BEYOND BORDERS

A Rugby Dream

Charlie Hartley

To all the girls
who aspire to be great

Beyond Borders
A Rugby Dream

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INDEX

PERSONAL STRUGGLES AND DREAMS

1 Sophie's Struggle (England):

Sophie navigates the challenges of fitting into a privileged rugby team while dreaming of attending the World Cup.

2 Tahlia's Leap (Australia):

A small-town girl works tirelessly to attend state trials and dreams of joining the Wallaroos.

3 Jordan's Balancing Act (USA):

The only girl on her high school team, Jordan struggles with identity, academics, and rugby.

4 Mele's Heritage (Samoa):

Mele plans a community fundraiser to represent her village's spirit at the World Cup.

5 Harper's Hurdles (Canada):

Harper balances life on a farm while finding creative ways to save for her World Cup trip.

6 Cat's Courage (Scotland):

A shy Highland girl learns to overcome self-doubt on and off the rugby field.

7 Eira's Fire (Wales):

Eira channels her fiery passion into teamwork while fighting to prove her team's worth.

8 Nalani's Support System (Fiji):

With the support of her close-knit village, Nalani prepares for the adventure of a lifetime.

9 Pounamu's Pride (New Zealand):

A Māori girl connects her love of rugby to her cultural heritage while planning her journey to England.

10 Siobhan's Determination (Ireland):

Siobhan juggles school, work, and rugby in her small Irish village to make her World Cup dream come true.

11 Aiko's Journey (Japan):

Aiko organizes an origami workshop to fund her World Cup trip and share her culture.

12 Isa's Energy (Spain):

A spirited Spanish girl creates a Rugby Fiesta to ignite interest in the sport.

13 Amélie's Ambitions (France):

A Parisian teen turns her love of rugby into a bake sale that inspires her community.

14 Sofia's Strength (Italy):

Sofia bakes rugby-themed treats to unite her Tuscan village and fund her World Cup journey.

15 Zola's Breakthrough (South Africa):

Zola challenges stereotypes in her Johannesburg neighbourhood through a community rugby match.

16 Camila's Passion (Brazil):

Camila brings her community together with a carnival to showcase rugby's power to unite.

SHARED DREAMS AND CONNECTIONS

17 The First Kick-Off:

Sophie and the other girls meet in England for the opening match, united by their shared love for rugby.

18 Lessons on the Field:

The girls bond over their experiences, sharing how rugby has shaped their lives.

19 Meeting Ruby Rose:

A TikTok star inspires the girls to embrace their journeys and spread rugby's message globally.

20 Sophie's New Goal:

Sophie returns home and starts a rugby club to empower girls in her school.

MAKING AN IMPACT

21 Tahlia's Wave (Australia):

Tahlia organizes a beach rugby tournament, creating better facilities for her rural town.

22 Jordan's Leadership (USA):

Jordan establishes a girls' rugby club, inspiring confidence and inclusivity.

23 Mele's Community Impact (Samoa):

Mele creates the Fa'atasi Rugby Festival, bringing her village closer through sport.

24 **Harper's Advocacy (Canada):**

Harper leads a campaign for better facilities, uniting her community around rugby.

25 **Cat's Courage (Scotland)**:

Cat inspires her village by sharing her journey, encouraging others to step out of their comfort zones.

26 **Eira's Resilience (Wales):**

Eira supports her family through difficult times, using rugby lessons to bring unity.

27 **Nalani's Family Legacy (Fiji):**

Nalani starts a family rugby tradition, fostering joy and connection in her village.

28 **Pounamu's Cultural Pride (New Zealand):**

Pounamu blends rugby and Māori heritage to empower young girls through workshops.

29 **Siobhan's New Perspective (Ireland):**

Siobhan uses her World Cup experience to inspire local youth and achieve her dreams.

30 **Aiko's Cultural Exchange (Japan):**

31 **Isa's Creative Legacy (Spain):**

Isa organizes rugby workshops for children, building a sense of community in Seville.

