



SHIFTPOINT

2 0 8 6

N. Van Seters & Claude

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CHAPTER ONE

The familiar route



NIA SERRAT KNEW where Ellis would be before Ellis asked for the ball.

That was the pleasure of it: the pressure behind her right shoulder, the blur of Imogen Pike starting too soon down the left channel, Mae's voice deeper saying hold, hold, and Ellis not saying anything because she did not need to. Nia took Suri's pass at hip height and felt the shape of the drill around her.

Three touches to cross the middle. No flags counted, no scoreboard, only Coach Duarte's whistle and the scrape of boots on the school pitch.

Ellis had checked her run once, just a stutter on the turf, enough to show the lane. Nia turned her left shoulder as if feeding Imogen anyway. Imogen, bless her, was already too eager, ponytail whipping as she looked back. The two defenders in orange bibs leaned with the lie.

Nia passed without looking.

The ball left her hands on a flat line. Ellis was already there.

"Nice," Ellis said, because she had breath for one word, not because she was surprised. She caught, tucked, and cut behind Mae, who had

become a moving wall without blocking illegally. Suri drifted wide enough to make the last defender choose. Ellis chose first. She flicked the pass to Suri, Suri returned it into space, and Nia, following because following was also part of knowing, received the final ball two metres before the taped practice gate.

She crossed through at a controlled run.

Duarte's whistle went. "Clean. Again."

Nia slowed outside the cones and jogged back through the damp rubber smell of the late-afternoon pitch. Beyond the east fence, a tram sighed at its stop. A cluster of Year Eights in Alderbank blue spilled out laughing, not yet old enough to pretend they did not look over when the senior team trained.

"Did you see Immy launch herself into next week?" Ellis asked, falling in beside Nia.

"I saw a comet wearing legal studs."

"I heard that," Imogen called, jogging backward and nearly tripping over a flat cone.

"You were meant to," Ellis said.

Nia had known Ellis since they were small enough to lose teeth in the same week and accuse each other of copying. She knew the way Ellis's mouth pulled sideways before a joke, the way she counted players under her breath at water breaks, the way she could be bossy and kind in the same sentence.

"Reset," Duarte called. "Same pattern. Orange press harder."

Suri rolled her shoulders. "Ready?"

Mae lifted a hand. Imogen bounced. Ellis pointed once, two fingers low.

Nia was already moving when Tavi said, "Wait, am I inside or taking Mae's outside shoulder?"

The sequence snagged.

Tavi Shah stood in an orange bib too big for her, the armhole gapping over a thermal top. She had joined the rotation three weeks ago after moving up from the mixed development sessions. Quick hands. Good first step. Too many questions, usually at the exact second Nia

had already seen the answer.

Ellis opened her mouth, but Duarte beat her to it. "If you're pressing Nia, take Mae's outside shoulder away. Don't let the pass behind you be easy."

Tavi nodded fast. "Right. Sorry. I thought when Ellis did the two fingers—"

"It means hold, then release," Nia said.

She meant to sound helpful. It came out clipped.

Tavi's eyes flicked to her. "Okay."

"Again from Suri," Duarte said. "And this time we wait for everyone's feet and head."

Ellis nudged Nia with her elbow as they walked back.

Nia made a face at the turf. "I know."

"Didn't say anything."

"You inhaled."

"I'm a human person. Sometimes we do."

"You inhaled captainly."

Ellis grinned. "That's a medical condition."

The whistle went before Nia could answer.

They ran it again. This time Tavi pressed correctly, forcing Nia to pivot deeper. The pattern re-formed around the adjustment: Suri waited, Ellis checked, Mae offered her body as a legal screen of presence rather than contact, and the ball still found its way through.

On the next repetition, Nia turned before Suri had even passed. Not guessing, exactly. More like hearing an old song and moving her mouth before the chorus. Ellis was in the lane. Ellis was always in the lane. Nia gave it to her, perfect weight, perfect timing, and Ellis scored through the cones with no defender within touching distance.

Duarte did not whistle right away.

That was how they knew.

"Was that good?" Duarte asked.

Imogen started to say yes and then wisely swallowed it.

Mae wiped sweat from her forehead. "It worked."

"It worked," Duarte agreed. "What else?"

Suri rocked back on her heels. "Orange knew it was coming and still didn't get there."

"Because?" Duarte said.

"Because we ran it well," Ellis said.

Duarte's eyebrow moved half a millimetre.

Ellis sighed. "Because they also knew we'd run it, and they sort of... let the known thing happen."

Tavi raised a hand halfway, then lowered it. "I thought if I cheated that lane, Nia would use Imogen."

Nia looked at her.

Tavi shrugged. "But she didn't have to."

"I had Ellis," Nia said.

"You did," Duarte said. "And in a match I won't cry because Nia Serrat found Ellis Navarro in space. But if we only ever ask the question we already like answering, better teams will stop needing the answer key."

Imogen groaned. "Coach, please don't make us do philosophy. I have actual philosophy homework and it's already ruining my life."

"Then you'll enjoy practical philosophy with running," Duarte checked her tablet. "Water. Two minutes. Then we change the entry."

They broke toward the sideline where bottles stood beside school bags and shed shadows. Nia found hers between Ellis's enormous kit bag and a cone stack. The bag had once been standard issue. Ellis had expanded it until it contained tape, spare laces, two inhaler spacers for people who were not Ellis, printed fixture lists, emergency period pads, a bent hairbrush, and, according to team law, an entire second team.

Nia nudged it with her boot. "It moved."

Ellis dropped onto the turf and unzipped a pocket. "That's because the reserve goalkeeper wants out."

Ellis pulled out a foil packet of apple slices and cinnamon crackers. "You want?"

"You packed food for twelve again?"

"I packed food for me, you, and any idiot who forgets that training happens after lunch but before dinner."

Ellis leaned back on her hands and looked toward the road. “North Campus open day is on the twenty-third. Sport science lab tour, movement analysis thing, probably someone pretending the cafeteria rice is good.”

“You’re definitely applying?”

“Probably. I mean, yes. Unless they read my personal statement and ban me for using the phrase load management twice.” Ellis glanced at her. “If I get in and you end up at design tech there, we can still take the forty-six tram in together. Same stop, just ten minutes earlier. My mum’s already decided we’ll become tragic commuters with flasks.”

Nia unscrewed her bottle more slowly than necessary. She had looked at North Campus. She had also looked at the river college course in civic systems, and the applied mapping track that started from South Station, and one apprenticeship page she kept closing because it made something in her chest pull tight and interested. She had not decided. She had not even worked out how to say she had not decided when Ellis was arranging tram times as if the future were another fixture list that only needed printing.

“Ten minutes earlier is criminal,” Nia said.

“I know. We’ll suffer beautifully.”

“Your flask would leak in week one.”

“My flask would be a leader among flasks.”

Her wristband buzzed.

MUM Late depot review. Eat something real when you get in. Left stew in fridge. Knee?

Nia typed with her thumb.

ME Sensible. Training good. Home on 17:42 with Ellis.

MUM Reliable pair. Tell Ellis hello. Don’t let her carry the whole equipment cupboard.

Nia angled the message so Ellis could read it.

Ellis placed a hand over her heart. “Rosa sees me.”

“Rosa knows load-bearing hazards.”

Duarte's whistle cut the break. "Bring it in."

They gathered in a loose half-circle.

"Before we finish," Duarte said, "you need the fixture update. Saturday's match against Briar Hill is our first under the district pilot rule set."

"The shift one?" Imogen said. "With the gates?"

"Shiftpoint," Ellis said automatically.

Duarte tapped her tablet and the pitch markers lit in four small colours at the boundaries. North, South, East, West. "Six on field. Four boundary gates. The active gate can change during possession, and when it does, there's a five-second conversion interval. You can move, pass, defend. You cannot score until the interval ends. We'll walk it now, then run it ugly."

Ellis's wrist moved, sending the first practice intention through the team channel: start centre, attack North, release wide if West lights. It was clear, chosen, limited. Nia saw it flash and looked up to find Ellis already looking at her.

"Same route until the world tilts?" Ellis said.

Nia tucked the ball under her arm. "Something like that."

They walked the first sequence. North gate active. Suri to Nia, Nia to Ellis, Ellis drawing Mae, Imogen looping too early because Imogen's body considered patience an insult. Duarte let them reach the chalked line, then thumbed the signal.

West lit.

For half a second, everyone's habits kept running north.

"Freeze," Duarte said.

They froze in a crooked scatter.

Duarte pointed at Nia's feet. "Where is the score?"

"West," Nia said.

"Where are you facing?"

"North."

"Can you fix that?"

"Yes."

"Then don't wait for Ellis to become convenient."

Nia felt the ball under her palm. Ellis did not look offended. She looked interested, breath fogging faintly in the cold.

“Again,” Duarte said.

This time when West lit, Nia turned through her hips before her head had finished arguing. Imogen was still too far and Suri had a defender sitting on her shoulder. Mae had stopped being a wall and become an option. Ellis, for once, was behind the lane instead of inside it.

Nia passed to Mae.

It was not beautiful. Mae caught it against her ribs with a grunt, stumbled, and shovelled the ball onward to Suri before Tavi could pull her flag. The timing went ragged. Suri crossed West with one foot skidding over the tape.

Duarte’s whistle went. “Messy. Better.”

Mae held up the ball. “Put that on the team poster.”

“Messy. Better,” Imogen said grandly. “Our motto.”

Ellis jogged past Nia on the reset and bumped her shoulder. “Good turn.”

“It was hideous.”

“Yeah. I loved it.”

By the end Nia’s lungs burned cleanly and her knee remained, in her mother’s word, sensible.

“Saturday,” Duarte said, gathering cones with the toe of her boot. “Briar Hill will make mistakes because the rules are new. So will you. The first team to admit it fastest gets the next pass.”

Ellis collected the bibs, already sorting orange from green. “Seventeen forty-two?” she asked Nia.

“If you don’t put the entire shed in your bag.”

“No promises.”

They changed quickly and walked out through the side gate with damp hair cooling at their necks. The tram was just sliding into the stop beyond the east fence, lights bright in the early dark. Ellis jogged three steps, unnecessary but anxious on principle, and Nia followed at the pace she knew would make it in time.

Ellis was still talking about Briar Hill, about who pressed high and who faked tired and whether Duarte would let them test the Westgate switch before halftime. Nia listened, answering where the answers came easily.

The tram pulled away from school and found the familiar route home. For now, Nia let it carry them.

CHAPTER TWO

Four destinations



ON THURSDAY THE proper gate strips went in.

“Monday was the walk-through,” Duarte said as they came out of the changing rooms. “Today we stop treating Shiftpoint like a document and start treating it like a game.”

She sent Mae for the gate lights while Suri and Nia dragged the flat boundary markers from the shed. The pitch had been painted faintly by the municipal crew: sixty-four metres by forty, with four scoring gates centred on the boundaries. North by the courts, South toward the maintenance shed, East facing the tram stop beyond the fence, West toward the old gym wall and its ivy that refused to die.

Ellis crouched by the North gate to test the strip. It blinked green, then blank. “If this starts judging us, I’m resigning.”

“It only judges whether you can run five metres in the correct direction,” Suri said.

“Cruel. Personal.”

Tavi carried the signal bands in a coil over one arm. “Wrist or upper arm?”

“Wrist unless it catches,” Duarte said. “They buzz at the shift tone. Gate lights show the draw. If yours doesn’t buzz, you say.”

Nia took a band from Tavi. Their fingers bumped, and Tavi gave her a quick uncertain smile.

"Thanks," Nia said, making it warmer than before.

Tavi's shoulders eased by a centimetre. Then she looked toward the school drive, where the late buses came and went behind the science block. "Coach? Is there any chance I can take early defensive reps? I've got to catch the four-forty-two if I'm getting home before Mum leaves for her shift. I've got my little brother after. If I wait for the second block I'll mostly be watching."

Duarte glanced at the tablet, then at the bib pile. "Good reason. You defend first. Tell me sooner next time so I don't build a rotation that eats your minutes."

"I will."

Duarte raised a hand. "Six on field. Flags on. No tackling, no holding. If your flag comes off, stop and pass within three seconds. Defender gives you two metres. Fourth pull in one possession, ball changes hands."

Imogen lifted both hands. "Please say we are not doing all the maths in our heads while running."

"You are doing some of the maths in your heads while running," Duarte said. "That is why we practise."

She tapped her tablet. The four gate strips flashed once. North glowed green for Alderbank. South lit amber; East and West stayed dark.

"Alderbank ball. We attack North, orange attack South. To score, you carry the ball under control from inside the field through your active gate. Not a throw, not a toe outside waiting for a present." Duarte pointed them into shape. "Suri starts. Nia link. Ellis, Imogen high. Mae hold. Tavi, with orange."

Tavi nodded, then immediately asked, "High means toward North even if the ball goes back?"

"High means first threat toward the active gate. When the point changes, high changes."

They set themselves. Nia tightened her flag belt, then looked across

to Ellis.

Ellis was already looking back, two fingers low: hold, release, same as always.

Nia nodded.

Duarte blew the whistle.

Suri passed to Nia and drifted right. Nia caught cleanly, turned up-field, and saw Imogen too flat, already sprinting before the route had opened. Mae offered a square safety pass. Ellis slid into the inside lane, readable as handwriting.

Nia carried three strides to draw Tavi. Tavi came in fast but under control, eyes on the flag not the ball. Nia shaped toward Ellis, felt the defender lean, and gave Mae the ball instead.

“Good,” Mae grunted, surprised enough to say it.

Mae took two steps and passed to Suri. Orange dropped deep to block North, leaving space behind Nia near centre. Suri found her again.

The gate lights snapped.

A tone cut across the pitch, bright and short. Nia’s wrist buzzed twice.

Half the team kept running North. Not just Imogen, who had committed so hard she nearly waved at the North posts on her way past. Ellis too, one foot planted toward the glowing memory of the route. Nia herself tucked the ball tighter and angled for North before her eyes caught the actual lights: East green now. West amber.

“East!” Ellis shouted. “East, East, East!”

“Conversion!” Duarte called. “Five seconds—no score yet!”

Imogen tried to bend her sprint from North to East and skidded on the damp turf. Mae threw both arms out. “Not through me, Immy!”

Tavi started toward West, then realised Alderbank wanted East and burst out laughing so hard she missed Nia’s flag by half a hand.

Nia saw Ellis recovering across the middle, but two orange bibs had turned with her. Suri was behind and safe. The old habit tugged: give Ellis the correction, let Ellis reset them.

Instead Nia carried.

For two beautiful seconds, space opened ahead of her toward East. Not a lane someone else had made. Hers. She pressed the ball to her ribs and accelerated.

Then Mae stepped into the exact patch of turf Nia needed, legal but disastrous, and Nia had to chop her stride so hard her boot slipped. Tavi recovered enough to grab the blue flag from Nia's belt.

"Pull!" Tavi called, still laughing. "One!"

Nia stopped, breath jolting. Tavi backed off two metres with exaggerated innocence.

"Three," Mae reminded.

"I know," Nia said, though she had spent the first second being annoyed at Mae, not counting. Two. She passed to Suri just inside three, ugly and too high. Suri caught it anyway, because Suri's hands were a public service.

Duarte's whistle went. "Freeze."

"What stayed the same?" Duarte asked.

"Possession," Suri said. "We still had it."

"Flag count," Mae said. "Nia's pull was first."

"Not obvious when your brain thinks North is still the whole point. What changed?"

"Active gate," Ellis said. "Ours North to East. Theirs South to West."

"And when could Alderbank score?"

"After the five," Nia said.

"Right. The signal is public. The interval is not a time-out. Move, pass, defend."

Ellis jogged back toward Nia while Duarte reset the drill. Her braid had loosened wisps around her face. "You saw East fast."

"You called it first."

"No, you saw it and went." Ellis bumped her shoulder against Nia's. "Mae became a roundabout, but still."

Nia tried not to look too pleased. "I could've passed earlier."

"You could've. You also could've yelled, 'Mae, shift your entire self,' but we're all learning."

They set again with the ball at centre. Active gate East now. Duarte switched the team channel into match mode for green and made them test it with the small thumb pad on the new signal bands. The channel did not speak in full thoughts; it carried chosen tags, agreed cues, anything a player deliberately offered. Mae sent **HOLD** and it appeared in Nia's earpiece as Mae's clipped voice. Imogen sent **WIDE** and then, unnecessarily, said it aloud with jazz hands.

"Use both," Duarte said. "Channel can help in noise. It does not guess what you meant and it does not tell anyone what you haven't sent."

Whistle.

Suri to Ellis this time. Ellis carried toward East, drew Mae, and passed back to Nia. Nia checked the defender, then thumbed **ADVANCE**. Her own voice, flattened by the channel, murmured in her ear: Nia advancing.

Ellis heard it; Nia saw the tiny lift of her chin. Tavi heard it too and stepped up.

Nia took the space anyway. She had not asked permission. She had told them what she was doing.

Ellis flashed an open palm: switch wide.

Nia obeyed, sending the ball to Imogen on the right. Imogen, chastened by her earlier pilgrimage to North, waited half a breath. That patience made Tavi hesitate. Imogen darted toward East with the ball tucked high.

Tavi pulled her flag cleanly. "One!"

Imogen stopped and passed within two seconds to Suri. Suri turned her shoulders south, selling retreat, then found Nia cutting underneath.

"Count one, East live!" Mae called.

Nia caught. This time Ellis had the better angle. The pass was there so cleanly it felt rude not to use it, so Nia gave her the ball and kept moving.

Ellis received, took one hard step toward the gate, then hesitated. Nia felt the question in the gap. The channel stayed silent, because

Nia had not offered anything.

“Back!” Nia shouted, hand up.

Ellis snapped it to her at once.

The return came early enough that Nia did not have to break stride. She crossed the East gate from inside the field to outside with the ball controlled against her forearm.

The strip flashed. Duarte’s whistle followed. “Point.”

Nia slowed in the runoff beyond the boundary. The tram stop advertisement behind the fence cycled from a dental clinic to the autumn arts programme, bright squares reflected on the wet pavement. She turned with the ball and found Ellis smiling at her.

“That,” Ellis said, “was less pigeon.”

“Less what?”

“First rep. You looked like a pigeon that had just heard a car.”

“I was a very directed pigeon,” Nia said. “You waited, though.”

“I didn’t know if you wanted it back.” Ellis tapped her own band.

“No tag. No hand until late.”

Nia rolled the ball between her palms. “I thought wanting it was obvious.”

“Several terrible things are obvious to you.”

That should have sounded like a joke, and mostly it did. Nia smiled because Ellis was smiling. But she kept the other piece: Ellis had not refused her. Ellis had not known.

Duarte reset them from the sideline. “Point doesn’t reset the shift timer. We continue from the live clock. Be ready.”

As if summoned by complaint, the tone cut again. South lit green; North amber.

Everyone moved this time, not perfectly but sooner. Nia had been facing East and had to turn her hips all the way through. Ellis called, “South! Carry, don’t throw!”

Suri had the ball and no lane to South. She took the flag pull rather than force it, stopped dead, and counted aloud. “One. Two.” She passed to Ellis before three.

Ellis drove two steps, drew Tavi, and sent a short pass to Nia.

Nia caught with South ahead and the conversion interval almost over. She could hear Duarte counting the last beat from the touchline. She did not cross early. She stuttered, let Tavi swipe and miss, then went through when the strip flashed steady.

Whistle. "Point. Better."

Duarte split them again. "Orange possession now. Alderbank defending. Gates South and North. If you win it, you attack South. Do not celebrate running through their gate unless you enjoy giving me paperwork."

Tavi came on for orange, bib bright over her thermal. She held the ball at centre, eyes flicking North-South, North-South.

"You good?" Nia asked as she marked her.

"I'm making a small map in my head."

"Leave room for it to get ruined."

Tavi huffed a laugh. "Great advice."

Whistle.

Tavi passed left and moved behind. Orange tried to work toward North. Nia stayed between Tavi and the inside return, arms loose, watching hips. Ellis called from behind her, "No middle, Nia."

Nia angled half a step outside. The ball came back to Tavi sooner than she expected. Tavi caught, planted, and almost looked for Duarte.

Then she didn't. She cut hard toward the North gate.

Nia got a hand to one flag and missed. Tavi was not fast like Imogen, but she had planned the step. Mae closed from the side and pulled the second flag strip just before Tavi reached the gate.

"Pull!" Mae called. "One."

Tavi stopped so abruptly the ball bumped her chin. She made a face, retreated into the legal stillness, and found her pass before the count reached three.

"Good rep," Duarte called. "That's the bus one."

The drill moved on. Orange did not score. Alderbank did not win anything that mattered. But Nia kept noticing the lanes: the one she took, the one she gave, the one Ellis could not know she wanted unless she showed it. On the next reset she stood beside Ellis at centre, their

shoulders not quite touching. Beyond the East gate the tram shelter shone, and past it the roads went off in four directions the way they did after school every day.

The lights shifted again. West flashed green.

This time Nia turned with it.

CHAPTER THREE

A game worth watching



BY THE TIME the first public draw flashed East–West, Nia had turf grit stuck to the sweat behind one knee and one of Imogen’s hair grips biting under her thumb.

She had found it on the turf during warm-ups and kept meaning to hand it over. Now she stood at centre with Alderbank’s six, the strip of metal hooked in her fist like a secret. Across from them, Briar Hill bounced on their toes in maroon and white, less like a school they had never played before and more like a problem that had done its reading.

Alderbank’s active gate glowed green at East, facing the tram stop and the low flats beyond. Briar Hill’s glowed amber at West, toward the old gym wall. North by the courts and South by the maintenance shed stayed dark.

The crowd along the sheltered walkway cheered. Parents, classmates, younger kids in Alderbank scarves even though it wasn’t cold enough for scarves. Nia’s mother stood near the maintenance gate in her municipal jacket, phone tucked away, watching with the serious attention she gave to bus timetables and storm drains.

From the small commentary table near halfway, Adrian Bell’s voice came through the pitch speakers, warm and amused. “First live fixture

of Alderbank district's pilot season. If you've only seen the diagrams, stay with the bodies. The bodies will explain it better."

Ellis glanced sideways at Nia, eyebrows up: no pressure, just our bodies explaining.

Nia's mouth twitched. She settled her wristband higher, checked the buzz light, then checked Ellis. Ellis held up two fingers low: hold, then release.

Coach Duarte stood just outside the rectangle, tablet against her hip. "First six: Ellis, Nia, Suri, Mae, Imogen, Tavi. Trust the count. Trust the call. Play."

The official raised the oval ball. Briar Hill had won the toss but chosen direction second; Alderbank would start with possession. Suri took the ball at centre.

The whistle cut.

Suri tapped the ball into motion and passed to Ellis, who received on the move, hips angled toward East. Nia dropped behind her left shoulder. Imogen streaked ahead too early, dragging one defender wide. Mae stayed central. Tavi hovered near the far channel.

Ellis carried three strides. A Briar Hill defender came in low and clean, hand sweeping for the flag. Ellis twisted away from the hand, then popped the ball back to Nia.

Nia caught it against her ribs. East was open if she could get there in two steps she did not have. Another defender closed. Nia showed the ball to Imogen, watched the defender flinch toward that speed, and passed inside to Suri.

"Good," Ellis called.

Suri waited one sharp breath while Imogen's defender kept traveling, then sent the ball flat to Ellis cutting back inside. Ellis tucked it, accelerated, and crossed the East gate before anyone reached her flag.

The strip flashed green-white. The official's whistle followed.

"One Alderbank," Adrian said. "Not because Navarro is quick, though she is. Because Serrat and Das made the defender answer two questions in a row."

Nia jogged toward the centre restart, pretending she hadn't heard

the name. The praise landed in her chest and fizzed there anyway.

Briar Hill restarted from centre, attacking West. Their captain, a compact runner with red boots, took the first pass and came hard down Mae's side. Mae held ground until the last legal instant, then snatched the flag cleanly.

"Pull!" Mae barked. "One."

The runner stopped. Mae retreated two metres, palms up. The Briar Hill player had three seconds to pass. One, Nia counted with her. Two. The ball went back to a teammate near centre.

Briar Hill had planned. Two passes later they drew Tavi out, sent the ball behind her, and crossed West with control. 1-1.

The first quarter moved too fast to think in paragraphs. Alderbank scored again through Imogen after Suri sold a back pass so completely that half the crowd groaned before the ball went forward. Briar Hill answered when Nia overcommitted to a lane and the red-booted captain slid behind her.

The lights had already swung twice that quarter without costing anyone much. At 2-2, with Alderbank in possession and the East gate theirs again, the shift tone sounded, and this one mattered.

The lights blinked out and relit—North green for Alderbank, South amber for Briar Hill.

For five seconds, no one could score at the new gate. Everything else stayed alive.

"North!" Ellis shouted. "Conversion, keep it!"

Suri had the ball near the right touchline, almost level with East. Nia saw the whole team hesitate in different directions, the shape of East still pulling at their legs. Briar Hill's defenders turned toward North by the courts, recalculating.

Nia moved first into the ugly space: back toward Suri, offering a safe pass.

Suri used her. One second of conversion gone, maybe two. A maroon defender came for the flag. Nia carried diagonally toward the middle, not North yet, because going directly North would run her into Mae and two defenders.

“Count zero!” Ellis called. “North live in—now!”

