

Bend It Like Beckham

Narinder Dhami

Chapter 7

I carried the tray of tea in from the kitchen with shaking hands, hoping no-one would notice the cups rattling in their saucers. There was an awkward silence in the living-room. Dad, Mum and Pinky were sitting staring at Joe, and not in a friendly way. But at least they hadn't kicked him out without hearing what he had to say.

I put the tray down on the coffee table, and handed Joe a cup.

'Thanks, Jess,' he said quietly.

I sat down on a corner of the sofa, stealing a glance at him. It was great to see him again. My heart was thumping and my insides were flipping every time he looked at me. But I had to be careful. Pinky could spot a romance a mile away. If Mum and Dad suspected that I was crazy about my coach, my chances of playing for the team again would be even more microscopic than they were right now.

20 I wondered if Joe had come just to find out why I hadn't been at training, or if Jules had told him that my parents hadn't known I was playing for the team all this time. Either way, he'd probably guessed the situation by now, based on the dirty looks he was getting.

Joe cleared his throat. 'I'm sorry to barge in on you, Mr and Mrs Bhamra,' he said, 'but I wanted to talk to you in person. I only found out today that you didn't know Jess was playing for our team.'

'No, we didn't,' Mum snapped.

'I apologise.' Joe looked straight at Mum, and I loved him for it. Jules must've told him, so he'd known when he decided to come round here that it was going to be tough. He'd still come though. Oh, I knew it was just because he wanted me back on the team, but it made me feel good. 'If I'd known, I would've encouraged Jess to tell you -' he paused, then went on '- because I believe she's got tremendous potential'.

40 We all sat there in silence for a few seconds.

'I think we know best our daughter's potential,' Dad said quietly. 'Jess has no time for games. She'll be starting university soon.'

'But playing for the team is an honour,' I blurted out, unable to keep quiet any longer.

Mum glared at me. 'What bigger honour is there than respecting your elders?' she demanded.

Dad looked at Joe. 'Young man, when I was a teenager in Nairobi, I was the best fast bowler in my school', he said curtly. 'Our team even won the East African cup. But when I came to this country,

nothing. I wasn't allowed to play in any team. These bloody *goreh* in their clubhouses laughed at my turban and sent me packing.'

I looked down at the floor. I knew about this because Mum had told me, but Dad had never talked about it before.

'I'm sorry, Mr Bhamra,' Joe began. 'But now -'

60 'Now what?' Dad broke in. 'None of our boys are in any of the football leagues. And you think they'll let our girls in? I don't want to build up Jesminder's hopes -' he glanced over at me '- she'll only end up disappointed like me.'

'But, Dad, it's all changing now,' I said desperately. 'Look at Nasser Hussain. He's the captain of the England cricket team, and he's Asian.'

'Hussain is a Muslim name,' Mum said sternly. 'Their families are different.'

'Oh, Mum!'

It was no use. I could tell that they weren't going to give in. Joe got the message too. A few minutes later, he got up to leave without finishing his tea.

I was determined to grab a quick word with him alone, so I walked out to his car with him. Mum gave me a filthy look, but I didn't care. It would probably be the last time I ever saw him.

80 'Sorry about that,' I muttered as I pulled the front door shut behind me. 'But thanks for trying.'

Joe shrugged. 'We've been invited to play a match in Germany this Saturday. It's a shame you'll miss it.'

My eyes widened. 'Wow! Germany? Really? Then my face fell, as I realised that I had more chance of going to the North Pole.

'I can see what you're up against,' Joe said softly. 'But your parents don't always know what's best for you, Jess.'

I stood staring at him as he turned away and got into his car. My mind was buzzing. *Your parents don't always know what's best for you.*

Joe was right.

In this case, they didn't.

'OK, you know what to do, yeah?' Pinky said impatiently, as she scorched down the road towards the club.

100 'Yeah, call them twice a day,' I replied, picking up her mobile. 'They won't be able to tell I'm in Germany, will they?'

Pinky shook her head. 'Trust me, I'm an

expert at this.' She swung the car into the club car park. 'Look, there's your team.'

The girls were all sitting in the minibus, and Joe was just climbing inside. He was pulling the door shut when he spotted the car.

I jumped out, grabbing my bag. 'My sister's covering for me,' I said breathlessly. 'We're supposed to be staying at our cousin's in Croydon.'

Joe smiled at me. 'I didn't hear that.'

I rushed on to the bus, and all the girls cheered. I made my way over to Jules, who was sitting on her own.

'I knew you'd come,' she said with a huge grin. 'I even saved a seat for you.'

120 'I wouldn't have missed it for anything.' I grinned back at her, pushing the fact that I was deceiving my parents to the back of my mind. I was going to enjoy myself, whatever happened.

Things started off brilliantly. The plane journey was a laugh, and I even enjoyed the plastic meal we were served by the stewardesses. When we arrived in Hamburg, we were whisked out of the airport and on to a luxury bus for the short drive to our hotel. Jules and I were sharing a room, but we hardly had time to unpack before we were off for a river-boat trip around the city.

'Isn't this fab?' Jules yelled in my ear, as the boat sailed along one of the many canals. I nodded. Hamburg was huge, a real mixture of old and new, with churches and museums right alongside big new shopping centres.

