

BONUS CHAPTER FOR
THE LAST GREAT ADVENTURE OF THE PB&J SOCIETY



ANNIE'S Bet

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Jason is a terrible team captain. (Not that I'd say that to him). But it's why Evan—King of fourth grade—always chooses him as the opposing captain.

I try to whisper suggestions of who to pick, but Jason never listens. "Bryce will feel bad if I don't choose him." Blah, blah, blah. Well what about us? Won't we feel bad when we lose?

But that's what you get when your best friend is so nice. Too nice, in fact, to take on a role as important as team captain.

So even though I tried to help, Monday's recess was the same as ever: Evan picked all the best players, while loyal-to-a-fault Jason stuck with the kids from our recreation league soccer team.

What good is it being a star forward if your defense can't get the ball to you? I was relieved when the recess bell rang.

Jason and I met up at the sidelines and headed to where our class lined up. "See? You should have listened to me," I whispered. "There's a reason our team has never won a game."

Jason shrugged. "It's not like it matters. It's only recess."

"Nice game, Parker!" Evan ran past dribbling the ball. "That had to be some kind of record! Fifteen to zero? That's like a goal a minute. My pet fish could have played better than that." He high-fived a group of boys from his team.

Jason turned pink but didn't respond. "It doesn't matter," he mumbled.

Like peanut butter it didn't! PB&J Society members stick together and stick up for each other.

"Annie . . . don't do it." He grabbed my arm, but I yanked free and stomped toward Evan.

"Who cares?!" I called. "You may beat us at soccer, but no way you'd win in a game of football."

Evan froze. Turned around.

"Annie!" Jason hissed.

I waved him off. "I've got a plan."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

I ignored him. Hadn't we been practicing our spirals since last Christmas when Jason's Dad gave him his old football? A lucky football, no less, since Jason's Dad had won the state championship with it as quarterback for his high school team.

Evan waited for us. Watched us with that crumpled-nosed sneer-face of his until we reached him. I crossed my arms and sneered back.

"You think you could beat us at football?" he said. "Prove it."

"Fine. Tomorrow at recess."

"Same teams?"

"Same teams."

Evan smirked and then ran a hand through his hair before holding it out. "Deal. You bring the ball. And if you guys lose, you two are out. No more soccer at recess the rest of the year. We're tired of letting a girl play, anyway."

"Annie . . ." Jason's voice warned.

I gave him a look, and he stopped and closed his mouth.

Earning a spot on the field with the boys had taken me half the year. I'd been suspended two days for climbing the pillar by the fourth-grade doors to get that ball from the roof — Evan's final test to prove I wasn't some sissy girl. And on top of that, Mom and Dad had grounded me for a week. No way was I backing out now.

"Fine." I grabbed his hand. "But if you lose, I get to take your place as captain the rest of the year."

"Deal." We shook as the teacher's whistle shrilled again.

"Recess ended five minutes ago! Hurry it up!"

###

When we climbed on the bus that afternoon, Jason slunk down in his seat. "How could you do that, Annie? Who cares if we lost? And now we'll be stuck playing hopscotch or on the playground like babies."

“Are you kidding me?” I shifted to face him. “Aren’t you tired of him bossing everyone around? We both have awesome passing skills and your catch last week was incredible!”

Jason’s ears turned pink. “You think? I mean . . . was it really that good?”

“Better, even. So let’s show him what we’ve got. We can even practice some more tonight. As soon as we’re done with our homework.”

Jason grinned. “Okay. Want to play at my house?”

“No.”

“Why not? We always play at your house.”

“Do you, or do you not still have turkeys in your backyard?” I shivered.

Jason rolled his eyes. “Fine.”

###

We stood at the top of the deck stairs leading to my backyard. Matt — Big Brother of Doom — and his friends bounced on the trampoline, which they’d moved next to the overflowing ditch.