The lane was blocked. Nia passed backward to Mae.

The crowd made the small disappointed noise crowds made when the ball went away from the glowing thing. Mae ignored them. She took one step, drew the nearest defender, and fired to Ellis.

Ellis caught, turned, and ran parallel to North, dragging the last defender sideways. Nia felt Ellis’s timing before she saw the ball.

The pass came soft enough to run onto. Nia took it, tucked it, and crossed North through the centre of the gate.

The whistle blew. 3–2.

Nia slowed in the runoff near the courts, breath burning sweetly. Ellis pointed both hands at her, grinning.

“Bodies explaining it,” Ellis called.

“Your body talks too much,” Nia said, jogging back.

Briar Hill’s coach used the next dead ball to swap two players. Duarte kept Alderbank’s six on. “Good recognition,” she told Nia. “You didn’t chase the light. You linked the new route.”

Briar Hill tied it before quarter time, 3–3, with a patient sequence to South while the North–South assignment remained active. Tavi got a hand to the carrier’s flag a breath too late and slapped both palms on her thighs.

“Next one,” Nia told her.

“I know,” Tavi said, too sharp, then grimaced. “Sorry. Yes. Next one.”

At the break, they gathered by the sideline bottles. The scoreboard showed Alderbank 3, Briar Hill 3, Q2 pending, active assignment North–South, shift timer paused with the match clock.

Duarte crouched in front of them. “Briar Hill are folding hard to the active gate after shifts. We use that. Nia, stay available underneath. Ellis, don’t force first light. Tavi, your outside contain is good; keep your hips patient. Mae, keep giving me counts loud enough for the tram stop.”

Nia drank, chest still lifting. Stay available underneath. It was praise as instruction, a hand on the top of her head holding her in a shape.

She looked to Ellis without meaning to.

Ellis bumped her knee. "Link wins games."

Maybe it did. Nia smiled because Ellis meant it kindly and because the score was tied and because she did not want to be ungrateful for being seen accurately.

The second quarter proved that accuracy could be exhausting. Briar Hill scored first, 3-4, after three Alderbank flag pulls forced them back but not over. On the fourth pull, possession would have transferred; instead their distributor passed just inside the three-second count to red boots, who slipped through before Mae arrived.

Alderbank answered when Tavi, given the ball near centre after a dropped Briar Hill pass turned over at the resting spot, did not panic. The active gate had shifted back to East. A defender rushed her. Tavi planted, waited until Nia almost shouted, and passed to Imogen in stride. Imogen crossed East laughing so hard she nearly dropped the ball after the line. 4-4.

"Shah with the patience of someone pretending not to be patient," Adrian observed. "Convincing performance."

Tavi heard and went bright around the ears.

By halftime it was 5-5. Nia's legs had begun to feel like they belonged to an older cousin who made poor choices. Her wristband had buzzed through shift after shift. East to North. North to West. West to South. Each time the field stayed the same size and somehow doubled.

In the third quarter, Duarte rotated Imogen off, staggered Suri's rest, then brought them both back when Alderbank fell behind 5-6. No one said pilot fixture anymore. It was a game, and losing it would feel like losing a game.

It was still 5-6 when the fourth quarter began.

Rain threatened but did not fall. The ball grew slick from hands and turf. Nia wiped it against her shirt before the restart from centre, Alderbank possession. Active gate South, toward the maintenance shed. Rosa Serrat stood just beyond that end, expression intent.

Ellis took the centre pass. Nia checked her before advancing. Ellis signalled: left hold, then release. Familiar as the route home.

Briar Hill pressed high, trying to trap them near halfway. Ellis sent to Mae. Mae's flag was pulled almost at once.

"One!" the defender called.

Mae stopped dead. "Retreat," she said. The defender hopped back two metres. Mae passed within three seconds to Nia.

Nia turned and found red boots in front of her, low and balanced. South was behind the defender's left shoulder. Ellis was marked. Tavi was wide but flat. Suri, two metres back, offered safety.

The shift tone sounded.

Nia's wrist buzzed. Gate lights blinked. Alderbank's active gate changed from South to East; Briar Hill's from North to West.

"East!" Tavi shouted.

"Conversion!" Ellis called. "Keep shape!"

Nia still had the ball. The red-booted captain did not lunge. She waited, knowing Nia could not score for five seconds and hoping to trap her into a bad pass.

Nia carried sideways, counting through her breath. One. The defender mirrored. Two. Ellis cut across but was shadowed. Three. Tavi dropped deeper. Four. Nia passed to Tavi just as the defender reached.

The flag stayed on Nia's hip by a finger's width.

Tavi caught. The conversion ended.

"East live!" Mae yelled.

Tavi drew her defender and passed back inside to Nia, who had kept moving. Nia caught on the run, saw Ellis ahead and right, saw a Briar Hill defender split between them, and looked at Ellis.

Ellis's hand flicked: yours.

Nia tucked the ball and accelerated at the defender's inside hip. The defender reached. Nia shortened, let the hand miss cloth, then lengthened again. The East gate widened with every step, the tram shelter beyond it shining with old rain.

A second defender came across. Too far to stop her, close enough to panic her into passing.

Nia did not pass.

She crossed East with the ball clamped tight, both flags still on.

The whistle blew. 6–6.

For a moment all she heard was her own breath. Then the sideline lifted. Tavi whooped. Mae said, “Yes, Serrat,” in the tone she used for a properly tightened bolt. Ellis reached her first and slapped both hands against Nia’s shoulders.

“You went,” Ellis said.

“You told me to.”

“I suggested with elegance.”

Nia laughed, breathless. The edge inside her went soft.

Only two minutes remained. Briar Hill worked the restart carefully. Their captain took a flag pull from Mae, passed on two to a teammate, got it back, then lost it when Suri read the return and caught the ball clean out of the air.

Alderbank possession at the interception spot. Active gate still East. Flag count reset on turnover.

Duarte clapped once. “Value it!”

Nia wanted the ball and did not want to ask for it as if she were asking permission. She called anyway. Suri sent it to her.

The public live timer hit its limit with less than a minute left. The mandatory shift tone rang out. East died. North lit green for Alderbank, South amber for Briar Hill. Five seconds when a score would not count, but hands and feet and mistakes still did.

Nia drew two defenders by carrying toward the bright new gate, then passed to Ellis outside before the trap shut. Ellis took it wide, calm enough to make the defender turn her hips the wrong way.

“Live!” Mae shouted.

Ellis returned the ball at once.

This time the pass did not finish Nia’s idea for her. It gave the idea back. Nia caught, kept both hands on the slick ball, and crossed North under control.

Alderbank 7, Briar Hill 6.

Briar Hill restarted and pressed until every voice on the sideline seemed to be counting. Red boots broke once toward South, but Mae pulled the flag clean and loud. The pass after that went loose. Tavi

chased it down, not catching it, only making Briar Hill start again from worse turf and worse time. The final horn sounded before they found another point.

For half a second Nia did not move. Then Imogen crashed into Suri, Suri protested with no force at all, and Mae bent over with both hands on her knees, smiling at the turf.

Ellis found Nia in the untidy middle of it and held up one hand. Nia slapped it. Ellis did not let go immediately.

“First one,” Ellis said.

“First one,” Nia answered.

Later, on the ride home, their knees knocked whenever the tram turned. Nia had finally remembered Imogen’s hair grip and returned it bent but usable. Her mother sat two rows ahead, pretending not to listen and absolutely listening.

Ellis dug in her bag, came up with the last biscuit, and broke it in half with great ceremony.

Nia looked at the pieces. “That one’s bigger.”

“I know.”

Ellis gave it to her anyway.

CHAPTER FOUR

The question nobody needed



THE NEXT TUESDAY, the East gate would not light no matter how many times Mr. Haldane from facilities told the control board to stop sulking.

“It’s not sulking,” Tavi said from the sideline, crouched beside her water bottle with one boot lace undone. “It’s expressing a boundary.”

Mae, waiting at centre with the ball under one arm, said, “If the gate has a boundary, can we run through it?”

Coach Duarte did not look up from the tablet. “You can run a lap while it considers.”

Nia stood near the middle stripe, rolling her shoulders against a wet wind that had found the gap between her collar and the back of her neck. The pitch had drained badly after the weekend rain. One long seam of standing water ran toward South, where the maintenance shed doors stood open and smelled of cut grass, oil, and the sharp cleaner they used on the courts.

The first fixture had turned the place familiar and strange at once. Alderbank had beaten Briar Hill 7–6 after Suri sent Nia the ball; Nia drew two defenders before finding Ellis outside. Ellis returned the pass, and Nia crossed North with seventeen seconds left.

Duarte raised her voice. "Until East is back, we drill South-North and West-East on manual cone calls. Same rules. Tavi, tie your boots or commit to losing a toe."

Tavi tied them.

Ellis jogged in from the changing rooms late enough that Duarte's eyebrow moved. Her hair was still half trapped under her collar, and her kit bag looked heavier than usual.

"Sorry," Ellis called. "Year reps meeting ran over. They discovered agenda items."

"Entire second council in there?" Nia asked as Ellis dropped the bag beside the bottles.

"Three councillors, four consent forms, one mouldy orange, and possibly your spare gloves from last winter."

"You said you didn't have them."

"I said I couldn't prove I had them."

Ellis touched two fingers against her wristband to check the team channel. Nia felt it settle into its training shape: positional intent, active call, count alerts, nothing more. It could tell Ellis where Nia had agreed to stand. It could not tell anyone why her stomach had tightened.

"All right," Duarte said. "Pattern two. Assume Alderbank active South, opponent North. Ball starts with Suri. On my call, shift to West. Five-second conversion still applies even if East is sulking. Move the shape before the score. Ready?"

They ran it clean twice. Suri to Ellis, Ellis drawing the defender, Nia dropping under and back because that was what the call meant in this pattern: if Ellis cut across the centre after a shift, Nia retreated two steps into the hinge, received if needed, then moved the ball on. It had worked against Briar Hill. It had worked in practice before anyone in town had understood why the gates mattered.

On the third repetition, Duarte called, "Shift West!"

The whistle chirped. Nia's wrist gave a training buzz. No lights changed because East was still having boundaries, but everyone's bodies answered.

Ellis angled away from South and toward West, cutting through the middle. Nia retreated into the pocket. Tavi, playing outside defender for the drill, hesitated half a beat and then followed Ellis too far. Suri passed to Nia. Nia returned it to Ellis. Ellis accelerated through the cone gate.

“Good,” Duarte said. “Reset.”

Tavi jogged back, frowning. “Why does that signal mean Nia retreats?”

Nia looked at her.

Tavi had not said it loudly. She had said it in the exact voice she used when asking whether a dropped pass turned over at the resting spot if the ball rolled after first contact. Interested. Annoyingly reasonable.

Mae wiped her forehead with the back of her wrist. “Because if Nia goes forward there, Ellis gets boxed.”

“Maybe,” Tavi said. “But the signal is cross-two, isn’t it? Ellis crosses two lanes, link supports. It doesn’t actually say back.”

“It means back,” Imogen said, stretching her calf. “It has always meant back.”

Nia laughed because everyone else did, but it came out thin. Ellis was listening, one hand on her hip, breathing lightly through her nose.

Nia said, “If I go forward, I drag my defender into Ellis’s lane.”

“If your defender follows,” Tavi said. “What if she checks you and stays? Or what if the shift opens West and she’s still thinking South? You might be through.”

Mae made a sound. “And if she isn’t, we’ve got two people ahead of the ball and no hinge.”

“That’s why I’m asking.”

“It works because Nia is the hinge,” Ellis said.

There it was: clean, kind, confident. Nia felt it land in the space where she had been about to say something less tidy.

Duarte glanced between them. “History, not rule. Tavi’s right about that. The cue was built from Ellis and Nia’s timing, and it has been effective. But if we change it, we name the change. We don’t let six people guess.”

Nia nodded quickly.

Tavi's mouth shifted. "I wasn't saying it's bad."

"No one thought you were," Nia said, although she had, a little.

Ellis tipped her head toward Nia. "It's why I can go when I go. I know she'll be there if the first line closes."

Duarte lifted the ball from Mae. "Again. Same call."

"Could I—" Nia stopped. Everyone looked at her.

Ellis's attention sharpened. "What?"

Nia pressed her thumb against the seam of her wristband. "Could I call the first attack after a shift once? Not now, maybe. In a drill. Just one decision. Like whether we hold the hinge or go at the open side."

Mae's eyebrows went up. Imogen stopped pretending not to listen.

Duarte waited.

"I don't mean I finish it," Nia said. "I mean I call it."

Ellis said, "You can call a move."

"A first move," Nia said. "Before we know where everyone has landed."

For a second the wet wind seemed louder than the traffic beyond the fence. Tavi bent to tighten the lace she had already tied.

Duarte nodded once. "We can build that. Not by surprise in a fixture. Bring me the option you want named, and we'll test it against a defender who isn't helping you."

Nia heard the caution more than the permission. "Okay."

Ellis smiled at her, small and pleased. "We'll make room for it."

Duarte clapped. "For now, Nia hinges. Tavi, defend the actual threat, not the memory of the last one."

They ran it again. Nia retreated. The pass came. Ellis crossed West. The pattern worked, which was the problem with useful history: it kept bringing evidence.

After practice, Ellis had a student council follow-up and would be on a later tram. Rosa Serrat had messaged during last lesson: If you can wait fifteen, I'm near school. Walk with me to the depot? Tram stop's right outside. So Nia waited.

Rosa arrived in her work jacket, hair pinned back with the severe

clip that had survived storms, budget meetings, and one attempt by Nia at age nine to decorate it with stickers. She smelled faintly of rain and machine dust.

“Good session?” Rosa asked as they crossed behind the courts.

“East gate expressed a boundary.”

“Again?”

“You say that like gates do this often.”

“Lighting modules do this when someone orders the cheaper seals and then acts surprised by weather.”

They passed the maintenance shed, where two workers were loading folded barriers into a van. Rosa slowed, incapable of walking past municipal objects without knowing whether they were where they should be.

One worker called, “Rosa, you saw the notice from transport?”

“The sinkhole diversion? Yes. If they close Mill Road before six, the 42s bunch by the leisure centre.”

“We’re meant to move the temporary stop signs.”

“You’re meant to move the first one,” Rosa said. “Leave the second until the school run clears, or you’ll send half of Alderbank to stand outside the pharmacy with no shelter.”

The worker blinked, then nodded. “Right. I’ll tell Dev.”

Rosa watched him go, her face set in that inward map she carried of drains, bus shelters, crossing lights, tree roots, and the thousand small promises that made a town feel like it was behaving.

They continued toward the depot entrance. A row of service carts sat charging under a canopy. Their indicator lights blinked in patient green sequence.

“Predictable isn’t glamorous,” Rosa said, as if answering something Nia had not spoken. “But when people know where the stop will be, they can get home in the rain.”

“I know.”

Rosa looked at her. “That sounded like two words carrying a suitcase.”

Nia smiled despite herself. “It’s nothing.”

“Mmm.”

Inside the depot office, warmth hit them, along with the smell of instant coffee and damp paper. Rosa signed for a stack of work slates while Nia leaned against a filing cabinet with a sticker peeling off: **REPORT FAULTS EARLY, NOT DRAMATICALLY.**

Her mother noticed the mud up Nia’s socks. “You played hard.”

“Practised hard.”

“Your coach says you read the field well.”

“She says I stay available.”

“That’s good.”

“It is.”

Rosa tucked the slates under one arm. “Nia.”

Nia rubbed at a dried line of mud on her thumb. “It is good. I’m not saying it isn’t.”

“Being reliable is not a small thing.”

“I know that too.”

“What do you want from it?” Rosa asked.

Nia could have said win. It would be true and incomplete. She could have said a good season with Ellis, which was truer and more dangerous.

“I want to go sometimes,” she said. “Not always. Just sometimes when I see it.”

Rosa nodded slowly. “Then you’ll need them to know when sometimes is.”

“I know.”

“Knowing is irritating, isn’t it?”

Nia laughed. “Deeply.”

On the tram home, Ellis wasn’t there to share the double seat near the back, so Nia sat alone with her kit bag against her shins. Rain began properly, threading silver down the windows. Nia watched the town smear and re-form: bakery, clinic, the closed flower shop with paper suns in the window, the temporary stop sign still where Rosa had said it should stay.

Her wrist buzzed with a message.

ELLIS council over. survived. bag now contains democracy and a very flat cereal bar.

NIA save me the last piece

ELLIS obviously. unless democracy eats it.

At home she finished maths questions at the kitchen table while Rosa took a call about drain covers. Nia ate lentil stew with bread, showered, then sat on her bed with the team diagrams open on her slate. Cross-two. Hinge. Shift West. Her route was drawn in blue, re-treating into the pocket like a good answer.

She copied the diagram and made the blue line go forward instead.

Not straight to the gate. That would be stupid. Mae was right about getting two players ahead of the ball. Nia drew a shallow forward hook, two strides into the blind side of a defender expecting the retreat. A call, maybe, if she could make herself say it before the space vanished. If Ellis saw it, she would know where Nia meant to go.

Nia looked at Duarte's instruction waiting in her memory: name the change.

She saved the diagram without sending it, then closed the slate before she could turn the route into an explanation. She would try the line in Friday's match and let Ellis see it there.

CHAPTER FIVE

The first opening



By FRIDAY THE East gate had stopped expressing boundaries, and the whole rectangle looked too awake under the match lights.

Nia stood on Alderbank's half of centre with the oval ball tucked against her ribs, listening to the referee explain timing everyone already knew. Sixty-four metres long, forty wide. North and South gates on the short ends, East and West on the long sides. Five metres of lit scoring mouth, runoff beyond.

Across from them, Westmere waited in green. They had a tall distributor with calm hands, a wing testing the turf with her studs, and a captain, Freya, who looked once at each gate as if checking the locks.

"Initial assignment," the referee called.

The public board beside the sheltered walkway spun through the four ordered pairs. A tone chimed. Alderbank: South. Westmere: North.

"Eight minutes," Coach Duarte called. "Clean flags. Talk early."

Ellis brushed two fingers over her wristband. Nia felt the team channel open in its match shape: active gate, flag count, positional intent, agreed cues. Nothing private. Nothing that would say, I copied the diagram and drew myself somewhere new.

Mae took the first run from centre, shoulders low, ball tucked tight. Westmere's near defender caught Mae's right flag after four strides.

"One!" the referee called.

Mae stopped dead. The defender backed off two metres.

Mae passed back to Suri. Suri held just long enough for Imogen to sprint too early toward South, then sent the ball sideways to Ellis. Ellis cut inside, drew Freya, and slipped a pass to Nia at the left seam.

For one clean second, South opened.

Nia did not go. She checked Ellis first—Ellis's angle, Ellis's hand, Ellis's expectation folding Nia back into the hinge—and moved the ball on. Imogen looped, received from Suri, and crossed South before Westmere could close. The gate flashed green.

Alderbank 1–0.

"Good patience," Ellis said, jogging back for the centre restart.

Nia nodded. Patient was good. Patient had won them points. Patient also had teeth.

Westmere answered before the quarter break. Their tall distributor, Anika, took two flag pulls without panic, then on third possession found Freya cutting behind Mae. North lit, and the score went 1–1.

The draw shifted four times in that first quarter and hurt no one much; twice it even landed back on South–North, which Imogen took personally.

The shift that mattered came early in the second quarter, with Alderbank holding possession and the flag count at two.

They had restarted after a dropped Westmere pass, ball placed at the resting spot just west of centre. Suri carried under control while Imogen curled ahead. Westmere's defence sat narrow, expecting South. Nia hovered between lines.

Twenty-five seconds since the last shift. Then five more.

The lights snapped. Tone, bright and double. Nia's wrist pulsed.

Alderbank: West. Westmere: East.

"Conversion!" the referee called, arm up.

Five seconds when movement continued, passes stayed legal, defence stayed legal, but no score could count. Bodies still flinched toward the new truth.

Suri turned her hips first. Ellis shouted, "Cross-two!"

Ellis cut across two lanes toward West, fast enough to make Freya commit. Nia dropped because the cue meant hinge, and the ball came exactly where history said it would. She caught, passed back, and watched Ellis slice into the West gate a heartbeat after the conversion interval ended.

2-1.

Westmere did not unravel. They used their still-active East gate, drawing Mae out with a patient sideways pair, then sending their wing through. 2-2.

At halftime Duarte kept them standing, rain freckling her tablet.

"Westmere are giving the first receiver two steps and hunting the second," she said. "Do not admire your pass. Move after it. Mae, give yourself an angle to recover. Imogen, possession first."

Imogen breathed into her sleeve. "Possession first, fame second."

Ellis leaned close to Nia while Suri drank. "You good?"

"Good," Nia said.

Ellis bumped her shoulder. "Last half. Stay sharp."

Early in the third quarter, a live check changed the pair from Alderbank West/Westmere East to Alderbank South/Westmere North. After the five-second interval, Westmere scored off Alderbank's fourth flag pull. Mae was caught near the sideline with no clean pass; the count hit four, possession transferred at the spot, and Anika used the short field to feed Freya through North. 2-3.

Alderbank came back with Suri to Tavi to Imogen. Tavi's pass was slightly high; Imogen snatched it like she was stealing laundry from a line and carried through. 3-3.

A further live shift changed the pair to Alderbank West/Westmere East. Then Ellis scored on a restart mistake. Westmere's receiver looked up too soon, the ball bobbled, and Ellis was first to the resting spot

after the turnover. Suri fed her; Ellis crossed West before Freya recovered.

4-3.

Rain turned the black pellets in the turf into grit against Nia's calves. The match clock bled into the fourth quarter, and every five-second check after the minimum felt audible even when it did not hit.

Westmere tied it 4-4 with three minutes left: three passes, no drama, Nia arriving half a stride late to pull the final flag as Anika crossed East.

"Reset!" Duarte called. "Plenty."

The centre restart was Alderbank's. Active gates remained West for Alderbank, East for Westmere. The last shift had been forty-eight live seconds ago by the public board when Ellis took the ball from the official.

"Keep possession," Mae called.

Ellis looked toward West. Freya matched her. Westmere set two defenders between centre and the West gate, leaving the near northern lane softer than it should have been if West stayed the goal.

Nia saw it. As boots. As Freya's weight leaning toward Ellis. As the second defender glancing over her wrong shoulder. As her own marker, Joss, squaring to stop Nia from retreating because every clip said she would retreat.

Ellis carried two strides and passed to Suri before the first flag came. Suri drifted right. Imogen darted ahead and checked herself. Nia stayed central, heart ticking with the board.

Suri passed to Nia. The ball hit her palms solid and wet. Joss closed, fingers low for the flag. Nia turned away and felt the tug at her hip.

"One!" the referee called.

Stop. Three seconds. Pass.

Nia gave to Ellis, who had come under. Joss retreated the required two metres, eyes on Nia now. Ellis moved left, drawing Freya again. Suri made herself available behind. Mae pointed from deeper field, wanting the safe reset.

The board hit sixty.

Tone.

Lights swung. Alderbank: North. Westmere: South.

Conversion interval. Five seconds.

For a fraction, the whole field seemed to inhale. North was behind the space Westmere had just neglected. Nia was already facing it. Joss was still resetting from the pull, hips wrong. Freya was outside Ellis, guarding the pass back to the old West lane. The northern gate glowed at the short end.

Nia's route was not certain. Anika stood between centre and North, too calm to be wished away. Joss was quick. Freya could peel off if Ellis did not hold her. But it was there: shallow hook forward, receive after conversion, carry through if Anika bit toward Ellis.

Nia opened her hand and called, "Cross-two—go!"

Go could mean Ellis go. Go could mean run the pattern. Go could mean urgency, not change. In the channel, Nia pushed forward intent, bright and narrow, but it was only positional. It did not say Ellis, become the support. It did not say hold Freya wide and give me the return. It did not say I am not the hinge this time.

Ellis heard the cue she knew.

She crossed two lanes, hard, toward North now, expecting Nia to drop under. Her arm flicked back for the hinge pass. Nia was not there.

Nia had taken the two forward steps. Joss, wrong-footed but not asleep, went with her. Anika read both of them and shuffled inside, cutting the direct lane. Suri had the safer reset behind Ellis, but Ellis's pass had already left her hand, angled to where Nia always appeared when Ellis went.

The ball skimmed wetly through empty air.

Nia lunged back, fingertips grazing the seam. Not enough. It struck turf, bounced once, and settled near the centre stripe.

"Dropped pass," the referee called. "Westmere possession at resting spot."

For a second the field noise flattened. Then Westmere moved.

Freya scooped the restart pass from Anika after the official set the spot safe. Alderbank had to retreat into shape. Active gates: Alderbank

North, Westmere South. Flag count reset on turnover.

Westmere did not rush the gift. Anika took the ball, allowed Mae to pull her first flag, stopped clean, passed within the count. Freya carried sideways, forcing Ellis to choose between pressuring the ball and guarding the route to South. Ellis chose pressure.

Freya passed back to Joss.

Joss, who had chased Nia and learned something, did not hesitate. She cut behind Mae. Suri closed from inside, got fingers to one flag, but Joss twisted legally, kept control, and crossed South.

4-5.

"Next," Ellis called immediately. Her voice did not crack. She jogged to centre with her hand out for the ball.

