

**GIRLS** *with*  
**GAME**

# SOCCER *Shutout*



**ERIN FALLIGANT**



By *Erin Falligant*

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For Chrissy Watson, who has inspired so many young athletes to play hard and dream big—*EF*

To my baby, Xing Xuan, you're the absolute best teammate a parent and artist could ever ask for—*WT*



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## Chapter 1

**A**ubrey's heart raced as she dribbled down the field. The defender was stuck to her like glue, following her every move.

Quick as lightning, Aubrey faked a cutback, stopping the ball with the outside of her foot as if she were going to dribble right. Instead, she nudged the ball left—and the defender ran right. *Yes!*

Then Aubrey drove the ball straight toward the goal, eyeing up the bottom-right corner. *Smack!* As she struck the ball and followed through, the ball swished into the back of the net. “Goal!” Aubrey shouted, pumping her fist. “The Spirit wins again!”

Except she wasn't playing for the Washington Spirit.

And the defender was her best friend, Zuri, who fished the ball out of the net with a groan. “No fair. I wasn’t ready,” she said, tossing the ball back to Aubrey. She gave Aubrey her best puppy dog pout. Expressive Zuri had a hundred different faces, and Aubrey knew every last one.

“You’re *never* ready,” Aubrey chided. She laughed and wiped her sweaty forehead on the sleeve of her T-shirt.

It was the middle of August, the hottest month of the year in Maryland. A river of sweat trickled down Aubrey’s back, but she wasn’t ready to go inside just yet—because August was *also* the official start of soccer season. *Best time of the year!* she thought with a smile.

She dropped the ball back into the grass, ready to go another round with Zuri. But just then, a blur of black and white sped past, taking the ball with it. Aubrey’s border collie dribbled the ball across the yard with his paws.

“Striker, get back here!” Aubrey chased after him, but that made Striker only run faster. He cut left and then right with the ball, his tail wagging happily.

When Zuri joined the chase, Striker ran circles around

the net, herding the ball with his paws and snout as if it were a tiny sheep. He stopped just long enough to bark excitedly before taking off again.

“Striker!” Zuri cried, laughing. “You’re using your front paws. That’s a hand violation—er, I mean a paw violation!” She darted left to try to tackle the pup.

*Thweet!* A whistle rang out, as if a ref had just stepped onto the field to halt play.

When Striker froze, his ears cocked, Aubrey grabbed hold of his collar. Then she spun around, searching for the source of the whistle.

Cammie, who lived a few blocks away, strode into the yard with a grin, her soccer ball tucked under one arm. “It looked like you guys needed a ref,” she said, sticking two fingers into her mouth and whistling again.

Bold, confident Cammie had one of the loudest voices on the soccer field. Aubrey and Zuri had been friends with her for years. *But who knew she could whistle like that?* thought Aubrey.

Striker barked and broke free, bounding toward Cammie.

He jumped up, nearly tackling her to the ground, before she squatted and wrapped him in her arms. “Down, boy!” she said, shielding her face from his sloppy kisses. “When did you get so big? I thought you were still a puppy!”

Aubrey laughed. She could barely remember puppy-size Striker. When Mom had first brought him home, he’d been black, white, and round, like a little soccer ball. That’s how he’d gotten his name.

“He turned a year old last week,” she told Cammie. “We made a cake out of dog biscuits and peanut butter. That was Zuri’s idea, of course.”

Zuri took a little bow, her braids flopping over her head.

“Guess I haven’t been here in a while,” said Cammie, straightening up. “But that’s about to change now that soccer’s starting up!” She juggled her soccer ball, bouncing it off her knee—until Striker leaped up and nosed it away with his snout.

“Good header, Striker!” Aubrey cheered, laughing.

Cammie went one-on-one with Striker, positioning herself between him and the goal as if he were actually

trying to score. She mirrored his every move, pivoting when he changed direction. *Striker has met his match!* thought Aubrey. Cammie was a tough defender—and patient too.

The second Striker lost control of the ball, Cammie pounced. She poked the ball away with her toe and took off with it toward the goal. “Breakaway!” Cammie shouted as Striker raced after her, barking happily.

“Wait!” Aubrey cried. “You need a keeper.” She jogged toward the back porch and grabbed her keeper gloves. Then she hurried toward the goal, clapping her padded palms together. “All right, give me your best shot!”

As Cammie stared her down, Aubrey instantly regretted her words. Tall, lanky Cammie had her game face on, and it was terrifying. She set her jaw and narrowed her eyes.

Then Cammie’s eyes flickered toward the corner of the net—her tell. *Gotcha*, thought Aubrey. The second Cammie kicked the ball, Aubrey dove left. She spread her fingers wide and caught the ball. *Yes!* She wrapped her body around it and rolled sideways. When she sat back up, grass dangled off her chin.

“Good save,” Cammie groaned.

“Yeah, except for the grass sandwich,” Aubrey joked. She brushed the grass off her face and tossed the ball back to Cammie. “Want to go again?”

Then she spotted Zuri sitting cross-legged by Striker, who had rolled over for a full-on belly rub. Zuri was nibbling her lip, the way she did when something was bothering her.