Jason clutched his ball a little tighter. Front yard it was. No way Jason would risk his dad’s ball getting dunked in the ditch by Matt and his friends while they taunted us with Monkey-in-the-Middle. But at least my house was on a cul-de-sac so we wouldn’t have to worry about cars.

We started with small passes and built our way up. By the time we’d been passing for fifteen minutes, Jason had already moved into the Chen’s yard next door.

Perfect spirals every time. Boom! Right into each other’s hands. Evan was so going down.

“Try throwing it over the tree,” I called. The pear tree in our front yard wasn’t even as tall as my house, so it wasn’t super hard. But we could pretend it was the other team.

Jason chucked it, and the ball mostly sailed over the tree, crashing through the top few branches. I had to run, but my diving catch was awesome.

I threw the ball back, totally clearing the tree by a mile. “Beat that!” I called.

“Okay, show-off. Try this!” He backed away from the tree and hurled the ball up and over. No branch snapping this time.

With every throw, the challenges increased. Back and forth, harder and harder, higher and higher. When I couldn’t think of anything else to try but over the house, I waved Jason over and sat on the steps. I mean, I totally could have done it, but Matt’s voice still echoed from the backyard. No way was I letting Matt anywhere near Jason’s ball. We needed it for recess.

Jason jogged over. “You were right, Annie. I know I doubted you, but tomorrow will be awesome! Seeing Evan’s shocked face will be better than the Superbowl!”

I jumped to my feet. “Hey! We can have both! Let’s pretend we’re in the Superbowl . . . Superbowl PB&JXVII!”

Jason’s face lit up, and I put on my announcer voice.

“It’s twenty-one to twenty-seven. The PB&J’s are down by six late in the fourth quarter. They have the ball with one second on the clock. Can they pull out a victory?”

“They’re at the line, ready for the snap . . .”

Jason dropped down, legs wide, the ball on the ground.

I got behind him. “Forty-seven! One-thousand, two-hundred and ninety-two! Five!”

He hiked the ball, and I dropped back while Jason zig-zagged across my yard, pretending to dodge our opponents.

“Annie ‘The Bomb’ Jenkins, PB&J’s phenom quarterback, has the ball. She dodges a sack, scrambling to find an opening. She dodges another sack! That girl’s got moves! She’s gunning toward the sidelines with a mob on her tail. Can she lead her team to victory?”

“The crowd is on their feet. You can feel the tension mounting. But wait! Jason Parker has broken free, and Jenkins sees him.

Jason was sprinting across the cul-de-sac, glancing over his shoulder for my throw. I cocked my arm back and threw the ball with all my might.

“The ball is up! And Parker’s on the run, but will he reach it on time? He’s racing down the field, and oh no! Looks like he can’t get there . . .”

“And I don’t believe it! A diving leap over that tackle to make the catch . . . and touchdown!! He caught it! He caught it! The PB&J’s have tied the game!!!”

Jason jumped up from the grass slick he’d created and held the ball in the air. “Touchdown!” he screamed.

I’d been so caught up in my announcing I hadn’t noticed where he was until the door behind him banged open.

The smile dropped from my face as I realized what Jason was about to do.

“No! Don’t do it!” I waved my arms but too late.

Jason spiked the ball into the grass, and I cringed as a large divot of the lawn went flying.

“What in tarnation?!”

Jason froze mid-celebration.

Ever-so-slowly he turned around.

Mrs. Schuster (aka Mrs. Meany) stomped down her front lawn, her purple polyester pants swishing as she walked. Her short gray hair seemed to stand on end like a cat ready to attack, and I shuddered. I’d seen that look before — when Matt’s skateboard had skidded off his homemade ramp and landed in her flowers. He was still skateboard-less.

With one hand on her back as she stooped over, she picked up the football and held it out. “I asked you a question, boy!”

Jason visibly shrunk. “Well, I don’t . . . it’s just that . . . I mean the tarnation wasn’t . . .”