Nia wanted to explain while running. Wanted to say it had been there, not guaranteed but there. Instead she took her place because there were still eighty-two seconds left.

Alderbank made it 5-5. Mae earned it by refusing to be stranded. She took a pass from Suri, absorbed one flag pull near East, stopped, and snapped a pass to Tavi, who had come on for Imogen with fresh legs and terror in her eyes. Tavi did not freeze. She fed Ellis, Ellis fed Nia, and Nia did what the field needed: one touch onward to Suri, who crossed North with two Westmere defenders arriving too late.

The final Westmere point came after the mandatory shift at sixty seconds. Active gates changed to Alderbank East, Westmere West. Conversion interval ran while both teams scrambled. Westmere's wing held wide without camping, timed her run from inside after the interval, and Anika placed the pass soft in front of her. Mae pulled at air. The wing crossed West.

5-6.

Alderbank had twenty-four seconds and no clean miracle. They moved the ball twice. Ellis almost broke through East, but Freya took her flag at the hip.

Ellis passed to Nia. Nia had Suri behind, Tavi ahead, Mae calling left. She sent it to Tavi, who was pulled, stopped, passed back. The horn went while the ball was in Suri's hands.

Full time. Alderbank 5, Westmere 6.

The Westmere players cheered in a cluster, muddy and breathless. Freya bent with hands on knees, then straightened and offered Ellis a palm. Ellis took it. Joss, passing Nia, said, "Good run," with an awkward half-smile.

Nia said, "Good read."

They lined up, tapped hands. Coach Duarte did not look furious. That almost made Nia wish she did.

"Cool down," Duarte said. "Then two minutes."

The cool down was a slow lap along the boundary. North gate dark now. South dark. East and West ordinary aluminium frames with light strips cooling under rain. Imogen walked beside Tavi, describing the high catch with her hands bigger each time. Mae argued with herself under her breath about the Westmere final point.

Ellis walked ahead, kit top stuck between her shoulders. She had not turned around yet.

Under the sheltered walkway, Alderbank parents clapped anyway. Nia spotted her mother near the fence, hood up, one hand lifted. Rosa did not mime a solution. She just stayed there.

Duarte gathered them by the bench. "Score is score. Westmere managed the last two shifts better than we did. We'll review Monday."

Nia braced.

"Immediate note," Duarte continued. "The turnover after the North shift: that was a communication failure, not a forbidden idea. There may have been a forward route. There was also a defender with angle and a second defender reading inside. We do not turn maybe into certainty after it fails—or pretend afterward that it was certain to succeed. We review the read we had, not the result we wish we had earned."

Mae dragged both hands down her wet face. "So not 'never do that again.'"

"Not that," Duarte said. "Also not 'do that with three words and a hope.'"

Ellis looked at Nia then, quick and worried. "I thought you were

dropping.”

“I know,” Nia said.

It came out too flat. Ellis’s mouth tightened.

“I heard cross-two,” she said. “And go.”

“I know,” Nia said again.

Duarte closed her tablet. “Dry kit. Food. No private trials of memory in the group chat tonight. If you want to write down what you saw, do it before sleep and send it tomorrow morning.”

They broke apart. Tavi asked Imogen if the showers always took three minutes to become warm or if that was punishment. Mae said the showers respected winners only, which was untrue and still made Tavi look alarmed.

Nia found her towel at the bottom of her bag, already damp at one corner. Ellis stood beside her, tying and untying the cord on her kit sack.

“That lane,” Ellis said quietly. “Was it really there?”

Nia pressed the towel to her hair. Across the field, Westmere were still noisy, their green shirts bright under the lights.

“For a second,” she said. “Not clean. Anika saw it.”

Ellis nodded once. Rain slipped from the end of her braid. “I didn’t.”

“I didn’t say it right.”

“No,” Ellis said. Then, softer, “I didn’t ask.”

“Monday,” Nia said.

Ellis nodded again. Then Mae shouted from the changing-room door that if they wanted hot water they had to stop holding a funeral for a wet bag, and Ellis huffed a laugh.

Nia picked up her things and followed. The loss stayed behind her and came with her, both at once.

What a captain protects



By MONDAY, Ellis had decided the worst part of losing by one was how tidy the number looked.

Five-six fitted neatly in the results grid. It did not show rain in the mouth, or Nia's fingertips missing the ball by a strip of white seam, or the way Westmere had used the last shift as if they had been given a clean table and Alderbank had been left holding everyone's cups.

Ellis got to school early because getting there early was one thing she could still make happen. The courts behind the science block were silver with overnight damp, and the pitch beyond them had that tired Monday look: light strips off, gates dull aluminium, maintenance mower parked by the shed with its cover half-fastened.

She checked the team chat before she checked her homework reminders.

Mae had posted at 06:41: my left hamstring is fine stop asking imogen

Imogen had replied with three running emojis and then, possession first fame second, which had already become the kind of joke that made Ellis relieved and irritated at once. Tavi had not posted. Suri had sent a thumbs-up to the video review time. Nia had read the messages

but said nothing.

Ellis stood under the sheltered walkway and thumbed open the schedule she kept pinned: review at lunch, light recovery after school, maths assignment due Wednesday, Tavi dentist Thursday, Suri orchestra Friday so no late film, trams on the winter timetable from next week. North Campus sport-science application draft, sitting there in quiet grey. She had not missed that deadline either. Missing things made them larger.

She added bring spare blue flags because somebody always forgot after rain.

A black kit bag thudded beside her shoe.

"I'm alive," Nia said.

Ellis looked up too fast. Nia's hair was still damp from a shower or the weather, curls tightened at her temples. She had a chemistry folder under one arm and half a toasted roll in her hand. There were faint turf scratches down her right shin, already yellowing at the edges.

"I knew that," Ellis said. "You read the chat."

"Could've been a ghost with my login."

"Your ghost would answer Mae with a full sentence."

Nia's mouth moved like it might become a smile and then did not quite bother. She tore the roll in half. "Breakfast?"

Ellis had eaten toast standing over the sink, but the piece Nia offered was the end with the crisp cheese, and refusing it would make both of them notice things. She took it.

"You have review at lunch," Ellis said. "Duarte said classroom, not pitch. She wants board access."

"I saw."

"And recovery after school. Not conditioning. Actual recovery. Which Imogen will misunderstand unless physically restrained."

"I'll bring rope."

"Flag-pull only," Ellis said.

That time Nia did smile. Small, but there.

Ellis let herself breathe.

The mistake had been ordinary too. Painful, yes. At the exact

wrong time, definitely. But ordinary. A new cue badly shaped under pressure. A run and a pass not matching. You fixed ordinary by returning to what held.

At lunch, the review room smelled of wet coats and radiator dust. Coach Duarte had claimed the small tactics classroom beside the gym, with its wall screen and stackable chairs. Someone had drawn four tiny gates on the whiteboard in blue marker and labelled North, South, East, West.

"Phones away unless you're using your wristband export," Duarte said as they came in. "Food is fine. Crumbs are not a training philosophy."

Ellis took the chair beside Nia automatically. Then, because automatic suddenly felt visible, she made a show of dumping her bag between them.

Nia eyed it. "You know your kit bag contains an entire second team."

"Only five. Sixth one escaped."

"Probably with the spare flags."

"I wrote that down."

"Of course you did."

Duarte dimmed the screen. "We're looking at the last four minutes. Not to assign shame. To locate decisions."

"So shame's optional," Mae said. "Noted."

"Thank you, Mae." Duarte tapped the wall control.

On screen, Alderbank's active gate glowed West. Westmere's East. Suri passed to Nia. Joss closed. The flag pull registered.

"One," Duarte said, pausing. "Clean stop. Defender retreats. Nia has three seconds."

Ellis watched herself on the screen come under for the pass, exactly where she should have been. Nia gave it. Good. Stable. Then Ellis moved left, Freya with her.

"Here," Duarte said.

The room went quiet before the tone sounded on the recording, as

if their bodies remembered. Lights changed. Alderbank North. Westmere South. The conversion interval bar appeared across the bottom, five seconds in amber. Movement legal. Passing legal. No score yet.

Nia on screen lifted her hand.

Ellis remembered the call through rain: "Cross-two—go!"

Duarte let it run. Ellis saw her own body respond, crossing two lanes hard toward the new North route, arm already flicking for the hinge. Nia stepped forward instead. Joss recovered. Anika closed the inside. The ball slid into empty space and died on the turf.

Duarte paused on the oval ball resting near centre stripe.

"What information did the cue give?" Duarte asked.

"Cross-two," Suri said. "Known pattern. Captain crosses two lanes to draw, hinge drops under, return or reset depending on defender."

"Go adds urgency," Mae said. "Not new job."

Imogen frowned. "Could be go toward North?"

"Could be," Duarte said. "Did it specify who becomes carrier?"

No one answered immediately.

Ellis looked at Nia. Nia was looking at the frozen ball, jaw set not hard but careful, like she had stacked plates too high and was listening for the first crack.

"No," Ellis said. "It didn't."

Duarte nodded. "The team channel showed Nia's offered positional intent. Forward, inside lane. That matters. It told us she wanted to advance. It did not tell Ellis that the pattern had inverted, or that Ellis's job had changed from primary runner to holding Freya wide for a return."

Nia shifted beside her. "I should have said that."

"Yes," Duarte said, not unkindly. "In full or in agreed shorthand. 'Cross-two invert,' if we'd had it. 'Hold wide, return me,' if there's time. The idea may have been playable. It was not communicated enough for the speed of the moment."

Ellis felt the words settle into the room in a shape she could use. Not forbidden idea. Not Nia being reckless. Not Ellis being stupid. Communication incomplete. That was repairable.

Duarte advanced the clip frame by frame. "Sporting context. Anika has an angle. Joss is recovering. Freya is attached to Ellis but can peel if the ball floats. So we do not pretend it was an open gate. We also don't pretend there was nothing there. Clear?"

"Clear," Mae said.

Imogen raised her hand, then seemed embarrassed by her own hand and lowered it. "If Nia says 'invert,' do we all switch? Or only them?"

"Good question," Duarte said.

"That's part of what we'll build," Duarte continued. "But not today. Today is recovery and restoring clean options. Westmere scored because after turnover they coordinated better. Before that, the turnover came from incomplete communication under shift pressure."

They watched Westmere's next point. Anika took the pull, stopped, passed. Freya forced Ellis to choose. Joss cut. Suri nearly got her flag. South lit. Clean, annoying, earned.

Mae leaned back. "I hate when the useful answer is 'they did it well.'"

"Keep hating usefully," Duarte said. "Last sequence."

They saw Alderbank equalise, messy and stubborn. Mae to Tavi, Tavi to Ellis, Ellis to Nia, Nia one-touch to Suri. North gate. 5-5.

"There," Ellis said before she meant to.

Duarte paused. "Say more."

"That's us not panicking," she said. "Same players, same match, same pressure. Nia doesn't try to fix the last one by forcing it. She moves it. We get the point because we go back through the shape."

Nia's eyes flicked to her, then away.

"Fair," Duarte said. "The familiar shape steadied us."

Ellis zipped her notebook away. "You've got English now?"

Nia nodded. "Poetry comparison. Because joy must be rationed."

"I'll save you a seat after school. Tram too, if your mum's not picking up."

"She's on late maintenance planning. Drainage grids near Holmbrook, I think. So tram."

“Okay.”

Ellis said it lightly, but the word caught somewhere. Tram. Same lower stop, same route past the closed cinema and the river wall. Next year she had already pictured it too many times: North Campus if she got in, Nia beside her with music leaking from one earbud, both of them complaining about the timetable as if timetables were the worst thing life could invent. Nia had not chosen her course yet. Nia changed the subject when anyone asked properly. Ellis knew that and still found herself building the journey.

She reached into the side pocket of her enormous bag and found the small wrapped oat square she had not eaten. It was flattened at one corner but intact.

“Here.”

Nia blinked. “You need that.”

“I have another.”

“You do not.”

Ellis did not. “Captain’s privilege. Take the last piece so I don’t have to watch you buy that horrible vending soup.”

“It’s not soup. It’s warm salt with ambition.”

“Exactly.”

Nia took it. Their fingers brushed, ordinary enough to be allowed.

After school, the pitch felt different without match lights and spectators. The gates were still there, of course. North, South, East, West. Same aluminium, same five-metre mouths. A gull stood in the runoff beyond East as if waiting for a pass.

Duarte kept them to mobility, short passing, flag technique at half pace. “Recovery means you finish fresher than you started,” she said, which made Imogen look personally wronged.

Ellis moved through the session checking little things because little things were captains’ work. Mae’s hamstring held when she decelerated. Imogen’s catches got louder when she was tired. Suri needed reminding to drink before she admitted thirst. Tavi asked to run the stop-and-pass footwork twice more because she had missed the release angle on Friday; Duarte gave her the reps, no fuss.

Ellis paired with Nia for lateral passing. Ten metres apart, then twelve. Oval ball spinning imperfectly in the damp air. Catch, tuck, step, pass. Nothing heroic. Ellis liked drills that built a floor under people. She liked hearing breath settle.

She liked, too much, the idea that if she kept the floor solid enough then no one would have to look down and notice how close the season's edge had come. Briar Hill was already behind them. Westmere had taken one Friday night and made it smaller. There were not endless matches left.

"You okay with what Duarte said?" she asked during the jog back to the cone.

Nia rolled the ball between her palms. "It was fair."

"Yeah."

"She didn't say the route was stupid."

"No." Ellis hesitated, choosing care the way she chose a pass lane: not too late, not too soft. "And it wasn't. It just wasn't... ready."

Nia's face changed by less than a centimetre.

Ellis hurried on. "I mean, we can get it ready. Properly. With a cue. But for now I think maybe we should go back to the responses we know when the shift hits late. Just for a bit. Rebuild confidence. You and me on the same side of it."

Nia looked down at the ball, thumb along the seam. Duarte called for the next pair to switch sides. The gull beyond East startled up, offended by nothing Ellis could see.

"Okay," Nia said.

Ellis heard agreement. She heard trust returning to its usual place, a quiet click in the mechanism. She tossed Nia the next pass cleanly and believed she had made room for Nia to be comfortable again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The corrected version



By WEDNESDAY, the rain had stopped pretending to be weather and become part of the pitch.

It sat in the seams between the artificial blades, shivered on the white lines, clung to the undersides of the gates. When Nia crossed to the equipment crate, water darkened her boots before she had warmed up. Beyond the sheltered walkway, younger students crowded around the snack machine, voices bouncing off the glass.

Coach Duarte had set cones in a tilted diamond near centre, with coloured bibs pegged to the fence. No full-contact scrimmage today, the message had said. Corrected shift responses. Controlled pressure. Bring wristbands.

Ellis arrived with Mae, laughing. Her kit bag banged against her knee, enormous and lumpy, the same black bag that had swallowed spare flags, tape, two protein bars, someone's forgotten gloves, and probably a small reserve goalkeeper from another sport. Nia looked up automatically: Ellis present, Ellis okay, Ellis looking for her.

"Saved you the dry side," Ellis said, nodding toward the bench under the shelter.

"There's a dry side?"

“Less wet side. Don’t be ungrateful.”

Nia dropped her bottle beside Ellis’s and sat where there was room for half her thigh and one careful elbow.

“Did you bring the blue flags?” Nia asked.

Ellis pointed at the bag with her foot. “Three sets.”

“Your second team will need them.”

“They’re disciplined. They share.”

Tavi jogged over last, plait tucked into her training top. “Sorry. Physics practical ran over.”

“You’re not late,” Duarte called without looking up from the tablet. “You’re exactly inside the window I gave you.”

“I still hate arriving while cones exist already,” Tavi muttered.

Mae gave her a blue flag belt. “Cones existed before you, Shah. Be brave.”

The team gathered at centre. Six training players today: Nia, Ellis, Mae, Suri, Imogen, Tavi. The field felt huge with only them on it, four gates waiting at the edges.

Duarte clipped a whistle to her jacket zip. “We’re not relitigating Westmere. We did that. Today we install a corrected version of late-shift response. Known pattern first. Clear cue. No guessing that your teammate has become a mind reader because you’ve played together since you were seven.”

“The correction,” Duarte said, “is not never improvise. Under late shift, if we do not have a complete cue, we default to the agreed shape. If someone wants to invert it, the cue must carry the changed jobs. Not vibes. Not heroic eyebrows.”

Mae raised two fingers. “Are heroic eyebrows illegal under obstruction or just useless?”

“Both,” Duarte said. “Warm-up. Two laps, mobility, then we work.”

Nia ran beside Suri for the first lap and behind Ellis for the second. Ellis’s ponytail flicked damp drops onto the back of her neck. Nia could have slid level and matched her. Usually she did. Today she stayed a step back.

After stretches, Duarte set them in threes. Nia, Ellis, and Mae started with the ball near centre. Suri, Imogen, and Tavi defended at half pace. The active gates were set by the training board: Alderbank West, defenders East.

“First run,” Duarte said. “No shift. Show me the ordinary link.”

Suri rolled the ball to Ellis to begin. Ellis passed back to Nia, clean and chest height. Mae cut across, taking Imogen with her. Nia caught, tucked, and moved before Tavi could close. She let Tavi’s angle commit, then pushed the ball to Ellis on the outside.

Ellis carried two strides and passed to Mae, who drove through West from inside the field. Point.

“Good,” Duarte said. “Again.”

They reset. Tavi came quicker at Nia, flag hand low and hungry. Nia showed her shoulder toward West and felt Tavi bite on it. The moment Tavi’s weight shifted, Nia stopped, planted, and slipped the pass inside to Ellis. Ellis didn’t have to slow.

“Pull!” Suri called, catching Ellis’s flag just before Ellis could release.

Ellis stopped at once. Suri retreated two metres, palms up. Ellis had three seconds. “One!” Duarte called, and Nia was already under.

The pass came hard. Nia cushioned it, turned, and gave Mae the simple ball.

Mae scored again.

“Better,” Duarte said. “Now late shift. West to—” She tapped the board.

The tone cut bright across the field. The gate lights changed: Alderbank North, defenders South. Duarte lifted her arm. “Conversion interval. Five seconds. Move, defend, no score.”

Nia’s body knew the old correction before her mind named it. Ellis would cross two lanes to stretch the defence. Nia would hold the hinge. Mae would become second wave if the return opened.

Ellis glanced once at Nia.

Nia answered with the tiniest nod.

“Cross-two!” Ellis called.

There was room. For one breath, there was a slice opening inside Tavi's shoulder, straight toward North. If Nia stepped now, if she said Hold wide, return me, if she made the changed job clear, the pattern could turn inside out.

She heard Duarte's Monday voice: if we do not have a complete cue, we default.

Nia stayed.

Ellis crossed hard. Imogen followed too eagerly, overrunning the angle. Nia took the return, passed to Mae, and Mae drove just inside the North gate after the amber interval clicked off.

"Point," Duarte said. "That is the corrected version."

Ellis jogged back smiling. "Felt better."

"Yeah," Nia said.

Duarte ran them again. Then again. The shift came from North to East, from East to South, from South to West. Each time the corrected response settled faster. Ellis called early. Nia anchored. Mae demanded balls she could use. Suri, defending, began to predict them and forced Nia to sharpen the pass by a handspan.

"Nice," Suri said after Nia threaded one past her hip. "Annoying."

"Thank you."

"I did mean annoying."

"I accepted it as praise."

Tavi watched from the defensive side, eyes moving from Ellis to Nia to Mae. After the next reset, she raised a hand. "Can I try the invert? The one from review, I mean. With the actual words."

Duarte considered Tavi for a second. "Yes. Controlled speed. You will be carrier. Ellis, defend the captain lane. Nia, you're wide hold. Mae, secondary. Suri, pressure. Imogen, recover angle. Tavi, what is your cue?"

Tavi swallowed. "Cross-two invert. Hold wide, return me."

"That's why we practise," Duarte said. "Run it."

They set with Tavi in Nia's usual link spot. The training board showed Alderbank West. Suri fed the ball to Tavi, who caught it neatly. She carried with short, quick steps, eyes up. Ellis, defending, gave her

enough pressure to make it real but not cruel.

The tone sounded. Gates shifted: Alderbank North.

“Cross-two invert!” Tavi called, voice cracking on the second word.
“Hold wide, return me!”

Nia went wide right, dragging Imogen with her. Tavi stepped into the inside channel.

For half a second it looked beautiful.

Then Tavi looked at Nia instead of at Suri. Suri’s hand flashed. Flag pull. Tavi stopped, startled, and nearly passed anyway before remembering. Suri retreated two metres.

“Pass within three,” Duarte called.

Tavi rushed it. The ball came out with its nose wobbling and skidded off the slick turf before Mae could scoop it.

“Turnover,” Duarte said.

Tavi put both hands on her head. “I said the words.”

“You did,” Duarte said. “Good. You also ran into Suri’s best hand and passed like the ball insulted your family.”

Nia jogged over and tossed Tavi the ball.

“You were early on the step,” Nia said.

Tavi caught it. “I thought early was good.”

“Sometimes. But Suri wanted you to think the gap was already yours. Make her move twice.”

Tavi looked at her. “Again?”

Nia glanced at Duarte.

Duarte nodded. “Again. Same cue. Slightly less personal feud with physics.”

The second try was better and still failed. Tavi made Suri move, but Imogen recovered from the wide hold faster than expected and blocked the return lane without touching anyone. Tavi had to dump the pass to Mae, who got flagged at once.

By the fourth try, Tavi managed a clean return. She took the ball back with the North gate in front of her and the amber conversion light still glowing. Scoring was not legal yet. For a moment she hovered, waiting for permission from the board instead of moving Ellis off the

line.

Ellis used the moment. She recovered across Tavi's shoulder and plucked the flag clean before the interval ended.

Tavi bent over, hands on thighs, laughing breathlessly. "This sport is rude."

Duarte pointed at the place where Ellis had made the pull. "That was not the route being bad. That was a pause. If you arrive early, you still play. You move the defender, you protect the ball, you make the next pass if the score is shut. The interval is live, not a waiting room."

Tavi nodded. "Right. Don't stand there admiring the colour amber."

They ran it once more. Tavi did not score. She did, however, make Ellis take the long way round, then slip the ball to Mae before the pull came. Mae got stopped a metre short, second flag of the possession, and came up grinning.

"Better," Duarte said. "Nia back to link. Tavi, defence. We finish with live controlled sequences. Four-pull count active. Dropped ball turns over. Out means out. I want correct responses, but I also want you to see the field, not recite at it."

Nia took the ball at centre for the restart. The board set Alderbank South, defenders North. Ellis stood to her left, flexing her fingers. Mae pointed at her own chest, then toward the right lane. Suri waited deeper. Imogen bounced on her toes.

"Ready?" Duarte called.

The whistle went.

Nia passed to Suri and moved into the seam where Suri would need her if Tavi cut the first option. Tavi did. Suri gave it back. Nia caught and turned away from Imogen, feeling the flag belt tug against her hips as she accelerated.

Ellis came under. The pass to Ellis was there. So was the lane beyond Tavi's outside foot, thin and bright and probably gone already.

Nia let the lane go and gave Ellis the ball.

Ellis took it in stride, drew Suri, and returned it before the pull. Nia had already shifted to receive. Mae yelled once, not words, just noise,

and cut across the front of the gate.

Nia waited half a beat. Tavi reached. Nia's hip turned away from the flag hand; her pass went behind the reach and into Mae's run.

Mae crossed South after the conversion light was gone, ball under control, boots spraying water from the line.

"Point," Duarte said.

Ellis clapped once, sharp and delighted. "That was filthy."

"Legal," Nia said.

"Still filthy."

Duarte tapped the stylus against her tablet twice. "Again."

They ran it again. This time Tavi read Nia's hip early, stayed patient instead of lunging, and plucked the flag clean before the pass came out. Nia stopped, passed within the count, and Mae's run died a metre short of the gate.

"Good pull," Duarte said.

Tavi held up the flag like a tiny trophy. "I accept tribute in bus fare and praise."

"You get praise."

"Mean team."

At the final whistle, Duarte called them in.

"That was calmer," she said. "Not softer. Calmer. The corrected version gives us something to stand on. It does not solve every match and it does not make defenders polite. Tomorrow we add ambiguity back in."

Mae groaned. "You just taught us certainty."

"I let you visit certainty," Duarte said. "Don't unpack."

Ellis bumped Nia's shoulder lightly as they walked toward the shelter. "You were brilliant today."

"Thanks," Nia said.

"No, properly. That pass to Mae? Suri looked personally offended."

"I enjoy upsetting Suri."

"Everyone needs hobbies."

Ellis stood close enough that their sleeves touched. "Felt like us again," she said.

“Yeah,” Nia said.

Ellis nudged her again. “Snack machine before the Year Nines empty it?”

“In this economy? We’ll be lucky if they’ve left dust.”

“I have emergency bars.”

“Of course you do.”

For now, she took the protein bar Ellis offered, broke it in half, and gave the larger piece back.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Useful to everyone



By the third quarter, Nia could feel the match in the soles of her feet.

Just the thud of turf under studs, the catch in her lungs when she cut toward the East gate and the ball came in a little behind her, the grit of rubber crumb stuck to the sweat at the back of her knee. Alderbank led 5–3, which was not enough. Their playoff place sat somewhere beyond the last whistle, as real and unreachable as the North gate when the active target was South.

