



CHAPTER 1: TIME TO STEP UP

The shrill squeal of a whistle sliced through the air. Puffing, Leah came to a stop. Miss Kaur had made them run farther than usual for their warm-up and Leah's entire body was tingling with warmth, despite the chilly January air. She brushed strands of sweaty blonde hair from her eyes as Mimi appeared at her side.

'Ugh, I'm not made for long-distance running, L. Especially on a Monday,' her best friend moaned, bending over and planting her hands on her knees. Her skin shone with a light layer of sweat.

'That's not true,' Leah said. 'You're a better runner than me. Much faster!'

'Faster. Yes. Further? No.'

Leah laughed and they joined the rest of the football team heading towards the benches.

‘L! Mimi!’ A familiar voice rang out across the pitch. Leah saw George, the third member of their trio, waving at them from the sidelines. He was bundled up in a thick black coat, his red bobble hat barely containing the wild brown curls dancing over his forehead. Leah and Mimi split from the other players and jogged over to meet him.

‘Hey! What are you doing here?’ Leah asked.

George grinned and held up a fancy camera, its exposed lens glinting in the watery winter sun. ‘Miss Kaur asked me to take some pictures of your training sessions for the school newspaper. She wants to build up some hype before the big game on Thursday.’

‘Don’t remind me,’ Leah groaned, covering her eyes with one hand. ‘I’ve been trying not to think about it.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Mimi frowned. ‘I thought you were looking forward to it.’

‘I was, but after last week’s match . . . I’d be

surprised if Miss Kaur even lets me start.' The corners of Leah's mouth turned down. 'I can't *believe* I missed that shot. She's going to bench me for sure.'

'You can't be perfect all the time, L,' George said. 'Everyone has bad days.'

Leah shook her head. 'Not this close to the end of the season, they don't. I've got to be on top form.'

George and Mimi exchanged a look, but before either of them could respond, Miss Kaur's voice drifted over from the benches. 'Come on, team!'

Leah and Mimi joined the rest of the players streaming towards their teacher. George followed behind, his camera at the ready. The team arranged themselves in a rough semi-circle around the bench, Miss Kaur at the centre. A football was tucked into the crook of her arm, her silver whistle hanging on a string around her neck.

She clapped her hands together. 'Right, you all know Thursday is a big game for us. Westfield High are a tough team to tackle.'

‘Which is why we’ve never beaten them,’ William Riley piped up. His beefy arms were crossed over his chest.

Miss Kaur tipped her head in acknowledgement. ‘No, we’ve never won against them, but that’s why this last training session is so important. It’ll give us a chance to iron out our creases.’ She paused. ‘Look, I know you’re all nervous about doing well, but you’re some of the most talented kids I’ve ever coached. Compared to a few years ago, you’re a wonder team! I know you can do this.’ Reluctantly, the players nodded. Leah didn’t think they looked very convinced.

Miss Kaur seemed to sense it too. She sighed and plucked up her clipboard from the bench, her eyes drifting down the page. ‘Before we even start thinking about tactics, though, we need to get our final team organised.’ She started to rattle off positions.

‘Oh no,’ Leah whispered. She looked at Mimi in panic. ‘This is it. She’s going to kick me off the starting eleven!’

‘You don’t know that,’ Mimi whispered back

sternly, hands on her hips.

Leah gulped. She knew her friend meant well, but Mimi didn't understand. Leah's performance in the last game had been her *worst ever*. She'd been preparing for this moment ever since.

What if she cried? she thought suddenly. The thought was mortifying.

'Leah!' Miss Kaur's voice broke through Leah's thoughts. Her shoulders clenched as she braced herself for her teacher's next words. She tried to compose her face – she didn't want the team to see her shame and disappointment. She had to keep it together when Miss Kaur told her . . .

'You're going to be our primary penalty taker if that situation arises.'

Leah blinked. Next to her, Mimi whooped. There was a smattering of polite applause as Miss Kaur grinned at her astonishment.

