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Chapter 1

Joe kicked the ground in frustration. It was the first thing he had kicked all afternoon.

Joe played left-back on his team, Woodstock Wanderers, but nobody ever passed the ball to him. It wasn't that he was unpopular, just that his team-mates knew that he was likely to lose possession as soon as they gave him the ball.

'You've got two left feet, Joe,' chuckled the coach as they walked off at half-time. Joe wished he *did* have two left feet – as that was the one he actually kicked with. The coach had obviously not noticed because Joe had so few chances to kick the ball.

'Two right feet, you mean,' sniffed Joe.

The coach chuckled again. 'Sorry, Joe….'

Just twice in the first half Joe had seen the ball up close – each time as the opposition winger had nipped past him. His belated attempt at a tackle missed the player by half a metre.

Luckily, neither of these breaks cost his team a goal, and Woodstock were leading 1-0 at the break.

'Nice goal, Robbie,' Joe told the team's star player, who played centre forward.

'Thanks, Joe,' Robbie grinned back.

'Did you see that guy on the far side,' asked Jakob, pointing at a man wearing a long, padded coat that covered his shins, a thick scarf wrapped several times around his neck, and a stylish black hat. 'He looks like a scout – maybe he's from United?'

The boys all turned and stared at the mysterious stranger, who looked nothing like the rest of the spectators – mostly their mums and dads – dressed in anoraks and woolly beanies.

'He's obviously here to have a look at you,' one of the boys blurted, pointing at Robbie.

The striker grinned and shrugged his shoulders. There was no point being modest. He wasn't cocky about it at all, but he – and everyone else – knew he was the best player on the team. By far.

Robbie went on to prove that beyond doubt early in the second half with two excellent goals, one a diving header from a corner.

Joe, meanwhile, managed to execute one successful tackle – although the ball ran away for a throw-in – and also gathered a loose ball which he kicked as far as he could up-field.

He was happy with that contribution, and thought to himself how relieved he was that neither of the opposition's goals were his fault.

But disaster struck with just one minute left on the clock. The Woodstock centre back was hurried into clearing the ball, and a powerful header from midfield propelled the ball all the way back so it bounced into Joe's path. All he had to do was kick it back from where it had come, but in his excitement he took a wild swing at the ball – and slipped.

As his standing leg went from under him, the opposition winger dodged out of the way and collected the ball as it bounced away towards the goal.

Joe was still on his hands and knees in the sticky mud when the winger's shot hit the back of the net. The referee thrust his arm in the air and blew his whistle to signal the goal, and immediately gave two more long blasts of the whistle to denote the end of the game and a 3-3 draw.

Joe's head dropped, but he struggled to his feet and turned to find the quickest route to the dressing room. He stopped to shake the hands of the opposition players he met, but was more concerned with the battle with his own tear ducts, which wanted to run free. Crying would be just too humiliating for him after costing his team two precious league points.

None of his team-mates would look him in the eye as they wandered off, except Robbie, who sought him out to put an arm across his shoulder, congratulate him on a pretty good game, and tell him not to worry about what happened at the end.

In the dressing room Joe changed quickly, keen to get out of there with as little delay as possible. He zipped up his hoodie and slung his bag over his shoulder, muttering a 'see you Tuesday' to the boy next to him before heading for the door.

At that moment, the coach's large frame filled the doorway. He stared down at Joe with a puzzled look on his face.

'Ah… Joe… Can you hang on for a minute, I need to talk to you with your parents.'

Joe's face fell, and his insides felt as if someone had kicked him. His team-mates stared across at him, but no one wanted to meet his eyes.

The coach gave his post-match talk to the boys, but he was clearly distracted by something. Not that Joe noticed, as his mind raced about what the coach was going to say. He was obviously going to drop him, maybe even ask him to leave the club.

The coach finished up and told the team to make sure to be on time for training on Tuesday. He nodded at Joe and signalled for him to go outside.

The parents were milling around, full of chat about the game and their plans for the weekend ahead. Joe's mum gave him a sympathetic look, and his dad put his hand on his shoulder. 'Hard luck, Joe, you were very unlucky at the end there,' he smiled.

Joe smiled awkwardly back, but his gaze was fixed on the door to the changing rooms. Out strode the coach, who made straight for the trio.

