KEY PLAYER

KELLY YANG



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ALSO BY KELLY YANG

Front Desk

Three Keys (Front Desk #2)

Room To Dream (Front Desk #3)

New From Here (Published by S&S UK)

For older readers:

Parachutes

TO EVERYONE WHO HAS EVER STRUGGLED
IN P.E., LIKE ME

CHAPTER 1

I read in a book once that if you want something bad enough, all you have to do is picture it. Then BOOM, it becomes reality.

I have always been a very good picture-er. After all, I pictured my family and friends buying a motel and running it together. I pictured that business would thrive. Before all that became a reality, when my parents and I first moved from China to California, I pictured that I would master English as a second language.

So it shouldn't be so hard to picture myself scoring a goal in PE— or at least getting anywhere near the football. Even now that my family has health insurance and I'm not so afraid of getting hurt, I still can't help avoiding the ball like it's radioactive.

Maybe it was all those years of sitting on the sidelines, or the fact that my classmates all had twice the sports equipment I had. (Do you know how expensive shin pads are?!) But when Mr. Antwell said, "All right, kids!

We're going to be doing a football unit in honour of the World Cup, which as you know is coming up, and being played right here in LA!" I instinctively looked around for an ice box to bury my head in.

The only cup I was interested in was a cup of jasmine tea, along with some time to write my next piece for the school newspaper.

But instead, on this scorching hot day, Mr. Antwell marched up to me on the field and yelled, "Mia, what are you doing? This is football! You're walking around the field like it's a museum!"

"I'm sorry," I muttered. "I was thinking about a column I'm going to write!"

"Well, think with your feet!" Mr. Antwell cried. "C'mon, picture yourself as Brandi Chastain, dribbling the ball and driving it into the goal!"

I shook my head. How did I tell Mr. Antwell I couldn't picture myself as Brandi Chastain? First of all, she looked nothing like me! She had wispy hair the colour of glistening sand, while mine was thick and jet-black. Second, even if I did dribble the ball, I'd probably end up kicking it off the metal corner of the goal, have it come flying back at me, and get sent to the emergency room with a concussion. I still remembered the time my mum had to go to the hospital. It was expensive and she

had to take days off work. Even with health insurance, none of us could afford time off for a PE head injury.

"I need water," I told Mr. Antwell.

Bethany Brett, my forever nemesis, rolled her eyes and groaned, "We'll never win with Mia on our team!"

"It's not all about winning," I fired back, huffing and puffing to the side of the field toward our water bottles. My friend Jason glanced over at me and raised a concerned eyebrow, silently asking, You okay? He'd gotten so fast, I could barely see his feet when he ran. PE was much more his thing. I nodded back: I'm fine.

As I sat down to take a long drink, I pictured myself in San Francisco over winter break, at the new journalism camp that the San Francisco Tribune was hosting. It would be so amazing. I'd actually get to write, all day! But the camp was expensive, and I needed a scholarship. And for that I needed straight As. Including in PE.

With a sigh, I put my water down and picked myself back up. As I walked over to join my classmates, all huddled together, kicking their feet, their bold legs darting in and out as they chased after the ball, I marvelled at their bravery. None of them ever seemed to even think about getting hurt. They just played. I wished I could do that. But no matter how good my

imagination was, I couldn't erase all the years of worrying every time the ball came close to me.

I looked at the grass, fighting the urge to plop back down and read instead. It probably didn't help my speed that I had a book tucked inside my PE shorts.

Mr. Antwell blew sharply on his whistle. "Mia! You done with your water break? Let's hustle! I want you to play like it's you at the Rose Bowl in two weeks, in front of millions of fans!"

Yeah, right. Me playing in the Rose Bowl? Selling hot dogs, maybe.

Still, I tried to pick up the pace, for Mr. Antwell's sake.

"She can't run—look at her toothpick legs!" Bethany complained. "Hey!" Jason cried out in my defense.

My cheeks grew hot, and I looked down. My legs were skinny, sure, but why'd Bethany have to say toothpick? I kept jogging, and of course, that's exactly when my copy of the Baby-Sitters Club #2 decided to fall out of my waistband.

Mr. Antwell blew his whistle again, stopping the game. He walked over and stared at my book on the field. All my teammates crowded around. I knew I was DOOMED.

"Mia Tang. You brought a book to football?" Mr. Antwell asked.

Bullets of sweat rolled down my forehead. Journalism camp flashed through my mind. San Francisco! The Golden Gate Bridge! All my hopes and dreams! I glanced in the direction of the locker room, but Lupe was late again. She was usually late coming back from the high school, where she went for maths, and frequently missed PE. Today, I missed her more than ever. Even with Jason here, I felt so alone.

"I . . . uh . . ." I had to say something! "I was using it as a weight! To run faster," I finally managed. "You know, like in those adverts on TV!"

"Uh-huh." Bethany rolled her eyes.

I ignored Bethany and looked up at Mr. Antwell. "I swear, I wasn't gonna read it. I already know what happens in the book!"

That part was true. The Baby-Sitters Club was one of my favourite series. They couldn't release the books fast enough, and I would reread them over and over again while I waited for a new one to come out.

Bethany crossed her arms. "Aren't those books about, like, super-annoying girls who kidnap little kids?"