I raced across the street. “It’s my fault!” I cried. “I’m sorry! Please don’t take his football! I was announcing the Superbowl, and I didn’t realize . . .”

“Well you should have!” Mrs. Meany tucked the ball under her arm. “I spend good money to take care of my yard, and it is not so that a couple of hooligans like yourselves can go ripping it up with your unholy shenanigans! Super or not.”

Jason’s lips were trembling. I knew I should apologize again, but I was too mad. How dare she call us hooligans! That was Matt and his friends, not us. So we’d pulled up a few strands of grass. So what?! It’d grow back.

“Unholy shenanigans?! I’ll give you unholy shenanigans if you don’t . . .”

Jason pushed me out of the way. “What she means is we’re really sorry! We’ll pay to fix your yard, but please can’t I . . .”

“Darn tootin’ you will. And I’ll be calling your parents tonight to make sure of it. Now you’d better skedaddle before I decide to really get angry!”

Jason bolted for his house and I reluctantly followed, making sure to throw my meanest look back at the old lady.

At his porch, we dropped onto the steps. Jason wrapped his arms around his knees and buried his head. I waited for him to say something. Anything.

His body shook and I wanted to melt into the cement. That ball was his prized possession, and I’d gone and gotten it confiscated.

“I’m sorry,” I finally whispered. When he still didn’t say anything, I stood. “Guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

I was halfway down his walk when Jason called out. “Annie, wait!”

I faced him, ready for his anger. But he was grinning. Laughing, even. He’d been shaking with laughter!

“Did you see it? Were you watching?! Best. Catch. Ever!”

I stared for half a moment before laughing with him. “Ridiculously amazing!”

“With the dive! And the reach! And oof, and touchdown!!”

We grinned, reliving our brief moment of victory.

“I really am sorry about your ball.”

Jason shrugged. Wiped at the laughter-tears in his eyes as he headed up the steps. “Yeah. It’s too bad. I guess it means neither you nor Evan will be losing that bet tomorrow.” He winked as he opened the door.

I stared at him, my mouth dropping open. “Wait a minute. Did you do that on purpose? But what about your ball?!”

He closed the door and stepped back out. “Mrs. Schuster will have to cough it up some time. My dad will make sure of that. But look. You’re right. We’re awesome and could totally show up Evan at recess if it were just us two. But it’s not. It’s same teams as today. Remember? No way we can win. It’s better this way. Now we can just tell him I lost my ball — completely true — and things can go back to normal.”

My hands shook. “And you think Evan will forget?”

He'll just bring his own ball the next day!"

"Then we admit he was right and call off the bet. Better that than being stuck on the playground the rest of the year."

I didn't even have a response to that. I glared at him, then spun around and marched off. Because no way was I backing down.

At home, I marched straight to the backyard and faced off with Matt at the trampoline. He and his friends were playing Crack the Egg, and Matt was the egg. He gripped his cross-legged feet, his face scrunched in concentration while his friends bounced him around, trying to make him let go. I should've waited for the game to end, but that would take way too long. Matt was hard to break — like his hand were super-glued to his feet or something.

"I need to borrow your football tomorrow. For recess."

His friends laughed, and bounced him higher. "Oooh! This sounds serious."

Matt didn't break. Held on tight to his feet. "Go away, squirt. We're playing a game."

"I'll take your dish-night this week."

He landed off-center and one of his hands came free. "This month and you've got a deal."

"That's ridiculous! I only need it one day."

He balanced with his free hand out and managed to right himself at the next bounce. "Two months then."

His greasy-haired friend laughed. "Sounds like a deal to me!"

"But . . ."

"You're right. Let's make it . . ."

"Two months! Fine. I'll take it."

His friends guffawed like monkeys and caught Matt off-guard with a bounce. He splatted on the tramp, his egg broken, his legs uncrossed and both hands off his feet.

Matt scowled at me. "Now look what you've done. I'll draw up a contract tonight and give you the ball then. Now go away!"