Penalty taker? Did that mean she wasn't being relegated to the bench? Was Miss Kaur actually giving her a second chance? She couldn't believe it.

Neither could William. 'Her?' he spat in angry

disbelief. 'You can't be serious! I'm the top scorer on the team, not *her*. Besides, she's rubbish at penalties!'

'William,' Miss Kaur said, her tone thick with warning.

William snorted, shaking his head. 'The wonder team? More like the blunder team if you put her anywhere near the penalty area.' A few of the players around him sniggered, and Leah couldn't help the crimson flush that stained her cheeks.

'That's enough,' Miss Kaur said sharply. 'If you're going to argue with my decisions, you can leave my pitch. Is that clear?' William didn't reply, but he shot Leah a look of pure venom.

Leah's stomach writhed uncomfortably. William Riley was the worst bully in the school. Even most of the older kids went out of their way to avoid him. Now all of his attention was focused on Leah.

Miss Kaur shaded her eyes and she stared up at the sky. There was a shroud of dark clouds looming on the horizon that made her frown.

She chucked the clipboard back onto the bench, then threw the football to William. 'Let's get out onto the pitch,' she said. 'I don't like the look of that sky and I want us to get as much practice time as possible.'

As the team jogged onto the pitch, Mimi gripped Leah's arm, her face breaking into an excited grin. 'Leah!' she exclaimed. 'Penalty taker! This is awesome!'

'Is it?' Leah said faintly.

'Of course!' George had caught up with them. 'It's a big responsibility, but it shows Miss Kaur trusts you. Now, smile! I want to get a good shot for the paper.' He raised his camera to his eye, clicking the shutter. The smile on Leah's face felt false.

'George, Mimi, will you give me and Leah a moment, please?' They hadn't heard Miss Kaur come up behind them.

'Sure, Miss,' Mimi said, and she and George hurried off to where the other players were gathering by the goalposts.

Leah gulped as she was left with Miss Kaur.

She felt like her teacher was expecting her to say something, but she didn't know what.

Eventually, Miss Kaur said, 'Are you alright, Leah? I thought you'd be pleased to have been chosen as our penalty taker.'

'I am!' Leah blurted. It was true, especially because she'd been so sure Miss Kaur was going to bench her completely. 'It's just . . .' she hung her head. 'William's right. I *am* rubbish at taking penalties.'

'That's certainly not true,' Miss Kaur chuckled.

Leah continued as if her teacher hadn't spoken, 'And in our last game I missed that last shot. It was basically an open goal, but I bottled it!'

Miss Kaur's expression turned serious. 'Last week definitely wasn't your best game, Leah, but everyone has off days. A penalty taker doesn't always need to be the best goal scorer on the pitch. It's more important for them to be calm and collected, no matter what's going on around them. That's why I didn't choose William for this job.' She patted Leah on the shoulder. '*You* don't let your emotions get away from you. It's a

great quality in a leader, and in a high-pressure moment a leader is what the team will need.'

Leah scrunched up her nose. A leader? *Her?*

Leah considered for a moment. *Was Miss Kaur right?* Leah knew that if she stepped up to this role, everything would change. It would mean being brave enough to take charge and tell people what to do, not to mention standing up and making big speeches.

She shook her head so violently that her ponytail whipped against the back of her neck.

'I can't.'

Miss Kaur's expression softened. She tilted her head to one side. 'I know this sounds scary, Leah. But I wouldn't have asked you if I didn't think you had it in you. It's time to step up to a new challenge.'

'What if I freeze again?' Leah asked, her voice dropping to a whisper. She hugged her middle, wrapping her arms around it.

Miss Kaur shrugged. 'Well, there's only one remedy for that. You'll have to practise! It's a good thing we're starting today's session with



some penalties, isn't it?' She grinned and nodded her head towards the rest of the team. Leah gulped, noticing the bag of balls slouched against the goalpost. She bit her lip. She felt dizzy and a little bit sick. *Could she really do this?*