

SCUFFED BOOTS

1

Stay with the Swarm, or ride the Wave?

Shannon Swift knew the clock was running out.

Her head on her pillow, Shannon ran her eyes over the long crack on her ceiling. *I'm like my ceiling – cracking apart. How can something I love so much make me stress out like this?*

Two soccer teams wanted Shannon. She could choose only one. She loved playing for the Swarm, her town travel team. But now Shannon had an offer to join the Wave, the best under-thirteen academy team in New Jersey. She checked her watch: 3:17. She had less than three hours to decide.

Shannon closed her eyes and drifted off, but her phone rattled her. A text from Haley Punt, her best friend, next-door-neighbor, and Swarm teammate. *Wanna fire some shots at me?* Shannon smiled and tapped back, *Meet ya out back in five.* She bundled her long red hair in a ponytail and changed into her soccer gear. Hopping down the stairs two at a time, Shannon stepped out to the deck and grabbed a ball from the bin. A light mist dotted her face as she trotted onto the Square, the mini soccer field in her backyard. Shannon was eleven touches into a juggle when she heard the gate jiggle.

Haley walked in, but she wasn't alone. Behind her marched in every one of Shannon's teammates. At the back, Abby Rains and Montana West held a banner that read, *Swift and the Swarm – a Perfect Match.* Under the words, Abby had drawn a picture of Shannon in mid-air, cracking her favorite shot, a bicycle kick. The girls began to chant. "Shannon...*Swarm!* Shannon...*Swarm!*"

A lump rose in Shannon's throat. Haley wrapped an arm around her. "We love ya, Shan," she said. "You gotta stay."

Shannon blinked back a tear. The girls chose up sides and played a quick game on the damp grass. After it ended, Shannon watched the girls trail out through the gate. *I love those girls. How could I leave the Swarm?* Shannon flicked the ball up with her left foot and began another juggle. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Haley coming back. The girls dropped into the grass. Shannon thumped a fist on her thigh. "I can't decide, Hale. It's driving me nuts."

Haley swept her black bangs off her forehead. "Shan, I got it figured out. Stay with the Swarm this spring, so we can win the State Cup. Then you can join the Wave."

Shannon frowned. "But Hale, the Wave may not want me then. This could be my only chance."

Haley yanked out a few blades of grass and tossed them into the breeze. "Shan, whatever you decide, I'll support you. As long as you stay on the Swarm."

Shannon snorted, and then the yard fell quiet. There was nothing more to say. For days, the only thing the girls had talked about was Shannon's decision – Swarm or Wave? Haley got up and started off. As she reached the gate, she turned. "My Dad's bringing home a new flavor tonight – Vanilla Key Lime Crunch. Come over after dinner."

"Maybe," Shannon murmured. It was the first time she hadn't jumped at the chance to try Mister Punt's homemade ice cream. Shannon tapped the ball toward her deck. She trudged up to her room, sat at her desk, grabbed a pen, and drew a line down the middle of her note pad. On one side she wrote her reasons to stay with the Swarm. On the other, she jotted why she should join the Wave. She counted, five to five. *I hate ties.* She stood and flopped on her bed. *I could flip a coin, but it would probably stand on its edge.*

Shannon picked up her pad and read her first reason to join the Wave – *get away from Chelsea*. Chelsea Mills, Shannon’s enemy ever since she moved to Manchester, New Jersey, last summer. First, Chelsea tried to keep Shannon off the Swarm. When that didn’t work, Chelsea and two other teammates quit the Swarm and joined their rival, the Monsoon. Then Chelsea injured Shannon in two games, and pushed her around in school. Shannon grabbed her pen and drew a red line through Chelsea’s name. *If I join the Wave, I’ll never have to play against that brat again.*

But then Shannon eyed the photos pinned to her bulletin board. One showed Shannon and her teammates making a human pyramid in the backyard of the White House during a tournament in Washington D.C. Another photo showed Shannon and Haley lifting the trophy after that event. In a third shot, Shannon hugged her coach, Kate Wiffle. Shannon rolled over. *I love my teammates, love my coach. Love ‘em more than I hate Chelsea.*

*** *** ***

That night, Shannon sat for dinner with her parents and her older brother, Tim. An eerie quiet hung over the table. As Shannon cut into her bacon and cheddar quiche, she could feel six eyes on her. Finally, Tim broke the silence. “So Shan, you pick a team yet?”

