



Cody Dorsett kicked at the grass with his cleats and tried to catch his breath. Coach Trevor had been on the warpath all practice. He'd really stepped things up lately. The Lions only had eleven players on the roster, so fitness was a big deal. While they grumbled about the hard work sometimes, Cody knew deep down everyone loved it.

“Okay, this is a six-on-five drill. Attacking side has to get a shot on goal — or they run the length of the field and back. The last guy does ten push-ups,” Trevor yelled between cupped hands. “Work the ball around — and no mistakes.”

A tall, lanky kid, with wavy blond hair, sidestepped over to Cody. “We win six in a row and Trevor gets cranky?” he said.

Bone-tired, Cody still had to laugh. Kenneth was forever cracking jokes, although when it came to soccer he

was deadly serious. He was probably the Lions' best midfielder.

"Support the ball this time," Trevor called out. "Quick short passes, and strike when you see an opening. You're using the long ball too much. Keep possession."

Kenneth pushed forward. "I hate defenders — they're so defender-y. And they smell like . . . defence. It's close, but I think Luca smells the worst." Kenneth pointed to a short, powerfully built kid with straight black hair.

"I smell a shot wide right — enjoy the run, attackers," Luca said. He and William, another defender, high-fived.

"Don't know why we even have defenders on the team. All they do is keep the ball out of the net — like you're gonna win a game that way," Kenneth said.

Kenneth held his hand down low to Cody. He hesitated, then gave Kenneth's hand a light slap. The midfielder ran off toward Paulo, who had the ball just in from the right sideline, about thirty-five metres from goal. Paulo had only been with the team for a month and he was totally one of the boys. Cody still felt like an outsider. He was obviously on the team, but not good friends with anyone — not really. Cody wondered whether he'd ever fit in the way Paulo did already.

He knew why he didn't, of course. All the guys knew. Cody had told them last month after a tournament. How it had started with the pain in the back of his right leg, and how Dr. Charya told him he had a tumour and she'd have to operate. About his hair falling out, the dizziness, and the chemotherapy. The chemicals had killed the cancer in his body — but the cancer was still part of him.

Always would be. He'd always be the kid with cancer. He knew the guys found it creepy. He couldn't blame them, either. He'd had something gross growing in his body. He found it creepy, too.

Cody watched Paulo feed the ball down the sideline to Brandon. Brandon pressed forward and shovelled a pass to Kenneth, who made as if to continue that way and then spun back and carried it cross field. Paulo hustled in on the overlap and Kenneth rolled it to him. Cody cut inside. Jordan, the other striker, did the same.

"Spacing, boys," Trevor bellowed. "I don't want two players in the same spot. Cody and Jordan, spread out. Give him someone to pass to."

Cody flushed and backpedalled to the outside. Austin, the outside right back defender, moved up to mark him.

Stupid mistake. He'd seen Jordan. Probably should have said something. He didn't like telling the guys what to do. Kenneth, Paulo, or Luca were the guys who did that.

Paulo slowly dragged the ball along with his right foot. Kenneth called for it. Brandon made a short run to the box. Ryan, another midfielder, took off to the other sideline. Paulo caught Cody's eye, only for a brief second, and that was enough.

Cody spun around Austin's right shoulder. He heard the thud of the ball. Paulo had delivered. He could only hope he wasn't offside. The ball curled over Austin's desperate leap. Cody reached out with his left foot to control it.

No whistle: onside!

The ball bounced inside a little more than he wanted it to, giving William a chance to cut him off.

David spread his arms wide and came out to take away the angle. The super-athletic goalie was always tough to beat, even in practice. With William half a step away, Cody struck the ball with his right foot, aiming short side. David reached out his right hand — too late.

“Yeah, baby,” Kenneth whooped from behind.

The ball ticked the post — wide left.

“Yeah, baby — I predict pain in your future,” Luca said gleefully.

“You’re a monster,” Kenneth said to Luca.

Luca’s face fell. “I have a sensitive side, you know.” He paused. “Okay, I don’t, really. Enjoy the run.”

Kenneth growled at Luca and ran off downfield. Cody threw his head back and stared up at the sky. Two inches the other way and the ball would have been in. Brutal.

“Good effort,” Trevor said. “The chance was there. I don’t mind that.”