The pitch behind school was louder than usual. Parents and younger siblings pressed along the rail by the courts, coats zipped to their chins. Two former pupils had brought a cardboard sign that said **ALDERBANK PILOT PROGRAMME: STILL CONFUSING, STILL FUN**, with the letters getting smaller toward the end. The public-feed camera blinked above the sheltered walkway. Rain had stopped ten minutes before kickoff and left the line markings bright.

Suri held the ball near halfway, one hand spread across its oval side, eyes up.

Alderbank's active gate was East. Calder North had West. The last shift had come half a minute ago, lights snapping over after the tone.

The five-second conversion interval had passed, and now the route was live.

Nia drifted inside from the right, checking Ellis first.

It was automatic: Ellis at centre-left, captain's band dark against her sleeve, chin tilted to take in Mae's position behind and Imogen's restless bounce ahead. Ellis flicked two fingers low. Hold. Let Suri choose.

Nia held.

Calder had pulled two flags on this possession. Another pull would make the count three; one after that would turn Alderbank over at the spot. Their nearest defender, a tall girl with pink tape on one wrist, waited just outside Suri's reach, ready to snatch if Suri tried to burst through.

"Back pocket," Suri called.

Nia turned her hips before the pass left Suri's hands. The ball came flat and kind. Nia received it against her chest, felt the seam bite her palm, and took two steps toward the East gate.

Pink Tape lunged.

Nia did not try to beat her. She planted, let the defender's hand catch the blue flag at her hip, and stopped dead on the whistle chirp.

"Pull three," the official called. "Pass in three. Retreat two."

Pink Tape jogged back the required space. Nia already had Ellis moving into the pocket she had left, Suri sliding behind, Imogen sprinting too early toward the East gate with one hand up as if she could will the ball there.

"Im, wait!" Ellis barked.

Imogen checked, almost skidding.

Nia passed to Ellis. Not exciting. Necessary.

Ellis took it and turned, and Mae appeared from nowhere on the far side.

Mae was a defender by nature and by personal complaint, but in Shiftpoint nobody got to be only one thing. She had started the move with a flag pull near Alderbank's own South corner, then stayed high when the target shifted East. Calder forgot about her for half a breath.

Ellis did not.

“Mae!”

The pass went hard across Nia’s line of sight. Mae caught it with both hands, tucked it under her right arm, and drove for the East gate.

A Calder defender cut across to meet her. Mae lowered her centre of gravity, not into contact—Coach Duarte would have removed her soul through her ears for that—but into balance. The defender went for the flag. Mae twisted just enough that the hand missed cloth and grabbed air.

Mae crossed the East boundary through the five-metre gate from inside the field, ball under control.

The light above the gate flashed green.

The rail erupted. Mae kept running into the runoff, then turned with both palms up like she had been accused of something and found innocent.

“Point Alderbank,” the official called. “Six–three. Restart centre, Calder North.”

Mae jogged back past Nia, breathing hard. “See?” she said. “Useful to everyone.”

“You were four metres out of position,” Nia said.

“I was spiritually perfect.”

Ellis laughed as she retrieved a loose flag strip from the turf and tossed it to Mae. For a second, the sound opened something warm in Nia’s chest. Then Ellis looked at Nia and pointed toward the middle.

“Same link, yeah? They’re biting on first carrier.”

“Yeah,” Nia said.

It was the right call. It was exactly what Nia was good at. Carry enough to pull shape, release before the fourth flag, keep Imogen from outrunning possession, give Suri a safe backward angle, make Ellis’s read easier.

Alderbank had needed this version of her all afternoon, and the worse part was that she was proud of doing it well.

Calder restarted from centre. Their captain, a compact girl with cropped hair, tapped the ball against her thigh while the official checked flags.

“Live,” the official called.

Calder moved fast toward West. Mae met the carrier five metres inside Alderbank’s half, feet chopping, hands low. The carrier tried to pass over her shoulder. Mae read the shoulder early, stepped, and made the receiver hesitate. That hesitation was enough for Nia to close from the side.

Flag pull.

“First!” called the official.

The carrier stopped, cheeks flushed, and held the ball out with a grim little smile. “Nice.”

“Thanks,” Nia said, backing away two metres.

The pass went behind. Suri pressed up, just reducing options. Calder got through two more passes before a runner dropped a low ball. It hit the turf, bounced once, and lay still near the North touch-line.

“Turnover at resting spot,” the official called. “Alderbank ball.”

Tavi bounced on the sideline, already half out of her bib. Coach Duarte held up three fingers for the rotation at the next change, then jabbed them toward the cones where substitutes waited. Tavi froze, nodded too hard, and started actually listening.

Nia bent with hands on knees while Suri set for the restart. Across the pitch, the gate lights still showed East for Alderbank, West for Calder. The tone could come any time now.

Suri caught Nia’s eye. “Inside lift?”

Nia nodded.

Suri sent it flat and early. This time Nia did not look to Ellis first.

She caught it cleanly anyway and stepped into the inside channel. Her first instinct was to glance left, to find Ellis’s confirmation, to make sure the picture in her head had permission. Instead she saw Imogen.

Imogen was fast enough to turn small gaps into insults. She had spent the first half arriving at gates before the ball and then looking offended by cause and effect. Now she hovered on the edge of motion, knees bent, waiting.

“Not yet,” Nia called. Then, louder, “Im—cut on me.”

Imogen’s face changed. She stopped vibrating forward and angled across Nia’s shoulder.

A Calder defender committed to Nia. The hand came in for the flag.

Nia passed before the pull, a short push into Imogen’s path.

Imogen did not have to slow. She caught the ball with a delighted grunt and tore toward East. One defender had angle, maybe. Imogen burned it. She crossed through the gate so fast she nearly tripped over the runoff line.

“Point Alderbank. Seven–three.”

Imogen screamed, not words, just weather.

On the sideline, Coach Duarte clapped once, sharp. “That’s the timing. That’s it.”

Ellis jogged to Nia first, not Imogen. “Good hold on the cue.”

Nia’s stomach did a stupid hopeful flip.

Then Ellis added, “That’s what we need from you. Keeps everyone sane.”

The flip became something smaller and meaner.

Nia wiped rain from her eyebrow with her wrist. “Yeah.”

Ellis was already turning, calling positions for the restart. She had not meant it as a box. Nia knew that. Ellis meant: I see the work. Ellis meant exactly the praise Nia had once wanted more than being called quick or brave.

Calder North did not fold. In the final quarter, after Alderbank scored again through Suri’s patient give-and-go with Tavi—Tavi’s pass wobbled but arrived, and her expression afterward could have lit the maintenance shed—Calder took two points back. One came after a shift at the worst possible time: Alderbank had set for North, the tone sounded, Nia’s wristband buzzed, and the lights changed to South for Alderbank and North for Calder. During the five-second conversion interval Calder kept moving, legal and calm, and when scoring became live they were already flowing to their North gate. Their captain crossed with Mae half a step late.

“Eight–five,” Mae muttered, hands on hips. “I hate competent people.”

“Terrible habit,” Suri said.

There was one last Calder possession, one last live draw check that did not shift, one last desperate run toward North. Mae pulled the carrier’s flag for the third count. The pass went out toward the sideline. Suri arrived first, palms open, and the receiver fumbled under pressure. The ball skidded over the line.

The whistle went.

For half a second Nia only heard breath. Then the rail understood. Alderbank 8, Calder North 5.

Playoffs.

Imogen jumped on Suri, who accepted it with the resigned grace of a public statue. Mae punched the air once and then immediately began explaining to the nearest official that her second-quarter pull had been “even cleaner than the data would show.” Tavi ran from the sideline and collided with Nia chest-first.

“We’re in,” Tavi said into Nia’s shoulder. “We’re actually in.”

“You’ve been saying that since warm-up.”

“I was manifesting. This is more sweaty.”

Ellis reached them last, because she had gone first to shake Calder North hands. Their captain hugged her briefly, then offered Mae a fist bump that Mae took with suspicious respect.

Coach Duarte gathered them near the centre mark. Her hair had escaped its tie in black-grey wisps. She did not smile broadly, which was how Nia knew she was pleased.

“Good,” Coach said. “Not perfect. Good. Mae, defence gave us field position. Suri, tempo saved us when the shifts could’ve made us stupid. Imogen, your second-half patience made your speed matter. Tavi, that pass to Suri counts whether you looked terrified or not.”

Tavi whispered, “I looked strategically haunted.”

“Nia,” Coach said.

Nia braced without meaning to.

Coach’s gaze was steady. “You connected phases all match. You

took pulls when we needed the count managed. You made Imogen wait. You made Ellis's calls playable and Suri's resets useful. That is high-value work."

Everyone looked at her with the warm, damp approval of people who had just won because some small invisible machine kept running.

Nia nodded. "Thanks."

On the tram home, Ellis saved her the last corner of a protein square without comment. They shared the bench seat at the back, kit bags piled between their feet and Tavi's shin because Ellis's bag had apparently swallowed the cones again.

"Your second team needs to start paying fares," Nia said.

Ellis leaned her head back against the window. "They qualify as equipment."

"They smell like equipment."

"Harsh. Accurate, but harsh."

The joke landed, mostly. Ellis broke the protein square and gave Nia the bigger piece, like restoring an old rule after discovering someone had moved the furniture. Nia took it because refusing would make it A Thing, and she was too tired to hold another thing.

Ellis's shoulder brushed hers with every bend in the road. "You were brilliant today."

Nia chewed. The square tasted of cocoa powder and cardboard optimism.

"Useful," she said.

Ellis turned her head. "That too."

Nia wanted to say, That too is not always a gift. She wanted to say, Sometimes I don't know if you like me or the space I leave for everyone else.

Instead she said, "Your bag's leaking sock."

Ellis looked down. "That's not mine."

"It is emerging from your property."

"Could be one of the second team."

Tavi, half-asleep across the aisle, mumbled, "If there's a spare left defender in there, wake me when we get to playoffs."

At home, the kitchen windows had steamed around the edges. Rosa Serrat stood at the counter in her municipal fleece, scrolling through a work slate with one hand and stirring lentils with the other. A map of Alderbank's drainage repairs glowed on the table, blue lines and amber alerts laid over streets Nia knew by tram stop and corner shop.

"You won," Rosa said before Nia got both shoes off. "Eight-five. The feed froze twice, but Mrs Iqbal downstairs shouted updates through the ceiling."

Nia smiled despite herself. "Efficient."

"Possibly not compliant with quiet-hours guidance." Rosa set the spoon down and came over, smelling of raincoat, cumin, and the outdoors. She kissed Nia's temple. "My reliable girl. Playoffs."

There it was, offered with pride so clean Nia felt ashamed for flinching.

"Don't make that face," Rosa said.

"What face?"

"The one that says I have stepped on your foot, emotionally."

Nia snorted and hung her jacket over the chair. Her thighs ached as she sat. The house hummed with ordinary systems: heater, fridge, pipes, and Rosa's low voice checking a depot route in the next room.

"Can I ask Coach for a practice to try that forward run?" Nia said.

Rosa set her slate down. "Do you want help asking?"

"No." Nia pulled her homework toward her, though the words on it were swimming. "I want to make it clear myself."

Rosa nodded once, not making a ceremony of it. "Then ask."

Nia reopened the page. The request was already taking shape.

CHAPTER NINE

Old footage



THE INTERVIEW CHAIRS had been set on the stage in the assembly hall, two grey school chairs angled toward each other as if they might start their own awkward conversation if left alone.

Nia arrived with damp hair from training and a carton of noodles cooling against her palm. The hall smelled of floor polish, wet coats, and the peppery sauce from somebody's chips. A public-feed screen hung above the stage, paused on a still of last Saturday's fixture: Alderbank's East gate lit green, Mae mid-stride with one arm out for balance, three defenders behind her looking personally offended by geometry.

"Your mum texted," Ellis said, dropping into the seat beside Nia. "She says tell you the trams are diverted because of resurfacing on Calder Road, not because the universe hates you."

"Reassuring. The universe has delegated."

Ellis's kit bag slumped across both their feet. It had gained, since practice, a spare towel, two cones Mae had sworn she did not steal, and half a packet of ginger biscuits.

Nia nudged it with her toe. "Your second team is going to suffocate in there."

"They're fine. They've got tactical discipline and crumbs."

Ellis held out the biscuit packet. One biscuit left, cracked almost through the middle.

Nia looked at it. Usually one of them would break it without comment, the larger piece migrating by ancient law to whoever looked more tired. Today Ellis held the packet open and waited.

"You have it," Nia said.

"No. Your noodles look depressing."

"They're not depressing. They're lukewarm."

"That's a category of depressing."

Nia took the smaller half when Ellis split it, because Ellis did not push the bigger piece toward her, and because taking the smaller half felt like a decision so tiny it almost didn't count.

Onstage, Ms. Han from media studies was adjusting a microphone stand for Adrian Bell. Adrian had chosen not to sit yet. His continued presence occupied the chair only through a school-owned projection rig: a clean-edged, light-built figure in a brown jacket and open-collared shirt, hands folded behind his back while he looked up at the old banners. The rendering was good enough that when he turned, the hall lights seemed to catch in his eyes. It was not good enough to pretend he was breathing.

He had commentated their 8–5 win last weekend from the commentary table by halfway, his voice warm in Nia's ear afterward when the clip went up: Serrat doing the unglamorous work well there. Makes two choices available, which is sometimes better than making the choice yourself. Her mum had played that bit twice while cooking rice, smiling as if Adrian had personally come round to praise the plumbing.

Now pupils from three year groups filled the front rows. Some were there for media credit. Some because Adrian Bell had played for Alderbank before the regional championships had professional haircuts and wearable feeds. Some because he was authenticated continuity and people liked to see what that meant up close.

Tavi slid into the row in front, turning sideways over the seat back. "Did I miss rules?"

“This is an interview, Shah,” Mae said from Ellis’s other side. “Not a hostage situation.”

“Interviews have rules. Don’t ask stupid questions. Don’t say ‘what’s it like being continued’ like nobody’s ever thought of it. Don’t knock over the mic.”

“Those are more manners than rules,” Suri said, settling neatly with her notebook on her knees.

Tavi pointed at her. “See? Suri knows.”

Ms. Han tapped the microphone. It popped softly, and the hall groaned with it.

“Thank you for staying after school,” she said. “Mr. Bell has agreed to speak with us about sports commentary, memory, and how public accounts of matches get made. He’ll take questions. You all know the consent rules for recording.”

Adrian sat. His projected knees aligned almost perfectly with the real chair legs. “I was promised difficult questions,” he said. “If you only ask kind ones, I’ll have to invent criticism of myself, and I prefer that done by trained professionals.”

Ms. Han began with safe ground: how he prepared for Shiftpoint, whether commentating a pilot sport felt different from old football, how much data was useful before it became clutter. Adrian answered plainly. He liked the modest feed because it forced him to watch bodies before numbers. He liked gates because they made intention visible and then unreliable. He disliked saying “obviously” on commentary because if something was obvious everyone at home had already seen it, and if it wasn’t, he was lying.

When a Year Ten asked whether being continued made him remember matches perfectly, Adrian’s smile changed but did not vanish.

“No,” he said. “It gives me access to what I carry, not ownership of what happened. My recollections are mine. They have fingerprints on them.”

The questions drifted toward the old match everyone knew. Alderbank versus Rookfield, regional semifinals, 2054. Nia had seen clips because everyone at the school had seen clips. Mud instead of turf. A ball

that looked heavier than modern training balls. Adrian Bell at twenty-two, shoulders sharp, hair plastered to his forehead, driving through midfield like he had a private agreement with the ground.

The loss had acquired a name in old local feeds: the Far-Post Folly. Nia disliked names like that. They took twenty-two bodies, weather, tired legs, a referee, and an opponent with plans, then tied the result around one person's neck because it made a cleaner thumbnail.

A boy from Year Twelve stood with a microphone. "Can you talk about the last attack? The one people still argue about?"

Adrian's mouth quirked. "I wondered when we'd arrive."

On the big screen, Ms. Han brought up the footage. It was grainy, flattened by age and weather. The score bar showed Alderbank 1, Rookfield 1, stoppage time bleeding away. Different sport, equipment from another era, but Nia's body still leaned forward when players began to move.

"Set it for us," Ms. Han said.

"We'd been chasing control for twenty minutes," Adrian said. "Rookfield had dropped deeper. We had one planned overload left—left half-space, quick wall pass, runner beyond. We had trained it all week because their fullback liked to step early."

On screen, young Adrian received the ball near the left touchline. A defender closed. He slipped a pass inside and kept running. Another Alderbank player, number eight, dark hair tied back with a band, checked toward him.

"Jon Marr," Adrian said before anyone asked. "Best first touch in the squad. Could make a wet ball sit down and apologise."

"The pattern required Jon to set the ball back into my path. He knew I was coming. Everyone knew I was coming. Instead, he let it run across him and tried to reverse play to the far post."

The footage showed exactly that: number eight opening his body, the ball sliding beyond his first foot. For half a second the far side looked empty in a tempting way, a white shirt beginning a run. Then a Rookfield midfielder read it, stepped in, and intercepted. Two passes later, Rookfield scored.

Adrian leaned back. "That was the lesson I took for a long time. There are moments when invention is not courage. It's vanity wearing studs. Jon had the simple action. He had the captain's run outside him. He chose a picture no one else had been given time to see."

Nia stared at the paused blur of number eight's body half-turned away from Adrian. Beside her, Ellis sat still, attentive in the way she became when a captain was being described, even one from before they were born.

Ms. Han did not rush in. "You've said versions of that in earlier interviews."

"I have," Adrian said. "With better hair and worse mercy."

A girl from the media club lifted her hand. "Do you still think that's right?"

Adrian looked up at the screen.

"I think Rookfield scored," he said. "That part has proved stubborn."

He nodded toward Ms. Han. "Can we run it back ten seconds? With audio, if the old file has any left in it."

Ms. Han glanced at the technician. The clip jumped. This time the hall heard the match: crowd hiss, rain static, a whistle somewhere not meant for the play. Voices on the pitch came through as shredded bursts.

Young Adrian: "Wall! Wall!"

Another voice, maybe Jon Marr: "Far if he—"

The sound drowned under a roar as the pass went in. The same movement unfolded: Adrian outside, Jon checking, defender stepping. Jon's head flicked, not toward glory at the far post, but toward the defender's foot.

"Again," Adrian said.

Ms. Han replayed it.

"Far if he—" The rest disappeared.

Adrian's projected hand lifted, index finger marking the moment on no surface at all. "There."

"I remembered myself calling the pattern," he said slowly. "I remembered Jon ignoring it. I did not remember him saying anything."

Ms. Han said, "What do you hear?"

"Not enough." Adrian's tone had lost its polish, not its steadiness. "Possibly 'Far if he steps.' Possibly something else. The audio is ugly."

Mae frowned at the screen. "Defender did step," she said quietly.

Nia saw it now because Mae had named it. The Rookfield defender did not just close Adrian. He jumped the return lane, weight forward, knee bent to spring. If Jon set the ball back exactly as planned, maybe Adrian reached it first. Maybe the defender took it. Maybe Adrian's younger legs cut through anyway and everyone called Jon disciplined for the rest of time.

On screen, the far-side runner was open for a blink. The pass was not clean enough. The interceptor was faster than the idea.

Adrian exhaled. The projection did not need breath, but the sound came through the speakers as human as tired lungs.

"I don't want to revise history into a softer lie," he said. "Jon's pass was underhit. The turnover was real. My run was real. The pattern was real. But I may have made his choice smaller afterward because that made my disappointment simpler."

No one laughed.

Nia looked at his face instead of the clip. He seemed older suddenly, which made no sense. Continued people did not age in the visible way unless they chose versions and settings Nia did not fully understand. Still, his expression had changed. The old story had moved in his hands and shown a different edge.

The Year Twelve boy still had the microphone. "So was he right to ignore the call?"

Adrian looked at the frozen frame. "I don't know. I was the one calling a pattern, and Jon may have been answering something I didn't hear. The defender was already stepping into the return lane; his pass was underhit. That is not enough to make the alternative wrong, or to prove it would have worked."

Ms. Han thanked the student. The screen returned to the interview

title. The old result stayed where it was, and nobody asked Adrian to turn uncertainty into a verdict.

CHAPTER TEN

Say the whole thing



BY TUESDAY, the win had dried into video clips.

Coach Duarte put them on the changing-room wall after school, projected large enough that Nia could see the rubber crumbs flicking up under her own studs. The room smelled of damp coats, boot spray, and citrus cleaner. Outside, rain ticked against the high windows. Inside, ten girls sat on benches in training kit, trying not to look too pleased when their good moments came up. Asha Rao, a quiet Year Twelve who had spent most of the season as first sub off the bench, sat at the end with her knees pulled up, watching the clips as if they might be on a test.

“There,” Coach said.

On the wall, match-Nia caught Suri’s pass against Calder North and stepped inward. Imogen started forward, too early, then checked when Nia called her.

Coach froze the image. Imogen appeared mid-hover, hair lifting, face bright with almost-going.

“What changed this from a wish into a point?”

“Im actually waited,” Mae said.

Imogen threw a sock at her. It hit Mae’s shin with a sad slap.

Coach did not look away from the frame. "Yes. And?"

"Nia gave the cue before the gap shut," Suri said.

"Before contact," Ellis added. "So Imogen could run onto it, not rescue it."

Nia looked at the floor between her boots.

Coach clicked the tablet. Match-Nia called, passed, and Imogen ripped through the East gate. The gate light flared green. In the little speaker, the recorded crowd became a thin, tinny roar.

"Good," Coach said. "Now we build it so it survives people knowing we can do it."

That ended the smiling.

They went out under the sheltered walkway. The pitch lights had come on early because of the weather, silvering the wet turf. Four gate frames stood at North, South, East, and West, unchanged and waiting. The maintenance shed door banged in the wind until Mae kicked a cone against it.

"Technical solution," Mae said.

"Municipal vandalism," Nia said.

"My future taxes are emotionally present."

Coach had set out a narrow channel in the middle third, with coloured discs branching toward the four gates. Nia recognised Alderbank's usual link pattern, then realised it had been turned wrong. Mae stood where Nia normally would. Ellis was sent wide and high, almost in Imogen's lane. Suri was placed as first runner. Tavi, to her visible alarm, stood in the captain's central spot with the ball.

"Role swap," Coach said over the groans. "Not chaos. Swap. You will learn what your cue costs someone else. You will also learn that asking one question now is faster than repairing three guesses later."

The first repetition was ugly.

Tavi held the ball at centre, East active for Alderbank, West marked for the defending group. Coach had set the shift signal off for the first few runs so they could focus on shape. Mae, playing Nia's linking line, drifted too far forward. Suri, playing the runner, stayed patient for three beats and then lost patience with herself.

“Now?” she called.

Tavi stared at three options and chose none.

Mae came back for the ball as Suri cut across her. Imogen, defending, flicked Suri’s flag cleanly before the pass left Tavi’s hand.

“Stop,” Coach said.

Everyone stopped. Tavi’s cheeks had gone red.

Coach pointed from Tavi to Suri to Mae. “What did you need?”

“A word,” Tavi said, then winced. “Any word.”

“Not any,” Suri said. “If I say ‘through,’ I’m committing forward. If Mae is support, she needs to know if return is allowed or if she holds out.”

Mae looked wounded. “I needed to know I was allowed to be boring.”

“Boring saves possessions,” Ellis said from the wide lane, and then seemed to notice where she was standing. “That is horrible. Is this how Nia feels?”

“Constantly,” Nia said.

Coach’s mouth twitched. “Good. Again. Same positions. Nia, you’re observing first. What cue would you give if you were Tavi?”

Nia looked at the cones. Tavi central with ball. Suri about to split the defence through the inside. Mae behind the move, able to support if the pass came back. Ellis wide, drawing a defender. The active gate was East.

“Say who is through,” Coach said. “Say who supports. Say whether the return stays on.”

Nia swallowed. “Suri through. Mae support. Return stays.”

“Shorter if you’re the runner?”

Nia felt Ellis watching her. Not judging. Expecting, which could feel too close to the same thing.

She changed the names in the pattern without meaning to. “I’m through; Ellis support; return stays.”

Coach nodded once. “There. That’s a complete cue. It doesn’t promise success. It tells people what decision they are in.”

Tavi pointed at Nia with the remains of her banana peel. “Can I

steal that structure?"

"You are required to steal that structure," Coach said. "And put that peel somewhere that is not my pitch."

This time, Tavi called, "Suri through; Mae support; return stays."

The movement worked well enough to show the idea. Suri drove into the channel, drew Imogen's hand toward her flag, then slipped the ball back to Mae before the pull. Mae received with a look of moral discomfort, held for half a beat, and passed wide to Ellis. Ellis gathered the pass, cut toward East, and stopped before the gate because Coach's whistle split the air.

"Good. Reset. Now Nia runs it."

Coach moved the defenders. Mae and Imogen stayed defensive. Suri fed from centre. Tavi rotated wide as a late option. Ellis took the support pocket just off Nia's left shoulder.

"Live targets," Coach said. "Initial assignment: Alderbank East, defence West. I'll run a shift tone when I choose. Five-second conversion still counts: move, pass, defend, but no scoring. Make your words do work."

Nia rubbed her palms on her shorts. The ball sat with Suri at centre. East gate ahead-right. Mae crouched opposite Nia with an expression that promised legal misery.