###

I spent the rest of the night making plans. Football was nothing like soccer. With soccer, every player has to know how to handle the ball or you're sunk.

With football, you just need two. Everyone else can act as decoys and distractions. Which is pretty much what our team did all the time, anyway.

We'd be fine. Jason would see.

When I got on the bus, I had everything ready. In our seat, I unzipped my backpack and showed Jason Matt's ball.

Jason's whole body deflated. "What are you doing? I thought we talked about this. We had a plan, remember?"

"No, you had a plan. But I have a better one." I pulled out all the notes I'd made. One for every person on our team. "I'll need your help passing these out when we get to school."

Jason snatched one up and, with an exaggerated eye-roll, opened it. I watched his face as he read my

instructions and studied the diagram. His frown softened. He glanced at me before grabbing another.

When he'd read them all, he rubbed his forehead. "It pains me to admit your idea is actually pretty good. But it doesn't guarantee a win. It's still a huge risk."

"Life's a risk. And if we don't try, we'll never know. And think about the morale boost for our team if we pull this off! I bet they'd even start playing better at our soccer games."

Jason tapped a finger on his backpack. He gave a great sigh. "Okay. I'll help. But you have to promise me. If we win and you get to be captain, you can't just choose the best players. You have to choose people like Bryce and Corbin, too. It's only fair." He stuck out his hand, looked around then whispered, "Peanut butter."

I stared at his hand a moment, struggling between what was fair and what would help me win. But my conscience got the better of me. "Deal." I grabbed his hand, and whispered, "Jelly," and we smacked our other hands over the top to make a PB&J handshake sandwich. There was no backing out now.

We divided out the notes, and when we got to school, Jason and I subtly passed them out. At one point, Jimmy trapped Jason back by the cubbies. He loomed with his arms at his hips while Jason sent paranoid looks my way. But Jason must have covered for us because Jimmy finally took his seat and pulled out a book.

I made sure to avoid Evan, so the same thing wouldn't

happen to me. And what a relief when I handed the last note to Tommy. Still, I felt Evan's gaze as Mr. Griffin called roll. I dared a glance, and he grinned, pointed at me then pretended to smush something on his desk top.

The jerk.

I looked away, but my stomach flip-flopped. Which was dumb, because the plan would work. It totally would.

Even so, by recess, my stomach was in a full-on knot. I dug Matt's football out of my backpack and walked as slowly as possible to the doors. Jason fell in step beside me, and the rest of our team followed us in silence.

As the field got closer, I gripped the ball as though it were a life preserver. Evan and his team were already there.

"What took you long?" he yelled. "Afraid to face defeat?"

"You'll be the ones . . ."

Jason grabbed my arm. "Annie . . ."

I took a deep breath. Bit back my words and marched stoically to meet our foe. When we were close enough, I tossed Evan the ball. "You guys can go first."

He caught the ball and laughed. "The ball too much for you to handle?"

"No, just taking pity on you." I waved my team into a huddle and kept my voice low. "You all read your notes?"

They nodded.

"Do you really think that'll work?" Bryce asked.

"Yeah," Tommy chimed in. "I don't know if I can . . ."

I held up a hand, and he stopped.

“What did your note say, Tommy?”

His cheeks turned pink. “To talk. Like I do in science, when I can’t stop asking questions.”

“And you don’t know if you can do that?”

“Of course I can, but . . .”

“No ‘buts.’ You can. And what does yours say Corbin?”

He snort-laughed. “To pick my nose at the line as the play is being called. Then threaten the other team with my boogers.”

“Right. And can you do that?”

“Yeah.” Another snort-laugh.

“You guys can all do this. It’s what you’re good at. Jason and I will take care of the rest.”

“Hey!” Evan yelled. “Are you guys playing or what? Recess is half over!”

“All right, guys. We’ve got this! Now, break!”

We took formation and waited for Evan to start the play.

