

MAGIC BOOTS

Chapter 1

All eyes on Shannon

Shannon Swift knew it was coming. This time, she would fight back.

When that same hand grabbed her shirt, Shannon swatted it off and dashed into the box. She eyed the cross curling in behind her, and she knew this was her chance. *Here it goes...bicycle kick.*

Shannon slowed, turned her back to goal, and leaped. Leaning back in mid-air, she swung her left leg up and lashed her right boot at the ball. The goalie never moved. She'd never seen a girl shoot with her back to the net.

Like the arc of a rainbow, Shannon's shot looped over the keeper and dipped under the bar. She crashed to the turf and bit her tongue. Scrambling up, she felt the *thump-thump* in her heart, that special jolt she got after every goal. Shannon could also feel all eyes on her. By now every girl knew – this new girl could play.

Abby Rains ran up to Shannon. "Cool shot, how'd you do that?"

"Lots of practice on my trampoline, and a little luck," Shannon replied. She turned, smack into the shoulder of Chelsea Mills, the shirt-grabber. "That shot was all luck," Chelsea sassed. "You'll never do that again."

Shannon felt Chelsea's cold eyes, boring in like icicles. *Wow, this girl looks like me, tall, red hair, too many freckles. But her eyes are different.*

A whistle sounded. "Bring it in, girls," called out Kate Wiffle, coach of the Swarm, the under-twelve travel team in Manchester, New Jersey. Sixteen girls jogged toward the sideline. Fifteen were already on the Swarm, every girl but Shannon. This tryout was all about her – her chance to make the

team after moving to Manchester from Tottenham, Pennsylvania. As Shannon joined the girls on the bench, one question rang in her head: *Will I make it?*

Coach Wiffle paced, her blond ponytail poking out of her yellow ball cap, the cap's crown marked by SWARM in black letters. "Good workout, just what I expect from the league champions," Coach said. "So now we start a new season. Tell me, girls, are we gonna keep our title?"

"Yes!" the girls roared. But Shannon was silent. *I'm not on the team yet. Am I?*

"I like your spirit," Coach said with a smile. "See ya next week."

The girls grabbed their bags and walked off, but Shannon froze. *Did I make it, or not?* As Coach Wiffle gathered up balls, Shannon knelt, pretending to tie her boot. Finally, she picked up her bag and stepped away.

"Hang on, Shannon," Coach called. She walked over and looked Shannon in the eye. "Thanks for coming, I'll call ya tonight."

"Sounds good, Coach. Thanks for letting me try out."

Shannon gave Coach her cell number, and then she walked toward the parking lot. Abby Rains jogged up, her blond curls swishing around her ears. Abby barely reached Shannon's chin. "Shannon, you're crazy good. You'll make the team, for sure."

"Thanks."

Just then a voice thundered across the lot. "Abby, we're leaving!"

Abby threw back her head. "Chelsea Mills, screamin' at the moon again. Anyway, see ya."

Shannon waved but her eyes were on Chelsea, standing by her car, arms crossed, scowling at Abby. Shannon frowned. *That girl is gonna be trouble, I know it.*

Shannon's mom pulled up, and she got in. "How'd it go?" Mrs. Swift asked.

"Everyone was watching me, made me nervous."

"Think you'll make it?" her mom asked as she drove out.

"Not sure, these girls are good, way better than Tottenham. Coach is calling me tonight."

"I thought you looked good," her mom said.

Shannon eyed her. "Coach has a rule, no parents at tryouts. I saw you leave."

"I watched from the woods," her mom replied. "Your bicycle kick was a gem. The two moms with me said the same thing."

"Mom, you really hung out in the woods?"

"Yep, and I have only one gripe about your play. You didn't shoot enough."

"I can't hog the ball at my tryout, Mom."

Mrs. Swift swept a shock of red hair off her forehead. "That tall girl you were playing against, she's pretty good."

"That's Chelsea, the captain. She was in my face the whole time."

"What was that about?" her mom asked.

Shannon nibbled her lip. "Maybe she's worried because I play center-midfield. Her position."

"That's wild. You're both tall, you both have red hair, and you both play center-mid."

"Yeah, and she cheats, kept grabbin' my shirt."

"There's one scoundrel on every team, Shan."

"I wish it was only one," Shannon shot back. "Some girl named Tory kept telling me how to play. And this Montana girl tried to trip me a few times."

"Trip you? Come on, Shan."

"I've played a lot of soccer, Mom. I know when I'm being tripped."

Shannon squeezed her water bottle. "By the way, what's with the name, 'Montana?' I mean, what's her brother's name, 'Colorado'?"

Mrs. Swift snickered. "Good one, Shan."

Shannon leaned her head on the window. "I wish we didn't move."

"But your Dad got a great job."

"But I loved Tottenham. I miss my friends."

"You'll make friends on this team."

"Maybe, but I gotta go to sixth grade in a new school."

“It’s the first year of middle school, Shan. It’ll be a new school for everyone.”

“But I’ll be the only new girl.”

Shannon stuck in her ear buds for the rest of the ride. Minutes later she was standing in the shower, replaying every move she made. *I played okay, but maybe Mom’s right. What if I had scored more?* Shannon shut off the shower. Toweling off, she thought she heard her phone ring. She dashed to her desk and picked it up, but there was no call. She tossed the phone into her pillow. *I’m so nervous, I’m hearing things.*

Shannon opened her shirt drawer and rummaged through until she found her only yellow T-shirt. She slipped it on. *The Swarm wear yellow shirts, maybe this’ll bring me good luck.* She got dressed, flicked up a tennis ball, and started to juggle. She kept the ball up for nine touches before it hit the white carpet. Her eyes swung to her digital clock. 5:36. Shannon flopped on her bed. *Seems like time is standing still.*

“Tacos on the table!” her mom called out. Shannon grabbed her phone and bounced down the stairs. She joined Tim, her thirteen-year-old brother, and her parents at the kitchen table. Her eyes went right to her dad’s new haircut.