'Come on, Jess.' Jules whipped her camera out of her bag. 'Say "cheese"!'

140 'What do you want a picture of *me* for?' I laughed, doing a mock-sexy pout. I was playing to the camera a bit because I knew that Joe was looking at me. But it was liberating to know that no-one was going to see me and rush to tell Mum and Dad that I wasn't behaving myself properly.

The match against the German team was in the evening, so we headed back to the hotel for lunch and a rest before we went over to the club. We were all up for the game massively. Even though it was a friendly, we were determined to win. I couldn't wait to get out on to the pitch - though there was a secret worry niggling away at the back of my mind. I'd missed several training sessions, and I hadn't even been playing in the park with the lads like I used to. What if I wasn't fit enough for a ninety-minute game?

160 The German club was amazing, I reckon the German girls would have gone on strike if they'd had the same facilities we were expected to put up with at the Harriers. As I stood on the pitch that evening, waiting for Mel and the German captain to choose halves, I stared round at the immaculate green grass, the huge, comfortable stands filled

with people, the state-of-the-art floodlights and the electronic scoreboard. This was easily the biggest crowd I'd ever played in front of. I was desperate to do well.

The ref blew his whistle, and the first half began. The German team were no pushover. They obviously weren't considering the game as just a friendly either, and they were pretty physical. I got a bit frustrated after forty-five minutes when all my runs and attempts to set something up with Jules were blocked. At the half-time whistle, we'd had one shot at goal, a header from Mel, and that was all.

'Don't lose heart,' Joe said urgently to us in the changing-room. 'We're blocking them just as efficiently at our end. It's going to be a question of which side can hold out the longest. Don't give up.'

180 I felt OK as we ran out for the second half. All my fears about not being fit enough seemed to be unfounded. But as the deadlock continued for the next twenty minutes, I began to wheeze a bit. My pace started to drop, and I was having to push myself hard to keep up with the flow of play.

Suddenly a shout from behind startled me. 'Jess! Mark her!' Mel yelled.

With a sinking heart, I realised that my opponent had got away from me, and was dribbling towards the penalty area, unmarked. I chased after her, but couldn't catch her up. She banged the ball into the net past Charlie, and we were one-nil down.

It was all my fault, I thought gloomily as the German team celebrated. Mel saw my face and came over to put her arm round me. 'Don't worry, Jess,' she said. 'These things happen.'

200 *Yeah, but it wouldn't have happened if I was fit enough,* I thought silently. It wasn't fair on the rest of the team. I had to make it up to them somehow.

The match was nearly over and I was almost on my last legs, when I saw a chance. I picked the ball up from Sally, and, as if by magic, a gap suddenly opened up in front of me. I got my second wind, and headed for the German penalty area.

'Jess!' I could hear Jules shrieking as she ran alongside me. 'Pass!'

I glanced up and hit the ball forward into space. Jules ran on to it, picked it up and thumped the ball into the net. It was just as good as Beckham's last minute goal against Greece. I almost collapsed with relief.

220 Jules cartwheeled over to me and I jumped on her, followed by the rest of the team. We were all screaming with joy. The ref had to break it up and hustle us back to the centre circle, but two minutes after we kicked off, he blew the whistle for full-time. A draw.

'Penalties,' Jules said, with a wide smile on her face. 'Let's stuff 'em, girls.'

Although it wasn't usual to finish a friendly with penalties, both sides had decided that it would be a nice idea. Now, with my legs wobbling dangerously underneath me, I wasn't so sure. I hung back as Joe came on to the pitch to give us a quick pep talk. Maybe he wouldn't choose me.

'OK, Jules, you go first,' Joe said briskly. 'Then Mel, Tina, Hannah and -' he turned to me '- Jess.' I tried not to look relieved that I was last. With any luck I wouldn't have to take my turn, if the match was decided before that.

The Germans went first, and scored. So did Jules, with a cracking shot that nearly broke through the net. The Germans scored again. So did Mel. After a third German goal, Tina was looking nervous, but she was lucky because her shot went in off the post.

240 My stomach was turning over and over as Hannah stepped up to take our fourth penalty. The Germans hadn't missed one yet. If Hannah scored, it would be all down to the last German penalty-taker – and me.

Hannah sent the goalie the wrong way and rolled the ball smoothly into the left-hand corner of the net. I tried to take deep breaths to calm myself down. If the next German player scored, I'd have to take my turn. I closed my eyes, willing her to fail.

A loud roar around the stadium told me that she'd scored. The ref beckoned to me, and I trudged over to place the ball on the spot. I was incredibly tired, and my legs felt like they were made of lead. Behind me I could hear the girls yelling encouragement.

260 'Come on, Jess!' That was Jules. 'You can do this.' I made a superhuman effort and ran towards the ball, but even as I hit it, I knew it wasn't right. I groaned as the ball hit the crossbar and ricocheted into the crowd. Now I knew exactly how Gareth Southgate, David Batty and all those other players who'd missed penalties for England felt. Like someone had grabbed hold of my insides and ripped them out. Gutted, in other words.

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