,” said Trevor.

“My dad always says that when we have to do something that isn’t,” said Ravi.

“But we’re all going, aren’t we?” said Trevor, looking crestfallen.



“Yes,” said Nancy, shooting Ravi a warning glare, “we’re all going.”



The FAB club was surprised to see a good dozen or so other kids at the football team tryout.

“Look,” said Toby, “even Alisha is here.” He couldn’t resist waving at her, but she was looking down at her phone and didn’t notice.

“Woop-deee-do,” said Nancy, winking at Ruth. Ruth was watching Trevor closely.

Ravi said, “I guess whatever’s on that phone is a lot more interesting than us.”

Trevor saw Ruth looking at him and she quickly looked away. “Uh-huh,” he said.

The coach blew his whistle to get everyone’s attention. He smiled broadly. “Hello, everyone. I’m Mr Penalty and I’m the coach of the Marypuddle football team. Since there are so many of you this year, I’ll select two teams. Team A will play in the Big Match and Team B will be the substitutes. There will be five of you in each team, so let’s see who’s got what it takes, eh?”



Ravi grumbled to the rest of the FAB club. “Why doesn’t he train everyone and then pick the team at the end?”

“I don’t know,” said Trevor, “but I guess he knows what he’s doing.”

Mr Penalty then pointed at Trevor and Jake. “You two take turns to pick players for your teams this afternoon.”

“Toby,” said Trevor, who knew Toby hated being picked last.

Jake smiled at Trevor. “Nancy.”

“Ravi.”

“Ruth.”

They then picked the rest of the teams at random.

“Well done, boys,” said the coach. He threw a football at Jake. “Now play!”

Jake looked confused. “I’ve never played proper football before, sir.”

Some of the other kids murmured in agreement.



Mr Penalty rolled his eyes to the sky and tutted. “Does anyone know how to play?”

Half of the kids put up their hands, including Trevor and Ruth. Mr Penalty looked at them expectantly.

Ruth began, “Obviously, the aim of the game is to get the ball into the net of the other team’s goal, by kicking it.”

“Or heading it,” said Trevor. “You can’t use your hands.”

“Unless you’re the goalie,” said Ruth.

Mr Penalty filled in a few more of the game’s rules before ushering the kids onto the pitch. Then he blew the whistle.

There was pandemonium. A scrum of kids followed the ball up and down the pitch.



Mr Penalty blew the whistle again.

“You can’t all be on the ball at once. You need to spread out and create space so that

your teammates can pass to you. Look at Alisha. She was the only one who was standing in free space. Why did no one pass to her?”

“I was going to kick it to her,” said one of the short but speedy girls, “but she wasn’t looking at the ball. She was looking at her phone.”



“Okay,” said Mr Penalty, “Alisha, put away your phone and pay attention. That goes for the rest of you too. I’ll give you all your positions and you need to mark the players in the opposite team.” Then he paired up all the players on the field.

Trevor was put in midfield and had to do a lot of running. After twenty minutes he was exhausted. The others were doing okay, all except Toby.

Toby was at the back. He kept being tackled, or tripping over,



and he kept losing the ball. Mr Penalty noticed this and told him to go in goal, where he didn't have to move very far. This was even worse.



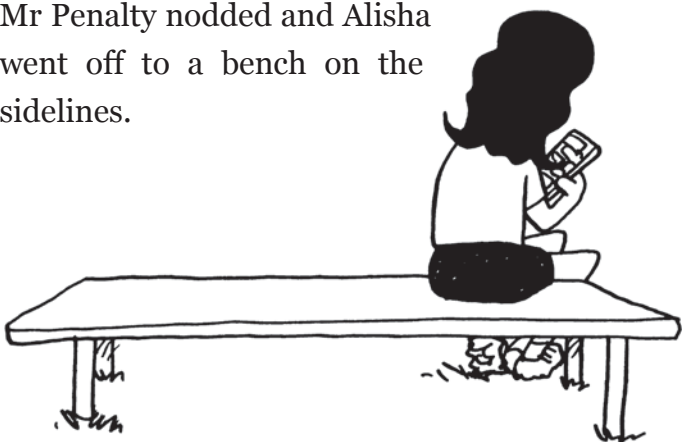
Toby could never work out where the ball was going and always seemed to jump the wrong way. He let in eleven goals. A very puffed-out Trevor asked if he could go in goal instead.

“You’re doing fine, lad,” said Mr Penalty. “You just need to get into shape. And that goes for all of you!” he shouted. “Stop the game! We’re going to spend the last ten minutes running up and down.”

“Oh no,” said Trevor.

“Sir, I’ve ever so slightly sprained my ankle,” said Alisha. “I’m sure it will get better if I go and have a little sit down.”

Mr Penalty nodded and Alisha went off to a bench on the sidelines.



“Okay, everyone, let’s run as fast as you can up to the end of the pitch and back. And keep on going!” said the coach.

By the time the ten minutes were over, Trevor couldn’t speak. He collapsed by the sideline. Jake brought him his water bottle, and when he got his breath back Trevor gulped it all down. “That was terrible,” he said.

“Didn’t you find it fun?” asked Ravi, smiling. “I actually enjoyed myself.”

“It would’ve been better if you were in goal, Trevor,” said Jake.

“I don’t ever want to go in goal again,” said Toby.

Mr Penalty overheard that, and said, “Don’t worry, boy, you won’t.” Then he turned to the rest of the kids and said, “Thanks, everyone. I’ll be posting the team names tomorrow, and then we’ve got a lot of training to do, eh?”

The FAB club walked off the field, grabbed their bags and started to walk home.

“Hey, Ravi,” said Ruth, “you can kick the ball really well.”

“I’m glad,” he said. “I got out every last book on football from the library and have been studying them for days.”

“You played really well as well, Nancy,” said Jake.

“I’ve been watching football skills videos so much it gave me a nosebleed,” said Nancy.



“It’s a thing she has,” said Ravi. “Whenever she gets bored she has a nosebleed.”

“Hey,” said Trevor, “football isn’t boring.”

“It is when you are running up and down for ten minutes,” said Jake. “I am surprised you didn’t get a nosebleed doing that.”

“That was okay,” said Nancy. “You should try watching training videos for five hours straight.”

“You’re a nutcase, Nancy,” said Trevor. “Even I would find that boring!”

“Let’s hope the training sessions are more interesting,” said Ruth.

“Let’s hope we all get on the team,” said Ravi.

“Well, I won’t play unless you’re all playing too,” said Toby.

And the rest of them agreed.