“Thirty-seven!” he called.

Corbin stood up and stuck a finger up his nose. Jimmy and Reese, who faced him, shared a look.

“Fifteen!”

“Hey! Did you see that we’re starting arachnids in science next week?” Tommy’s voice carried from the far end of our line. All three of Evan’s guys — Lincoln, Cole, and John — stared at him like he was nuts.

“Dude, this is a game,” Lincoln said.

“Did you know that spider silk is stronger than steel? And some have like these super brains that are so big the leak over into their legs! Like, it totally wouldn’t be an insult to call them leg-brain! And in Pakistan, there was this village that . . .” Tommy didn’t let up.

“Forty-two!”

I tensed, ready for the snap, but nothing happened. Corbin had pulled a huge green bogey from his nose, and both Jimmy and Reese leaned back, staring as the booger dangled from his finger.

It was working! Though it was hard not to fall over laughing.

“I said forty-two!” Evan screamed.

Reese jumped, then snapped the ball way over Evan’s head.

“What was that?” Evan glared at Reese.

Which was a total mistake.

Bryce plowed through their line and our team took off running while Evan’s guys stumbled out of our way. Whether fear of bogies, plain old surprise, or the fact that Bryce was twice everyone’s size, it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that we were first to the ball.

Jason scooped it up and ran straight to the end zone with no one to stop him.

“Touchdown!” I cried. I threw up my arms like a referee, but Evan was already in my face.

“You can’t do that! It’s totally illegal.”

I smiled. “Oh. I’m sorry. Don’t you know the rules?”

Ball is live on a fumble. Should we call the game until you've read the rule book?"

His face flamed bright red. "I know the rules."

"Perfect. Then six-zero. Time to play for the extra points."

This was Britton's cue. He started coughing as I began the count.

"Twenty-seven!"

The coughing got sharper.

"You okay?" That was Cole.

"Ignore him!" Evan screamed.

"Hike!" I skipped the last two numbers and Jason took off running. I didn't wait for everyone to catch on before launching it.

Jason crossed the goal line holding the ball above him.

"Woo-hoo! Eight zero!"

Evan looked ready to explode. "My team! Huddle! Now!"

"Come on! Us, too!" We ran back to our side of the field and my team gathered round.

"You guys were awesome! But now it gets tricky because they know our game plan." I tapped my watch. "We only have to make it to the whistle which means five more minutes. So keep doing what you were doing, but also try to stall. Knock the ball away, whatever. Just use up as much time as possible!"

"Come on!" Evan called. "Play already, or I'll call delay of game on you. Or don't you know the rules?!"

"Hear that?" Jason asked. "He's nervous. We've got this!"

We jogged to our positions, lining up for Bryce to take the kick. Corbin held the ball for him, and tinkered with it a long time before finally giving Bryce the go-ahead.

Bryce backed up, giving himself a long running start. He trundled forward, the ground practically quaking at every step.

With any luck, it would clear the goal line and we could eat up some time while they chased it.

But right before he got to the ball, Bryce tripped. His foot connected right before he crashed to the ground, and the ball skittered forward along the grass, straight to Jimmy.

The fastest kid in our class.

Probably the fastest kid in fourth grade.

He streaked toward us, and Jason squared off. Jimmy faked left and steamed right, and Jason barely managed to tap his arm before he had a free shot to the goal.

"Woot! That's how it's done!" Evan and his team high-fived as they screamed and hollered.

My team trudged back to the line.

"Sorry," Bryce muttered.

Another look at my watch. Three minutes. I hoped they'd get caught up in celebrating, but they were already lining up.

"You cover Jimmy," I told Jason. He nodded.

"Fifty-four! Ten! Eighty-six!" The ball was snapped.

Evan dropped back while Jimmy sprinted for the goal.

Corbin held out his gooey green finger and Evan's line melted away.

I zipped past them, heading straight for Evan who still danced around like some ballerina as he waited for Jimmy to break free.

