

Making the Team

I stared in shock at the principal, feeling the color drain from my face. “Wha-wha-what do you mean, there isn’t any soccer team?” I finally managed to stammer out.

The principal was getting impatient. “I mean what I say. There isn’t any soccer team. Well, at least not a girls team. We have a well established boys team going. In fact, they won the state finals last year. You could be a cheerleader for them, if you’d like.”

I shook my head no. “That’s okay. Thank you anyway.”

I was at the sports registration office in my new school, Brightwood Middle. I moved to Brightwood a few days ago. It was a quiet town, small. My mom called it quaint. She had fallen in love with our new home right away. Me, as an 11 year old tomboy, I preferred cities, like Chicago, where we used to live before my dad died and my mom got a new job here.

“Moouooooom! I’m back!” I shouted. After a 10 minute walk with my mind reeling, I was back at my new home. It was a little house with a sliding screen door that almost never worked and a roof with all the shingles coming off. Yet another thing for my mom to call “quaint”. I called it shabby, but only when Mom wasn’t listening. I didn’t want to burst her bubble.

“Mom?” I called again. This time, I heard a reply.

“Hey, Bailey. How did the sports sign up go?”

I hesitated for a second before walking inside and responding. “It was...good.”

“Did you find out when tryouts were?” she asked, walking towards the small entryway and smiling at me.

“Um, yeah, it was the uh, the 22nd of August,” I lied, naming the date that the principal said the boys team was trying out on. I didn’t even know why I said that date, although I did know why I lied. Or at least, partially. I didn’t want another thing for Mom to worry about. She was already stressed about the nursing job she took, and me, of course, and I just couldn’t add

another thing. Besides, after Dad died, she was fragile, like a piece of glass. I didn't want her to break. This was my problem, and I wasn't going to bother her with it.

"Wow! That's tomorrow! Good thing you found out now. Do you need me to drive you?" Mom asked.

"Nah, I'm okay. I can walk. It's not that far," I responded. "Well, I guess I'll go to my room now and make sure my gear's all set."

I escaped to my room, practically running to escape the interrogation I was getting. Once there, I plopped down on my bed, thinking. I just had to play soccer. It was practically a matter of life or death, and if I didn't go to any games then my mom would know that I lied. As there weren't any girls' teams, I had to figure out a way to get on the boys' team. I could just go and hope that I was so good that the coach would just let me on, no questions asked, but I had a feeling that wasn't going to work. I had to come up with another plan. Suddenly, I sat straight up in bed. "I got an idea!" I whispered excitedly. "And it might just work!"

I was almost immediately interrupted by my mom. "Dinner's ready!"

I sighed. I would just have to work on my idea in the morning, then, because after dinner I would never get a chance to work on it. I knew that.

The next morning I woke up early for the summer, at about 7:00 a.m. I quickly got back to my plan. I had a pretty clear idea on what I was going to do, I just needed to put it into action.

I got a pair of shorts and a short sleeve tee-shirt, making sure that it wasn't too girly, and then I got my scissors and marched into the bathroom. I knew what I had to do. I took a deep breath, looking in the mirror and saying goodbye to my hair. Now, I know that you might think me silly for caring so much about my hair, but let me explain. When I was little, and my dad was still alive, I wanted to get a boyish haircut, but my dad refused. He said that my long blond hair was the only part of me that reminded him that I was a girl, and he didn't want to let go of that. I was confused at the time, but I obeyed my father's wishes. After he died, I never wanted to let go of my hair. It felt like the only part of my father that I had left.

And now, I was letting go of it. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I cut the first bit of my hair. Snip. Second bit. Snip. And the tears kept rolling down as I cut my hair into a short, boyish cut.

When I was done I dried my tears and examined myself in the mirror. It was a bit shabby, but it would do.

“Bailey?” my mom called. “Breakfast’s ready.”

“I already ate,” I responded. “In fact, I should leave now. Tryouts are coming up in about 30 minutes.”

