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Hit by a Wave

“Mom, it feels like fireworks are going off in my belly,” said Shannon Swift. “You gotta pull over.”

“The road’s too narrow, Shan,” Mrs. Swift said. “Hang on, we’re almost there.”

Shannon Swift was a half-mile from Sunset Park, and her first practice with her new soccer team, the Wave. She held her breath until her mom turned into the park and swung up to the portable bathroom. Shannon got out and hustled in. *This is crazy. How can I get sick when I haven’t eaten all day?* She leaned over the sink, and the fireworks stopped. Shannon splashed water on her face, walked to the car, and got in.

“Feel better?” her mom asked.

“False alarm,” Shannon said. “But Mom, I’m so nervous. I don’t think I can do this.”

Mrs. Swift put a hand on her shoulder. “What’s troubling you, Shan?”

“Remember how Chelsea Mills treated me when I took her position on the Swarm? No way can I go through that again.”

“That was a long time ago, Shan. Besides, Chelsea was nice to you at that tournament in England. She said you were the best player the Wave faced last season.”

“Okay, but what if I stink today?” Shannon countered. “I had mono for most of the summer, hardly touched a ball until two weeks ago.”

“Coach Dash knows that,” her mom said. “He’ll give you time to get your game back.”

“He better.”

Mrs. Swift saw a few girls warming up on the field. “Practice is about to start, Shan, you need to go. If you want, I’ll stay for a while.”

Shannon swallowed over the knot in her throat. “I’ll be okay.” She got out and stepped into a jog, her red ponytail bobbing on her back. Shannon was twenty miles from home, about to take the field with the best under-thirteen academy team in New Jersey. Jack Dash had recruited her at the end of last season, for the second time. This time, Shannon decided she’d had enough of being triple-teamed. She left her town travel team, the Swarm, and joined the Wave.

But Shannon knew only one girl on the Wave. Chelsea Mills. They had a history – a nasty one. First, Shannon took Chelsea’s position on the Swarm. Then Chelsea quit and joined the Swarm’s rival, the Monsoon. Chelsea played dirty against Shannon and taunted her in school. The first time Coach Dash asked Shannon to join the Wave, she decided to stay on the Swarm. Instead, Coach Dash had picked Chelsea to join the Wave.

Sure, Chelsea was kind to Shannon when the Wave played the Swarm in England three months earlier. But Shannon still didn’t trust her. And now she was about to take Chelsea’s position, for the second time, on a second team. As Shannon neared the field, she looked back and saw her mom pull out. The knot in her throat swelled. *This could be the worst two hours of my life.*

Shannon jogged toward four girls passing a ball in a square. The one farthest away wore a ball cap. As Shannon got closer, she noticed the hair under the cap. Hair the same color as hers, bunched in a ponytail, just like hers. The girl looked up.

“Shannon!” Chelsea called out. And then she ran over and wrapped Shannon in a hug. Shannon snapped out of her shock and hugged back. Chelsea nodded to a spot away from the other girls, and Shannon followed.

“Remember how I was a brat on the Swarm?” Chelsea asked.

“Uh, kinda.”

Chelsea snorted. “Well, I’ve changed. Coach Dash has shown me how to be a good teammate. You and me, we’re gonna have a blast playing together.”

“Sounds good to me,” Shannon replied. She walked over and put her bag by the bench. *Wow, I didn’t expect that.* Coach Dash blew his whistle, and sixteen girls flocked in front of him. Coach waved Shannon forward. She stepped beside him, and he rested a hand on her shoulder. “Girls, let’s welcome your new teammate, Shannon Swift.”

The girls burst into a chant. “Shannon, Shannon, Shannon!” Coach Dash went on. “Shannon will be a terrific addition to our midfield. I know you remember her from our tournament in England. She scored two goals against us in the first half.”

“Yeah, and then we shut her down,” snapped Molly Horn, the center back. Shannon glanced at Molly, who glared back. Chelsea broke the silence. “Come on, Molly, we had to put two players on her. Shannon’s crazy good, we all know it.”

Shannon blushed. *Chelsea just called me, ‘crazy good.’ Wow, maybe she has changed.*

Coach peeled off his jacket. “Come on, let’s take a warm-up lap.” He sprang into a jog, the girls falling in behind. Shannon kept pace for the first hundred yards, but then a cramp pinched her side. One girl passed her, then another, then a few more. Finally, Molly ran by. “Come on, Shannon, get in gear,” Molly sniped. Soon, Shannon was looking out on a long trail of girls. She thought she was at the rear, until a girl ran up beside her. “Molly can be a little sassy,” Chelsea said. “Just ignore it, she’ll chill out.”

