

FOOTBALL FEVER

NEXT LEVEL



KRISTIN DARELL

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LESLEY VAMOS

PUFFIN BOOKS

CHAPTER 1

‘Can you see anyone from Merridale?’
Kat asked.

Her twin brother shrugged. ‘Not yet.
But they’ll be here somewhere.’

Kat peered out the side window as their car crept along to the drop-off point at the National Academy of Ball Sports. Kids were everywhere, wearing a kaleidoscope of jersey colours. There was shouting and laughter and more footballs than Kat had ever seen. It was chaos.

It was perfect. Kat couldn't believe she was finally here. The High Potential Pathway Program, or as the kids called it, HIP. Only a hundred players were invited to the weekend camp each year. Being here was a dream come true. Usually just one player – maybe two – from clubs made the cut, so Kat was extra excited that she'd get to share it with her *whole* football team, the Merridale Fever Under 11s.

Luka leaned over, squinting past Kat out the passenger-side window.

'This is amazeballs,' he said, grinning. Kat grinned back. Sometimes Luka drove her mad, but there were no arguments over their love of football. Their dad said their Croatian heritage meant they had football in their blood.

'There,' Kat said, pointing as she spotted Merridale's yellow and green colours.

‘I think I see Hani.’ She wound down the window.

‘Hani! Over here!’ Luka screamed.

‘Thanks for the burst eardrum,’ Kat muttered as the car came to a stop. But nothing could dampen her mood as she jumped out and grabbed her Merridale FC bag from the boot.

‘Slow down, tiger,’ her dad said, wrapping her in a big hug. ‘Have an amazing time.’ He pulled back, and Kat saw tears glistening in his eyes. ‘I’m so proud of you. My little star defender.’

‘Hey, what about me?’ Luka said, swinging his bag over his shoulder.

‘You know I’m the favourite,’ Kat said, smiling as she elbowed her brother.

‘We don’t have a favourite,’ their mum said. ‘We love you both the same.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ Kat said. ‘But can we go now?’ She saw her best friend Ava waving,

and an excitement bubble was spreading through her body.

Her dad laughed. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘We love you *both*.’

‘Love you too,’ Kat called as she jogged towards her teammates. Luka was right on her heels.

Next to a pile of dumped Merridale FC bags, their teammates were mucking about.



Ava was with Sasha, Meili, Charlie, Sam and Finn practising tricks. Beside them, Crabbie, Kyra, Hani and Harper were paired up kicking balls. Harper dribbled towards Hani. They were a funny pair. Harper barely made it past Hani's shoulder, but she was fast and skilled. She faked left then ducked to the right, racing around him. Hani laughed.



Kat dropped her bag.

‘Hi Kat,’ Ava said as she approached.

‘Hey Kat,’ Charlie said. ‘Check this out.’

Charlie pulled off a perfect around the world.

Kat clapped. ‘Awesome.’

‘Now you, Finn,’ Sasha said. ‘Like we’ve been practising.’

Finn and Sasha were best friends, but while Sasha was awesome at tricks, Finn struggled.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘As long as no-one laughs!’

Finn managed twelve juggles before the ball went flying sideways. They clapped. It was a definite improvement.

‘Diego!’ Kat exclaimed as a shaggy golden retriever returned Finn’s football. He plonked down next to Kat for a pat. Diego was Kyra’s dog and the Fever’s mascot. He loved rounding up footballs.

‘How incredible is this!’ Kyra said, joining the group. Harper, Hani and Crabbie were right behind her.

‘So good,’ Ava said. ‘Have you seen any of the HIP coaches yet? They’re total legends.’

Kat scanned the crowd for bright blue HIP shirts.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Can you even imagine what it would be like to play with them in the Game of Stars on Sunday?’

‘You’ll make the top sixteen for sure, Kat,’ Ava said. ‘You’re seriously the strongest defender I’ve ever seen.’

‘You’re a good best friend,’ Kat said. ‘But we’ve all got a chance, or we wouldn’t have been selected.’

‘Kat’s right.’

Kat turned as their coach walked up. ‘And now you’re all here,’ Coach said, ‘it’s time to get this HIP show on the road.’