Suri tapped the ball. "Live."

Nia moved.

For once, she did not look to Ellis first. She saw Mae's weight on her left foot, Imogen shading the return lane, Tavi wide and too eager but available. The channel opened for a slice of a second.

"I'm through; Ellis support; return stays."

Suri fired the pass.

Nia caught and drove. Mae backed, hands low. Nia took two fast steps toward East. Imogen narrowed toward Ellis, trying to smother the support before it breathed.

She gave the ball to Ellis just before Mae's fingers reached her flag. Mae missed cloth by a whisper.

Ellis caught, planted, and returned immediately into the space Nia

had kept running toward. Not behind her. Not safe and dead. Ahead.

The ball met Nia's hands in stride. For one bright instant everything was not easy but exact.

Nia crossed through the East gate from inside the field with the ball tight to her ribs.

Coach's whistle blew twice. "Point if this were match. Good."

The relief hit Nia so hard she laughed, breathless and stupid. Tavi whooped. Imogen clapped despite having defended the failure of her own side. Mae pointed at Ellis.

"I was a centimetre from making you all sad."

"You were," Ellis said. "Devastating centimetre."

Ellis turned to Nia, grinning, rain on her eyelashes. "That cue's good."

Nia tried not to store the sentence somewhere embarrassing. "You returned it properly."

They reset with everyone louder now. Coach did not let them keep that illusion for long.

"Again," she called. "Defence, respond differently. Mae, don't chase the pull. Imogen, take away the return first. Suri, feed when ready."

Suri lifted the ball. This time Coach let the shift timer run on the little public training unit clipped to her wrist. Twenty-five seconds minimum had already passed from the staged reset. A tone might come on a check, or might not.

"Live."

Nia moved into the same seam.

"I'm through; Ellis support; return stays."

The pass arrived. Mae did not bite. Instead she held inside, forcing Nia wider than before. Imogen ignored Nia almost rudely and stepped straight into the Ellis-return lane. Ellis adjusted, hands up, but Imogen had the line sealed.

Nia still tried to make it happen.

She pushed the pass to Ellis. The ball got there, but Ellis had to catch high and turn away from Imogen's reach. Nia kept running for the return that no longer existed.

“Tone!” Coach called.

The training unit sounded. Gate lights on the portable posts snapped: Alderbank’s active gate switched from East to North; defence from West to South. Nia’s wrist buzzed with the accessible signal. Five-second conversion interval. Movement and passing continued, scoring did not count yet.

Ellis held the ball, eyes flicking North, then to Nia. Nia was beyond her, too flat, momentum dragging her toward an East gate that had stopped mattering. Mae saw it and closed the space. Imogen stayed between Ellis and the return.

“Reset back!” Suri called.

Nia heard it too late. She tried to bend her run toward North and slipped on the wet turf just enough to lose speed. Ellis, correctly, did not throw a rescue ball into Mae’s hands. She passed back to Suri as the conversion interval expired.

Suri caught cleanly, but Mae was already pressing. Two passes later, Tavi dropped a hurried ball near the North touchline. It bounced, rolled, and came to rest against a blue cone.

“Turnover at resting spot,” Coach said. “Freeze.”

Nia stood with her hands on her knees, rain dripping off her nose.

“I said it,” she managed, before she could stop herself.

Coach walked into the middle of the shape. “You did.”

Mae pulled her own flag off and held it out. “You were clear. The lane still closed.”

Nia nodded.

Coach pointed to the strip of turf between Imogen and Ellis. “What changed?”

“Imogen took the return,” Ellis said.

“And Mae stopped offering the pull,” Suri added. “She made Nia keep carrying sideways.”

Coach turned to Nia. “Your cue was complete. It was not wrong. It was conditional.”

Coach held up three fingers. “It works if the inside defender threatens the carrier first, if the support lane stays passable, and if the shift

doesn't make your run old news. One of those changed. Then two. By the time North came on, Ellis returning to you would have fed the defence."

Coach took the ball from Ellis and rolled it back to Suri. "This is not Westmere again."

Nia's head came up.

Coach did not soften it. "Then, we had half a cue and three people guessing the secret version. Today you said the whole thing. Good. Now you add the next line. If return closes?"

"Reset back," Suri said at once.

"Or wide switch," Tavi said. "If I haven't wandered off to start a new life."

"If return closes," Coach repeated, looking at Nia.

Nia wiped rain from her upper lip. "Reset back or wide. Don't force the ghost of it."

"Again."

When Coach finally called water, they clustered under the pitch shelter. Rain drummed on the plastic roof. Tavi sat on an upturned crate and retied both shoes with ferocious concentration.

Ellis leaned beside Nia, shoulder warm through wet sleeves. "The run's real," she said.

Nia unscrewed her bottle. "Conditional."

"Everything is conditional."

"That sounds like something you'd write on a revision card."

"I have excellent revision cards."

Ellis nudged her with an elbow. "I mean it. I can do that support. It's just..." She frowned toward the pitch, where Coach was moving cones again. "It's not our base shape yet. If a match goes sideways, I'm still going to see the old reset first."

Nia stared at the bottle cap in her palm.

"Okay," Nia said.

Ellis heard too much in it and not enough. "Not because I don't trust you."

"I didn't say that."

“I know. I’m saying it anyway.”

Coach called them back.

They ran it until the words lost their shine and became work. Nia through; Ellis support; return stays. Nia through; Ellis support; return closed, reset. Suri through; Nia support; hold wide. Mae through, somehow; everyone panic, politely. The cue did not open every lane. Sometimes it saved them from lying to themselves about a lane being open.

Nia rubbed rain out of her hair. “When I call it, don’t treat it like a trick play.”

Ellis went still.

Nia made herself finish. “If I say the whole thing, I need you to hear it as a real option. Not as me asking for a special favour.”

Ellis’s face changed slowly, the joke leaving first. “I can do that.”

“You can try to do that.”

A small smile tugged at Ellis’s mouth. “I can try to do that.”

Coach locked the equipment crate and looked over at them. “Thursday,” she said, “we make the defence nastier.”

Mae groaned. “I thought we were the defence.”

“You are,” Coach said. “Improve your personalities.”

Nia shouldered her bag. The rain had eased to a mist over the four waiting gates. East, North, South, West: none of them promised to stay useful. She walked beside Ellis toward the changing rooms anyway, carrying the cue in her body now, not as proof, not as magic. As work they had actually named.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Before the whistle



By FRIDAY, the quarterfinal had become a number on the athletics office screen: Alderbank 6, Mossley 4, semifinal confirmed.

It looked too neat there. It did not show Mae taking three clean flags in one defensive set and coming off with turf stuck to her elbow. It did not show Suri holding the ball through the last shift check, waiting out Mossley's reach until Imogen finally stopped sprinting at hope and sprinted at space. It did not show Nia's lungs burning after the fifth point, when the active gate switched from South to East and she had to turn her whole body like someone had tugged her by the ribs.

It also did not show Ellis shouting, "Leave it, leave it, not our gate," while Nia pulled out of a run that would have looked brave and been useless.

That part had stayed in Nia's legs ever since: the stop, Suri's pass across, Imogen through the East gate before Mossley reset. A point made of restraint. Coach had replayed it twice and said nothing dramatic. Just, "Good recognition."

Now they were in the media room because the pitch was booked for lower-year trials, studying Eastbank on the wall.

Eastbank wore dark green with white side panels, and they moved

like they had agreed not to hurry unless hurry was useful. Leah Osei, their captain, caught a pass one-handed near midfield, felt the flag defender closing, and sent the ball backward to a teammate Nia had not been watching. Two passes later, Eastbank scored through the North gate.

Mae made a disgusted sound. "That was rude."

"It was clean," Suri said.

"Clean can be rude."

Coach Duarte paused the feed before the restart from centre. The room smelled of radiator dust, lunch chips, and someone's lavender deodorant trying its best. Outside the internal window, a Year Nine boy pressed his face briefly to the glass and was hauled away by a friend.

"What does Eastbank do well?" Coach asked.

Imogen, cross-legged on a chair, said, "They don't chase the old gate after a shift."

"They don't overpull," Mae said. "Annoying. They wait until the carrier has to choose."

"Tight support triangles," Ellis said. Her notebook lay open on her knee, but she had stopped writing. "Leah reads the second pass. Not just the first."

Nia kept her eyes on the frozen frame. Leah stood angled toward the ball, not flat, not greedy. Her attention seemed to include three people.

"They're good at making your safe pass worse," Nia said.

Coach pointed the remote at her. "Say more."

"If I carry toward the active gate, they don't always pull me," Nia said. "Sometimes they block the return lane and let the first decision get old. So if the cue is 'I'm through; Ellis support; return stays,' they'll try to make the return not stay."

"Good." Coach clicked the feed forward: Leah stepping into a lane exactly like that. "So?"

"So we need the next word," Nia said.

Ellis's pen lowered. "If return closes."

"Or if I see it closing before I commit." Nia pressed her thumb into

the seam of her shorts. "Not a whole essay. Just something that tells you I'm changing the route, not panicking."

Mae raised a hand. "Please let the something be useful to defenders too. Some of us enjoy knowing whether to sprint or watch you all do art."

"Valid," Coach said. "Options."

They built it badly first. "Switch" meant too much. "Cut" already meant Imogen's diagonal. "Hold" sounded like stopping, which in Shiftpoint usually meant someone was about to lose a flag and dignity.

Tavi said, "What about 'carry on'? As in, no return, carrier keeps the ball to the new lane."

"That sounds like my aunt when she's pretending she's not crying," Imogen said.

"No, the meaning's right," Ellis said. "Too long maybe."

"On?" Suri suggested.

Mae grimaced. "On what?"

"Forward," Nia said. "If I say forward after the cue, return cancels. Ellis offers inside shoulder, draws attention, takes the pass only if it's clean. Otherwise I carry or send ahead."

Coach repeated it, testing the weight. "Nia calls 'forward,' return cancels. Ellis?"

"Do not force the return," Ellis said. "Offer inside shoulder. If Leah's sitting on the ahead lane, I can still call it back."

"Good. Captain can overrule, but the overrule has to be clear. Mae?"

"If I'm defending, I hear forward and know she's less likely to bounce it back." Mae narrowed her eyes at Nia. "I become horrible accordingly."

Coach checked the time. "One more clip, then we stay on for a proper walk-through. Half an hour, no boots."

Suri's hand went up, slower than Mae's had. "I can't stay. Orchestra run-through. We're performing at the leavers' thing."

Ellis sat forward immediately. "What time? We can move you earlier. Or I can ask Mr Caulfield if you can swap your section call. If it's

just run-through, maybe—”

“It isn’t just,” Suri said.

The room went still.

Ellis stopped with her slate half out. “Right. Sorry.”

“I’m not missing it,” Suri said, not sharp, just plain. “I missed the winter concert because of Calder North. I chose that. I’m not choosing it again.”

Nia had been preparing, all morning, to ask for extra tactical practice. Twenty minutes after the walk-through, maybe thirty if people were already there. She had pictured it as wanting properly. She had not pictured Suri’s violin case by the door, or Imogen’s mum waiting in the car park, or Tavi’s earlier bus that meant she actually got home before her little brother’s bath.

Ellis looked at Coach, already rearranging in her head. “We could come in early tomorrow instead. Before warm-up.”

“Mae’s lift can’t get her here early,” Coach said.

“Only because cars hate joy,” Mae muttered.

Nia heard herself before she could make it grand. “Can we change the ask?”

“I want reps on forward,” she said. “But not everyone for ages. Could we do ten minutes now, in here, walking it? Then Coach sends the clip set. Tomorrow warm-up, the six who start do three live ones. Suri doesn’t have to miss orchestra for me to feel calmer.”

Suri’s face softened by one millimetre, which for Suri was practically a hug. “I can watch the clips after rehearsal.”

“And I can stay ten now,” Tavi said. “If it is ten. I need the 5:12.”

“Ten is ten,” Coach said. “Ellis, stop emailing a music teacher in your head.”

Ellis put her slate down. “I was not emailing. I was drafting.”

“Worse,” Mae said.

Coach wrote on the board while they laughed. “Tomorrow’s six: Ellis, Nia, Suri, Mae, Imogen, Asha. Tavi, first off the bench.”

Tavi nodded so fast her plait bounced. At the back, Asha gave a thumbs-up without looking up from her notes.

So the plan changed. No half-hour walk-through. Coach cut the last clip short and cleared the chairs into a crooked lane. They walked the pattern in trainers on carpet worn shiny by a hundred damp assemblies: Nia carrying toward an imaginary East gate, Ellis at her shoulder, Imogen beyond, Suri marking the return lane in school shoes with one lace undone. "Forward," Nia called, first too soft, then too late, then once with the word landing where everyone could use it.

"That," Ellis said. "That one I heard as a call."

By the tenth minute, Coach stopped them. Tavi caught her bus. Suri went to orchestra with her violin case knocking gently against her knee. Nia watched her go and felt embarrassed, not because she had asked, but because she had nearly asked as if other people's time was empty until sport filled it.

Ellis bumped her shoulder, easy and automatic. For a moment the week loosened. The court lights shone on puddles. Someone's little brother dragged a scooter through the runoff strip outside the West gate and was gently redirected by a grounds assistant in orange water-proofs.

On the tram, Ellis dropped into the window seat and put her bag on her knees instead of the empty place beside her. Not blocking it. Holding it until Nia got there.

She sat beside Ellis anyway.

They shared the last corner of a packet of chilli crackers from Nia's coat pocket. Ellis broke it badly, leaving one piece bigger, then handed the bigger half to Nia as if this were law.

"Quarterfinal tax," Ellis said.

"You scored twice."

"You stopped doing something stupid at least once. Very glamorous."

The tram hummed down Alderbank Road, past the health centre, the library steps, the bakery with its evening shutters half-lowered. Nia's reflection floated over the glass: damp hair, tired eyes, the small crease between her brows that her mother said appeared when she was being reliable at an aggressive level.

Ellis checked the time on her wrist. "If I get home by six, shower by six-twenty, dinner, chemistry worksheet, then I can watch Eastbank's third quarter again before bed."

"That sounds diseased."

"It's called leadership."

"It's called needing hobbies."

Nia laughed, then the laugh thinned out. The tram turned by the municipal depot. Through the wide open doors she saw maintenance carts lined in their bays, their yellow backs washed clean from rain. Her mother's office window was lit above them.

Ellis followed her look. "Your mum on late?"

"Drainage scheduling. Big glamour. She said if the culvert crew get moved wrong, half of South Alderbank complains by breakfast."

"Dependable Serrats saving civilisation."

Nia leaned her forehead briefly against the cool glass. "She'd hate that sentence. She'd say civilisation is saved by labelled valves and people arriving when the rota says."

"She's not wrong."

"No." Nia watched the depot slip behind them. "She asked yesterday what I wanted from Saturday."

Ellis turned, surprised. "Your mum?"

"Yeah. Usually she asks what I need. Food, lift, clean socks, human body maintenance."

"Valid categories."

"She asked what I wanted."

"What did you say?"

Nia picked at the cracker salt on her thumb. It was easier to discuss tram routes, training slots, whether Ellis should take the late tram next year if she got into North Campus. They had spent whole evenings mapping future journeys as if knowing the timetable meant knowing the life.

"I said I wanted us to play like we'd actually told the truth in training."

Ellis was quiet for two stops.

Then she said, "That's annoyingly good."

"I was aiming for mysterious and athletic."

"Missed. Landed on terrifying captain-adjacent."

Nia smiled, but the quiet did not leave completely. "Have you done your North Campus application bit?"

"Most of it."

"Most."

"The personal statement is acting like it wants to kill me." Ellis flicked a raindrop off her sleeve. "You?"

"The mapping-track form's open. I've stared at it."

"Good staring?"

"Hostile staring."

Ellis said, "We're very good at routes."

"Mm."

"Less good at destinations."

Nia's chest tightened with affection so sharp it felt like a stitch. "Don't be poetic. It's upsetting."

"Sorry. I'll say something about socks."

"Please."

But Ellis did not. She nudged the kit bag lower and turned enough that her knee pressed Nia's for balance as the tram braked.

"Saturday," Ellis said. "If you need something different from me, say it. Not after. Not in your face where I have to guess and then get smug about being right when I'm only half right. Say it."

Nia swallowed. The easy answer was a joke. The old answer was you'll know.

"I need you to believe the second call," she said.

"If I call the cue and then say forward, I'm not abandoning the plan," Nia went on. "I'm changing it because I've seen something. You can still overrule if you see danger. You're captain. But don't hear it as me getting carried away."

Ellis nodded slowly. "Okay. And I need you to make the second call loud enough that I know it's a call, not frustration."

"That's fair."

“And if I say ‘hold’ or ‘back’ because Leah’s sitting on the lane, I need you to hear tactics, not me shutting you down.”

Nia looked at their reflections in the tram window, faces doubled over the town lights. “I can try.”

“I can too.”

Nia did homework at the table: statistics questions that made honest uncertainty look cleaner than sport ever did. At eight, the school feed notification blinked on her slate. Adrian Bell had posted the semi-final preview segment, filmed from his tidy little commentary booth with Alderbank’s old blue scarf folded beside the mic.

Rosa looked over from the kitchen. “That your school feed?”

“Adrian predicting things he’ll later pretend were obvious,” Nia said, but she opened the preview and watched with the sound low.

On screen, Adrian talked about Eastbank’s patience, Alderbank’s improved shift discipline, Leah Osei’s reach, Ellis’s captaincy. Then he said Alderbank would need more than one first answer.

On Saturday, she would say what she saw.

The open route



BY THE TIME the semifinal clock showed 2:18 left in the fourth quarter, Nia's mouth tasted of plastic and orange squash, and the floodlights had made a hard white rim around every moving shoulder.

Alderbank 4, Eastbank 4.

The number sat on the public feed board beyond the courts. Parents and lower-years stood along the rope with hoods up. Adrian Bell's commentary came from the small speaker by the scorer's table, thinned by the evening air.

"Eastbank have been calm under count pressure," he was saying, "but Alderbank's link play has kept them from settling. Serrat again—watch where she positions herself before the ball arrives."

Nia tried not to hear her name. Hearing it made her feel briefly like a drawing of herself: useful arrows, no lungs.

Ellis had the ball at centre-left, just over the halfway line, tucked in her right arm. Alderbank were attacking the West gate. Eastbank's active gate was East. The shift timer had started after the last change. Nia had glanced at the pitch-side display when she jogged back into shape. Twenty-nine seconds live since the shift.

Flag count: two on Alderbank's possession. Ellis had been pulled

once by Leah near the South sideline and passed within the three seconds to Suri. Suri had taken the second pull rather than force a bad ball into Imogen's feet. Eastbank had retreated, and Suri had restarted quickly to Ellis.

Nia was ten metres ahead and inside, between Ellis and the West gate, with Suri staggered behind to the right. Imogen hovered high near the North half. Mae held depth against the break, shoulders square. Asha Rao, quiet on the far side, kept the South-wide lane honest, glancing in every few seconds to check Ellis's hand. Tavi was on the bench, standing in her bib with both hands pressed to her mouth.

Eastbank's Leah Osei faced Ellis from three metres away, knees bent. Amara shaded Nia's outside shoulder. Kel stood between Imogen and the West gate, inviting the pass that would hang half a second too long.

Ellis lifted her left hand. "Settle. Two count."

Nia answered through the team channel and aloud. "Inside link. I'm free for carry."

Ellis looked once. There it was, the old moment: Nia checking Ellis before advancing. Tonight she made herself step before Ellis's nod was finished.

Ellis passed flat and quick.

The ball slapped into Nia's hands. She turned her hips toward West, selling the direct carry. Amara closed but did not reach. Leah slid off Ellis, reading the return lane already.

Nia saw it. Saw Leah's angle. Saw Kel's attention flick from Imogen back to Nia's hands. Saw the thin open route not behind her, not the comfortable bounce to Ellis, but forward and slightly north, where Imogen could cut across Kel's blind side if Ellis occupied Leah for one more breath.

Nia took another stride. "I'm through; Ellis support; return stays—forward!"

The words came whole. Rehearsed, loud, clean: return cancelled, Ellis offer inside shoulder, runner expect carry or pass ahead.

Ellis's head snapped, not confused. Assessing. Leah had not fully committed to the return; she had paused between Nia and Ellis. Kel,

instead of chasing Imogen, had turned her hips early. The forward pass was still there, maybe, but narrower now.

“Back, Ni!” Ellis called. “Back safe—Suri!”

It was not panic. It was not malice. It was a captain’s call with reasons in it.

For half a second Nia’s body continued with the play she had declared. Her left foot planted toward West, shoulders wound to send Imogen through. Imogen started the cut, trusting the word. Leah’s eyes sharpened.

Nia obeyed.

She checked the throw, pulled the ball down against her ribs, and pivoted back. That small delay was enough. Amara took the flag cleanly from Nia’s right hip.

“Flag!” the official called.

Third pull.

Nia stopped dead. Eastbank retreated two metres. The three-second count began in the official’s hand.

“One.”

Suri was available but no longer moving onto the pass; she had halted when forward became back. Ellis had shifted to receive but Leah stood close enough to make it ugly.

“Two.”

Nia pushed the ball to Suri anyway, low and safe. Suri bent, gathered it, and immediately had to turn away from pressure.

“Good patience from Eastbank,” Adrian said. “They’ve turned a dangerous cue into a count problem.”

Suri carried two steps, looking for Ellis. Leah pressed without touching, hands low for the flag. The shift tone sounded before Suri could release: a clear double note, lights flashing at the gate frames, the accessible buzz against Nia’s wrist.

New active pair: Alderbank South, Eastbank North.

“South! South!” Coach Duarte shouted.

The West route died under everyone’s feet. Suri turned with the ball tucked. Leah used the five-second conversion interval beautifully,

just moving to make Suri's next safe pass point away from South.

When the conversion light went steady, Suri sent a careful pass back to Mae, resetting depth. It was sensible. It was also slow.

Mae caught it near midfield with the flag count still at three.

"Last before turnover!" Ellis called.

Mae drove toward the South gate. An Eastbank defender matched her stride for stride. Mae tried to angle inside. The defender's hand flashed.

"Flag four. Turnover Eastbank."

Mae held the ball out at the spot, face hard with frustration. Eastbank players turned at once. Their active gate was North. They would restart from just inside Alderbank's half, slightly left of centre, with 1:41 on the clock.

Nia jogged back on defence, legs suddenly too light. Ellis passed her on the way into shape.

"Good call," Ellis said quickly. "I saw Kel sitting on it."

Nia nodded because there was no time to do anything else.

Eastbank's Leah took the restart. Alderbank spread to protect North: Mae square in front, Suri inside, Asha wider left with one hand out to mark the passing lane, Imogen dropping from high, Ellis pointing her two steps farther across. Nia held between Leah and the gate, watching hips, not ball.

"Contain," Ellis called. "No cheap first pull."

Leah tapped the ball once against her palm. The whistle went.

She passed backward to Hana, who had drifted into the left channel. Hana caught and moved immediately, forcing Suri to step across.

Hana carried four metres. Suri took her flag cleanly.

"Flag one."

Hana stopped. Both teams reset around the ball. Hana passed to Leah, who had circled into space behind Mae.

Leah received on the move. Mae turned and chased. Leah accelerated toward North, then slowed just enough that Mae's reach came half a beat early and missed the flag. Nia stepped up from cover.

"Inside!" Ellis shouted.

Leah saw Nia and sent the ball sideways to Kel. It travelled no higher than her chest. Kel caught near the right hash and ran across the field instead of toward the gate, pulling Alderbank's line with him.

The shift timer kept counting in the corner of Nia's vision. Twenty seconds since South/North had been assigned.

Kel's flag was taken by Ellis near the sideline.

"Flag two."

Kel planted, waited for the retreat, then passed back to Leah. Leah was now central, twelve metres from the North gate, with Amara to her left and Hana sliding behind.

Nia felt the shape before she named it. Eastbank's tight triangle, the one from the feed.

"Watch second," she called.

Ellis echoed, "Second pass!"

Leah moved toward Nia. Nia stayed low, not reaching. The flag count was only two. Eastbank could afford patience.

The twenty-five-second mark passed. No shift tone.

Leah passed to Amara.

Amara caught slightly wide, and Imogen, eager and tired, stepped toward her for the pull. Amara took one step back instead of forward. Imogen's hand brushed air.

"Immy, hold!" Ellis barked.

Amara sent the ball inside to Hana. That was the second pass. Nia turned with it, but Hana had already angled between Nia and Suri. Mae came across and took the flag from Hana's left hip five metres short of the North gate.

"Flag three."

Alderbank had one pull left before they would win possession. The crowd noise tightened. Someone behind the rope yelled, "One more!" and was immediately shushed.

Hana stood with the ball, breathing through an open mouth. Leah walked into a pocket to the right. Amara stayed left. Kel backed toward the North gate but not through it.

Nia pointed. "Ellis, Leah."

“I’ve got.”

The shift check hit thirty seconds. The pitch lights stayed as they were. No tone.

The official’s hand dropped. Hana passed to Leah.

Ellis closed hard. Leah caught, turned away from the flag, and for the first time looked rushed. Nia’s heart kicked upward.

Leah passed back to Amara, losing ground.

Adrian’s voice cut through the noise. “That backward ball looks cautious, but it may be the only route that preserves the count.”

