



For Maggie and Elkie. I love watching you both play. -J.B

I dedicate this book to my parents, Sadao and Harumi Gushiken,  
who have always encouraged me to do what I love,  
which is creating art. -M.S

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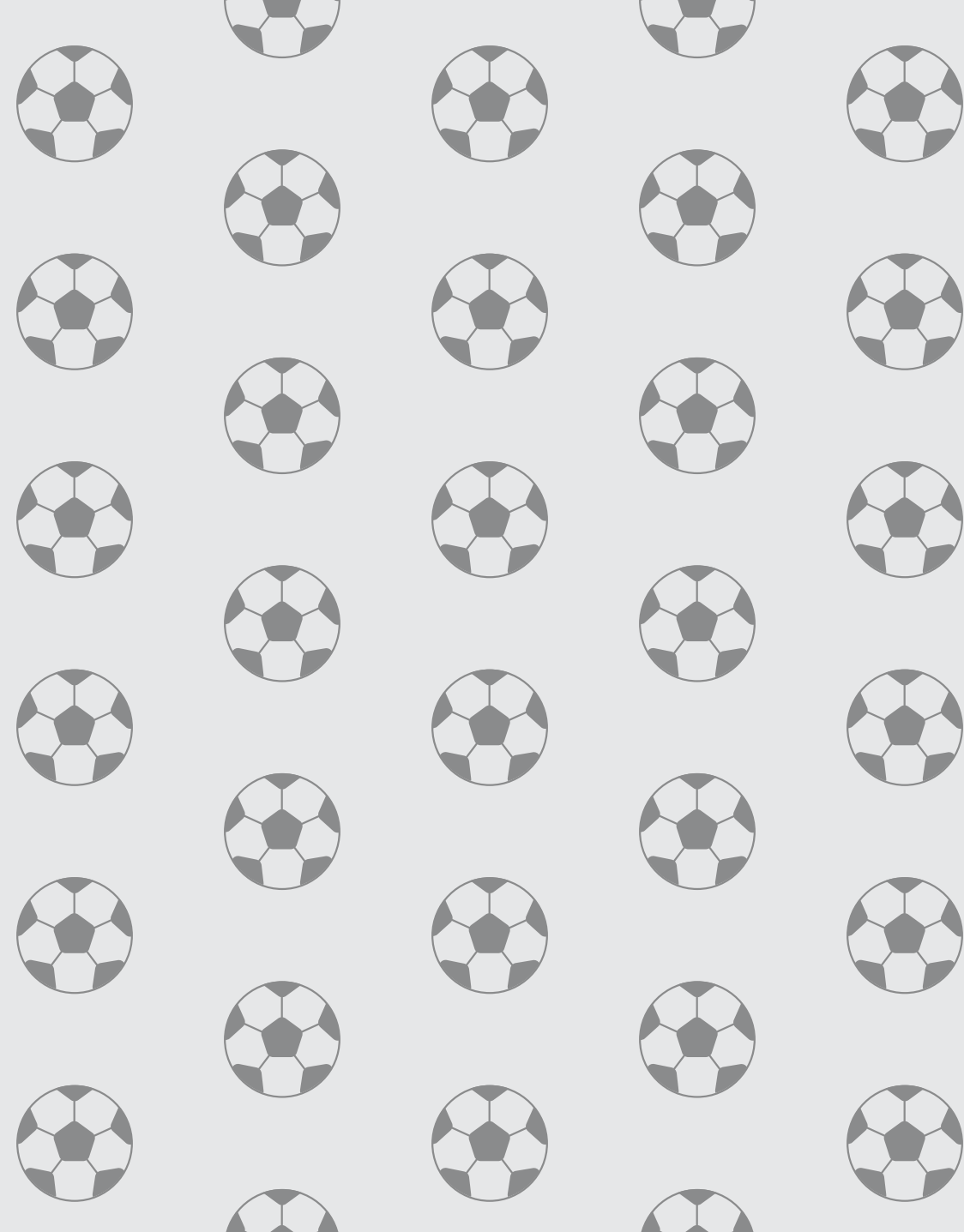
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## DREAM GOAL