‘Joe, Mr Wright, Mrs Wright, can you come with me, I’ve someone who wants to talk to you. He says his name is Fry,’ as he led them away from the gathering of parents and into the car park.

At the end of the line of cars a man was sucking on a cigarette, the smoke drifting into the sky. But Joe didn’t notice that, because he was fixed on what the man wore on his head – a stylish black hat.

Chapter 2

Kim was having a bad day too. She had only taken up rugby the year before, but already she loved it and lived for the training and games with her club, Seaside Spartans. She liked the way everyone had their role, and all shapes and sizes could fit in, and playing in the backs gave her a chance to run with the ball.

But while she enjoyed the excitement of taking the ball under her arm and sidestepping opponents before charging into space, other aspects of her game needed work. She was one of the weakest members of the team, and the coach never tired of pointing that out.

‘You couldn’t tackle your way out of a wet paper bag,’ growled the coach as Kim tumbled into touch while the opposition winger charged up the touchline to score.

Kim hated when the coach was negative – and not just about her.

‘I didn’t do it on purpose,’ she muttered to herself. Her friend, Amy, helped her up and the pair jogged back while the kicker readied herself for the conversion.

‘I hate when coach singles players out,’ agreed Amy. ‘I wish we had a different coach. I’m thinking of giving up.’

‘Oh, please don’t!’ replied Kim. ‘Just ignore his insults and concentrate on getting better. I’ve never enjoyed a sport as much as this and I want to stick with it.’

The Spartans played their home games in the girls’ school grounds, and some of the teachers came along to support them.

‘Hard luck, Kim,’ called out Miss Conlon, everyone’s favourite Geography teacher. ‘You’ll get there, don’t worry.’

Kim smiled and waved back at the teacher who was standing beside a short, dark woman carrying a clipboard.

She knew she had a problem with her tackling technique. She had even studied all the best players in slow motion on YouTube, but when confronted with an opponent in real life all her plans seemed to fall apart.

It was a cold, wet day and there were few chances for anyone to try out their speedy running, however. The game developed into a gritty forward battle with the ball invisible to most spectators – and even players – under a succession of scrums, rucks and mauls.

The coach made a series of substitutions and Kim was moved to full-back where she suddenly felt very vulnerable. She had to concentrate on every play and anticipate what it might mean to her.

There wasn’t much time left in the game when she suddenly realised she was about to take centre stage.

The opposition out-half unleashed a long, low kick into the corner, more than thirty metres from Kim. It was obviously a pre-worked move as the speedy winger was already hurtling towards the ball.

Kim reckoned she was as quick as her opponent, but she had a lot of ground to make up so she slightly changed direction – abandoning getting to the ball first, but giving her a better chance of stopping the winger.

She gambled correctly, and was still moving at top speed when she crashed into her opponent’s thigh. There was a huge cheer from the Spartans’ support, but it didn’t last very long as the winger flipped the ball back over her shoulder. The opposition centre was following in support and easily ran in under the posts.

‘Kim!’ roared the coach, his face turning purple. ‘You should have hit her harder and buried her in touch.’

Kim sank to the ground, breathless and soul-destroyed.

‘Rubbish,’ came a voice. ‘She made the right call to switch focus and hit the winger, and that pass for the try was a total fluke.’

Kim looked up, wondering who had dared to contradict the coach. She saw him turning a deeper purple as he turned to see the woman with the clipboard who had been standing with Miss Conlon.

‘Who are you to say that?’ he sneered.

‘Rugby coach level 4,’ she replied, coolly.

The Spartans’ coach turned away, trying to keep his anger under wraps.

After the conversion was taken, the referee blew the whistle on a 10-0 defeat for Spartans and Amy and Kim trudged unhappily back to the shed in which they changed. The coach gave them a thirty-second telling off, but everyone could see he had been rattled by the comment from the sideline.

‘I really enjoyed that,’ chuckled Amy. ‘It’s good to see him getting a taste of his own medicine.’

Miss Conlon tapped on the door of the shed, and stuck her head inside.

‘Hard luck, Spartans, but there was loads there to encourage us. I think you’ll be winning trophies next season if you keep working.’