Shannon nodded, because she was breathing too hard to speak. Her tummy was making more funny noises. *Please, no barfing now.* Chelsea ran alongside Shannon until they reached the bench. “Get a drink, girls,” Coach said. As Shannon guzzled her water, Molly neared. “You were moving like a crippled turtle, Shannon,” Molly jabbed. “What’s up with that?”

“I was sick for most of the summer,” Shannon shot back. She turned away. *That Molly girl is creepy. Like my old teammate, Olga Watts, maybe even worse.*

Coach set up a scrimmage. She put Shannon at center mid on the red team, Chelsea at center mid on yellow. As Shannon took the field, she felt her heart beating a little too fast. *Me against Chelsea, this is my chance.* Right away, Shannon knew she was in for a quicker pace. No girl held the ball, no girl touched it more than twice. Every girl ran after she passed, ran hard, like she expected to get the ball back. *Wow, these girls move the ball, move it like a pinball. This is like going from second gear on the Swarm to fourth gear on the Wave.*

As the game went on, Shannon felt a step behind. Chelsea beat her off the dribble, beat her to loose balls, and even scored two goals. Late in the game Shannon finally broke free for a shot – and sent it toward the clouds. That’s when Molly wailed, “Come on, Shannon you’re better than that!”

Shannon glared at Molly, but then jogged away. *Molly’s right, I am better than that. Or at least I was better than that.* As the game wound down, Shannon kept seeing Coach Dash scribble away on his clipboard. *What is he writing, a novel?* When Coach ended the scrimmage, Shannon trotted off with her eyes on her laces.

The girls gathered by the bench. Coach handed a stack of papers to Molly and asked her to pass it around. “That’s our schedule for the fall season,” he said. “We’ll practice every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. We have at least one game every weekend, sometimes two. The weekend before Thanksgiving, we go to Paris, France, for an international tournament. Paris is my favorite city in Europe. We’ll learn some cool facts about it before we go.”

Coach paced for a bit, then he faced the girls. “I’ve settled on our lineup for Saturday,” he said. Shannon felt her pulse race. Coach read off the starting goalkeeper and defenders first. He

checked his clipboard and looked up. “Chelsea will play center mid. Lacy will play on the right, Shannon will play on the left.”

Shannon felt like she taken a punch to the gut. Coach kept talking, but Shannon didn’t listen. *Coach Dash told me I could play anywhere I want.* Feeling a tear coming, she squeezed her eyes shut. *You can’t cry now, you’ll look like a fool.*

Coach took a few seconds to look each girl in the eye. “We made history last year, won all thirty-eight games we played,” he said. “We outscored our opponents by a combined score of one hundred and twenty goals to fifteen. We even got written up in *USA TODAY*.” The girls hooted. Coach put up a hand. “So, what does that mean for this season?”

“We have to get better,” Molly blurted.

“That’s right, because every team will come at us hard,” Coach said. He held up the schedule. “We don’t have much time to prepare for the season. We practice Wednesday and Friday, then play our first game on Saturday.” Coach put out a hand, and every girl piled one on top. Coach led the chant. “One, two, three, RIDE THE WAVE.” Shannon said nothing, because she didn’t know the chant. She knew it now, but she didn’t care. A single thought hammered in her head: she had lost her position to Chelsea Mills.

Shannon grabbed her bag. She thought about approaching Coach, but she knew she would melt. With another lump rising in her throat, she walked across the field, alone. Mrs. Swift pulled up, and Shannon got in. “How’d it go?” her mom asked.

“Terrible. I didn’t play well. Some girl kept callin’ me out.”

“You’ll get your game back soon, Shan.”

Shannon blew out a sigh. “Coach Dash read the lineup. Chelsea is playing center mid, I’m playing on the left.”

Mrs. Swift drove out. “He’s not going to change things right away, Shan.”

“But he said I could play wherever I want.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know you want to play in the middle. Did you tell him?”

“I was too upset. Besides, Chelsea owned me today.”

“Be patient, Shan. Time is your friend.”

Shannon slid the headband out of her hair. “Mom, get this, Chelsea was nice to me. When this Molly girl sassed me, Chelsea stood up for me. Then I fell behind on the lap around the field, and Chelsea ran with me for the last hundred yards.”

“Sounds like Chelsea has grown up.”

Shannon squeezed her water bottle. “Maybe, but she has my position. And I want it back.”

Mrs. Swift started to speak, but she was too late. Shannon had already stuck in her ear buds.