Shannon took a deep breath and looked away from her mom. “I’m staying with the Swarm,” she said.

Shannon’s timing was perfect. Her mom nearly gagged on her water. “Shan, I’m surprised,” Mrs. Swift said. “You sure?”

Shannon rolled her eyes. “I’m sure, Mom. I’ve nearly gone crazy over this.”

Mrs. Swift held her stare on Shannon. “I hope you’re doing this for you, and not for your friends.”

Shannon frowned. “Mom, I know you want me to join the Wave. But I can’t do it.”

Tim piled on. “Shan, the Wave is the best academy team in the country. You’d be nuts not to join them.”

Shannon shot her brother a miffed look. “I love the Swarm, Tim. I’m not taking a chance with a new team.”

“Sometimes you gotta take chances,” Tim shot back. “If it was me, I’d join the Wave in a heartbeat.”

Shannon squeezed her eyes shut. Her dad put a hand on her shoulder. “Shan, I think you made a good decision. I’m proud of how you thought it through.”

“Thanks, Dad, but now comes the worst part. I gotta tell Coach Dash I’m not joining the Wave.”

The room went quiet again. With half her quiche still on her plate, Shannon excused herself and plodded up to her room. She picked up Coach Dash’s card from her desk. Her heart thumping, she tapped in his number. After the first ring, she poked, “end call.”

Shannon bounced a palm off her forehead. *That was stupid, he’ll know I called.* Her phone still in her hand, she paced across her white carpet, flicked up a tennis ball, and started to juggle. Her phone rang, and she saw *Jack Dash* on the screen. Shannon felt her hand shake. After four rings, she answered.

“Shannon, it’s Coach Dash, sorry I missed your call.”

Shannon tried to speak, but no words came out. Finally, she blurted, “Coach Dash, I’m so sorry, but I’m staying with the Swarm.”

A few seconds of silence followed. At last, Coach Dash spoke. “I’m sorry to hear this, Shannon. I even had a number picked out for you.”

Shannon felt a lump swell up in her throat. She didn’t know what to say. “Shannon, are you there?” Coach Dash asked.

Shannon found her voice. “Coach, it was really hard. I just want to stay with my friends.”

“I understand,” he said. “Hey, the Swarm and the Wave both play in the Globetrotter Tournament in England this May. At least I’ll get to see you then. Listen, I hope you have a great season with the Swarm.”

“Thanks, Coach.” Shannon hung up and flopped on her purple comforter. *Coach Dash sounds awesome. Maybe I blew it after all?*

Shannon’s next call was much easier. She punched in Coach Wiffle’s number, and she answered on the first ring. This time, the words flowed out. “Hey Coach, it’s Shannon. I’m staying on the Swarm.”

“Shannon, that’s fantastic!” Coach blared. “I was so worried you might ‘wave’ goodbye.”

“It was hard, Coach, but I can’t leave you and my friends.”

“You made my night, Shan,” Coach said. “And guess what? I’m going to make you the captain of the Swarm.”

Shannon’s jaw dropped. “But I’m still pretty new. Plus, last fall we had different captains for each game.”

“You’ve earned this honor, Shan,” Coach replied. “You always put your teammates first. The girls look up to you. I’ll tell them at our first indoor practice. We can meet for lunch before then, go over what I expect from you.”

Shannon ended the call and clicked off. Wearing her first smile of the day, she tapped a quick text to Haley. *Staying on the Swarm.* The response came fast. *Hooray!*

Later that night, Shannon took her phone to bed. She went online and searched, ‘captain.’ *Leader of a sports team.* Shannon smiled. *It’s cool that Coach wants me to be captain, hope I can do a good job.* She shut off her light. For the first time in a week, she slept through the night.

*** *** *** ***

Two mornings later, Shannon was spreading strawberry jam on her toast when she heard the newspaper go ‘thump’ on the porch. She went out and picked up the *Manchester Mirror*. A chilly breeze nudged her back inside. She sat at the kitchen table and opened the sports section. The headline jumped out at her.

Chelsea Mills Picked for the Wave Soccer Team