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# CHAPTER 1

“FRIEDMAN!”

I open my eyes and look up. It’s Coach DeSalvo and he’s trudging my way.

“Me?” I say.

Coach DeSalvo stops in front of me. He folds his arms and looks around the soccer field. “I don’t see any other Friedmans here,” he says.

That’s not strictly true. There’s Tiffany Freedman, but she spells it with two “E”s, and she’s a girl.

“Friedman,” he says again, “what are you doing back there?”

“Um . . . playing defense?” I answer.

“From behind the goal?” I look at the net. Yup. It’s clearly in front of me. “What’s the matter with you, anyway, Friedman? What are you afraid of?”

I want to say, “Green olives with red speckled tongues.” I want to say, “Stewed prunes and vampire bats and street sweepers.” I want to say, “Charlie Kastner,” who just a minute ago was charging toward me with a crazed look that I’ve seen



in the eyes of a raging buffalo on Animal Planet, which is why I've ended up crouched behind the goal, covering my head with my hands, during our first PE class of seventh grade.

But instead, I just say, "Nothing."

"Nothing. Good." Coach DeSalvo walks around the net, plants a meaty hand in the middle of my back, and guides me to a spot near the middle of the field. "Then pick it up, Friedman. Stop running away from the ball."

All this has made my stomach shake, but I manage to say, "Okay."

Coach DeSalvo marches over to the other side of the field. He blows his whistle and the game starts up again.

"Frank," I say to Frank Maldonado, "am I on your team?"

He looks at me like he's not sure if I'm kidding. I'm not.

"Yes. Unfortunately," he says.

"How can you tell?" I ask.

"Pinnies?" he says, like it's a question I should know the answer to.

I look around. Half the kids are wearing those little blue bibs. "Oh. Yeah," I say. "Thanks."

I try to move around like the other kids, in case Coach DeSalvo is watching, but, not surprisingly, he's forgotten all about me. I drift over toward the sideline, where a gray squirrel is hunting around in that herky-jerky squirrely way. I watch how he picks up a fat brown maple seed—the

kind with wings that looks like an angel. He clutches it in his pointy little squirrel hands, turning it around and around to find just the right biting-in place.

Then all of a sudden he freezes. He sits up straight, staring at a spot right behind me.

I freeze too, feeling the earth shake under me. I turn to see what's causing it: twenty-four sets of middle school feet charging down the field. And out in front is Charlie Kastner, dribbling the soccer ball like a maniac and heading straight for me.

This time, there's nowhere to run. All I can do is brace for impact and hope to heal up by Thanksgiving.

But instead of being smashed and ground to dust, I watch as Charlie's legs fly miraculously out from under him. His big sweaty body tumbles through the air. It seems like an eternity that he's up there, and then he lands with a thud on the grass. Someone has taken out Charlie Kastner and stolen the ball!

It's a girl.

She's by me in a flash, passing so close that her hair slaps me across the face. It's not tied back in a ponytail like the other girls'. It's flying wild. The ball skips ahead of her, celebrating its rescue from Charlie's clutches. All the other kids—whose thundering feet would have trampled my remains if Charlie had mowed me down—make a U-turn, following this new girl, as she dribbles the ball back toward the other team's goal.

Charlie gives me a vengeful look, then gets up and runs after the girl, but there's no way he can catch her. She's big—not fat, but tall and strong. And she's fast—faster than the boys, faster than everybody.

She's down the field now and the only one with a chance to stop her is Billy Hayward. He's small and wiry, and he's stayed back to guard the goal. He sticks out his leg to steal the ball or trip her up, or both, but she gives him a nudge with her hip—the same nudge she must have given Charlie—and Billy is launched three feet in the air. It's as if a tornado picks him up, twirls him around, and plunks him back down again.

The boys stop in their tracks, staring. The girls glare at this new girl, because they like Billy, and they don't want to see him tossed in the air like a Hacky Sack. Sally MacNamara, the goalie, is sending out vibes of mortal terror now that Billy, her last line of defense, is down. She doesn't even take a step toward the ball as it flies into the net.

It's a goal, but nobody cheers.

Coach De Salvo blows his whistle. "What's everybody staring at?" he calls out. Nobody says anything, but the answer is obvious. Even I know they're staring at the new girl, and if anybody's not going to be clued in, it's me. "Haven't you ever seen a hip check before?"

"It has a name?" mutters Billy.

"Jeez," adds his friend Zachary.

“Young lady,” says Coach DeSalvo, “I hope you’ll be trying out for the girls’ soccer team.”

“She belongs on the football team,” says Billy.

“She belongs on the Godzilla team,” says Zachary, and all the boys laugh.

The tall girl shrugs and looks at the ground. Her sandy-colored hair falls forward so I can’t see much of her face. It occurs to me that Coach DeSalvo could put a hand on her shoulder and introduce her, since she’s new and doesn’t know anybody, but he doesn’t. Instead, he blows his whistle again, points to the gym door, and tosses the ball to Charlie to carry in. And, I guess because he has to reestablish his rank in our seventh-grade world, Charlie calls my name and fakes a hard throw right at me. He doesn’t even have to let go of the ball. He just holds it over his head and jerks it forward, and I instinctively duck, triggering a wave of laughter.

The crowd separates into boys and girls. The girls are whispering to each other, and the boys are crashing in through the back door, racing for the water fountain.

Trailing the girls is the new girl. Trailing the boys is me.