32 **Amélie's Girls' League (France):**

33 **Sofia's Culinary Outreach (Italy):**

34 **Layla's Inspiration (South Africa):**

Layla runs rugby workshops and breaks stereotypes in Johannesburg.

35 **Camila's Leadership (Brazil):**

Camila launches a youth rugby programme, transforming her neighbourhood and empowering kids.

LIFELONG BONDS AND GLOBAL IMPACT

36 **Lifelong Bonds:**

The girls reconnect online, celebrating their achievements and planning their future collaborations.

37 Passing the Torch:

Sophie and the girls launch a global mentorship program, using rugby to inspire the next generation.

CHAPTER 1:

Sophie's Struggle (England)

Sophie Carter stood on the muddy rugby pitch, clutching the ball tightly as rain drizzled down. Her team, the Eastfield Academy Eagles, was preparing for the biggest match of the season. Sophie loved rugby more than anything, but sometimes, she couldn't help but feel out of place. Most of the girls on her team came from private schools, their parents cheering from the sidelines in smart raincoats and expensive boots. Sophie's dad stood in the corner of the pitch, wearing his old Eastfield High hoodie, shouting encouragement. He was her biggest supporter, but even he couldn't shield her from the whispers and glances.

"She's not like us," one girl had said at training last week. Sophie heard it, even though they thought she hadn't. It stung. They weren't cruel - just different. Their parents took them to exclusive training camps and fancy tournaments. Sophie had only ever played on her local park field with her brother, Ben, who taught her to tackle by having her chase him while he held her favourite chocolate bar hostage. Rugby wasn't just a sport for Sophie - it was a dream. Watching the Women's World Cup in England felt like the ultimate goal, but getting there? That seemed as far away as the sun.

"Carter, focus!" Coach Evans barked, snapping Sophie out of her thoughts. She nodded and stepped into the drill. They were working on quick passes, and Sophie excelled here. Her grip was strong, and her throws were accurate. As she passed the ball to the team's star player, Olivia, the usual hum of chatter filled the air.

"Not bad, Sophie," Olivia said with a raised eyebrow. It was the first time Olivia had acknowledged her skills, but it came with an air of surprise, like Sophie had done something extraordinary just by keeping up. Sophie bit her tongue, refusing to let the comment get to her.

After practice, Sophie lingered, packing her kit slowly. Coach Evans approached her. "You're improving, Sophie," he said, his voice kinder than usual. "You've got a natural instinct for the game. Don't let anything hold you back." Sophie smiled weakly and nodded, though her heart was heavy. Natural instinct wasn't always enough - not when the world around you seemed to expect less from you.

At home, Sophie sat on the sofa with her dad, watching highlights from the Women's Rugby World Cup qualifiers. England's captain, Zara Mitchell, was delivering a post-match interview. "Rugby isn't just about skill," Zara was saying. "It's about heart. It's about proving to yourself that you belong, no matter where

you come from."

Sophie's dad nudged her. "You hear that, Soph? Zara went to a state school just like you. Look at her now." Sophie nodded; her eyes glued to the screen. Zara Mitchell had become her hero - proof that the dream wasn't impossible.

As the match highlights ended, Sophie turned to her dad. "I want to go to the World Cup," she said. "I want to see England play in person."

Her dad smiled. "Then we'll find a way. You've got the heart for it, Soph. That's what matters most."

For the first time in weeks, Sophie felt a flicker of hope. Maybe, just maybe, she could turn her dream into reality.

CHAPTER 2:

Tahlia's Leap (Australia)

The afternoon sun blazed over the small suburban town of Armidale, New South Wales. Tahlia Bennett wiped the sweat from her brow as she adjusted her grip on the fence, she was painting. Splashes of white paint dotted her overalls, a testament to the long hours she'd spent helping her dad on weekends.

"You're a hard worker, Tahlia," her dad said, stepping down from the ladder. "You'd make a great tradie someday."

Tahlia grinned. "Thanks, Dad, but I'm thinking rugby player might suit me better."

Her dad chuckled and looked at her kindly. "That too, kiddo. But it's a long road."

