

CHAPTER 1

They Can't Stop Me

I'm sorry, but there is **no way** they can stop me from doing this.

They can pour chocolate syrup into my ears while I sleep and then stick me in a freezer so the chocolate turns into Tootsie Rolls. I'm still going to do it.

I am trying out for the Rutherford B. Hayes Middle School football team.

Why wouldn't I play football? I have been in this amazing throwing and kicking contest for the past three years. Kids from all over the country compete. When I was nine years old, and last year when I was eleven, they even chose me to go to a real pro football game and compete at halftime. I could beat most of the boys in my age group, even though they always make me play in the girls' division.

I come from a family that eats, sleeps, and breathes football. My dad played for the Philadelphia Eagles.





But now he's the problem. All of a sudden he doesn't think that football is "appropriate for girls," to use his words.



"I think we'll have you take a break from *Kick and Throw, Junior Pro* this year," he said.

"What?" I just about dropped my cream soda on our new kitchen tile. Talk about getting hit by a train that you never saw coming!



"I was thinking that maybe we should give some of the other kids a chance to win." He winked at me.

"You're serious?" I was waiting for a laugh to follow, but it never did.



"Your mom and I have been talking and, well . . . it's just that you're not a little girl anymore."



"That's kind of the whole point, Dad. I'm in sixth grade. I can play middle school football this year." I had been waiting *forever* to be old enough to play football for my school—just like my brothers.



"What are you two talking about?" My mom was passing through the kitchen carrying a basket of laundry the size of Mount Rushmore. Poor Mom—she constantly has a mountain of dirty clothes attached to one hip or the other. Three kids playing sports year round will do that to a woman, I guess.

"We're discussing football," Dad said. I decided to try a quick exit. Something about the way Mom and Dad looked at each other was making me feel nervous about my future in football.

"Can I go ride my bike?" I asked. Anything to get out of wherever this conversation was going. I would have gladly hopped into the dentist's chair at that moment if the sound of a drill on my teeth could drown out Dad's next sentence.

"Just a minute, Toni." Dad sighed. He threw one last pleading glance at Mom, but she just nodded. "Your mom and I have given this a lot of thought, and . . ."

I know my dad finished his sentence like two seconds later, but it felt like he paused for hours. Long enough for me to see all my dreams die right before my eyes. My whole life I've wanted to play football for my school. I can just see it: I'm the only Shark (that's our mascot) standing between the guy with the football and a touchdown. If I don't tackle him, we lose. He thinks he's going to run right past me—after all, I'm just a girl, and a kicker at that. But he needs to think again, because before he can take even one more step I hit him hard and he goes down. The crowd explodes . . .



“ . . . we think it might be best if you stick to soccer this fall,” my dad finished.



“That’s not fair!” I know it’s such a little kid thing to do, but I stomped my foot.



“Temper tantrums won’t get you anywhere, Big Foot.” Somehow my brother Marcos, who is seventeen years old and on the high school football team, had managed to sneak into the kitchen without anyone seeing him. I could tell by the wicked grin on his face that he was enjoying this. He grabbed a can of pop out of the fridge and jumped up on our new granite countertop.



“Down” was all Mom said. Marcos obeyed her like a whipped little puppy, but that crooked smile was still plastered to his face. Ooh, that smile always makes me so mad that I can’t think straight. But then Marcos took me completely by surprise.



“I think you guys should let her play,” Marcos said. He emptied the can in one huge gulp and crushed it flat with one hand. I have to admit, Marcos’s muscles are pretty impressive. I can barely fit two hands around his upper arm, and I have pretty big hands. I *can’t* fit both hands around his neck. I should know. I have tried plenty of times.



"I mean, I'm one of the captains of the high school team, and Big Foot here's the future of Marion football." He hopped up on the counter again, but no one seemed to notice.

"Marcos, please don't call your sister Big Foot," my mom sighed.

I have always been way off the growth charts. Now, in sixth grade, I am already 5'9". One time the ladies' basketball coach from Ohio State saw my mom buying me shoes at the mall. She came all the way across the shoe store, gave my mom her business card, and told her to keep in touch. I was *four* years old. Marcos was tagging along that day, and I've been Big Foot ever since.

"Marcos, thank you for your input, but you are excused to go upstairs." Dad was looking at Marcos in that way that says he really means business.

"Sorry, Squirt." Marcos crossed his eyes at me as he passed. Then he leaned in close. "I really meant what I said," he whispered.

"Antonia, honey, come sit down." Mom had abandoned her laundry chores for the moment and was patting the yellow-and-green cushion on a dining room chair.

GO TO
secretkeepergirl.com
and type in the secret word
"football" to see the real-
life history of girls
playing football!



"If it's okay with you, I think I'll stand," I said.

"Toni," my dad started again, "no one would ever argue your athletic ability. We have expected for a long time that you will play sports in college just like your brothers."