“Dad, your hair, it’s gone.”

Mr. Swift smiled. “I call this my salt and pepper buzz cut. Hides the gray pretty good, huh?”

“Tim looks just like you,” Shannon observed.

“Not quite,” Tim shot back. “I got only pepper, no salt.”

Mr. Swift chuckled at that. “So, Shan, how was your tryout?”

“I was nervous, but I think I did okay.”

“You made the team, right?” Tim asked.

“I’ll find out tonight, soon, I hope.” Shannon spooned a line of guacamole on her taco. She was on her third bite when her phone dinged. She grabbed it, sprang out of her chair, and slipped into the family room.

Shannon could barely get out one word. “Hello.”

“Shannon, it’s Coach Wiffle. I’m thrilled to welcome you to the Swarm!”

“Wow, I’m so excited!” Shannon blurted.

“So am I, Shannon. I’ll send an email to the team.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

Shannon gave Coach her email address. She clicked off, pumped her fist, and walked back to the kitchen. She tried to put on a pout, but it quickly gave way to a smile. “I made it!”

“Hooray, Shan!” Mrs. Swift roared. Shannon hugged her parents. Tim held up a palm, and Shannon rapped it. “Pretty cool, Shan, we both made the travel teams.”



Later that night, Shannon was dribbling a tennis ball across her bedroom carpet when her phone dinged. It was an email from zombie33, an address she didn’t recognize. The subject was ‘Swarm Soccer,’ so she opened it. “*No one on the Swarm wants you. Go find another team.*”

“Mom, come here!”

Mrs. Swift climbed the stairs two at a time. Shannon gave her the phone. “Read that.” Mrs. Swift read the message, shook her head. “Who on earth would do such a thing?”

Shannon sighed. “Bet it’s Chelsea Mills.”

Mrs. Swift put an arm around Shannon. “I’m calling Coach Wiffle.”

“No, Mom, I’ll look like a sissy.”

Shannon sank onto her bed. “The Swarm’s been together for five years. I feel like an outsider. There must be another team I can join.”

Mrs. Swift sat. “Shan, you’re a great player, set all the records in Tottenham. You should play for the best team here.”

“But some girls don’t want me. You should see Chelsea’s eyes. It’s like they drill right through me.”

“Come on, Shan, you’ll win the girls over.”

Shannon nibbled her lip. “I know you want me to play for the best team, Mom. But maybe it’s okay if I don’t.”

Mrs. Swift rubbed Shannon’s shoulder. “You’ve had a long day, Shan, time for bed.”

Mrs. Swift walked out. Shannon rolled over, her eyes landing on the photo on her windowsill. It showed Shannon on her first soccer team, her arm around her first coach, her mom. Mrs. Swift had played soccer in college. Her senior year, she was the top scorer in Division I. She was drafted by a pro team. But then she tore the Achilles tendon in her left leg, for the fourth and final time.

Shannon knew that her mom wanted her to be good at soccer. But no matter how well Shannon did, she felt her mom expected a little more. *Why did my mom have to be a superstar? Why do I have to live up to that?*

A bit later, Shannon dropped onto her comforter. Wiped out from her long day, she fell asleep in her T-shirt and shorts. Her light was still on.



Six blocks away, four Swarm teammates had gathered in the treehouse in Chelsea’s backyard. Chelsea, Tory and Montana were trying to cheer up Cat Woods. “My mom watched the tryout,” Cat said. “She says Shannon is so good, she’ll take my position.” Cat scooped a yellow leaf off the floor, crumpled it. “My mom knows the coach of the Monsoon. They need a midfielder. I’m trying out next week.”

“No way, Cat,” Chelsea shot back. “We’re not letting some new girl knock you off the Swarm.”

“Chelsea’s right, Cat,” Tory snapped. She shined her flashlight on the words Chelsea had carved on the treehouse wall: *‘Chelsea, Tory, Montana and Cat – Fab Four forever!’*

“I don’t know,” Montana muttered. “Shannon is good, I mean, really good.”

“She’s not that good,” Chelsea argued.

“You ever see a bicycle kick like that?” Montana countered.

Chelsea smirked. “That was a fluke. Besides, she’s a ball hog.”

“She passed to me, a lot,” Montana fired back.

Chelsea paced. “Look, I already sent her a message telling her not to join. Made up an email address – she’ll never know who sent it. Bet that scares her off.”

“What if it doesn’t?” Cat asked.

“We go to our back-up plan,” Chelsea replied. “We tell Coach that Shannon’s not a good fit, that she breaks up our midfield.”

“Won’t work,” Montana whined.

“Okay, Mon,” Tory blurted, “you got any bright ideas?”

“I got one,” Chelsea cut in, a sly grin edging across her face. “I’ll take her down.”

Montana’s eyes bulged. “You mean, hurt her?”

“I’ll do a slide tackle – get her ankle.”

“Good idea, Chelse,” Tory agreed.

But Cat frowned. “It’s not gonna work. I’m gonna be playing against you guys.”

“No way,” Chelsea railed. She stuck a finger at her friends. “We got our plan, girls. One way or another, Shannon Swift is goin’ down.”