Tahlia had been playing rugby since she was eight, learning to tackle and pass alongside boys in the local league. Now, at fifteen, she was the star of her high school team. Her dream was to one day play for the Wallaroos, Australia's women's rugby team. But in her small town, rugby wasn't a priority for most girls. Many of her teammates had stopped playing, leaving her as one of the few committed players.

After finishing the fence, Tahlia grabbed her old rugby ball and headed to the local park. She practiced alone, weaving imaginary defenders and perfecting her passes against the wall. It wasn't glamorous, but she knew every kick and every sprint would bring her closer to her goal.

As she caught her breath, her phone buzzed in her pocket. It was a message from her coach: Tahlia, the state trials are next month. You've got what it takes to make the team - don't hold back.

Her heart leapt. Making the state team was a step toward her dream, but it also felt like a mountain she wasn't sure she could climb. Could a girl from a small town really make it to the top?

At home that night, Tahlia sat on her bed scrolling through photos of the Wallaroos. She stopped at an image of Shannon Parry, her favourite player, holding the ball with fierce determination. Tahlia set her phone down and picked up her journal, jotting down her goals for the year.

1. Make the state team.
2. Save enough to attend the World Cup in England.

3. Never give up.

Her mum peeked in and smiled. “Still dreaming big, Tahlia?”

Tahlia nodded. “Always, Mum.”

Her mum walked over and kissed her forehead. “Then you’ve already won half the battle.”

As Tahlia turned off the light, she clutched her rugby ball tightly. This was just the beginning, but she knew deep down that her hard work and grit would take her places she couldn’t even imagine yet.

CHAPTER 3:

Jordan's Balancing Act (USA)

Jordan Smith paced nervously on the sideline as her rugby coach blew the whistle for the start of practice. The late afternoon sunbathed the field in a golden glow, but Jordan's thoughts were clouded with worry. Being the only girl on her Atlanta high school's rugby team was tough enough, but being openly part of the LGBTQ+ community added another layer of complexity. Some of her teammates didn't fully understand her, and while most were supportive, she occasionally overheard whispers or felt stares that made her question if she truly belonged. Despite the challenges, rugby was her escape - a place where she felt powerful, free, and authentically herself. As the team began drills, Jordan tightened her ponytail, determined to prove she could handle it all.

Practice was intense, but Jordan thrived on the physicality of the game. She loved the sound of cleats pounding against the turf and the thrill of a well-timed pass. Her teammates respected her skills, but the pressure to perform was relentless. That day, the coach had her practicing tackles against the strongest player on the team, Malik. "Come on, Jordan, dig deep!" Coach hollered. Jordan gritted her teeth and lunged, managing to bring Malik to the ground. The team erupted in cheers, but Jordan barely registered them. She kept wondering if her efforts were enough - not just on the field, but in life. Between the weight of her parents' academic expectations and the societal pressure to fit in, Jordan often felt like she was carrying too much.

Later that evening, Jordan sat at her desk, staring at her math textbook. Her muscles ached, and her eyelids felt heavy. A rainbow flag she'd hung on her wall fluttered slightly in the breeze from her fan, a quiet reminder of her commitment to live authentically, even when it felt hard. "How do people do this?" she muttered. Her mom knocked softly on the door, stepping in with a glass of water. "You know, Jordan, life is about finding balance," she said gently. "You're passionate about rugby, and that's wonderful. But don't forget to give yourself time to breathe." Jordan nodded, though she wasn't sure how to make it all work. That night, she wrote out a plan: study sessions before practice, early mornings for extra reading, and weekends dedicated to rest and time with friends who truly understood her. It wasn't perfect, but it was a start.

By the end of the week, Jordan began to see a change. She felt more in control of her time, and her focus during practice improved. Malik, who had always been her

toughest competitor, gave her a nod after a particularly fierce game. “You’re killing it out there, Smith,” he said, offering her a fist bump. The acknowledgment felt like a bridge between her world of rugby and her personal identity. Her coach noticed her dedication and pulled her aside after the game. “Jordan, I can see how hard you’re working. Keep it up, and you’ll be unstoppable.” For the first time in weeks, Jordan smiled with genuine pride. Balancing rugby, school, and her identity was no longer a burden but a challenge she could rise to meet. As the World Cup drew closer, Jordan’s determination to see her team play in England burned brighter than ever - a beacon of hope that rugby could be a place where she belonged, entirely and unapologetically herself.