CHAPTER 2

Crabbie was glad Coach was there. As well as being Kyra's mum and a brilliant coach, she had been a Young Matilda, so she'd been through all this, and more. Coach always made Crabbie feel like anything was possible, and he needed that right now more than ever.

'I know you're used to training together,' Coach said, 'but like I've been telling you, things will be a bit different here at camp. The coaches are splitting

you into girls and boys, for this afternoon at least.'

Crabbie's insides suddenly felt all twisted up, like the time he drank off chocolate milk. He'd counted on having *all* his teammates around, like he usually did. Even if they didn't know why he needed them right now. He kept a smile plastered on his face. Happy Crabbie was who his teammates expected.

'Girls, you're in cabin five,' Coach continued. 'Boys, you're next door in cabin six. You have ten minutes to put your bags away and be back on the oval.'

'Yes, Coach,' they said together.

She looked at them all one by one. 'The next couple of days will be challenging for you,' Coach said. 'But remember that it's an amazing next step and an experience not many kids get to have. You've worked

really hard for this, so enjoy it!’ She smiled. ‘Oh, I almost forgot. There might be some special guests coming to watch you.’ Coach winked. ‘Try not to get too distracted. Off you go!’

Coach always did this – gave them a hint of something fun that was coming up, but then left them guessing. It was usually worth it in the end, though, so when it became clear that no amount of begging would uncover any more information, the Fever headed towards their cabins to get ready for their first session.

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‘Bags the top bunk,’ Sam said as he charged through the cabin door. Finn, Hani, Charlie and Luka were right behind him.

There had been so much excitement on the walk to the cabins, no-one noticed that

Crabbie wasn't joining in like he usually did. He had wanted to be selected for this camp so badly. He was trying to be excited like his teammates, but how could he, when a week ago his whole world had been turned upside down.

We both love you very much, his parents had told him. *We love each other too, just not in a staying-married sort of way*. Now he was one of those kids who went from parent to parent. Two homes. Two everything. He hadn't even told his best friend Sam. He didn't know how.

Crabbie heard laughter. He took a breath, painted a smile on his face and followed the boys inside.

'Cool,' he said, dumping his bags on the bunk below Sam. Luka and Finn had scored the top beds on the room's other two bunks. One side of the cabin had windows looking out at the oval.

‘Check this out,’ Hani said. He was standing with Charlie in front of a black-and-white team photo hanging on another wall.

Crabbie joined them, squinting at the date on the bottom. ‘Wow, 1922. That’s old,’ he said. The other words were faded out. ‘Any idea who it is?’

‘Of course,’ Hani said. ‘It’s the official photo of the first Australian national men’s football team.’ Hani was the Fever’s football buff. ‘And 1922 was when they played their very first game. It was in New Zealand.’

‘Nice,’ Charlie said.

‘They weren’t even the Socceroos yet,’ Hani continued. ‘That didn’t happen for another fifty years. They didn’t wear green-and-gold either. They wore light blue and maroon because the players were all from New South Wales and Queensland.’

‘How do you remember all this stuff?’ Sam asked, hanging over the edge of the bunk for a closer look.

Hani shrugged.

‘You guys ready yet?’ Kyra asked, bouncing through the door of their cabin, her Merridale water bottle in her hand.

‘Of course,’ Sam shot back, jumping down from his bed.

‘Cool room.’ Harper followed Kyra inside.

‘Ooh, more old photos,’ Sasha said as she, Meili, Kat and Ava stepped in. ‘We’ve got some of those too.’

‘Nice,’ Charlie said. ‘We’ve even had time for one of Hani’s history lessons.’ He pointed at the photo. ‘That is the first Australian men’s football team, and they played their first game in NZ.’

‘Nailed it,’ Hani said, giving Charlie a high-five.

‘Well, HIP camp will be history if we don’t get moving,’ Meili said. She had her arms crossed but a big grin on her face.

Crabbie grabbed his goalkeeping gear and water bottle and followed his teammates as they piled out the cabin door. As he listened to everyone laughing and chatting, he felt some of the pressure on his chest ease. He didn’t like them being split up for training, but they *were* all here together.

I’ll feel better with a ball at my feet, he thought. *I hope.*