Amara caught near the left channel with Mae between her and North. Asha stepped in to take away the simple outside carry. Suri slid across to cut the inside. Nia held central.

Thirty-five-second check.

Tone.

Lights flashed. Wrist buzz. New active pair: Alderbank East, East-bank West.

A sound came out of the crowd, half gasp, half recalculation.

Amara did not freeze.

She turned away from Mae before Mae could overtake her, passed during the conversion interval to Leah in the centre, and Leah carried laterally, counting the seconds with her steps. Nia sprinted to recover. Ellis shouted, “West defence! West!”

The conversion light went steady.

Leah released the ball to Kel, who had already changed her route, curling from the old North lane toward West. Imogen chased from behind. Suri angled across, a step late because she had been protecting North a heartbeat ago. Asha cut in from the wide lane, trying to close Leah’s support angle.

Kel caught the ball eight metres inside the field, with the West gate opening beyond the boundary.

Nia was closest.

She ran at Kel from inside, aiming at the flag, right hip, right hip, right hip. Kel saw her coming and shortened her stride, slowing just enough for Leah to arrive outside her, a legal support lane.

Nia reached.

Kel passed to Leah at waist height.

Ellis, coming across, nearly had it. Her fingers sliced under the ball.

But the ball cleared her hand by the width of a thumb. Leah took it cleanly. Mae, arriving from the wrong angle, could not cross in front dangerously. Suri shouted, "Flag, flag!"

Leah carried under control through the West gate from inside the field to the runoff.

The whistle blew.

Eastbank 5, Alderbank 4.

The scoreboard changed with simple cruelty. 0:58 left.

Leah slowed beyond the gate, then turned back and tossed the ball to the official. Kel bent with hands on knees. Amara clapped her once on the shoulder. They had shifted with the signal, used the interval, waited until scoring was live, and moved the ball to the player with the route.

Nia stood just inside the West boundary, staring at the scuffed turf where Leah's last step had crossed.

Ellis came to her side, breathing hard. "Centre restart. We've got time."

Nia nodded again.

Coach Duarte sent Tavi on for Imogen, who jogged off with her face twisted in anger at herself until an Eastbank substitute touched her elbow and said something quiet. Imogen nodded without looking up.

Tavi ran to the right side, eyes wide but ready. Asha stayed wide left, hands on her knees for one breath, then straightened when Ellis took the ball at centre. Alderbank's active gate was still East; Eastbank's was West.

"East gate," Ellis said. "No hero throws. We build."

Nia forced air into the bottom of her lungs. She wanted the ball. She wanted not to want it. She wanted Ellis to look at her and know which of those was true.

The whistle.

Ellis passed to Suri. Suri to Nia. Eastbank did not sit back; they pressed the lanes. Nia carried toward East, saw Tavi available wide, and gave the pass early. Tavi caught, took two clean strides, and Amara pulled her flag.

“Flag one.”

Tavi stopped instantly, good discipline, cheeks flushed. She passed back to Ellis. Ellis moved it to Suri. Suri waited for Mae to cross and sent her through the middle. Mae drew a flag.

“Flag two.”

Restart fast. The shift timer rolled past twenty-five. No tone. Suri received and found Nia again, eight metres from the East gate with Leah in front of her and Ellis to her left. Asha held the far width, waving once to keep her marker from collapsing.

Nia heard herself call, “Inside link.”

Leah’s stance changed, ready for the forward word, ready for the back safe, ready for the whole version of Nia that had been put on film. There were thirty-one seconds left.

Nia did not have the open route. Not this time.

She passed to Ellis.

Ellis caught and tried to drive the edge, but Leah took her flag cleanly from behind as she turned.

“Flag three.”

Ellis slapped the ball once into her palm. Eastbank retreated. “One more. Suri, back. Nia, loop.”

Nia looped. The clock showed 0:22. Ellis passed to Suri, and Suri looked for Tavi near the East gate. Kel stepped into the lane—not a grab, not contact, just position. Suri held rather than throw into her.

The tone sounded again.

New active pair: Alderbank North, Eastbank South.

Twenty seconds left. Everyone turned. The North gate was forty metres from where the ball had been heading. Suri carried through the conversion interval, buying angle, then passed to Nia just as scoring went live.

Nia took it near midfield with the count still at three, North ahead

and Eastbank already folding back.

This was impossible if she thought of it as rescue. Possible only if each movement was small and correct.

Nia had the rehearsed cue ready: "I'm through; Ellis support; return stays." On the weak side, Kel had shifted across to cover the return lane; Leah squared herself to meet Nia's advance and angle her toward the boundary. Ellis saw it too.

"Tavi left!" Ellis called. "Mae trail!"

Nia checked her first step and followed the outside call.

She ran. Leah met her at an angle, not overcommitting. Nia sent the ball to Mae a beat before Leah's hand reached her flag.

No pull. The ball left first.

Mae caught cleanly at the trail. She turned toward North, but Hana closed from the gate side and pulled her flag.

"Fourth pull. Turnover Eastbank."

The clock showed 0:09.

Mae put the ball down at the spot as if it burned. Eastbank's Hana picked it up, waiting only for the mark. Alderbank crowded the legal distance: Ellis in front, Nia to the inside, Suri and Tavi ready to jump the first lane, Asha sprinting back from wide.

The whistle went with nine seconds left.

Hana passed to Leah along the touchline.

0:07.

Ellis chased, arms pumping, but Leah had already turned her shoulders away. Nia closed the inside, trying to force one more pass, one more mistake, one more loose catch in the cold air.

Leah sent it back to Amara.

0:03.

Amara caught with both hands and tucked the ball tight. Asha reached for the flag and missed by inches.

0:00. The horn sounded.

Eastbank 5, Alderbank 4.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Staying together



ELLIS DID NOT remember the final whistle as a sound. She remembered the way everyone's legs changed when it came.

Mae stood where her final run had ended, three metres short of the North gate, her hands empty at her sides. The defender's fingers still curled around the flag just pulled from her hip. Suri bent forward with both hands on her knees. Tavi turned in a small circle, looking for the next instruction even though there was none left to give. Nia stood a little behind the play with her arms hanging loose, her plait stuck darkly to the back of her neck.

Eastbank 5, Alderbank 4.

The board had the nerve to be simple.

Ellis swallowed against the burn in her throat and made herself jog to Mae first. Captain things. Do captain things while your body was still trying to argue with a number.

"Good carry," she said, touching Mae's shoulder.

Mae huffed once, not quite a laugh. "Not good enough."

"Good carry," Ellis repeated, because Mae liked calls she could use, and because Ellis could not bear for the first words after losing to be a lie. "They closed it well."

Mae looked at the defender who had pulled her. Eastbank's Hana held the flag out, breathing hard. "You nearly had me," Hana said.

Mae took the flag back and clipped it on with fingers that shook from effort, not tears. "Yeah. Nearly."

Across the pitch, Leah Osei was gathering her players, face flushed under the floodlights. She did not bounce or scream. She lifted both hands when her bench spilled forward, as if to say wait, breathe, we've done it, and then she let them reach her.

Coach Duarte was already with the official, quick nods, no argument. Confirmation of score, flag count, final timing. Adrian Bell's voice moved over the little speaker by the table.

"Eastbank take it, five-four. A tight semifinal decided by one conversion after the late shift, and by a lot of good decisions before that."

Ellis wished he would stop talking. She also knew he was not wrong.

She unclipped one of her own flags and clipped it back because her hands needed a job. The cold came in fast once she stopped moving.

Nia still had not moved.

Ellis walked toward her through the slow scatter of players. An Eastbank winger passed close and said, "Good game."

"You too," Ellis answered automatically.

Nia was looking toward the West gate, though the last play had finished at North. The gate lights were no longer changing; all four frames sat dull and practical at the boundaries. Her wrist unit blinked its post-match idle blue.

Ellis came to her side. For a second she almost said sorry. Kel had been sitting on that forward lane. Leah had read Nia's first angle. The pass might have gone; it might also have turned into Eastbank possession with more time and space than they'd ended up having. Ellis had called safe because safe had still been alive then.

And Nia had listened.

That mattered. That had kept them together on the field, not six people chasing six versions of what should have happened.

"Ni," Ellis said.

Nia turned her head a little. Her face was composed in the way it got when she was being careful with adults, except Ellis was not an adult and should not have been on the wrong side of it.

Ellis pushed damp hair off her forehead. "Thank you for staying with the call."

Nia blinked.

"I mean it," Ellis said, rushing because the words suddenly felt breakable. "On that West route. You had the forward cue, and I know you saw it, but when I called back—" She stopped before it became a little courtroom on the turf. "You stayed with me."

Nia's mouth softened, then closed again. Not softened. Folded. Ellis could not name the difference quickly enough.

"Right," Nia said.

The word was even. It landed nowhere.

Ellis tried again. "I'm not saying it didn't cost us. The timing got ugly. But if we split there, it's worse. You trusted the call."

Nia looked down and pressed her thumb against the place where her right flag attached, though it was already clipped properly. "I heard it."

"Yeah." Ellis gave a small laugh, thin as paper. "Obviously. Sorry. I just—thanks."

Nia nodded once.

There it was again: the nod. Ellis had seen it in the last two minutes after the Eastbank score, in the restart, in the last desperate North turn. Nia nodding like each nod was a box she could put herself inside until the next instruction arrived.

Ellis's stomach tightened. She told herself it was losing. It was absolutely allowed to be losing. Nia took losses quietly before she took them apart; that was one of the reasons coaches trusted her. She would get on the tram, sit by the window, accept the last triangle of flatbread from Ellis's bag because Ellis always packed too much, and then halfway home she would say the one sentence that showed she had been replaying everything at a higher resolution than anyone else. That was how they worked. Quiet first did not mean gone.

Coach whistled them in.

Alderbank gathered near the sheltered walkway, not fully in a circle because no one had enough neatness left. Imogen had her sleeves pulled over both hands. Tavi stood beside Suri with mud on one knee. Mae stared at the ground, jaw still working. Nia came in last and stood just outside Ellis's shoulder, the old place and not the old place.

Coach Duarte's cheeks were red from the cold. She had a clipboard tucked under one arm but did not look at it.

"First," Coach said, "that was a good semifinal. Not perfect. Good. You defended clean, you managed three-count possessions under pressure, and you did not panic at the shift signals. Eastbank earned the deciding point. We'll review how."

No one groaned.

"Right now, handshakes properly. Then cooldown. Warm layers before anyone starts turning blue. Captains with officials after that."

Ellis nodded. "Yeah."

Coach looked at her for half a second longer. "You all right to do that?"

"Yeah," Ellis said again, and hated that the second one sounded smaller.

Eastbank came across in a line loose enough to be human. The handshakes were damp palms, quick squeezes, little breathless comments.

"Your lateral defence was horrible," Suri told Leah, which from Suri meant praise.

Leah smiled. "Your patience is horrible."

Mae and Hana bumped wrists. Tavi said "well played" three times in a voice that got squeakier each time. Imogen accepted a shoulder pat from the Eastbank substitute who had marked her earlier and managed a crooked smile.

When Leah reached Ellis, her grip was firm and cold. "You nearly had that last turn."

"So did you," Ellis said, then realised it made no sense because Leah had, in fact, had enough. Leah seemed to understand anyway.

“See you next season?” Leah asked.

The words hit a place Ellis had not guarded. Next season would not be this team. It would be Tavi and Imogen, maybe Mae if her college course schedule allowed early fixtures, Suri only until exams went wild. It would not be Ellis and Nia in the same last school season, not again.

“Maybe in the community fixture,” Ellis said. “If they still make us play for civic cheer.”

Leah laughed. “They will. My aunt already volunteered to shout wrong rules.”

Ellis managed a smile. “Mine doesn’t shout rules. She just gasps like every pass is illegal.”

Cooldown was a slow lap and stretches under the lights. Ellis counted them through calf stretches because if she did not count, someone would rush. During quad stretch she looked sideways. Nia balanced on one foot without wobbling, hand around her ankle, eyes on the dark windows of the school building. Usually, if Ellis stared long enough, Nia would feel it and make a face.

This time Nia did not look over.

Ellis looked away first.

Parents pressed in gently once Coach released them: coats, flasks, the particular sad smiles of adults who wanted to fix a score that did not fix. Ellis’s dad was at the rope with her little brother Milo wrapped in a scarf too big for his head. Milo held up both fists.

“You didn’t fall over,” he called.

“Elite analysis,” Ellis called back.

Her dad’s hand landed warm between her shoulder blades when she came near. “Proud of you.”

“We lost.”

“I can read numbers.”

That almost made her laugh. Almost. “I have to sign off with the officials. Then changing.”

“I’ll be by the gate.”

Milo leaned over the rope. “Can I have the bottle drum?”

“No,” Ellis said. “Whoever had that should be banned from percussion.”

At the scorer’s table, the official showed the event log to Ellis and Leah. Final score. Last shift timing. Conversion interval complete before Leah’s scoring carry. Fourth pull on Mae before time expired. It was all clean. Ellis signed with her finger on the tablet. Leah signed after her. Their names sat side by side in pale blue boxes, both too neat for what their bodies had just done.

Adrian Bell’s commentary feed had ended, but his continuation avatar remained on the small display while the student producer unplugged a cable. He caught Ellis’s eye and lifted two fingers in acknowledgment. Not a verdict. Just respect.

Ellis lifted a hand back and went to collect the cones before Coach could ask.

By the time they reached the changing room, the first blast of warmth made everyone louder and then immediately quieter. Bags slumped against benches. Studs clacked on the floor. Someone’s deodorant hissed. Imogen discovered a bruise on her shin and announced it like the bruise had filed a formal complaint.

“It’s purple,” Suri said, crouching to inspect it.

“It was committed in public,” Imogen said. “There were witnesses.”

Mae sat with one boot off and one boot on, staring into her open bag. Tavi asked if anyone had seen her left glove while the left glove was tucked under her arm. Ellis answered, laughed when Tavi found it, and looked for Nia.

Nia had changed fast. Track trousers over damp legs, hoodie zipped, bag already on her shoulder. She was standing by the end of the bench, waiting for no one.

Ellis’s chest loosened with the beginning of habit. Walk out together. Pause while Ellis bought something too sweet from the machine if it was working. Same tram, same two seats if they were free, knees almost touching, the match held between them until it became bearable.

“Same tram?” Ellis asked.

Nia tightened her hand on the strap of her bag. “Mum’s outside. I’m going with her.”

She said it gently, which did not make it less of a no.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Who I have been



NIA GOT AS far as the changing-room door before her legs remembered the match.

Behind her, the room went on swallowing it in pieces: tape peeled from ankles, boot studs ticking against the floor, the metallic groan of lockers. Mae shoved a sweatshirt over her head and came out with her hair lifted in static spikes. Suri rinsed mud from her shin at the sink. Tavi had found her glove and was now missing her scarf.

The last nine seconds had been played out because matches did not care whether hope was already gone. Five-four still looked the same on the sheet.

Nia stopped with one hand on the door frame. The floor tilted in a small, humiliating way, and she tightened her grip.

“You all right?” Suri asked from the sink.

“Yeah. Stood up weird.”

Her mother would be outside by now. Rosa had come straight from a late maintenance briefing, safety vest folded over one arm, hair clipped hard off her face. Afterward she would say, You were reliable, mi vida, and mean it as praise so clean that Nia would have no right to flinch.

Nia shifted the strap on her shoulder, and her fingers found the little wrapped biscuit in the side pocket of her bag. Lemon, crushed at one edge. She had saved it from lunch because Ellis always forgot to eat properly after matches and then insisted she was fine until her hands shook on the tram.

She left it where it was.

“Ni,” Ellis said.

Nia turned. Ellis had followed her to the door, bag zipped, coat half on, the match tablet still in one hand. Her cheeks were still wind-red. “Can we—” She stopped, glanced toward Coach, then back. “Can we talk before you go?”

There it was: the thing Nia had wanted all through cooldown and dreaded since Ellis had thanked her for staying small enough to fit the call.

“Now?” Nia asked.

“If you can. If not—”

“Now,” Nia said.

They told Coach. Ellis did it, handing over the tablet as she spoke, because Ellis told adults things before they became worries. “We’re going to walk the long way past the courts. My dad’s by the main gate. Nia’s mum is there too.”

Coach looked from Ellis to Nia. “Ten minutes. Then check in.”

“Yeah,” Ellis said.

Nia said nothing.

Outside, cold pressed through her hoodie. The pitch lights were still on, making the empty field look flatter than it had during play. Without players cutting across it, the rectangle was only damp turf and four padded gates at the boundaries, North and South opposite each other, East and West quiet in their frames. The scoreboard had gone dark.

They walked under the sheltered path beside the courts. Rain from earlier clicked from the gutter at uneven intervals. Somewhere near the car park, a younger sibling laughed too loudly.

Ellis kept her hands in her coat pockets. Nia held the strap of her

kit bag, though it dug into the sore place on her shoulder.

"I didn't mean it like that," Ellis said.

Nia almost laughed because apparently they were beginning in the middle. "Like what?"

"After the whistle. When I thanked you." Ellis looked at the court fencing instead of at her. "I heard it as soon as I said it. Or maybe not soon enough. I wasn't thanking you for—I don't know. For not being difficult."

Ellis kicked lightly at a wet leaf stuck to the concrete. "I was scared we'd split. On the play. You gave the forward cue, and I saw Leah sitting in that lane, and I thought if we both committed to different pictures we'd hand them the ball with space. So I called you back."

"That's the tactical bit," Nia said.

Ellis nodded quickly. "Yes. And I still think—I'm not saying I was definitely right. I'm saying I had a reason. Leah had already cheated half a step inside. Kel was closing the return. Imogen was fast, but the pass needed to go early, and you'd had to adjust after the signal. It could have worked. It could also have been a turnover."

The words were sound. Horribly sound. Nia could see it too when she let herself: Leah's shoulders square, Kel waiting, the ball in Nia's hands a fraction late after the conversion tone. Her cue had been complete. Not magic. Not a guarantee.

"I know," Nia said.

Ellis finally looked at her. "You do?"

"I know it could have failed." Nia's fingers tightened on the strap. "I'm not angry because you blocked the true point hidden in the universe."

"Then what?" Ellis asked.

Nia looked past her to the courts, where rainwater held the fence lights in broken lines. "The first time," she said, "against Westmere, when I tried to change the route after the shift and I didn't really tell anyone—"

"You called, 'Cross-two—go!'" Ellis said automatically.

"Yes." Nia heard the old review room: Coach fair, the clip paused

on the ball dead by the centre stripe, Coach asking who the cue said would carry, and nobody answering. "I used the old words. I meant something else. I meant I was going forward myself, taking Joss with me and getting the ball back past Anika, not dropping for the usual cross. But I didn't say that. I just thought everyone would feel it because you would feel it."

Ellis flinched a little.

"And you didn't," Nia continued. "Which was my fault. We lost the ball. We lost the match. Coach was right to say incomplete communication. You were right. Mae was right that go only added urgency, not a new job."

"I wasn't trying to be right," Ellis said.

"I know. That was worse. You were reasonable."

Ellis rubbed both hands over her face. "That sounds awful."

"It was clean. It gave me something to fix." Nia shifted her bag to the other shoulder. "So I fixed it. I learned the full cue. I said more. I stopped springing things out of my head and calling it trust."

"You did," Ellis said. "You've been clear."

"Have I?" Nia asked. "Or have I been clear when I'm doing the version of me everyone already knows how to use?"

Ellis's mouth opened, then closed.

There, Nia thought. There was the place. Not a gate, not a lane, just a gap no one had marked because it was easier not to see.

"I check you before I go," Nia said. "I didn't notice how much until Tavi asked why that signal meant I retreated. At first it was coordination. It still is, sometimes. You're captain. You see things. We've played together since we were small enough to lose the ball under parked cars. But lately I look because if you don't give me the yes, I don't trust my own angle."

Ellis's face changed as if Nia had pulled a flag she had not known she was wearing.

"I never wanted that," Ellis said.

"I know."

"I don't want you waiting for permission."

"I know," Nia said again, and this time it came out sharper. "That doesn't make it vanish."

Ellis leaned back against the brick wall. "I thought I was making space," she said. "That sounds stupid now."

"It doesn't sound stupid."

"It does." Ellis pulled the hair tie from her wrist and twisted it until it snapped lightly against her fingers. "I thought, if I keep the structure solid, then you can do all the Nia things. The link things. The impossible little cover angles. The pass before anyone panics. If I held the team together, you wouldn't have to fight for room inside it."

Nia's throat tightened, not with forgiveness. With recognition, which was more dangerous because it could trick her into smoothing everything over.

"And I like those things," Ellis said. "I need those things. The team needs them. But maybe I kept needing them so loudly I didn't notice you were trying to add something else."

Nia stared at the wet concrete between her trainers. A dark thread from her sock clung to one lace.

"After the quarterfinal," Ellis said, "I kept thinking, one more week. Keep everyone together one more week. Then one more match. Then we'll talk properly when there's time, except there was never time because if we talked maybe something would move and I—" She stopped and bit the inside of her cheek. "I didn't want our last season to end before it ended."

"It ended anyway," Nia said.

Ellis nodded. Her eyes shone, though no tears fell. "Yeah."

Nia wanted to be cruel for one second. Not dramatically. Just enough to make the hurt visible from outside her skin. She wanted to say, Congratulations, you held me still until the whistle. She did not. Some sentences were satisfying because they broke the right thing and the wrong thing at once.

Ellis said, "I was scared of losing this. You and me. Not just matches. Next year you might be across the river or in Southport or wherever your course takes you, and I'll still be making lists no one asked for. I

know that's not your fault. I know you're allowed. I just—when you started moving differently, I think some part of me treated it like the leaving had already started.”

Nia looked up. “So you called me back.”

“In the semifinal, I called you back because of Leah.”

“And all the other times?”

Ellis took that. Nia saw her take it: shoulders dropping, no defence quick enough to hide behind. “Sometimes because I thought I knew the better play. Sometimes because I knew the older one.”

The rain from the gutter tapped, tapped, tapped.

Nia let out a breath that shook at the end. “That’s the injury.”

Ellis nodded once. “Tell me.”

“You’re not wrong about the pass. I hate that, but you’re not. The option I wanted might have died in Leah’s hands and then everyone would be reviewing my full clear stupid cue in high definition.” Nia swallowed. “But I gave you the change. I did the thing everyone told me to do. I said the whole intention. And you heard it as an interruption to the Nia you already had.”

Nia’s voice came low, almost lost under the gutter. “You know who I’ve been. I need you to leave room for who I might be.”

Ellis looked away fast, then back faster. “I’m sorry.”

Nia nodded, and hated the nod. “I know.”

“I am. Not because we lost. I mean, I’m sorry we lost too, obviously, but—” Ellis made a small helpless gesture. “I’m sorry I made your clearest version sound like a problem to manage.”

There were openings here. Ellis had said enough right things to build a bridge if Nia carried half the planks. They had done this their whole lives: passed the last crisp, saved the tram seat, knew when silence asked for company rather than an answer. Nia wanted to keep those things. She did not yet know how to keep them while changing.

Ellis took one hand from her pocket, then seemed to remember herself and let it hang at her side. “Do you want me to walk back with you?”

Nia looked toward the main gate. She could pick out her mother

now by the strip of reflective yellow over one arm. Beside her, Ellis's dad stood with both hands wrapped around a paper cup, talking to Rosa in the careful way adults did when they were giving teenagers time.

"I don't know," Nia said.

Ellis nodded. "Okay."

That was almost worse than if she had pushed. Nia had expected Ellis to fix, to plan, to make a small neat next step and offer it up. Instead Ellis stayed against the wall with her bag strap across her chest and her face open in the cold.

Nia reached into her side pocket and pulled out the lemon biscuit. The wrapper was creased white at the corners.

Ellis saw it. Her mouth moved, not quite a smile.

Nia held it for one second too long, then put it back. Not thrown away. Not given.

"I need to go to my mum," she said.

"Yeah," Ellis said. "I'll tell Coach we checked in."

"I can tell her."

"I know."

Nia almost laughed then, for real, because it was such a small, stupid correction and because Ellis had managed to hear it. The laugh did not come. Something loosened anyway.

They started back side by side with a careful space between them. At the turn toward the changing rooms, Ellis slowed.

"I'll see you Monday?" she asked.

Nia shifted the kit bag higher on her shoulder. "At school."

Ellis took that too. "At school."

No hug. No promise. No sudden clean line through the mess. Ellis went toward Coach Duarte and the lit doorway. Nia went toward the gate, where her mother had already seen her coming and had not moved forward yet.

Behind her, the pitch lights clicked off in banks. North vanished first, then South, then East and West, each gate becoming only a darker shape in the dark.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After the season



ON MONDAY, Nia wrote the same sentence about watershed management three times and made it worse each time.

She knew the advantages. Her mother had built half of dinner conversations around them. Predictable scheduling meant fewer emergency call-outs, cheaper repairs, workers who saw their families, streets that did not flood every time rain arrived with opinions.

She wrote: Predictable maintenance prevents small issues becoming—

Then stopped.

Across the room, Ellis laughed at something Imogen whispered. Not loudly. A small laugh, caught and held for a second before it became ordinary. Ellis sat two rows over instead of beside Nia because their teacher had rearranged them for group projects back in September, but usually that distance meant nothing. Ellis would turn with a pen between her teeth, eyebrows up, already asking if Nia had the assignment brief because Ellis's own copy had migrated into the strange weather system of her folder.

