



Chapter One



Marcus pushed open the doors to the canteen and strode into Breakfast Club. The room was bright, airy and warm, filled with the sound of kids talking loudly. The smell of *freshly made toast* and *sweet orange juice* wafted into Marcus's nose.

‘Hey, Marcus!’

A large crowd was huddled around one

of the long, wooden tables that stretched through the canteen. An arm waved above everyone's heads, beckoning him over.

'Hey, Amira,' Marcus said, smiling as he walked towards the table.

'I nominate Marcus to take my turn for me,' Amira announced loudly. All eyes turned on Marcus as he **squished** through the group. They were gathered around a tall, wobbling Jenga tower on the table. He looked up at Amira with an eyebrow raised.

'Are you sure?' he asked.

Amira nodded.

'You left me one of the hardest turns,' Marcus muttered, looking at the tower. He scratched the back of his head. Then, without hesitation, he reached out and expertly tapped a piece. It slid smoothly onto the table,



leaving the rest of the tower completely intact.

An 'oooooooooooo' ~~~~~
rippled through the crowd.

Marcus let out a breath of relief, feeling slightly embarrassed at all the attention. 'See you all later,' he called as he pushed through the crowd again. He walked up to

the hatch to grab his food, smiling at the dinner lady as she handed him a red plastic bowl and a black plastic plate.

Turning round, he spotted his friends Oyin and Patrick sitting at the far corner of the canteen. He made his way over to them, passing more crowds of kids playing board games, doing homework, eating breakfast or just chatting to each other.

‘Hey, Marcus,’ Oyin and Patrick said together as he arrived.

Marcus grinned at his friends. Patrick was big, but he was faster than almost anyone else his age. His thin glasses were kept together by a piece of tape, because he had **broken** them at football practice last week. Oyin was short and had a small afro, and her feet were *magic*.

‘Hey, guys,’ said Marcus, taking a seat on the bench opposite them.

‘What’s on the menu today?’ Patrick asked.

‘Toast and Weetabix,’ Marcus replied, grinning. ‘Only the best fuel for me.’ He gave a quick thumbs up.

‘Yeah, on Weetabix days you’re a **footballing machine** during lunch break. Almost as good as me,’ Oyin said, punching him lightly on the arm.

Marcus’s smile slipped slightly. He felt bad, but he was going to have to make up another excuse to get out of playing with Oyin and Patrick at lunch today. He just hadn’t been able to play properly since he’d lost his ball . . .

Every time he closed his eyes he saw it happen.

He could see his left foot *Slipping* as his right foot *Swung* towards the football.

He could see his toe **smashing** into the ball at the worst angle possible.

He could see the ball **whizzing up, way** over the two backpacks that made up the goal, **way** over the head of the goalkeeper, and **way** over the school fence.

And then it was gone. Lost by the building next to his school. It had happened more than a month ago, but he could still see it all.

‘Hey!’ Oyin poked Marcus’s forehead gently.

‘Is anyone home?’

Marcus blinked hard. ‘What were we talking about again?’ he asked.

‘You were remembering kicking the ball over the fence,’ Patrick said.

Marcus sighed. ‘How did you know?’

‘Marcus, whenever you go quiet these days you’re thinking about that ball,’ Oyin said.

Patrick nodded, taking off his glasses and giving them a good clean before placing them back on his face.

‘I just *know* I can still get it back,’ Marcus muttered.

‘We walked along the whole fence, Marcus, looking through to see if we could see it,’ Oyin said kindly. ‘It just wasn’t there.’

‘Maybe I just wasn’t looking hard enough,’ Marcus said. ‘Maybe I should have gone over.’

‘Marcus, you know the rules,’ Oyin said,

lowering her voice. 'We don't go over the fence if we can't see the ball. **It's too risky.**'

'Yeah, you heard Mrs Miller, right?' said Patrick. Marcus nodded, thinking about their **terrifying** head teacher. 'She's coming down hard on people. It's like getting a **red card**, but in your school life!' Patrick leaned back in his chair. 'I heard that some kid from Maths Club got detention for a month for going over that fence.'

'What's so special about the football anyway?' Oyin asked. Marcus opened his mouth to respond, but before he could speak a deep voice came from behind them.

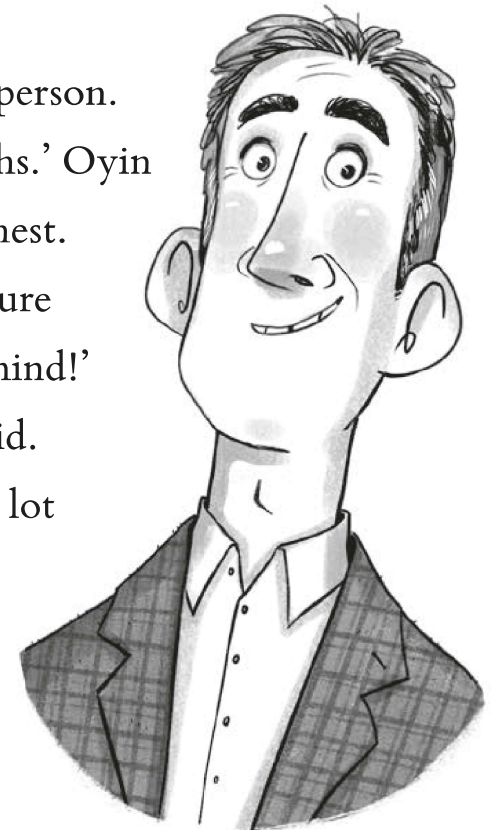
'Ah, here we have our table of young footballers.' Marcus turned to see Mr Anderson, one of his favourite teachers,

smiling at them, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. Mr Anderson was tall and had short grey hair, and every day without fail he wore a tweed jacket with patches sewn on at the elbows. He taught music, but often ran the Breakfast Club too.