“Oh, okay,” Mom said, clearly disappointed. “But I made you a special breakfast, and I thought that maybe we could spend some time together. I know that you were closer to your dad than you were to me, but I thought that now he, um, passed away, we should spend more time together. After all, we’re all alone now. We’re all each other have. And, also, you’ve been awfully quiet lately, and I have a feeling that something’s on your mind. I know that you’re dad’s not here, but you’ll always have your mom.”

I looked down at my soccer shoes. Mom was right. She was stronger than I thought she was. She wasn’t the heartbroken woman that she was right after Dad died. She wasn’t the woman who was getting up, but unsteady, a piece of glass that could break at any moment. She was a new woman. She wasn’t the same person she had been before Dad’s death. She was stronger. She had experienced pain and lived through it. She was a fighter. Like me. And so I stepped forward into the kitchen.

“Oh my gosh. What have you done with your hair?” Mom asked. “I thought that you said you would never cut it.”

“I changed my mind. It was for a good cause,” I started to explain. “You see, it all started yesterday, when I visited the sports administration office to sign up for soccer....”

“Wow. I can’t believe that you came up with such a smart plan, and actually put it into action. My brave, smart girl,” Mom said, stroking my now short hair. It had taken almost 10 minutes to explain everything, but I had finally finished.

“Will you still let me try out?” I asked.

“Of course,” Mom assured me. “Under one condition. You have to let me take you to a barbershop after tryouts to cut your hair into a style that could be worn by a girl or a boy. Deal?”

I smiled at Mom. “Deal.”

Mom, glancing at the clock on the kitchen wall, gave me a little shove. “Now go on, my soccer star. You can’t be on the team if you don’t get to tryouts in time!”

I burst out sprinting, throwing open the front door and dashing down the street to the park where tryouts were held. I got there just in time, dashing onto the grass just as the boys finished getting on their cleats and started jogging around the field.

“Hey,” a man said. Judging by his air of authority, I guessed that he was the coach.

I looked up, startled. “Me?” I asked, trying to make my voice slightly deeper than it was.

“Yeah, you. You new? What’s your name?”

“Yes, I’m new. My name is Bailey-I mean, um, Brandon. Brandon Connors.” I wasn’t sure if Bailey was a good boy’s name, so I decided to go with Brandon. It was safer.

“Okay, Connors. You good at playing soccer?”

“Yeah, I would say that I’m pretty good,” I said.

“Alright, then you get right out there and get in line. I don’t have dawdlers in my field.”

I obediently jogged onto the field, and got into line for the drill.

The tryouts flew by after that. I wasn’t the best kid out there, but I wasn’t the worst. And I knew that I could make the team. I could feel it in my gut. Sure enough, the coach got right around to putting the list up. Most of the players mingled around-it was only about a 15 minute wait, and they were all hoping that they could see if their name was on the list soon-like me. As

soon as the list flew up, all the kids still there rushed to see it, me included. Sure enough, Brandon Conners was there.

There was only one problem left. How would I keep up the act? Would I have to act as a boy for my entire soccer career in this little town? I was prepared to, but I hoped that there would be a different way. A better way.

“Hey, Brandon,” I heard the now familiar drawl of the coach.

I turned. “Yes, coach?”

“I just wanted to congratulate you for making the team.”

“Thanks,” I said, smiling at him.

“Not many girls make it,” he continued.

My smile turned into a jaw dropped gasp. “How did you know?”

“I think I can tell the difference between a girl and a boy,” he said, smirking. “But don’t worry. I won’t give away your secret. And I’ll help you keep it the best I can.”

“Thank you, coach,” I said, relieved.

“Yep,” he responded, already walking away. I watched him go, grinning. He didn’t care that I was a girl. He even said that he would help me. I started to walk home to my mom. I was glad that things were settled with her, as well. We needed each other. I grinned, happy. Everything had worked out so well. If this were a fairy tale, I’d say that this was my happily ever after.