I had him! Ten feet . . . five . . . two . . . but the ball was up.

I ground to a halt, watching the thing spiral. As much as I hated to admit it, Evan had an arm.

Jimmy was almost to the goal with Jason right behind him. They both craned their necks, watching the ball as they ran.

But the ball was way over their heads. No way Jimmy could reach it!

I pumped my fist in the air, started to scream, when Jimmy dived with a grunt, arms outstretched.

Boom! Right in his hands. Jimmy tucked, holding the ball close, as he skidded across the grass.

"Touchdown, baby!" Evan slugged my shoulder then ran to dog pile Jimmy with the rest of his team.

Urgh! Eight to six. My watch said we had just over a minute. I prayed they'd celebrate through the whistle, but Evan was already herding them back for the extra points.

"Hurry up! To the line, we don't have much time!"

"We can hold them guys! Come on! We can do this!" Jason flitted from player to player patting them on the shoulder. But didn't he see it was pointless? They had that

same glaze of defeat in their eyes we saw every Saturday at our games.

I trudged to join my team, praying for a miracle.

"Sixty-one! Five! One-hundred and eight!"

Reese snapped the ball and Evan dropped back. Our team had totally stopped trying, our secret plays completely forgotten. Instead they danced from foot to foot as though they had to go to the bathroom.

A short pass to Jimmy, and he was off.

Jason and I ran after him, but he was fast! No way I could catch him, but Jason was close.

"Get him!" I screamed, and Jason dived in a last ditch effort to tag him. But Jimmy dodged. Crossed the goal line right as the recess whistle blew.

No! We'd been so close!

Bryce and Corbin stood there for a minute before joining the others who headed to line up. I dropped to the ground next to Jason. He glanced at me and shrugged as he wiped at the grass bits that covered his sweatshirt. "A tie's not bad. I mean, at least we won't be banished."

My body sagged. "I guess."

"Jenkins!" Evan jogged up and got in my face. "Count yourself lucky! If the whistle hadn't blown, we would have walloped you." He held up a hand for Jimmy to smack, but Jimmy hung back.

Was it my imagination, or did he and Jason share a look?

Jimmy tossed me the ball. “Actually, Evan, they won. Jason got me with that dive.”

“What?! No way! That was all air! We all saw it.”

I climbed to my feet. “Really?” Because as much as I didn’t want to, I agreed with Evan. I’d been right there. And Jason would have said something.

Jimmy shrugged. “But I felt it. Sorry. Guess these guys win the bet. Besides, maybe recess will be more fun if the teams are more even.”

Evan’s lips tightened into a white slit. He glared at Jimmy before throwing me a dirty look. Finally he shook his head. “Whatever.” And he marched away.

Jimmy hurried after him, but paused to call back. “The teams will be more even, right?”

Jason gave a thumbs-up.

I tucked Matt’s ball under my arm and fell in step with Jason. “So that was weird. I didn’t think you got him.”

Jason kept his gaze forward. “Guess I must have.”

I studied his twinkling eyes. There was something he wasn’t saying. “I know you did something. I saw you talking to Jimmy this morning.”

His cheeks flamed red. “So?”

“Sooo . . . what’d you do?”

We walked in silence, me never pulling my gaze from Jason. Finally his mouth twitched at a smile. “Why are you always so suspicious? So I talked to Jimmy. He’s my friend, too. I mean, he may have mentioned that we’re not the only ones unhappy with Evan, but that doesn’t mean I did

anything. Really. Can’t you just be happy that you get to be captain?”

I tapped the football. Kicked at a twig in the grass. Jason could be as stubborn as me when he wanted to. “Fine. I’ll be happy.”

“Good.” He cleared his throat. “Now don’t forget your promise about who you’ll pick or . . . well just don’t. Okay?”

And before I could say anything he skipped ahead with that wretched grin of his and joined our class line.

THE END