Marcos is not my only amazing athlete-brother. My oldest brother, Milo, plays college basketball. I was so wishing he was here to defend me.



"We know you are only twelve, Toni," Mom said, "but it's right around your age that things start changing for boys and girls."

"Like what?" I mumbled.

"Well, like boys and girls might begin to think of each other as more than just teammates." Mom looked to Dad for some help.

He cleared his throat. "There are physical changes that start to happen around your age," he said.

"Ew, Dad! That's **gross!**" There was no way my dad just said that out loud.



"Here's the thing, Toni," Dad continued. "We have made up our minds. You will not be playing football. It's just not appropriate anymore. After a good play—on the sidelines—we can't have your teammates giving you, um . . . the universal football sign for 'Good Job.'"

I threw up my hands and turned to my mom. "Can you please tell me what Dad just said? In English?"

My mom rarely blushes, but she suddenly turned as red as a beet. "They might pat you on the butt," she said.

Could my parents possibly scar me any more in one short afternoon? As soon as I could I escaped to the freedom of my bike, but no matter how fast I pedaled I couldn't escape the sound of my parents saying to me the most horrible word in the English language: *no*.

Then it occurred to me. No problema! I knew how to turn that "no" into a "yes" tomorrow. . . .



"Tis for Antonio



CHAPTER 2

Girls Can't Play

nemesis[nem-uh-sis] an opponent or a rival whom a person cannot overcome

That's a new word we learned in school today, and I have decided that Trevor Kenworth is my nemesis. I *have* beaten him in every sporting event you can think of ever since kindergarten, but that never seems to sink in with him. He challenges me to races and games of HORSE on the basketball court, and one time he even challenged me to a fight! That one I said no to, but in everything else he ends up losing. I guess that's why he keeps trying.

Today when I arrived at school Trevor was the first person I saw. That is always a bad sign.

"So Diaz, you trying out for the football team?" He sneered.

"None of your business." I was trying to look cool as I stashed my books in my locker. Why was this leech hanging around anyhow?



"You know, my parents and I checked the rule book and it says it's illegal for a girl to play for the school." Trevor studied his fingernails casually, like he was just talking about the **weather** or something. I kind of wanted to peek at his fingernails to see if they were sharp and pointed and had slime oozing out of them.

"It's not *illegal*," I said. "You can go to jail for things that are illegal."

"I asked Coach Klutz, and he said girls can't play."

"That's an old rule, Trevor," I said. "Haven't you ever heard of Title Nine? Even Coach Klutz can't make rules that keep girls off of boys' teams."

Trevor shrugged. "Whatever," he said. And then he just walked off.

Fortunately, my first-period class is a study hall, and by the end of the hour I had developed a plan that would at least get me through tryouts . . . as a boy, if that's the way it had to be. I figured I could talk Coach Klutz out of his old-fashioned "no girls" rule *after* I made the team.

Coach has lunch duty on Fridays, so I was pretty sure his office would be empty. What I really needed to know was if the boys' locker room would be clear.

There's only one place to go when you need to know the boys' gym class schedule, and that's to Kate Harding. Her brother Pete and Marcos have always been on the same football team. We're not best friends or anything, but we talk. And I've found that if you need information on a boy, Kate is a good place to start.

"How could they have gym during lunch?" Kate asked me, twirling her hair around her finger. "Coach has lunch duty."

"So I can just go in and get what I need?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think so. But watch out for Miss Gilbert," she said.

I got chills thinking about Miss Gilbert, the girls' gym teacher, but I still pulled off Operation Football Equipment without a hitch. All of the equipment was laid out in neat piles for tryouts, and arranged by size. I grabbed a helmet, shoulder pads, a practice jersey, and some padded pants and was out of there in less than one minute.

I slid into the girls' locker room and stuffed everything into my locker. I was back in the lunchroom before anyone even noticed I had been gone. Kate gave me a double thumbs-up from across the room and I smiled.

During sixth period I pulled off the final part of my plan.



I waited until there were only ten minutes of math class left before the final bell rang, and then I raised my hand and tried to look desperate.

"Mr. Gulley, can I please use the bathroom?" I bounced a couple of times for added effect, hoping I wasn't overdoing it.

"Class will be over soon." Mr. Gulley looked at the clock. "Can't it wait?"

"No, sir, it really can't." Now I winced and turned up the acting heat.

"Do you have all of your assignments written down?" he asked.

"Yes, sir!" I grabbed my books and made a big deal of hurrying clumsily from the room. I think I should win an Oscar for my performance.

Ten minutes is not much time to put on a full football uniform. I fell down three times trying to pull up my stupid football pants. Suddenly I heard footsteps and voices and the truth hit me like a punch in the gut. The eighth grade girls' gym class was back, and there was no way I was getting out of there without being seen.