The kind words cheered him a little. Trevor was tough to please. Cody lengthened his stride. May as well get this drill over with. His right leg usually felt tight after a hard kick. Recently, the last week or so, he hadn’t felt any stiffness. That had to be good?

“Yo, speed demon. Slow down,” Kenneth said to him.

Cody was passing them all.

“Sorry,” he said. He cleared his throat and matched Kenneth’s stride. “Dumb kick. I messed up the pass and had to hurry.”

“You hit the freakin’ post,” Kenneth said. “I don’t think you messed up too bad. Bad luck. Besides, the smell of those defenders was getting to me.”

Cody wished he could be more like Kenneth. He could never think of a comeback fast enough, and by the time he did the moment was gone.

“Whenever you’re even with a guy like that on the back line I’m gonna chip it over his head,” Paulo said. “No one in this league has your speed.”

Paulo was always going on like that. Cody knew it wasn’t really true. Tons of guys were fast.

Jordan, Brandon, and Ryan had gone ahead early and were almost done. Cody decided to hang back. He’d missed the shot. He should come last and do the push-ups.

“Awesome Idea Alert,” Kenneth said suddenly. They were about twenty-five metres away. “If all three of us cross the line at the same time, no one is last, and no one has to do push-ups.”

“That’s good teamwork,” Paulo laughed. “I’m in.”

“I missed,” Cody said. “I’ll be last.”

Kenneth shook his head. “Do what you’re told. You’re not old enough to make your own decisions.”

“He’s practically a baby,” Paulo said.

“I can . . . I’m not . . .”

“We’re sorta joking here, Cody,” Kenneth grinned.

Cody hated himself sometimes. He was always making a fool of himself like that.

“I . . . umm . . . I know . . . Let’s all finish together,” he managed.

Kenneth threw his arms across their shoulders about ten metres from the goal. “*We don’t stop for nobody. We don’t stop for nobody,*” he chanted.

Paulo joined in.

“Someone please stop them,” Luca begged.

They crossed the goal line and Kenneth threw his arms in the air. “Aww. Sorry, Coach Trevor. No one finished last — so I guess no push-ups. Maybe next time.”

Trevor rubbed the side of his face with his hand. “Or . . . We could say you all came last?”

“We could,” Kenneth said, “but then you’d make me cry and . . . no one wants to see that.”

“I do. I do,” Luca said.

“You really are a monster,” Kenneth said.

“A monster with a sensitive side,” Luca corrected him.

Trevor pointed to the ground and flicked his eyebrows.

Kenneth dropped to his knees and held his hands to the sky. “Cruel world!” he yelled. He began to pound out the push-ups. “One, two, three, four . . .”

Paulo counted with him, and then Luca did too — and then everyone. Cody counted to himself.

“Bring it in, lads,” Trevor said. “I think we’ll shut it down. We have a game tomorrow against the Storm and I don’t want you tired out.”

“I feel so lucky,” Kenneth said to Cody.

“Tough practice,” Cody said.

He really was a total goof. He should’ve said “I hate it when we don’t run in practice” or “Trevor’s such a wimp.” Pathetic.

“I’m thinking we need a new coach,” Luca said, coming over. “He’s lost his edge.”

“The guy is clueless about soccer,” Kenneth said. “All he did was play pro for ten years in Europe and the US.”

Cody was about to mention that Paulo’s dad, the assistant coach, also played pro.

Luca beat him to the punch. “What about Paulo’s dad, Leandro?” he said. “Freakin’ loser played pro in Brazil for something like twelve years. What do Brazilians know about soccer?”

The guys sat on the ground around Trevor in a semi-circle.

“Let’s talk a bit about our next game,” Trevor said.

“I could spend the rest of my life not talking about the Storm,” David said.

“Maybe aliens kidnapped Timothy and he won’t play,” Luca said.

“Maybe they’ll do painful experiments on him and discover why he’s such a jerk,” Paulo said.

“Okay, lads,” Trevor said. “I know many of you have good reasons to dislike some of the guys on the Storm. We need to keep calm and play our game. They’re going to be chirping at you — expect it. The best revenge is to win.”

“We beat them in the tournament. We’ll beat them again,” Paulo said.

“You’ve heard me say it before. Timothy and his crew did us a favour when they quit our team,” Trevor said. “Timothy can play, and so can Antonio, Michael, and Tyler, but . . .”