“What’s wrong?” Aubrey asked. “Do you want a turn?”

Zuri shrugged. “Nah. You two would smoke me.” She reached down and plucked a handful of grass.

Aubrey sighed. Zuri had been down ever since Aubrey had found out she’d made the travel soccer team. That meant Aubrey would be playing competitive ball with Cammie this year, with more practices each week and games against teams from other towns. Zuri would still play rec soccer, which was less competitive and more for fun. *We’ll be on different teams for the first time ever*, thought Aubrey sadly.

Zuri suddenly jumped to her feet. “How about volleyball instead?” She grabbed another soccer ball and started setting it, popping it into the air with her fingertips. Zuri

had never been tall enough to block or attack at the net, but she could set the ball like a pro. “Tryouts on Monday, baby!”

Cammie shot Aubrey a wide-eyed look. “Tell her!” Cammie mouthed.

Panic flooded Aubrey’s chest. Volleyball tryouts were two days away—a couple of weeks before the start of eighth grade. Aubrey had been *meaning* to tell Zuri that she wasn’t going out for volleyball this fall, but how could she break it to her best friend?

Aubrey and Zuri had played volleyball the last two years, in sixth grade and seventh grade. Zuri’s mom, a teacher at Marshville Middle School, coached the team, which made it super fun! Zuri could easily play both sports again this year because her rec league soccer team would have practice only one night a week.

But travel soccer was a bigger time commitment—at least that’s what Cammie kept telling Aubrey. *You can’t do both*, she said. And Cammie would know. She’d been on the travel team for a year already.

“Coming your way!” Zuri called. She set the ball toward

Aubrey, who bumped it back. *Smack!*

“Oof, that ball’s too heavy,” Aubrey complained, rubbing her wrists.

“So go get your volleyball!” said Zuri. She was setting the ball to herself now, walking in a wobbly line across the yard.

Aubrey headed to the garage for the volleyball. It would buy her some time to think. But Cammie followed her inside the door. “You haven’t told Zuri you’re not going out for volleyball?” she whispered. “She just said tryouts are on Monday! That’s two days from now! What are you waiting for?”

“I don’t know,” Aubrey shot back. “Christmas? High school graduation? She’s my best friend—she’s counting on me!”

Cammie’s expression grew somber. “The Hawks and Coach Sharma are counting on you too. She wants you to play keeper this year, remember?”

*How could I forget?* thought Aubrey. Her stomach fluttered. Coach Sharma, head coach for the travel soccer team, had pulled her aside during tryouts to run some

keeper drills. She had praised Aubrey’s quick reflexes.

“She wants me as a *backup* keeper,” Aubrey pointed out. “The Hawks already have Dylan.” Still, the thought of playing keeper, even as a sub, sent a jolt of excitement down her spine. When she finally found the volleyball in a cardboard box, she gripped it as if it were a soccer ball that she had caught just short of the goal.

As Aubrey stepped out of the garage, she set the volleyball to Zuri, who passed it back. “You want in on this, Cammie?” Aubrey asked, sending the next pass to Cammie.

But instead of passing the ball with her forearms, Cammie popped the ball off the top of her foot.

As the girls passed the ball to one another, Zuri chattered on about all the fun she and Aubrey would have in volleyball. “You and me, star setter and star hitter, together again,” she announced dramatically. She set the ball to Aubrey, who hit it gently back.

“Singing on the bus, loads of snacks . . . and, ooh, lucky licorice!” Zuri went on.

“Lucky what?” Cammie asked as she popped the volleyball

off the inside of her foot.

“Licorice,” said Aubrey with a grin. “Coach Nia, Zuri’s mom, brings a bag to every away game.” She passed the ball to Zuri, but it veered sideways.

Zuri dove for the ball. “Umph.” She lay on the grass for a moment before lifting her head. “Ooh, we should make up a new team cheer this year!” She jumped to her feet and kicked the ball away. “How about this?”

She launched into the Renegade, swinging her arms side to side. “Pass, set, hit . . .” She dabbed and rolled her head. “Score!” She popped her hips and froze in place, a goofy grin on her face.

“Needs a little work,” said Cammie, laughing.

“Nah, just needs music!” said Zuri. She grabbed her phone to pull up a playlist then frowned. “Mom wants me home. She and Dad are heading into the city for dinner and I gotta watch my little brother.”

Zuri reached for her water bottle. But before leaving, she launched again into her Renegade dance. “Pass, set, attack, score!” She struck a pose and then collapsed into

laughter. When she recovered, she gave a little wave. “See you at tryouts Monday, right, Aubrey?”

Zuri’s words hung in the air like smoke from a campfire. Aubrey wanted to dodge the question or pretend like she hadn’t heard. But Zuri stared at her expectantly, waiting to hear one simple word.

It popped out of Aubrey’s mouth like a hiccup. “Yep!”

As Zuri hopped on her bike and pedaled away, Aubrey could feel Cammie’s eyes boring into her. She didn’t look—she didn’t need Cammie scolding her right now, because she was already scolding herself.

*What did I just get myself into?* she wondered.