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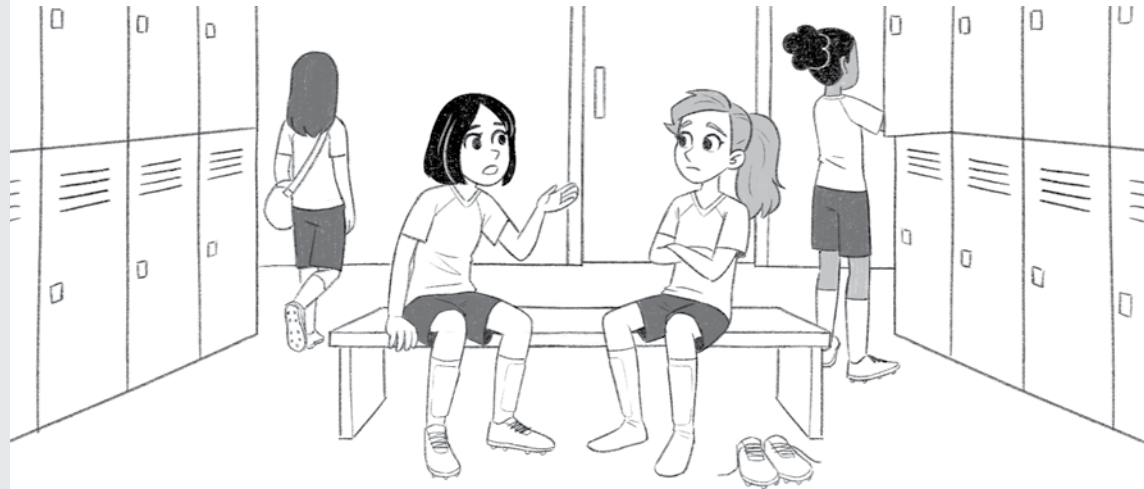
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# ONE

'There's **no way** some these kids are eleven,'  
Scarlett whispered to Alex.

'I know, right?' Alex replied. She had been thinking  
the same thing. She felt very aware of her long and  
gangly frame compared to the muscular builds on  
some of the kids milling around the change rooms.



'Alex, as your bestie and biggest fan,' Scarlett said, 'are you absolutely sure about this?'

'**Yes,**' replied Alex without hesitation.

'It's just that all of these kids look like serious athletes and you're . . .' Scarlett trailed off.

'Thanks for the **vote of confidence,**' Alex replied dryly.

'It's not like I don't believe in you! But some of these kids are borderline scary. That girl's muscles have muscles.'

'Stop talking!' cried Alex, looking around. 'You're *really* not helping my nerves right now.'



'Sorry!' Scarlett leaped to attention. 'You're right. More **positivity** and less freaking out. Forget everything I just said. Actually, don't! You need nerves. Nerves make you work harder. But then again . . .'

Alex cut her off. 'Scarlett! Get a grip. Have you still got my bag?'

Scarlett handed Alex's kit bag to her. 'Sure do! You should get your boots on. Have you had enough to drink?'

'Yes, I'm super hydrated. How about some quiet time now?' Alex suggested.

Scarlett nodded and busied herself with checking Alex's bag. Alex couldn't help but **smile**. Her best friend, Scarlett, was taking her newly-appointed role as Alex's

support person very seriously, and had been reading up on coaching tips. She'd even brought containers filled with orange quarters and red frogs, a few energy drinks and she'd made a playlist of motivational songs for Alex to listen to on the bus as they made their way to Lake Jackson Sports Facility.

Alex slipped her right foot into a football boot. Her trusty **fluorescent** pink boots were well worn-in, and fit like a glove. As she tied up the laces, she overheard snatches of conversation around her.

'Dad says they're taking even fewer people this year.'

'Stacey thinks she's so good. Look at her prancing around.'

'Anton's amazing. He'll get in for sure.'



'Mum said she heard that Coach David is leaving. He's the **best** in the business.'

Alex wondered how they all knew this stuff. She felt like such a **newbie**. She didn't know anyone who went to the school or any of the coaches. She tried to shake off her worries with a few leg stretches. Then everyone in the change rooms started exiting through the door, making their way onto the pitch.

'Hair tied back, out of your face?' asked Scarlett as she walked next to Alex.

'Check,' Alex replied.

'Shin pads on?'

'Check.'

Scarlett nearly yelled the next question:

**KICKER INSTINCT**  
= ACTIVATED?! =

Alex took a deep breath. 'Check.'

A whistle blew. It came from the direction of the pitch where three coaches were huddled together.

Alex had what her dad called 'a bad case of the **heebie jeebies**'.

She'd been counting down the days to these tryouts for months. She was now finally the right age to apply for Kicking It Football Academy's (KIFA) Year Five intake. Getting into the elite football academy had been her **dream** ever since her football hero, the captain of the Matilda's, had given a speech at her school when Alex was in Year Two.



She still remembered the exact words the captain had said, and Alex could have sworn the elite footballer looked **directly** at her when she said them.

'My advice is simple: work hard and believe in yourself. You want to be the hardest worker you know, because if you're not, someone else will be. Believe in yourself, stay determined and always maintain a strong work ethic. I wouldn't have guessed I'd be standing here right now, but I never gave up believing it was a possibility.'

Alex felt someone grab her shoulder.



Scarlett gripped both of her shoulders and gave her a hard stare. 'You've got this!'

Alex smiled on autopilot. She took a step backwards and **bumped** into another girl.

'Watch it!' The girl had long dark hair pulled tightly into a long braid. She had olive skin and a muscular frame.

'Sorry!' Alex gasped.

