

# No Girls Allowed

by Victor Rodger



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"It's for your own protection apparently."

Her heart sank. She could guess the rest. "Because I'm the only girl in the first fifteen," she said.

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Riley couldn't think of anything worse.

"I know I'm the smallest," she said, "but I'm your best halfback. You need me." It was true. Zac was slow. And he always dropped the ball as though it was covered in butter.

"I went in to bat for you. I really did," Callum said sadly. "But the organisers have made their decision."

"It's not fair," Riley said.

"I know. It's rough. You must be really disappointed."

Riley wasn't just disappointed. She was mad! Her family lived for rugby. Her dad had played professionally. So had Aunty Tiff. Her brothers Cashel and Archie were keen halfbacks, and Riley had been in mixed teams since she was five, playing with boys twice her size. She could take care of herself. One day, she was going to coach in New York like Aunty Tiff. As her team-mates gathered on the field, Riley wondered how she'd ever manage New York if she couldn't even play in a local school event.



When the whole team was there, Callum looked at Riley. "Do you want to tell them or shall I?"

"Tell us what?" said Zac.

So Riley explained that she wasn't allowed to play in the tournament, including the reason why. The news was met with a long silence.

"I still don't get it," Zac said finally.

"It's because I'm a girl," Riley said. "I told you."

But the boys' faces remained blank. Why were they confused? Riley wondered. Because it wasn't so hard – no girls allowed. She wished one of them would say something. It was getting awkward. But then, she thought, what could they say? They were boys. How could they understand?

"What are we thinking, team?" Callum asked.

"That it sucks," said Jody.

"Hard out," agreed Zac.

The others mumbled and nodded.

"So what should we do?" Callum's face was neutral while he waited for an answer.

"We should tell the organisers that if Riley can't play ... with us ... then we won't play either," Jody said.

There was a rumble of agreement. It made Riley feel happy. They'd only been a team for a few months. It felt good to know the others had her back, but it would mean they'd give away their chance of winning. She couldn't let them do it.

"It's OK," Riley said. "Honest. It's just one dumb tournament." She was trying to hide her disappointment, but everyone could still see it.

Riley hung back during practice so Zac had a good run as halfback. He still dropped the ball. She was glad when Mum turned up. They left straight away.

Riley told her dad the news that night. He almost choked on his dinner. "You're joking," he said through a mouthful of sapsui. "Who are these people, not letting my girl play? I'll give them a call, tell them what I think."

"Don't, Dad. Please," Riley said. She didn't want any fuss.

A silence fell over the table. "Well you can still play seven-a-side with the girls," said Mum. She was always positive.

Dad frowned. "Why should she?"

"Yeah. They're not her team," Archie agreed.

"She wants to play with her own team," said Dad.

Riley shrugged, but he was right.

Later that night, she talked to Aunty Tiff in New York. Her aunty was sitting up in bed, squinting through sleepy eyes. "Riley! It's four o'clock in the morning!"

"Sorry," Riley said. "I needed to talk."

Aunty Tiff managed a smile. "That's OK. It's nice to see your face, girl. What's going on?"

Riley told her about the tournament. Aunty Tiff shook her head with disgust. "You must be gutted," she said.

Riley nodded, although even gutted felt like an understatement.

"I would be, too. Want some advice? Let your team-mates side with you."

"I feel too stink," Riley mumbled.

"Don't," said Aunty Tiff. "It's awesome they want to help. It's not like anyone's making them."

This was true, Riley thought. But still, the price of sticking together was so high. She'd seen the disappointment on her team-mates' faces.

"Chin up," said Aunty Tiff. "You've got this. All of you."



But the next morning, as Riley walked to school, she felt lousy. There was no way she would score that winning try. It was just a stupid fantasy.

She was surprised to see Jody and Zac waiting outside her class. Jody had a pleased look on his face. "Guess what?"

Riley shrugged. She wasn't in the mood for guessing.

"We talked again last night, and we're sticking with the plan. If you can't play in the tournament, then none of us will play."

"That's really nice of you," said Riley, "but it's a bad idea."

"No way," said Zac. "All for one and one for all." He suddenly looked shy. "Or something like that," he mumbled.

"Callum's talking to the organisers right now," said Jody.

When they found Callum, his face was grim. "Well, they weren't impressed," he said, "but I pushed back, and they finally agreed Riley could play with us."

"Sweet!" said Jody. He thumped Riley on the back.

Callum shook his head. "There's a catch. If we score any points, they won't count."

"What? That's crazy!" said Riley. "It means we'll have no chance of winning the tournament."

Callum shrugged. "The best I could do, sorry. They called it a compromise."

"Fine," said Jody. "We'll do it."

"It's *not* fine," said Riley. "It's stupid."

"Hang on," said Callum. "I think you should let the team decide that."

"Yeah," said Jody. "Let us decide."

They had a final practice that night, and Callum didn't waste any time.

"Right," he said, turning to the others.

"Hands up who thinks Riley shouldn't play in the tournament and we go ahead and try to win this thing."

No hands went up.

"So who thinks we should play in the tournament with Riley even though it means we can't win it?"

This time, every hand went up.

Riley felt her cheeks burn, but she wasn't mad. She was the exact opposite.

The following Tuesday, Riley ran onto the field with her team. Her parents and Cashel and Archie were on the sideline. Even Aunty Tiff was there, watching from Dad's phone. While Riley waited for the first match to begin, she checked out the spectators. Which ones were the organisers? she wondered. She hoped they were paying attention.

From the very beginning, things didn't go their way. They couldn't connect with the ball. Time after time, Riley watched the opposition cross the try line while her team struggled. They lost three of their games and only just managed to win their fourth when Riley scored a

late try in the second half. Not that it mattered – their points didn't count.

Riley hated being beaten – especially today. She joined her family, mumbling hello. Then she heard Aunty Tiff on the phone.

"Oi, you. Get that chin up! You got a hiding. So what? You still smashed it! You deserved to be out there today. You really showed them!"

"Totally," agreed Dad.

Zac and Jody came over. "Can't win 'em all," said Zac.

"Hey! We won one," said Jody with a laugh. "And there's always next year, eh?" Riley smiled. "Yeah. Next year."

illustrations by Daron Parton



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