The teacher’s friend joined her. ‘Hi, I’m Kelly. I just want to say that I’ve apologised to your coach because although he was wrong, what I said was out of order. I coach some very senior rugby players and I saw plenty of talent here today, so keep working at it.’

Kelly turned and left, but just as Miss Conlon went to join her, she pointed at Kim.

‘Yes, you, Kim. Can you join us outside? Kelly wants to have a word with you.’

Chapter 3

Craig used to like bagels, but now he dreaded every mention of the chewy, O-shaped bread roll. He liked tennis even more than bagels, although his results this indoor season left a lot to be desired.

‘6-0, 6-0, another double bagel,’ sighed the coach of his club’s Under 12 side. ‘That’s four matches in a row you haven’t won a single game.’

Craig shrugged his shoulders. He had worked so hard at getting better, smashing a ball against a wall all afternoon to get his eye in, but he always seemed to freeze when it came to competitive matches.

There were only four under-12 players in Shelbourne LTC, so Craig didn’t have to worry about losing his place, but he was seriously considering just pulling out as the humiliating defeats piled up.

There was a reverse singles round to come, and then a game of doubles, and Craig decided that if he didn’t win another game he would tell his team-mates he had enough.

He joined Andy knocking up on the outside court, wrapped up warm against the chilly air where they had to get used to the weaker light cast by the floodlights.

‘You’ve a really strong forehand,’ his team-mate called out. ‘I don’t understand why you don’t win more games.’

Craig just shrugged his shoulders. He had tried to analyse why he made mistakes, but in the end he decided it wasn’t a technical issue, just that he always seemed to freeze when the pressure of competition came on. He had heard TV commentators talking about tennis players and golfers who ‘choke’ at crucial moments and recognised himself, but the more he tried to fight it the worse he got.

He and Andy smashed balls back at each other for a few minutes longer before they got the signal from their coach that they were needed back inside.

Craig wiped the handle of his racket in a towel and cast his eyes around the large sports hall. It was almost empty – his mother and sister always came along to support him, but the total attendance was still in single figures. He knew them all, or at least he had during the earlier game. Since he had been outside, another spectator had arrived, and as he was wearing a bright turquoise tracksuit it was hard to avoid him.

Craig studied the new arrival – he was sure he’d never seen him before and it was unlikely he was with the opposing team as they were staring and pointing at him just as much as the Shelbourne boys were.

The referee called them all to order and Craig’s reverse singles contest began. He was up against a weaker opponent than earlier, but still he couldn’t get things right. He heeded Andy’s compliment about his forehand, and tried to use it as much as possible, but he seemed to try too hard and overhit the ball out of play.

As he mopped his brow at one of the changeovers, his gaze caught the eye of the man in the loud tracksuit, who was staring intensely at him. Craig was a bit rattled by that and, struggling to concentrate, lost the next game in a rush. Soon, the first set was lost 6-0.

His sister called out some words of encouragement, and it seemed to snap Craig out of his confused and distracted state. He started to focus more on each shot, and soon won a few points. His opponent had been laughing and joking with his team-mates between sets, and Craig’s new drive seemed to rattle him.

Craig found his range with the forehand and soon picked up his first game. Another followed from his opponent’s service, and the deficit was back to 3-2. The other player took a deep breath and sought out his coach, who responded with some hand signals.

Whatever they were seemed to work, and Craig lost the next two games, meaning he was serving to staying in the match. He powered down a brilliant ace, which drew a scream of delight from his sister, and his opponent returned the next two services into the net.

He won the next point too, leaving the score at 5-3. His team-mates all gathered around to watch, and although he battled hard and won a couple of points, in the end he went down 6-3.

‘That’s a much more respectable score,’ grinned his coach. ‘I think we’ve seen there’s a lot more to your game than your results suggest. I’m delighted for you.’

Craig was still grinning when he bounced up the steps to where his mum and sister were sitting.

‘Well done, son,’ smiled his mum. ‘That was a great recovery. We were just talking to that gentleman there who had lots of interesting ideas about how you could improve. Here he comes now.’

Craig turned to see the man in the turquoise tracksuit coming up the steps behind him two at a time.

The man stuck out his hand. ‘Craig, isn’t it. I’m Ingo. You, me, and your mum – we need to talk.’