CHAPTER 4:

Mele's Heritage (Samoa)

Mele Fata sat on the cool grass of her village rugby field, her feet bare and her heart full of excitement. The sea breeze carried the sound of her cousins laughing as they passed the rugby ball back and forth. Rugby was a way of life in Samoa, a sport that brought the community together and filled Mele with pride. She had always dreamed of seeing her national team, the Manusina, play in the Women's World Cup. But for a girl from a small village, the dream felt as distant as the horizon over the Pacific.

That evening, Mele's family gathered around a long table for a shared meal under the stars. The conversation turned to the upcoming World Cup, and Mele hesitantly shared her dream. "I want to go to England and watch the Manusina play," she said, her voice trembling with hope. Her father looked at her thoughtfully, then smiled. "Rugby isn't just a sport for us, Mele. It's about family and community. If this is your dream, we'll find a way to support you." Her older brother, a former rugby player himself, chimed in, "We'll organize a village fundraiser. You represent us all when you follow your dreams."

The next morning, Mele and her family got to work. Her mother cooked trays of Samoan delicacies, while her father and brother prepared the rugby field for a community match. Mele spent the day inviting neighbours to the event, her excitement growing with every promise of support. That weekend, the entire village came together. The match was filled with laughter, competition, and pride. By the end of the day, Mele had raised enough for her flight. As she watched the sunset over the ocean, Mele felt a swell of gratitude. Rugby had taught her that dreams weren't just personal - they were a reflection of the community that raised her.

In the weeks leading up to her trip, Mele practiced her English with her cousins and learned as much as she could about the other teams in the World Cup. She felt a deep connection to her heritage and knew that her journey was about more than just watching a game. She was carrying the hopes of her village with her, a testament to the power of family and the unifying spirit of rugby. With her ticket in hand and her heart full of determination, Mele was ready to take on the adventure of a lifetime.

CHAPTER 5:

Harper's Hurdles (Canada)

Harper Sinclair wiped her brow as she stacked hay bales in the barn. Life on her family's farm in rural Alberta was rewarding but exhausting. Harper's passion for rugby had always been her escape, a way to break free from the monotony of farm chores. The game's physicality and strategy made her feel alive, but living so far from major cities often made pursuing her passion a logistical challenge. Her dream of seeing Canada play in the Women's Rugby World Cup felt like reaching for the stars.

One chilly evening, Harper shared her dream with her parents over dinner. "I want to go to England to watch the World Cup," she said, her voice tinged with hesitation. Her dad set down his coffee mug and leaned forward. "It's a big trip, Harper. How do you plan to make it happen?" Her mother chimed in with a gentle smile, "You've always been resourceful. If anyone can figure it out, it's you." Encouraged by their support, Harper decided to act. She created a plan to save money and started researching ways to make her trip a reality.

Harper turned to her community for help. She organized a farm-to-table dinner event, showcasing the fresh produce from her family's land. The local rugby club supported her efforts, spreading the word and donating items for a raffle. On the night of the event, the barn was transformed with fairy lights, long tables, and the aroma of homemade dishes. Harper shared her story with the guests, explaining how rugby had shaped her life and how much it would mean to see her national team play. By the end of the evening, she had raised enough money to book her flight.

With her trip secured, Harper felt a renewed sense of determination. She realized that overcoming obstacles wasn't just about personal ambition; it was about rallying a community to support a shared dream. As she packed her bags, she reflected on how rugby had taught her resilience and adaptability - qualities she knew would serve her well in England. Harper was ready for the adventure ahead, carrying the spirit of her small town with her to the world's biggest rugby stage.