“You left out John, Coach,” Kenneth grinned.

“Let’s not be mean,” Trevor said, but Cody could see he was smiling.

Cody clenched his fists. Timothy and his crew had come up with some choice nicknames for him when they used to play with the Lions: Egg-Head, Eggy, Cue Ball, Humpty Dumpty — as if he wanted his hair to fall out! A rush of emotion surged through him.

“We’ll win because we want it more,” Cody said, eyes burning.

They all looked at him.

He forced a grin. Inside, he was mortified. He was always saying awkward things.

Paulo came to his rescue. “Cody’s right,” he said. “We worry too much about them.”

“The Lions don’t need to worry ’bout nothing! Let the Storm worry about us!” Kenneth said.

The boys let out a roar.

Trevor nodded slowly. “I’m liking that idea — very much. Great practice today, too — focused, hard-working. You’re a team, and together you’re a force to be reckoned with.” He looked to the sidelines. A few of the parents had come onto the field. “I think your parents are getting restless. Sorry for the early practice on a Saturday. I know thirteen-year-old boys enjoy their sleep. It’s tough to get practice time. There just aren’t enough fields.”

“I heard the city is building a new community centre,” William said, “and it’s gonna have four soccer fields.”

“Yeah. My mom told me that, too,” Brandon said.

“There’s a company building a factory, and in return for a building permit they’ve agreed to give the city money for the community centre. It’s also going to have a pool, a gym, and a library,” Trevor said. “Won’t be ready for a few years, but it’s still great news.”

“Awesome,” Luca said. “Kenneth could totally use more gym time.”

Kenneth flexed his arms. “It would be nice to turn these spaghetti arms into Popsicle sticks.”

Luca put an arm around his shoulders. “Bro, that’s crazed. Let’s shoot for thick string or maybe pipe cleaners.”

“The city is holding a rally at City Hall Square this afternoon,” Trevor said. “I understand there’s free food and music and . . . sounds like a good time.”

Kenneth gasped. “Coach, I gotta go. All my life I dreamed of stuffing my face with free food at City Hall — this afternoon.”

“I gotta go, too, Coach,” Luca said. “I’ve always dreamed of stuffing my face while I watch Kenneth stuffing his face . . . at City Hall this afternoon.”

Trevor waved his hand in the air. “Game time tomorrow is ten thirty. Get there an hour early, please, so we can warm up properly. And again, good practice. You all put in a great effort.”

“And more importantly, let’s meet at twelve o’clock at City Hall Square,” Kenneth said. “I’ll be the guy with five hot dogs in his hands.”

“I’ll be the guy taking five hot dogs from Kenneth,” Luca said.

Cody tried to think of something to add.

“Get going already, then,” Trevor said, laughing. He headed to the sidelines where the parents were milling about.

Cody got up. Missed his chance.

“Paulo, you in?” Kenneth said.

“Like I’m not gonna eat five hot dogs — and french fries and pizza if they have them?” Paulo said.

“William?” Luca said.

“I’m there,” he said. “My dad’s all over this factory thing. My whole family’s going.”

“My mom’s part of it, too,” Brandon said, “so I’ll be there.”

Cody wanted to go. He couldn’t just show up uninvited — he’d look totally lame. Kenneth and Luca were best friends. Paulo was always included — everyone liked him. Lost in those thoughts Cody wandered to the sidelines. Kenneth ran up beside him.

“So you want me to swing by your place or should we meet at the Square?” he said.

Cody was too startled to reply.

“What do you wanna do?” Kenneth said.

“Umm . . . don’t know, I’ll . . .”

“Easy enough for us to come over. We can bike,” Kenneth said. “See you later — and next time hit the net.”

“Sorry about that,” Cody said.

Kenneth tilted his head.

“Joking, right?” Cody said.

Kenneth flashed a thumbs-up. “You’ll figure me out eventually. Basically, everything I say is stupid.”

“I’ll try and remember,” Cody said. “See ya later.”

His mom was waving at him from the sidelines. He turned away. He could feel his face getting all hot, which meant he was blushing. Kenneth was usually good about including him in stuff. Probably felt bad for him. They’d been extra nice since he told them about his cancer.

When would things be normal?

Probably never.