Today Ellis had the brief. Two copies, probably. She did not turn. Nia's pen left a blue dot fattening on the page.

“Drainage,” Mr Adebayo said as he passed, tapping the margin with two fingers. “Not autobiography, Serrat.”

“Working on it,” Nia said.

She finished the sentence badly and turned the page.

The day kept finding places where Ellis should have been. At break, the vending machine caught Nia’s snack bar halfway down, and for one stupid second she reached for her wrist unit to message Ellis, because Ellis knew the exact hip-check that freed stuck food without setting off the tilt sensor. At lunch, Tavi sat with Suri and Mae and argued that the school’s pasta bake tasted like “wet cardboard with ambition.” Nia saved the last triangle of flatbread on her tray, then noticed it, hated herself for noticing, and ate it in two bites that scratched her throat.

After last lesson, rain came low across the sheltered walkway. The pitch was locked. The four gates stood padded and unused, their white frames beaded with water. Without the scoreboard and bodies, East looked no more possible than West. North and South waited as if waiting was their only job.

Nia’s tram came in eleven minutes. Ellis would be on the same route unless she had captain paperwork or had invented an errand to avoid exactly this. Nia checked the transport board, then checked it again.

Her wrist buzzed.

M U M If you can, meet me at Court Street stop. Need extra hands for ten minutes. Gloves in van.

Nia typed yes before she could build a reason not to.

Rosa Serrat’s municipal van was parked half on the service bay near Court Street, amber roof light blinking without urgency. The side panel read ALDERBANK WORKS: WATER, WAYS, LIGHT in blue lettering patched where some old scratch cut through the W. Rosa stood at the open rear doors in a dark waterproof, hair clipped back, tablet tucked under one arm. Beside her were three shallow crates of

drain filters, a coil of bright marking cord, and two paper cups steaming on the bumper.

"You ate?" Rosa asked.

"Yes."

Rosa looked at her.

"Food happened near me," Nia amended.

"Good enough for a first statement." Rosa handed her one cup. "Careful. It's soup from the machine, so it may be soup or an argument."

It was tomato, too salty, hot enough to hurt in a useful way.

"What are we doing?"

"Sorting filters for tomorrow's crew. The depot scanner put the Court Street covers in with Northbank, and if I send the wrong crate out, three people lose half a morning discovering a label lied." Rosa set two crates on the pavement under the shelter of the van doors. "So. We make the labels stop lying."

Each filter had a stamped code along the rim. Nia wiped rain from the metal with her sleeve, read the numbers, and stacked them in the crate Rosa pointed to. Court Street. Market slope. School east run. Lift, turn, read, place. The filters smelled of oil and cold iron.

Rosa scanned a label and frowned. "That one's wrong too. Of course."

Nia passed her the marker. "Predictable maintenance prevents small issues becoming larger failures."

Her mother glanced over. "Homework?"

"Something like that."

"It is true."

"I know."

"That sounded like an accusation."

"Did it?"

Rosa capped the marker slowly. Rain ticked on the van roof. "A little."

Nia picked up another filter. The code had grit in the stamp, making the last digit uncertain. She rubbed it with her thumb until a six

became an eight. "It's just funny. Everyone loves predictable things until they want you to become one."

Rosa did not answer immediately. Instead, she set the marker down and leaned against the van bumper.

"Are we talking about the match," she asked, "or school, or me?"

Nia's throat tightened around a laugh that was not amused. "Efficient question."

"I am trying not to answer before I know."

"The match," Nia said. "Ellis. Me. A little bit you, maybe, but not in a terrible way."

"Ah," Rosa said. "Only a small indictment."

"You call me reliable like it's the best thing."

"It is one of the best things."

"I know you mean it nicely."

"I mean it truly." Rosa's voice stayed even. "And maybe sometimes I forget true praise can still become heavy if it is the only praise."

Nia looked at her mother then. Rosa's face was tired from a workday that had started before Nia's alarm and would probably stretch after dinner. A smear of dirt crossed her cheekbone. She was concentrating.

"I like being useful," Nia said. "I like seeing the pass no one else sees. I like covering Mae when she goes for a flag and making Suri look like she had more time than she did. I don't want everyone to act like that was fake."

"It was not fake."

"But if I try to do something else, it's like I've stolen from the useful version." She pushed the heel of her glove against one eye before tears could make any formal announcement. "And I hate that I miss her."

"Ellis?"

Nia nodded.

There were no dramatic memories, not right then. Only the dumb soft tissue of a life built by repetition. Ellis's knee bumping hers on the ride home. Ellis digging in her kit bag for tape and pulling out a fork, two cones, someone else's sock, and a history reader she swore

she had returned. Ellis leaving the last crisp folded in the packet because Nia liked the salty broken ones at the bottom. The seat beside her not empty in a tragic way, just filled by a man in a damp coat reading headlines, which was almost worse.

Rosa put one hand on Nia's shoulder, firm through the waterproof. Not pulling her in. Not arranging her.

"What do you want?" Rosa asked.

Nia almost said, For it to be normal. But normal meant going back inside an old outline and calling the fit comfort.

"I don't know," she said.

"Good. That is allowed."

"You hate not knowing."

"I hate pretending to know when the pipe is still underground." Rosa squeezed once and let go. "Do you want help avoiding her? Help talking to her? Help carrying crates until neither of us has to speak?"

Nia breathed in. The cold air smelled of rain, metal, tomato soup. "Crates first."

"Excellent. My strongest area."

They worked until the codes were sorted and the false labels crossed out in Rosa's square handwriting. Nia's shoulders warmed with the small labour.

When they were done, Rosa loaded the filters and handed Nia the second soup, which had cooled to drinkable.

"You know there's training tomorrow?" Rosa said carefully.

"Season's over."

"The school season, yes. This is for that community fixture. It was on the calendar before the semifinal."

"I know."

"You sound exactly like you're suggesting I go."

"I am informing you of a fact while standing in the shape of a mother who has opinions."

Despite herself, Nia smiled into the soup.

Rosa saw it and wisely did not celebrate. "You do not have to make your grief athletic on my account."

“It’s not grief.”

Her mother gave her a look.

“It’s not only grief,” Nia corrected.

At home, the kitchen light was warm and slightly too yellow. Nia showered, ate rice and lentils while standing until Rosa pointed at a chair, then opened her homework at the table. The house made its evening noises around her: pipes clicking, a neighbour’s music through the wall for half a song, Rosa on a call about a blocked culvert near Market slope.

Nia’s watershed paragraph improved when she stopped trying to make it elegant. She wrote what was true: schedules helped because crews, equipment and streets existed in relation to one another. Good planning did not prevent all change. It made response possible when change arrived.

Her wrist unit flashed with a public feed notification.

ADRIAN BELL

Alderbank v Rookfield, 2054 Regional Semifinal — Commentary

Addendum, 2086.

Nia hovered, then opened it.

The video loaded with Adrian in his usual narrow commentary frame: silver hair, dark jumper, a shelf behind him crowded with old match balls and one leaning plant that always looked near death but never died. Continued presence authenticated by the district seal in the corner; ordinary, official, strange only when Nia let it be. His expression had the mild embarrassment of a person about to adjust something in public.

“I said last week,” Adrian began, “that Alderbank’s semifinal turned on Eastbank reading the hesitation better. I stand by the play description. Osei’s positioning was excellent; Alderbank’s call had risk either way. No romance required.”

“But watching it sent me back to older commentary of mine, and less defensible. Some of you were in the hall last Monday when we

replayed the Rookfield semifinal from '54 and I heard Jon Marr's voice on that audio for the first time. I said then that I wasn't sure any more. Saying it in a school hall is not the same as saying it where the record lives." His mouth twitched. "Former pupils are cursed to have their worst analogies preserved by school archives. The correction should be preserved there too."

"For thirty-odd years I described Jon's late change of route as an unnecessary improvisation. The original commentary says so. The archive clip still shows what happened: Jon did change, we did lose possession, and the result remains stubborn. I am not altering the record or awarding us a goal we never scored."

Under the video, an archive card unfolded automatically: ALDER-BANK V ROOKFIELD, 2054 REGIONAL SEMIFINAL — ORIGINAL COMMENTARY PRESERVED. A new amber tag sat beneath it: ADDENDUM BY A. BELL, 2086. Nia tapped it. The old transcript opened with Adrian's younger voice rendered in text, brisk and certain. Then the addendum appeared below, dated today, pinned so no one could open the clip without seeing that there was more to read.

"What I may have done, over the years, is treat the change as abandonment because it was not the player I expected in that moment. I cannot tell you for certain what Jon intended. I could not then, and continuation has not made me psychic, whatever the comment threads believe. The audio gives me three words and a broken fourth. I also cannot know whether my preferred route would have worked. The counterfactual is not a cupboard I can open because I have had more years to think about it."

Nia read the added line twice.

My previous interpretation overstated the evidence available to me at the time. Jon Marr's decision may have been a response to pressure I did not recognise. The turnover and match result stand; my certainty about motive does not.

"I can still say the pass failed. I can still say pressure matters. I cannot say, as if it were fact, that Jon had stopped trusting the pattern or the people in it. That was my story placed over a record. The record deserves better. So does he."

Nia sat back. The kitchen smelled of lentils and damp hair. From the hall, Rosa said, "Everything all right?"

"No," Nia said. Then, after a moment, "Maybe. Adrian corrected an old archive."

"Did he fix history?"

"No." Nia looked at the amber addendum still pinned beneath the preserved transcript. "Just himself."

Rosa came to the doorway but did not step in. "Useful?"

"A little," she said.

"That is allowed too."

When Rosa went back to her call, Nia opened the community fixture notice already sitting on her calendar. Training tomorrow, north pitch, mixed squads. Nothing in the listing promised repair. Nothing even promised Ellis would come, though of course Ellis would; captivity did not evaporate because everyone was tired and hurt.

Nia let her thumb rest above the response buttons.

She did not want to go because she was ready. She was not ready. She wanted the room to not go still around the shape of a missing person. She wanted one more chance to stand inside the field and decide what to do when the lights changed, even if the decision came out ugly, even if someone else read it first.

She tapped Attend.

The confirmation blinked green, small and ordinary. It was not another title run, only another place to show up.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A different drill



ELLIS ARRIVED AT training twelve minutes early and still found Coach Duarte there before her, dragging a crate of flat cones from the maintenance shed with the expression of someone who considered the crate personally disappointing.

The pitch was damp enough to shine under the floodlights. Along the far side, the four scoring gates stood in their usual places, white padding scuffed at knee height, North and South paling into mist. The school courts behind them clicked with a late basketball session. Every sound seemed too clear: the rattle of a gate hinge, the soft slap of Coach's boot through wet turf, Ellis's own kit bag banging against her hip with half a pharmacy and possibly one old fork inside.

"Navarro," Coach said, without looking up. "If that bag contains another team, tell them they can help set cones."

"Only the reserves," Ellis said. "The starters are shy."

Coach looked at her then. Not softly, exactly. Coach Duarte did not do soft on the pitch. But her eyes checked Ellis the way she checked a player rising after a flag pull: balanced, weight-bearing, not pretending too hard.

"You asked for ten minutes," Coach said.

"I did."

"Before everyone else gets here."

Ellis nodded. She had rehearsed this on the tram until the woman across from her had started watching with mild concern. She had not sat in the back double seat. She had taken the fold-down near the doors and kept her bag on her lap because offering an empty place to no one felt theatrical and saving it felt worse.

Coach tipped the crate upright. "Talk."

Ellis gripped the strap across her chest. "I don't want to make Nia talk to me before she wants to."

"Good start."

"And I don't want the team to turn into a feelings committee with bibs."

"Also appreciated."

"But the way we reviewed after the first loss made her role smaller." The words scraped, but she made them pass. "Not because you were unfair. The cue was incomplete. It was. I backed the safe pattern too. But after that, every time she shaped to go, we treated it like something to confirm instead of something to notice."

Coach's face gave nothing away.

Ellis went on before courage drained out through her boots. "In the semifinal, I had a reason. Leah was sitting between me and Nia, and Kel had turned early to close the forward lane. If Nia cut across and I missed the weight, they could have had the intercept and an open West gate."

"Yes," Coach said.

"I know yes." Ellis swallowed. "But I also know I heard her complete cue and still answered the older version of her. I'm asking if we can practise noticing changed intention. Everyone's. Not as a punishment."

Coach Duarte bent, picked up three cones, and set them in a line with her boot.

"I said the first problem was an incomplete cue," she said. "It was. Then my corrected drills made the correction mostly be Nia asking to

do what she already saw. That put her back in the old job with neater labels.”

“You understand,” Coach said, “that noticing is slower than assuming.”

“Yes.”

“And in live play, slower loses points.”

“Yes.”

Coach studied the gates. South’s light panel blinked amber as the system ran its idle safety check. “Fine. We drill it badly first. Then less badly. Captain doesn’t get to resign because guilt feels dramatic.”

“I wasn’t—”

Coach raised one eyebrow.

Ellis closed her mouth.

Players began arriving in twos and threes under the sheltered walkway, hoods up, boot studs clicking on the concrete. Mae came first, hair tied in a tight knot, shoulders already squared against whatever nonsense the evening had prepared. Suri followed with Tavi, both eating from a packet of lentil crisps. Imogen jogged in from the courts side, waving at someone behind her, then nearly slipped at the pitch entrance and turned the stumble into a stretch no one believed.

Nia came last.

Not late. Just last.

She wore her dark training top under a rain shell, sleeves pulled over her thumbs. Her hair was still damp from somewhere else, or from the mist, curling at her temples. She looked at Coach, at the cones, at the ground between Ellis and the rest of the team. Not avoiding. Not offering either.

Ellis’s body moved before her judgment did—half a step, the old automatic angle that made space beside her. Nia saw it. Ellis stopped, shifted the movement into setting her bag down, and hated how visible the correction felt.

Coach blew the whistle once. “Bring it in.”

“This is community fixture prep,” Coach said. “Yes, the school play-off is done. No, that does not mean we spend an hour punting our

standards into the canal. Same safety, same flag discipline, same gate rules. We are adding a drill.”

Mae folded her arms. “That sentence has never improved my evening.”

“It will worsen it educationally,” Coach said. “Familiar positions, altered jobs. Defenders distribute. Runners call resets. Link players finish. The point is not to turn everybody into somebody else forever. The point is to practise when a teammate’s first movement does not match your stored picture of them.”

“You will use short intention cues,” Coach went on. “You may ask one clarification if you need it. One. If you ask, you must still play the ball before the defence has enough time to write a poem about it.”

Mae said, “I am already annoyed.”

“Useful. Start there.” Coach pointed. “Live half-pitch. North and South active. White attacks North, blue defends South. Four versus four. Ellis at link, Nia wide distributor.”

Mae pulled on a blue bib. “Can I object before or after this becomes a puddle?”

“After first puddle,” Coach said.

They jogged to shape. Ellis checked her flags, then the gate lights. North glowed green for their attack; South amber for the defence. The ball sat in Suri’s hands at the restart cone, oval and wet, seams darkened by water. Tavi defended Ellis, bouncing on her toes with too much apology in her face. Mae marked Nia from three metres off, already measuring.

“Ready,” Coach called. “Live.”

Suri passed to Ellis.

The ball slapped cold into Ellis’s palms. She turned, saw Nia outside right, hands ready but not calling. In Nia’s usual link position, Ellis would have known: hold, draw, give late. But Nia was wider now, and Mae’s hips were open to the sideline, inviting the safe pass and promising the flag.

Ellis carried two steps forward. Tavi came in. Ellis shaped to pass inside.

Nia said, "Across, then back edge."

Too many words. Ellis's brain snagged on back edge—edge of gate, edge of channel, edge of what? She asked, "You mean—"

Tavi pulled her flag.

"Flag," Coach called.

Ellis stopped dead, breath punching out. Tavi retreated two metres, hand up. First pull. Three seconds.

Nia had already checked her run because the timing was gone. Ellis passed to Suri too hard. Suri caught it against her chest, but Mae had read the panic and closed the angle. Two passes later Imogen tried to burst through the North gate from outside the field line and Coach's whistle cut across the pitch.

"No score. You cross from inside the field under control. You cannot loop out and re-enter through the gate like you're avoiding ticket barriers."

Imogen jogged back, grimacing. "I knew that."

"You knew it in theory. Put theory in your feet."

They reset.

Ellis wiped her hands on her shorts. Nia stood on the right again, expression closed around concentration. Ellis wanted to say, I'm trying. She wanted, worse, to say, Please see that I'm trying, which was not the same thing and would make this about her.

Coach blew live.

This time Nia received first. She held the ball away from Mae's reach, hips angled upfield. Ellis moved into support left. Nia's eyes flashed toward her. A check. A habit with bruises around it.

Mae stepped in. Nia said, "Ellis, screen-turn."

Screen was a bad word under obstruction rules, even if Nia meant show as shield then turn off. Ellis hesitated because she could hear Coach in her bones. "Legal screen?"

Mae took Nia's flag.

"Flag. Second pull."

Mae backed off, jaw tight. "If I can't act on the call, it's decoration."

Nia held the ball, rain shining on her cheek. "I meant show, not

block.”

Coach’s whistle went twice. “Freeze.”

Mae planted her hands on her hips. “Coach, this is making us worse at the thing we’re supposed to do. If I’m defending and they get to pause the world to discuss feelings, I’m punished for reading quickly. If I’m attacking and the cue is a whole weather report, I can’t use it.”

“It’s not feelings,” Tavi said, then winced. “Sorry. I mean—maybe it partly is, but—”

Mae looked at her.

Tavi stopped.

Ellis took one breath, then another. Captain did not get to resign. Captain also did not get to hide behind Coach like a padded gate.

“Mae’s right,” Ellis said.

Ellis kept her eyes on the group, not only on Nia. “If the clarification only works by stealing time from defence, it’s not a match skill. And if the cue needs a glossary, I’m not noticing intention. I’m doing homework while Tavi takes my flag.”

Coach let the small laugh pass through the group before she stepped in. “So fix it. What makes a cue playable?”

Suri tucked the ball under one arm. “Direction and timing. Maybe risk level, if it changes the obvious pass.”

“Three pieces is too many,” Mae said.

“Not if one is built into the word,” Suri replied. “Like ‘red’ for risky fast change, ‘blue’ for hold shape, ‘green’ for go now.”

Imogen made a face. “Why are we traffic lights?”

“Because you already understand them,” Suri said.

“I have concerns about Imogen and amber,” Mae said.

“Everyone has concerns about Imogen and amber,” Ellis said, and this time even Nia’s mouth moved, barely.

Coach pointed at Ellis. “You proposed the problem. Build the first version.”

“Okay,” she said. “One word for changed route, one word for where. If you’re doing what your position usually does, no special cue. If you’re changing the expected route or support, call—”

She almost said shift. Tavi's hand lifted halfway.

Ellis caught herself. "Not shift. The sport already owns that. 'Turn.' Turn plus gate or channel. Turn North. Turn middle. Turn East."

"Timing?" Suri asked.

"If it's now, just say turn," Ellis said. "If it's not now, timing first. Hold, turn middle."

Mae considered. "Clarification?"

"Only 'now?' or 'which?'" Ellis said. "And if I ask when the cue was already clear, that's on me. Defence gets the time it earns."

"Live," Coach called.

Suri fed Nia wide.

Mae closed quickly, testing. Nia carried infield instead of hugging touch. Ellis moved to the old safe pocket, then stopped herself and slid two metres deeper.

Nia called, "Turn middle."

Ellis did not ask. She cut behind Tavi's shoulder into the middle channel. Nia passed before Mae could reach the flag. The ball spun low, skidding wet, and Ellis had to scoop it before it slid away. She sent it on to Imogen, who crossed North from inside the field with both hands clamped round the ball like she expected it to bite.

Coach's whistle went. "Score. Reset."

They ran it again with roles shifted harder. Mae took the ball as distributor. Suri defended Nia. Ellis started high, where she was not used to being useful unless someone else had already made the problem simple.

Mae's first cue was a grunt and a shoulder fake. Coach killed it at once.

"That is not an intention cue," Coach said. "That is a noise you make moving furniture."

Mae scowled, but on the reset she called, "Hold, turn South."

Ellis hesitated because South was the defensive gate for whites, wrong for the attacking pattern, but the drill had flipped the carrier's job: Mae wanted a reset away from North before the live check forced a

shift. The hesitation cost a metre. Tavi, defending now, nearly pinched the lane.

“Which?” Ellis called.

“Left channel,” Mae snapped.

That was enough. Ellis cut left instead of straight back, received, and returned the ball before Tavi could close both angles. It was ugly, late, and playable. Coach let it continue until Suri pulled Mae’s flag cleanly near the cone.

“Better,” Coach said. “Not pretty. Better.”

Mae pointed at Ellis while getting her flag back. “That ‘which’ helped. The first hesitation did not.”

“I know,” Ellis said.

“Good.”

Coach changed the groups again. Nia came central this time, Ellis wide. The old map in Ellis’s body objected. Nia in the middle meant the ball should find her hands and be made safer. Ellis wide meant wait, stretch, be available if everything else worked.

“Live.”

Tavi started with possession, panic-bright but steady enough. She passed to Nia. Suri stepped up. Mae shaded the North lane. Ellis held width until Nia’s shoulders turned, not toward the expected reset but toward the gate seam Mae had left for half a second.

Nia called, “Hold, turn North.”

Ellis heard the hold and forced herself not to go early. One beat. Two. The lane thinned.

“Now?” Ellis asked.

“Now,” Nia said.

Ellis went. The pass came ahead of her, not to her chest but into the space she could reach if she trusted the answer. She caught it with cold fingers and crossed North under control before Suri’s hand slapped at the air behind her hip.

Coach whistled the score.

She turned back. Nia was already walking to the restart cone, face unreadable except for the tight focus still holding her mouth. Ellis

wanted to grin at her. Wanted to say, See, we can. Wanted to ask whether that had felt like anything to Nia or only like a rep.

Instead she tossed the ball back lightly, not too high, not making her reach.

Nia caught it.

"Next time," Nia said, then stopped.

Ellis waited. The mist gathered on her eyelashes. Around them, Mae was complaining that Imogen's route had the elegance of a trapped pigeon, and Imogen was insisting pigeons were underrated.

Nia looked down at the ball. "Nothing."

Ellis nodded once.

Coach blew the whistle. "Again. Different defenders. Same rule. If you mean something different, make it playable. If you don't understand, ask small and move."

They ran it until the mistakes got smaller. On one rep Ellis broke before Nia's call had finished, Suri pulled her flag, and Coach stopped them where they stood.

"What did you hear?" Coach asked.

"Turn East," Ellis said, mud on one knee, lungs burning.

"And what did she call?"

Ellis glanced at Nia. "Hold, turn East."

"What did you skip?"

"The hold."

Coach nodded. "Again."

When Coach finally called them in, no one looked repaired. They looked damp, irritated, and worked hard enough to be honest.

"Community side will not care about your history," Coach said. "They will read your feet. Make your feet worth reading."

Ellis bent to unclip her flags. Nia stood three steps away, doing the same. For one fragile second the space between them felt like the old space beside the tram doors: available, not claimed.

Ellis did not step into it.

Nia looked up. "The 'now' was useful."

Ellis's throat tightened. "Good."

“That’s all I meant,” Nia said quickly.

“I know.”

Ellis stacked the cone with the others and carried it back through the mist.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Asking at speed



By THURSDAY, the words had started to bruise less.

Turn middle. Hold, turn East. Which? Now?

They were ugly little words compared with the old language Alderbank used to have, all glances and shoulders and the exact tilt of Ellis's hand before a pass. Nia had loved that language for years. She had loved how it made the pitch feel smaller, how a look across rain could become a route. Lately it had felt like wearing a shirt she had outgrown and being told it still fit because everyone remembered it fitting.

Coach Duarte set them in three lanes with cones, the North and South gates lit for the first sequence, the evening sun low enough to turn the wet turf silver. No match feed, no parents along the rail, only the hard slap of balls into palms and the courts behind them squeaking with someone's late basketball practice.

"Twelve seconds per rep," Coach called. "Not a debate club. Ball carrier must either use the cue, ask the approved question, or reject it with a different call. Defenders, if they are vague, punish them legally."

Mae smiled without warmth. "My favourite kind of education."

Tavi stood beside Nia at the middle cone, tugging her bib straight. She had written the cue list on the inside of her wrist in tiny letters:

HOLD, TURN, WHICH, NOW. Not because she did not know it, she had explained, but because under pressure her brain sometimes opened the wrong cupboard.

Nia had wanted to say she knew the feeling. She said, "That ink's going to smear."

"It's fine." Tavi checked the blue blur already spreading near her thumb. "It's mostly fine."

They ran the first set at walking pace, which somehow made mistakes more embarrassing. Suri carried, Nia supported, Imogen defended with her hands tucked theatrically behind her back until Coach told her flag-pulling was not optional mime.

"Hold, turn East," Tavi called from the far lane.

Suri looked once. "Now?"

"Late," Tavi said, and Coach's whistle split the air.

"Freeze."

Tavi's face pinched. "I know. I added a forbidden word."