My jaw dropped. "No! It's about girls who start a babysitting club to make money!"

I knew Bethany was just being mean, as usual—but I couldn't help it, I felt extremely protective of the

characters. Especially Claudia Kishi, who was the only Asian American girl I'd ever seen on the cover of a novel.

Mr. Antwell just shook his head at me with supreme disappointment. As I reached for my book, Mr. Antwell blew his whistle again. "Leave it!" he ordered.

"But it's a library book!" "I said leave it!"

So I jogged away, staring back longingly at the book on the grass.

At the piece of myself that just didn't fit, no matter how hard I tried on the field.

...

I couldn't get my book back until lunch break. At least by then, Lupe had returned from the high school and could walk with me.

"So, I guess I missed something?" she said.

I looked down, kicking the grass with my Payless sneakers. There was a hole the size of a penny in the sole of the right shoe, but we were saving up to buy a house, so I didn't want to tell my parents.

"Mr. Antwell still screaming at you?" she guessed.

I nodded. "How about you? Those girls treating you any better?"

Lupe's face fell. I knew this term wasn't easy for

her either. She didn't have to deal with Mr. Antwell's wrath most days, but she did have high school girls, who liked to ask Lupe questions about boys that she didn't understand, then laugh when her face turned red.

I didn't know how Lupe did it. I could barely handle the brats our own age like Bethany! But Lupe was determined to keep pursuing her maths dreams.

"They're still the same," she said. Then her eyes flashed. "But guess what? My teacher recommended me for the Maths Cup!"

I stopped walking and grabbed her arm. This sounded like a cup I could get on board with! I pictured a huge yoghurt parfait with numbers. "YESSSSS!!!" I screamed.

Lupe giggled. "Have you heard of it? It's this major competition, and everyone on the team is a junior or a senior," she said, jumping on the grass as we reached the field. "Including Ethan Thompson."

"Who's Ethan Thompson?" I asked.

"This guy with dimples who all the other girls like," Lupe explained.

I smiled. "Do you like him?"

"No. But maybe they'll finally be nicer to me now that I'm on the same team as him." Lupe waggled her eyebrows.

I chuckled. Sounded like a plan.

"Just hope I don't flame out . . ." Lupe said, her face clouding with worry again.

"Are you kidding? You're going to rock this! When do you guys start?"

"Next week!" Lupe said.

"Who's the coach?" I asked. "Maybe my mum knows her!"

Now that Mum was teaching full-time at the high school—she had her own classroom and everything!—she went to all the faculty meetings.

"Him. Mr. Jammer. I haven't met him yet, but I hope he likes me." "He will," I assured her. We got to the patch of grass by the goal and looked around. Thankfully, my book was still lying in the same place I'd been forced to leave it. Tenderly, I picked it up and dusted off the grass.

"How mad did Mr. Antwell get at you for this?" Lupe asked. "Mad." I made a face. "You don't think he's gonna give me a bad grade, do you? Because that would jeopardize everything." "Relax. It was just one class," Lupe said.

I chewed my cheek. "How long do you think the football unit's gonna last?"

"At least till the World Cup's over. Oh, hey, that

reminds me! I heard they're putting World Cup blankets on all the beds of the hotels in Pasadena! You think we should do that?"

"Nah," I said. "What would we do with them after?"

The last thing I needed was a bunch of blankets reminding me that I was totally uncoordinated, even in my sleep.

Just then, I looked up and saw Mr. Antwell crossing over from the track to talk to us. I quickly put the book behind my back.

"Hey, Mr. Antwell," we said.

"Mia, can I have a word with you?"

I handed my book to Lupe, then walked over to Mr. Antwell, trying hard not to study the number of frown lines around his mouth when he looked at me.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Mia, I really need you to take PE seriously," he said, crossing his arms.

"I do take PE seriously," I insisted. "I'm just not that good at sports."

"Because you don't want to be—"

"No," I interrupted. "I do. It's just . . ." My voice trailed off. How could I explain that my arms were as rusty as an old bike chain because for years, my parents told me every day not to get anywhere close to the ball

because we didn't have insurance? I couldn't. It'd be way too embarrassing.

"I'm a good writer, though "

"You can't just be good at one thing, Mia." Mr. Antwell put on a pair of sunglasses, even though he already had one on top of his head. I didn't know which one to look at. I felt like they were doubly reminding me of the fact that I was bad at sports.

"Why not?" I furrowed my eyebrows. "Because it's not healthy!"

I wanted to ask why not? again. But I knew Mr. Antwell was a one why not? per day kind of guy.

He sighed. "I just want you to know, when you get your report card this week, that I still believe in you."

My heart started punching my chest. "What grade did you give me?" I asked. "Well, you'll see," he said.

"Please? I don't want to wait." I shook my head frantically. Report cards weren't due for three days. Three whole days wondering and panicking! PE might finally send me to the emergency room—not for running, but for stress!

Mr. Antwell shifted his weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably. I could tell he really didn't want to tell me. But he'd opened Pandora's box, and there was no putting the GRADE issue back inside.

Gently, he took off his sunglasses again. And as he told me my fate, I felt the field underneath my feet open up and swallow me whole.