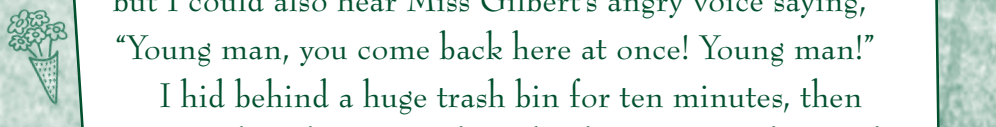
With no time to think, I threw on my helmet and began yelling and grunting like a guy, punching lockers,





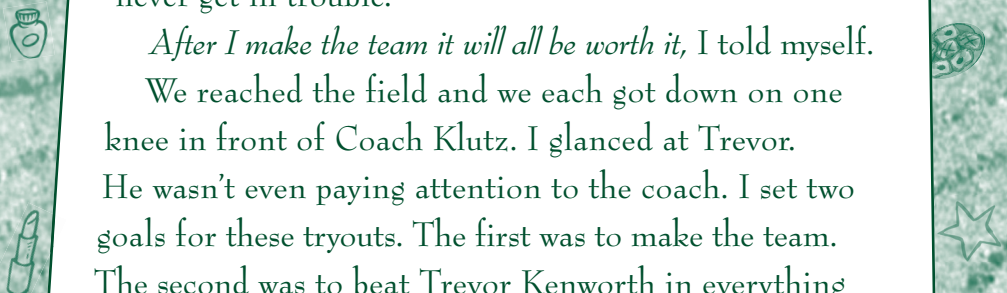
and jumping on and off the locker room benches. I hoped the girls would think I was just some crazy football guy who was pumped up about the season and running through the girls' locker room on a dare. It worked.

The girls must have really thought I was out of my mind, because they totally jumped out of the way as I ran past them. Not only could I hear them laughing, but I could also hear Miss Gilbert's angry voice saying, "Young man, you come back here at once! Young man!"



I hid behind a huge trash bin for ten minutes, then managed to slip in quietly with a large group of excited football players headed for the field. For the second time today I felt really bad about what I had done. I never get in trouble.

After I make the team it will all be worth it, I told myself.



We reached the field and we each got down on one knee in front of Coach Klutz. I glanced at Trevor. He wasn't even paying attention to the coach. I set two goals for these tryouts. The first was to make the team. The second was to beat Trevor Kenworth in everything that we did on the field.

We ran forty-meter dashes. I beat Trevor.

We did a drill to work on moving our feet really fast.

Trevor fell down three times!

We hit the coaches like we were blocking. I could move them backward, but Trevor couldn't.

By the end of tryouts, I figured out that I am not the biggest, strongest, or best player around. But I'm not the weakest or worst either. And I know I am the best kicker. Coach began to divide us into two groups, and I could see right away that I was in the "good" group. I was going to make the team!

When I glanced at Trevor, who was in the other group, I couldn't believe what I saw. He had tears running down his cheeks. He was trying to slip his hand under his facemask and wipe them off so no one would notice. For a second, I actually felt bad for him.

Coach's voice brought me back to attention. "Boys, take a knee again. Good job. Good job. Go ahead and take those helmets off."

All around me the guys were taking off their helmets. Everyone's hair was wet and matted down. I could smell the combination of grass and sweat that I've come to know so well. It's not a bad smell. Turning my eyes back to the coach, I saw he was looking right at me.

"Take that helmet off, Son," Coach Klutz said.



"I'm fine, Coach." I tried to make my voice sound deep and confident.



"Son, I didn't ask how you were. I gave you instructions. Take your helmet off now."

I was aware that everyone was looking at me, and I was aware that it was dead silent on the field. I kept my helmet on.



"What's your name?" Coach was approaching me now.

"Toni, sir." I was really glad at this moment that my name is not something like Sissy, because my brain was mushy oatmeal.

22

"Tony, you did a nice job today, but that doesn't mean my rules don't apply to you. What grade are you in?" Coach was right in front of me now.



"Sixth, Coach," I answered.

"Sixth grade, hmm?" He stood above me flipping through the pages on his clipboard. "I don't see you on my list here, Tony. We must have missed you." He had his pen out. "What's your last name?"



I'm sorry I ever felt bad for Trevor Kenworth, because at that moment the little rat rose to his feet and aimed his skinny, pointed, slimy monster finger right at my face.

He spread his feet wide and tilted back his sweaty little head and announced to the whole team . . .

"That's Antonia Diaz, Coach!" Then he got so close to my face that I could smell the sloppy joes from lunch on his breath. "I was wondering why you wouldn't take off your helmet. I already told you this morning. *Girls* aren't allowed to play!"

I could tell by looking at Coach that I was in more trouble than any other student at Rutherford B. Hayes Middle School ever had been. I wondered what they'd do to me for punishment. Still, seeing as Coach's face had the look of a mad grizzly bear, I knew I wasn't going to have to wait to find out.