EVE AINSWORTH



BACK OF THE NET

Illustrated by
LUNA VALENTINE

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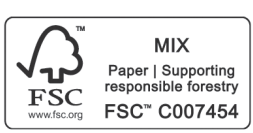
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To David – my beautiful nephew.

Thank you for the squashed bananas,
silly tricks and many laughs

You are so loved xx

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CHAPTER 1

VICTORY IN THE PLAYGROUND

It was a hot, sticky afternoon – but this didn't bother Eva. She was far too focused on the football to notice the sun burning on her back. She moved across the playground, dancing past Sid Matthews, who was far too slow to catch her. Next, she skipped over Tom Williams as he stretched his leg out to tackle her. It was easy, too easy. Eva couldn't help giggling as she volleyed the ball neatly into the back of the net.

Well, it wasn't exactly the back of the net. The ball hit a low brick wall where goalposts

had been marked out in chalk. But that didn't matter to Eva as she whooped with joy.

"Goal!" one of her team-mates screamed.



The other girls gathered around her, laughing and cheering. The game had finished 2–1 against the boys, and that was thanks to Eva's impressive skills. Even she had to admit she was on fire today.

"You were lucky," Tom said with a scowl as he ran to collect the ball. "I'm still recovering from an injury, remember. I shouldn't even be playing."

"Don't be such a sore loser," Jas replied, nudging Eva. "We were the better team – admit it."

"Yeah, and I think you owe us chocolate. Wasn't that the bet?" Emma added.

Tom frowned. He clearly regretted his earlier boast when he said that his group of friends could beat Jas and her team. He knew that Jas, Emma and some of the others played at the weekend for Lightmoor, a local football club, and he should have realised he was taking

a risk. The Lightmoor Lionesses team was known to be one of the best in the area.

"You still think us girls aren't as good as you, don't you?" Emma said, her hands planted firmly on her hips.

Eva stepped back. She was interested to see how Tom would answer this. Emma was hard to argue with when she was wound up.

"I didn't say we were better than you, did I?" Tom replied. "I just thought you'd struggle a bit, but the new girl's good."

He meant Eva, and she felt herself flinch. Eva tugged on the sleeve of her jumper, pulling it down over her hand. She found it weird that she was still called the "new girl". She had been at this school since September, and it was May now.

"You are really good," Tom continued. "Why don't you play with Lightmoor?"

Eva shrugged, replying, “I’m not really that bothered.”

Jas sighed. “We’ve been on at her for ages,” she told Tom. “Eva would fit right into the team. We’d be even better with her.”

“I said I’m not bothered, didn’t I?” Eva pulled a face. “I don’t even like football that much.”

The lie left Eva’s lips too easily.

“Fair enough,” Tom said with a frown, but he didn’t look convinced. “Here. You deserve this.”

Tom handed Eva the large bar of chocolate, and she thanked him. It had already turned soft under the warmth of the sun.

“But you should think again about playing for Lightmoor,” he said as he moved away. “You seem naturally good. Like your brother. I’d give anything to play like him.”

So would I, Eva thought, but she just nodded numbly and handed the chocolate bar to Jas.

She really wasn't that hungry now.