



T is for Antonia





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.


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“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. . . .