"You answered the wrong question," Coach said. "If you mean late, it goes first. Hold, turn East. If you don't say hold first, you have asked Suri to move now."

"I did say hold first."

"Then trust your own call. Suri asked a question she did not need."

Suri lifted the ball in apology. "That's on me."

Nia watched Tavi absorb it. The younger girl nodded once, serious, not crushed. A month ago, Nia might have felt impatient with the interruption. Tavi was forever asking where the obvious thing began. Now the obvious thing kept moving, and Tavi, annoyingly, was good at putting a cone around it.

They went again.

Nia received from Mae under no-pressure defence, turned her hips toward North, then heard Tavi from her left: "Turn West."

West was not active. North was. Nia's body rejected the cue before thought formed. She drove toward the North gate, two strides hard, ball tucked tight. Mae flicked a hand and pulled Nia's flag clean from her belt.

“Flag,” Mae said. “Also, dead decision.”

Nia stopped. “West isn’t ours.”

Tavi pointed, not at the gate light but at the panel above the maintenance shed. The accessible signal strip was pulsing amber-white, the tone just fading from the pitch speakers. Coach had set a live shift to East/West while Nia had been watching Mae’s hand.

Heat moved up her neck.

Coach did not soften her voice. “What happened?”

“I missed the signal,” Nia said.

“You heard Tavi.”

“I heard her and overruled her with old information.”

Tavi lowered her hand. “I should’ve said hold?”

“No,” Nia said, catching the reflex to make it easier. “You were right. Turn West was clear. I didn’t update.”

Mae flipped the flag back to her. “Good. Because I enjoyed that.”

“You enjoy most things involving me being wrong.”

“It’s important to have hobbies.”

Coach reset the timer. “Again. Serrat, first job is receiving new fact without arguing with the air.”

Nia clipped her flag back on. “Got it.”

They ran it faster. Tavi’s cue came again, this time from behind Nia’s shoulder.

“Turn West.”

“Which?” Nia called.

“Left lane.”

Nia pivoted, passed across her body, and Tavi caught it as the conversion interval ended. One clean step later, she carried from inside the field through the West gate. Coach raised a hand.

“Point in drill. Not because it was pretty. Because it was ordered.”

“It was a little pretty,” Tavi said, breathless.

Mae said, “It was damp.”

At the water break, they clustered by the sheltered walkway, shoulders steaming. Someone had left orange slices in a tub on the bench. Imogen took two and then looked guilty enough that Suri shoved the

tub at her again.

“Your body is ninety per cent sprint and poor choices,” Suri said. “Eat.”

Nia took the last thin piece without noticing until Ellis’s hand hovered over the empty tub.

For one stupid second, the old ritual opened between them: Nia saving the last snack piece, Ellis pretending not to want it, both of them splitting it unevenly and arguing about who got cheated. Nia had already put it in her mouth. Citrus stung her tongue.

Ellis’s hand dropped. “You need it.”

Nia swallowed. “There are cereal bars in your bag unless the second team ate them.”

Ellis glanced at her kit bag, slumped against the bench like a person who had given up. “The second team are on strict rations.”

Tavi groaned. “There is actually enough tape in there to wrap a ferry.”

Mae asked if the ferry had better lateral movement than Imogen, and the moment moved on.

After water, Coach changed the groups. “Role exchange. Ellis, low support. Nia, first receiver. Tavi, distributor. Mae and Suri defend. Imogen, in after three.”

Ellis jogged into the low support channel, where the job was mostly to be useful without becoming the point: offer the safe outlet, drag a defender half a step, take the ugly pass and make it playable. Nia knew the work in her bones. She wondered if Ellis did too, or if Ellis only knew that Nia had always done it.

Tavi held the ball at centre. The active gates were East for white, West for blue. Coach’s whistle made everyone snap still.

“Live.”

Tavi passed to Nia and cut right. Mae came fast, hands low, aiming for the flag instead of the ball. Nia carried two steps and saw Suri sagging into the middle lane. Ellis was behind and left, not in command, not waving, just present.

Nia called, “Hold, turn South.”

South was not active yet. It was a rehearsed-before cue for if the draw shifted; in this drill Coach had allowed pre-call patterns, but only if they did not distort the current attack.

Ellis did not move early. She held low, exactly where support should be, and said, "Now?"

The question cost time. Mae's fingers brushed Nia's flag. Nia twisted away, legal by inches, and felt annoyance flare—at the question, at Ellis not simply understanding.

Then the tone sounded. The gate lights changed: South for white, North for blue. Conversion interval.

"Yes," Nia said. "Now."

Ellis moved.

Not like a runner pretending to be Nia. Not like someone apologising in footwork. She moved as low support changing into a hinge: three quick steps across Mae's retreat line without obstructing, palms up, body angled so Nia could pass before the next flag attempt. Nia sent the ball hard. Ellis took it clean against her chest, absorbed it, and immediately gave it to Tavi cutting inside.

Tavi crossed through South from inside the field just after the conversion tone ended.

Coach's whistle. "Score."

Tavi punched both hands up and nearly dropped the ball after the fact. "That was so much better than my entire Wednesday."

Mae pointed at Ellis. "That support angle was irritatingly legal."

Ellis bent with her hands on her knees, grinning because she was out of breath and trying not to show how much the praise mattered. "I live to irritate within regulations."

The next rep went wrong in a smaller, more useful way. Imogen cut too early for East when Nia had called, "Hold, turn middle," and dragged Suri directly into the passing lane. Tavi, carrying this time, asked, "Which?" even though Nia's cue had been complete. Mae pulled her flag during the hesitation.

"Third pull," Mae announced. "I am thriving."

Coach made them reset from the spot. "Talk before I do."

Imogen wiped rain from her forehead. "I heard turn and became a heroic blur."

"No one requested a heroic blur," Suri said.

"I know that now."

Tavi looked at Nia. "My 'which' was bad. I panicked because Imogen moved."

"It made sense to want new information," Nia said. "But the call hadn't changed."

"So ask-now is when the missing piece affects the next two seconds," Tavi said slowly. "Rehearsed-before is stuff we could've sorted while no one was stealing our flags."

Coach pointed at her. "Again, louder."

Tavi did, cheeks colouring.

Mae nodded once. "That I can use. If you ask me what middle means while I'm open, I may legally abandon you."

"You cannot abandon your own team," Imogen said.

"Watch me grow as a person."

On Friday, the wind came hard across the pitch and turned every long pass into a small betrayal. Tavi arrived with the cue list printed on two strips of tape, one for each group's cone. She had changed "inside" to "middle" because, she said, inside meant three different things once people were tired and muddy.

"Approved," Coach said.

Mae squinted at the tape. "You did homework for being shouted at."

"I like knowing which shouting is useful," Tavi said.

By the second set, everyone was using her wording. Ellis called "middle" from support and corrected herself when she drifted too high. Suri rejected a vague "there" with a flat, "Name it," and Imogen, sweating through her grin, actually named it. Nia asked "which?" once when Tavi had already pointed her whole body into the lane.

"No, trust it!" Tavi shouted, offended enough to cut through the wind.

Nia passed without another word. The ball reached Mae, who had

rotated into attack and looked personally betrayed by success before charging through North.

It still kept going wrong. The ball skidded off Nia's palms twice before she adjusted, and once Suri's perfect "turn East" died on the turf because Nia led Imogen as if the ground were dry. Ellis, low support again, took a pass at her knees, bobbled it, then trapped it against her shin before Mae could pull her flag.

"Ugly alive," Ellis gasped, shoving it back to Nia.

"Counts," Nia said, and it did.

Coach made them run the same pattern until their calves ached and their voices rasped.

"Again."

Imogen flopped backward onto the turf. "If I become part of the pitch, do I count as obstruction?"

"You count as late," Coach said. "Up."

Nia hauled Imogen by one hand. Imogen came up laughing, muddy along one shoulder. There was no glory in it, only repetition: check the gate light, hear the cue, decide whether a question was courage or delay. Nia got it wrong. Then less wrong.

By the end, Nia's legs felt hollow. Her hair had escaped its tie. Mud freckled her shins. Hope, she was learning, did not feel like light opening in the clouds. It felt like being tired and still having one more rep that might be better because the last one had been honest.

Coach finished with a five-on-five sequence under full shift timing. Fresh trigger checks after the minimum, no one told when. The score did not matter; Coach kept one anyway on her tablet because she said pretending not to count made people weird.

Tavi restarted from centre after a blue score and passed to Ellis. First pull count reset. Ellis carried into space, Tavi outside, Nia deeper than usual. Mae called, "Hold, turn middle," from the far side, drawing her defender with the confidence of someone who expected to be obeyed or corrected quickly.

Ellis glanced once—not at Nia for permission, not at Coach for approval. At the shape.

“Now?”

Mae was already cutting. “Now.”

Ellis passed. Mae took it, stopped under a flag pull, and within the three seconds snapped it back to Nia. Second pull. Defenders retreated two metres. Nia heard the shift tone before she saw the lights. East for white, West for blue. Conversion interval.

Her first thought was wrong: continue South, old gate, old plan.

“Turn East,” she called.

Ellis was ahead of her, low and right. “Which?”

For half a breath, Nia wanted to say, You know. Then she checked the lanes: Mae had pulled the defender inside and Ellis was open under the turn.

“Under,” Nia said. “Tavi finishes.”

Ellis changed her support line. Nia found her with the pass. Ellis did not try to make it grand. She carried one step, drew Suri, and gave it back to Tavi in the middle. Tavi waited through the last beat of the conversion tone, then crossed East clean.

Coach marked the point, then called time before anyone could argue themselves into one more rep.

At the tram, everyone smelled of rain and rubber. Ellis got on first, reached the pair of seats halfway down, and stood with her hand on the back of one.

“Do you want this?” she asked.

Not saved like a claim. Offered.

Nia nodded. “Yes.”

Ellis moved her overloaded kit bag from the seat. Nia sat down beside her, knees aching, shoulder just close enough to feel the warmth through two damp sleeves. They had rehearsed the asking; the answer was simply yes.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The next pass



THE COMMUNITY FIXTURE had been on the calendar since September, wedged between a primary schools skills morning and the town courts' open finals, long before Alderbank had known how its playoff bracket would end. That mattered, because people kept talking about it as if it had been arranged to console them, and it hadn't.

Nia tied her boots beside the sheltered walkway and watched two Year Sevens argue over whether the West gate looked farther away than East.

"It's the same pitch," one said.

"It feels farther," the other insisted.

Ellis's kit bag landed beside Nia's foot with a thump like dropped furniture.

Nia looked at it. "Did you pack the entire second team or only their winter coats?"

"Budget cuts," Ellis said. "Only a back three and a spare goalkeeper."

"There aren't goalkeepers."

"That's why they fit."

The joke came easier than it had on Thursday. The semifinal still

lived in the muscles of Nia's jaw if she let herself bite down too hard: Ellis's call, Nia obeying, Eastbank through, the afterward thank-you landing wrong and true. The conversation after had not made a clean shape of them. It had made space.

Coach Duarte clapped once from midfield. "Alderbanks, in. We treat this like a match, because it is one. Clean flags, clean restarts, speak early, ask if you need it. Same timing. Same gates. Same responsibility."

The modest feed drone hovered no higher than the maintenance shed roofline, its lens blinking green. The school's projection rig placed Adrian Bell at a commentary table under a blue awning by halfway. It rendered a paper cup between his hands and a dark coat over his shoulders despite the mild day. When Imogen jogged past, the rendered figure lifted the cup in salute.

"Pike," he called. "If you outrun the ball today, I'm writing it down as weather."

Imogen pointed at the pale sky. "Blame the wind early, Mr Bell. Establish the theme."

"Excellent advice. Entire careers have been built on it."

They were playing a mixed community side drawn from Eastbank reserves, former Alderbanks pupils home from college, and two district players who had missed the school season through timetable clashes. Their bibs were green. Leah Osei was not playing, but she stood by the rail with her younger brother, explaining something with her hands that looked like a support angle. Ordinary. That was almost the ache of it.

Suri held out the ball for the initial draw. The gate panel above the shed flashed through the possible ordered pairs and settled with a tone.

Blue—Alderbanks—North. Green—South.

"Eight minutes," the official called. "Live on whistle."

Ellis looked once around her team: Mae left, Suri central, Tavi bouncing on the balls of her feet, Imogen already leaning toward somewhere she had not been sent, Nia between lines. Ellis's gaze reached Nia and did not stay to ask for the old answer. It checked, received

her, moved on.

The whistle went.

Suri tapped the ball to Ellis, and Alderbank's first attack unfolded without drama. Ellis carried two strides, passed to Mae, Mae took the first flag pull near the centre stripe and stopped hard, one palm out. The green defender stepped back, already pointing for cover.

"Back," Mae called.

Nia came short, caught, turned. The North gate waited beyond moving bodies. She passed to Imogen in stride, then immediately regretted the height. The ball rose too much. Imogen gathered it but had to stutter, and the green defender pinched her flag before she could accelerate.

"Second," the official said.

Imogen puffed her cheeks. "My fault."

"My pass," Nia said.

"Shared custody."

Imogen snapped the ball to Ellis before the count closed. Ellis could have forced a lane to North. For one beat, it opened: familiar Ellis burst, Nia sliding low, Suri outside. Then the near defender stepped across—not obstructing, not dangerous, but enough that the direct carry would invite a pull and crowd the gate.

Ellis held.

"Reset middle," she said, and gave the ball to Suri.

It looked like nothing. It was the right nothing. Suri accepted, drifted away from North, and Alderbank kept possession until the first trigger check passed without a shift. Two more passes drew green wide. Tavi cut late through the middle, took Suri's pass, and crossed the North gate from inside the field with a clean two steps before anyone reached her flag.

Alderbank 1–0.

Tavi skidded into the runoff and turned with both fists tucked under her chin, trying not to look too pleased and failing.

Adrian's voice came through the small speaker near the rail. "Das refuses the shiny door, Navarro refuses the crowded door, Shah walks

through the one they built. Sensible young people. Very suspicious.”

The match settled into its own weather. Green scored next after a former pupil named Mara drew Mae too high and slipped a pass inside for the South gate. On the following restart Mae hunted flags so cleanly that Green reached fourth pull near the West touchline and turned over possession without ever looking comfortable.

By the first break it was 2–2. By halftime, 3–3. Parents clapped with paper cups against palms. Younger pupils chased each other behind the rail until a teacher redirected them into carrying spare cones.

Nia drank from her bottle beside Ellis, both of them breathing hard.

Ellis rummaged in her bag and produced a cereal bar flattened nearly transparent. “Last one not claimed by the imaginary back three.”

Nia took half when Ellis broke it. The piece was smaller. She noticed. Ellis noticed her noticing.

“Don’t,” Ellis said.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were preparing a legal case.”

“I was going to win.”

“I know. Eat.”

Across the pitch, Tavi was crouched with two primary pupils, showing them how to clip flags so the tabs faced out. Coach Duarte watched the scoreboard, then the players, then the sky as if the clouds had tactical tendencies.

Third quarter opened with Green active East, Alderbank West, after a shift had sounded in the final live seconds before the break. The conversion interval resumed with the match clock; for a few seconds everyone could move and pass, but no one could score. The shed panel logged it plainly enough that no one argued.

Green went ahead 4–3 on a patient move through East. Alderbank answered when Mae, of all people, carried the ball under control through West after three passes designed to make her complain she was not a winger.

"I remain a defender emotionally," she announced on the way back. "Emotionally versatile," Suri said.

At 4-4, with two minutes left in the third, came the play Nia would remember first in her body.

Alderbank had possession from a green drop near the centre-right channel. The active gates were still West for Alderbank, East for Green. The shift timer had been running since the last change, but Nia had not counted perfectly through the dead ball; she knew only that the minimum had probably passed.

Ellis restarted to Nia. Nia caught and carried diagonally left, drawing Mara's attention. Mae was ahead near the West lane, Tavi deeper, Ellis curling underneath. The route Nia had planned was simple: use Ellis as the hinge, send Mae into the gate if the defender overcommitted.

Then the tone sounded.

Gate lights snapped: Alderbank South, Green North. The buzz reached the players' wrist tabs at the same instant. West was gone. South would not count until the five-second interval ended.

Nia's first two steps were still aimed at West. She changed them.

Mara saw her hips turn and lunged for the flag. Nia kept the ball tight, shaving the angle. Ellis was below her and a little behind, exactly where the old Nia would have dumped the ball without words. South was open only if they moved now but not blindly; Tavi's defender was caught facing the wrong gate, Mae was too far wide to matter.

Nia drew breath. "Turn South."

Ellis's head flicked up. Not to Nia's face. To the lane, the clock, the defender.

"Inside or wrap?" Ellis asked.

Short. Necessary. It cost less than a heartbeat and more than nothing.

"Inside," Nia said.

Ellis planted, cut inward across Nia's trailing shoulder, and Nia passed into the space between Ellis's hands rather than at her body. Ellis caught, carried two strides while the conversion tone still held, then

slowed—waiting, not freezing. A green defender reached and missed the flag by a finger. The end tone chirped.

“Now,” Nia called, already outside her.

Ellis gave the return pass. Nia took it on the move. South gate in front, white posts bright against the turf, both feet still inside the field until the last step. She crossed through with the ball tucked firm to her ribs.

The official’s arm rose. “Score.”

Alderbank 5–4.

Noise came in a small wave from the rail—parents, pupils, someone’s little brother shrieking as if a spaceship had landed. Nia slowed in the runoff, lungs burning. Ellis arrived beside her, not grabbing, not apologising, just there.

“Inside was right,” Ellis said.

“You asked.”

“You answered.”

For a second Nia could not find a joke big enough or small enough. She bumped Ellis’s shoulder with her own, lightly, and they jogged back.

Adrian’s commentary, a fraction delayed, drifted over them. “Watch Serrat’s feet there. She loses the old gate before she’s finished wanting it, which is harder than it sounds. Navarro asks the one useful question and then, crucially, does not hold a committee meeting. That is a point made out of timing, not telepathy.”

Green tied the match before the quarter ended. Mara scored through North under the assignment established by the earlier shift, catching Alderbank’s press too narrow. Mae pulled one flag, then another, but on third pull Green restarted fast from the spot and Alderbank’s retreat opened a legal seam. A green player—small, sharp-braided, number fourteen—crossed with barely a step to spare.

5–5.

The fourth quarter was mostly tired decisions. Imogen nearly made a brilliant run and then checked it when Suri hissed, “No lane,” which saved possession and drew applause from Coach more than any sprint

might have.

With three minutes left, Alderbank had a chance after Tavi forced a fourth-pull turnover by staying patient in defence instead of snatching. Alderbank's active gate was East. Nia received from Suri, saw Ellis ahead, and also saw the green captain for the day baiting the pass the way Suri sometimes did in training.

Old hunger rose: prove the new thing, show the route no one expected, make the match bend around the answer she had learned to give.

She held.

"Reset," Nia called, and passed back to Suri.

Mae shouted, "Thank you!" from somewhere aggressively marked.

They built again. The next shift check passed with no change. Another five live seconds, no change. At the following check the tone came. Gates changed to North for Alderbank, South for Green. Alderbank moved, but Green moved with them. Tavi asked, "Middle?" and Nia, seeing the defender step into the lane, said, "No. Wide."

The pass went wide. It was safe. Too safe to score. But it kept them from giving Green the ball in the centre with the field split open.

One minute.

Green won possession on a dropped pass near the touchline, the ball slick off Imogen's tired hands and resting just inside before rolling out. The official gave Green possession at the exit spot. Score still 5-5. Green's active gate was South; Alderbank set to defend South, with North as its attacking gate if it won the ball back.

Mara restarted to number fourteen. Mae closed and pulled the first flag almost immediately.

"Pass," the official counted.

Number fourteen stopped, waited for the retreat, and passed back to Mara. Mara carried laterally, not toward South yet, making Tavi choose. Second flag pull came from Suri, clean at the hip. Green had three seconds. Pass out to the right.

Nia tracked the receiver, a college girl with mud on one knee and calm hands. The shift timer had been running since the last change.

The public display showed that the next five-second check was due.

Third pull: Ellis, low and precise. She flicked the flag free, then backed off at once, palms open.

The receiver smiled through her breathing. "Nice."

"Still pass," Ellis said.

The ball went to Mara again. At the scheduled check, the draw selected a change.

The tone sounded as Mara caught it.

Lights changed: Green West, Alderbank East. Conversion interval. South gone. West not live yet. Mara moved anyway, because movement was legal and because she had already seen where her teammate would be. Nia saw it too late: number fourteen cutting not straight to West but shallow first, dragging Mae half a step inward.

"Wide!" Nia shouted.

Ellis went wide. Tavi went with her. Mae recovered. For a heartbeat Tavi tracked Ellis toward the outside. Then she saw number fourteen's shallow cut and changed position without waiting for confirmation.

"Mae, hold inside. I'll take the runner."

Mae stayed central while Tavi crossed to the weak-side lane, closing the easy return. Mara held the ball through the interval, then fed number fourteen as West became live. The runner adjusted around Tavi and carried under control from inside the field through the gate. Tavi reached for the flag and missed by inches.

Green 6, Alderbank 5.

The final whistle followed. Adrian's voice came over the small speaker: "Shah read the cut early and left the outside lane to take the runner. Green found the next pass anyway."

The point was Green's. The choice had been Tavi's, made without waiting for anyone to confirm it.

At the tram stop Ellis asked, "Same ride?"

Nia said yes. On the tram, Ellis put her kit bag on the floor, and Nia chose the familiar seat beside her. They rode home together without promising they would never misunderstand again.

C O D A

Next season



NIA STOOD BY the sheltered walkway with spare flag belts over one arm and watched Tavi Shah explain the game to twelve incoming players in new boots, nervous plaits, and exaggerated boredom.

“No, you don’t throw it through the gate,” Tavi said, because one of them had already tried. “You carry it under control from inside the field out through your active gate. If you dive like a tragic cinema hero, Coach will make the noise.”

“What noise?” a small Year Seven asked.

From midfield, Coach Duarte said, without turning round, “Don’t find out.”

Nia hid her smile in the strap of a belt. The air smelled of cut grass, warm rubber, and the peppery leaves that gathered in the drain by the maintenance shed every autumn. The gate panels had been serviced over summer. Their light was cleaner now, and the accessible wrist signals had a stronger pulse after the district review found two players in different matches had missed a tone in heavy crowd noise. Nothing dramatic. The checks still came after the minimum; the shift was still mandatory by sixty.

Tavi held up an oval ball. “Pass any direction. Run any direction.

No kicks. No tackles, no holding, no pretending your body is a wall with opinions. Flags only. If you pull one, back off two metres. If your flag gets pulled, stop and pass within three seconds.”

A tall newcomer with silver clips in her braids raised a hand. “What if I know what she meant but she didn’t say it?”

Tavi looked across at Nia, not asking her to supply the answer so much as offering her the next pass.

Nia stepped off the walkway. “Then you can still ask.”

“But what if there isn’t time?”

“Sometimes there isn’t,” Nia said. “Then you use the clearest cue you have and accept it might be wrong. But most of the time there’s enough for one useful word. Inside, wrap, hold, reset. Questions are part of the play.”

Tavi tossed her the ball. It bumped her chest; she trapped it with both hands.

“Good,” Tavi said. “Now ask me where I want you.”

The girl blinked. “Where do you want me?”

“Too broad. I could answer with my feelings.” Tavi pointed to the South gate. “Try: short or long?”

“Short or long?”

“Short,” Tavi said, and moved.

The pass wobbled but stayed catchable. Tavi gathered it and turned her shoulders to show the next angle, not making it prettier than it was.

At the rail, Ellis was arguing with Mae over whether a kit bag could be taxed as additional housing. Ellis was not in training kit. She had stopped by on her way to an evening lab at North Campus, a folder tucked under one arm, hair pinned badly because she had done it while walking. Mae stole the folder, read the colour-coded tabs, and groaned as if personally betrayed by stationery.

Nia had finished at Alderbank in June with the rest of them. She was taking the year: three days a week at the depot, two evenings here as Duarte’s assistant, because Duarte had asked and Nia had, for once, said yes before checking anyone’s face. She had a different prospectus

folded in her pocket, its corners already soft. She had not filled anything in. Some mornings that felt like cowardice; some mornings it felt like room.

Ellis caught Nia looking and lifted her eyebrows: seat later?

Nia held up one finger: after this.

Ellis nodded.

Coach blew her whistle. "Demonstration. Serrat, Navarro if you're staying another five minutes, Shah, Mae. Show conversion interval after a shift."

Ellis dropped her folder into Mae's reluctant hands and jogged on in trainers. "If I slip, it's because I'm dressed as a civilian."

"If you slip, it's because you packed an entire second team in that bag and altered local gravity," Nia said.

"Physics has always had a grudge against me."

They set with Alderbank-blue bibs against imaginary pressure, the new players lined along the touchline. The panel displayed West for Nia's side. Coach started them live.

Tavi passed to Nia. Nia carried two strides, seeing Ellis outside, Mae ahead and complaining already with her shoulders. The tone sounded. Lights changed.

North.

The wrist pulse tapped hard against Nia's skin.

She turned her hips, then checked. Ellis was open, but only if she knew whether Nia meant a cut or a hold.

Ellis glanced back. "Inside?"

Nia smiled, ball firm in both hands, turf bright under her next step.

"Inside," she said, and passed.