'Not just that, we also have a trumpet player,' Patrick said, referring to himself.

'And a maths person. I'm good at maths.' Oyin pointed at her chest.

'Well, I'll be sure to keep that in mind!' Mr Anderson said. 'And I hope you lot have done your homework?'



He raised an eyebrow.

‘Yes, of course we have, Mr Anderson,’ said Oyin quickly.

‘Ah, Oyin, that’s what you always say,’ Mr Anderson sighed. He pretended to roll his eyes, **winked** at them and then walked off.

‘Young footballers?’ Marcus muttered glumly. ‘Not me so much any more, not when I’m still on the bench.’ Just saying that phrase felt difficult, like he was bringing something up from the back of his throat. ‘I have plenty of time for homework.’

‘Yeah, but everyone knows you’re good enough to be a starter, you’re just —’ Patrick paused — ‘a little off right now.’ He pushed his glasses back up his nose.

Marcus looked down at the table.

‘Marcus,’ Oyin began tentatively, ‘why don’t you let us help y—’

‘Thanks for offering,’ Marcus interrupted before she could finish. He forced a smile onto his face. ‘I do appreciate it — I really do — but I already have someone who can help me get my touch back. I just need to wait for her to come back.’

Patrick and Oyin sighed.

Marcus felt awkward under their gaze. ‘I’m going to the bathroom,’ he said, standing up. He knew they meant well, but they didn’t understand that he didn’t need their help. He just had to do what he always did when he was having a **rough patch**. Marcus had to get the help of his cousin, Lola.

He walked out of the canteen and headed down the corridor.

Everything at Rutherford Secondary School was old, from the way the doors locked to the windows that **rattled** when the wind blew violently. Even the forest that **stretched** out behind the school was ancient. But it was all really well maintained. Marcus liked feeling like a *time traveller* here. Even though this was only his first year, it felt as if it was his school.

Marcus slipped his hands into his pockets, blinking in surprise as his right hand brushed up against something. It felt like a piece of paper. He came to a stop in the corridor and pulled it out, staring at it in confusion.

Written in well-practised handwriting were the words:

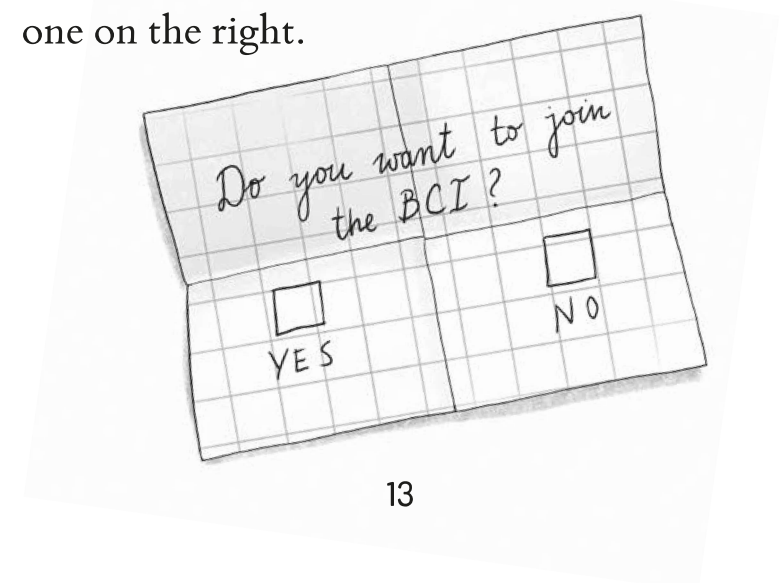
? Do you want to join the BCI? ?

If it wasn't for the marks that the pen had pressed into the page, Marcus would have thought that the words had come out of a printer.

'The BCI . . .' Marcus frowned. He had no idea what it stood for.

He peered down the corridor, searching for the person who had slipped him the note, but the hallway was empty.

There were two square boxes drawn onto the page. **YES** was written below the one on the left, and **NO** was written below the one on the right.




Yes or no? How was he supposed to decide if he wanted to join something he knew nothing about? Marcus's eyes flicked between the boxes uncertainly.

Suddenly there was a loud **squeak** from down the hall.

Marcus glanced up. A classroom door ahead was swinging closed, but he hadn't seen who'd gone through it. Was it whoever had slipped him this note?

He set off towards the door, his body moving before he had time to think. He was almost there when he suddenly realized what he was doing.

He stopped and smiled to himself. Why was he chasing some random person because they *might* have tried to prank him with a note? **It was all silly.** 

Shaking his head, he turned round and walked back to Breakfast Club.