



# Chapter 1



All Alfie could see was the goal. With each step he guided the ball toward the net, where a frightened-looking Jackson stood guard.

Quick as a cheetah, Alfie dodged the other players. From the corner of his eye he saw people shouting and waving their hands, but he tuned it all out and kept his focus steady. He aimed. He kicked. The ball sailed past Jackson, who reacted so slowly that he didn't even raise his hands to block the ball until it was already bouncing in the corner of the net. Victory was Alfie's.

“Yes! In your face, Jackson!”

Alfie ran screaming across the soccer field while

the other team—which was really part of his own team, since this was a practice game—looked away, probably ashamed of their own performance.

“Bertolizzi!” Coach Schrader called from the sidelines. “Get over here!”

Alfie ran toward Coach feeling as if he’d found his place in life. This was the first year he’d played a sport in the after-school program, and it was turning out to be the best decision of his ten-year-old life. In fact, Coach was probably about to make him team captain!

However, Coach Schrader’s face looked a little red, like *he’d* been the one racing across the field toward total domination.

“What was that?” Coach asked, gesturing toward the field.

“A goal, sir. A point for my team.”

“Your team?”

“Well, the jerseys.” He tugged on the yellow jersey his side wore for the practice game.

“Alfredo,” said Coach. He rarely called the kids by their first names, and he had never called Alfie by his proper name. “You had shirts all over you. Didn’t you see?”



“Yes, sir,” he said, because of course he’d seen. He’d seen and he’d conquered!

“If you saw, then why didn’t you pass?”

“Pass?”

“The ball, Bertolizzi. Why didn’t you pass the ball? You had two teammates in the clear.”

“Coach . . . ,” Alfie said. Clearly the guy was confused. “I got the goal. My team won. Isn’t that the whole point?”

“Is that what you think?” his coach asked.

Alfie was positive this was a trick question. Of course he knew that winning was the point—they weren’t out here to just kick the ball back and forth—but he got the feeling he couldn’t say that out loud. So he said, “No, sir,” even though he really wanted to say, “Well, yeah. Duh!”

Alfie was 100 percent positive you couldn’t say *duh* to your coach.

“We have our first game on Saturday,” Coach said, as if Alfie needed reminding. He couldn’t wait! “I need players on the



field who are a part of a team. Not some one-man show.”

“I’m ready to play, Coach.”

“I know you can play, but can you play on a team?” he said. “‘In your face’? Really?”

Alfie suddenly became very aware of his surroundings. The other players were standing on the field not too far from them. Coach wasn’t yelling at Alfie, but Alfie was sure those kids could hear every word. Even worse, some kids—including a few girls from his class—were sitting in the bleachers doing homework and watching practice.

“There’s nothing worse than an obnoxious winner,” Coach said. “Until you can be a respectful team player, I’m going to have to bench you for Saturday’s game.”

“But, Coach!”

“I’m sorry, Alfie. I’ve made my decision.”

“How am I supposed to learn to be a team player when I’m sitting on the bench?” Alfie asked desperately. It didn’t even make sense!

“Hopefully you’ll figure that out,” Coach said. “I expect you to be here suited up at every practice, on time with the rest of your team.”

“Suit up to do nothing? No thanks,” he said.

“I’ll tell you this once,” Coach Schrader said, lowering his voice. “If you’re not at the game on Saturday, supporting your team, then you’re off the team. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Alfie muttered.

The last thing he wanted was to get kicked off the team. But sitting on the bench the whole game? That was just about the worst thing that could happen.