CHAPTER 6:

Cat's Courage (Scotland)

Catriona "Cat" MacGregor stood at the edge of the rugby pitch, her cleats digging into the damp Highland grass. The misty air felt like a shield, hiding her from the world. A quiet girl from a small village in the Scottish Highlands, Cat had always loved rugby but struggled with self-doubt. Watching her older brothers play had inspired her to join the local team, but every time she stepped onto the field, she felt like she didn't belong. The other girls seemed so confident, while Cat often hesitated, afraid to make a mistake.

At practice one evening, Coach Maclean called the team into a huddle. "We've been invited to play a friendly match in Inverness next month," she announced. The girls cheered, but Cat's stomach sank. The thought of playing in front of a crowd made her palms sweat. She worried about letting her team down. Sensing her unease, her best friend Isla nudged her. "You're one of the best players, Cat. You just need to believe it," she said with a reassuring smile. Cat wanted to believe her, but fear held her back.

Determined to improve, Cat stayed after practice to work on her passing and tackling. Coach Maclean noticed her effort and offered words of encouragement. "Confidence comes from repetition," the coach said. "Every time you push yourself, you're building strength, not just in your body but in your mind." Slowly, Cat began to see progress. Her passes became sharper, her tackles more precise. The support of her teammates and coach helped her find courage she didn't know she had.

On the day of the match in Inverness, Cat's nerves returned as she faced the bustling crowd. But when the game started, something shifted. She remembered the hours of practice, the encouragement from Isla, and the coach's advice. Midway through the match, Cat intercepted a pass and sprinted toward the try line. The roar of her teammates spurred her on as she scored her first try. The crowd erupted in cheers, and for the first time, Cat felt like she truly belonged.

After the game, Isla hugged her tightly. "I told you - you're amazing!" she said. Cat beamed, her self-doubt melting away. She realized that courage wasn't about never feeling afraid; it was about stepping onto the field despite the fear. As she walked off the pitch, Cat felt a new sense of confidence, ready to take on any challenge, both on and off the rugby field.

CHAPTER 7:

Eira's Fire (Wales)

Eira Davies raced down the rugby pitch, the cold Welsh wind biting at her cheeks. The muddy field in her small town seemed to mirror her relentless, determined spirit. Fiercely competitive and driven to win, Eira often pushed herself and her teammates to their limits. She wanted nothing more than to be the best - and to prove to everyone that her team could compete with the top clubs in Wales.

Her fiery passion was evident in every game, but it sometimes caused friction. During one match, Eira shouted at a teammate who had fumbled the ball. "You've got to hold on to it tighter!" she barked. The girl's face flushed as she nodded, but Eira didn't notice. Her focus was solely on winning. That single-mindedness helped her team secure a narrow victory that day, but the celebratory mood was dampened. Some teammates avoided her gaze, and their usually lively post-game chatter was muted. Eira didn't understand why no one seemed excited about their win.

At practice the next week, Coach Jenkins pulled Eira aside. "You're a talented player, Eira," he began, "but rugby isn't just about winning. It's about working together. A team isn't strong because of one person - it's strong because every player feels valued." His words stung, but Eira knew he was right. She thought about her teammates, how she had focused more on their mistakes than their efforts. Determined to change, Eira decided to channel her fiery energy into encouragement instead of criticism.

In the next match, Eira made a conscious effort to support her teammates. When her friend Beth tackled an opponent, Eira shouted, "Great tackle, Beth!" When another teammate hesitated, Eira passed the ball back with a reassuring smile. Her team played with a renewed energy, and their communication on the field improved. They didn't win that game, but Eira noticed something more important - their camaraderie felt stronger than ever.

After the match, Beth clapped Eira on the back. "You were a real captain out there today," she said. Eira felt a warmth she hadn't experienced before. She realized that winning was important, but building trust and respect within the team mattered even more. From that day forward, Eira's passion for rugby was balanced by her newfound understanding of teamwork, and her team grew stronger together.

CHAPTER 8:

Nalani's Support System (Fiji)

Nalani Koro wiped the sweat from her brow as she carried a basket of taro from her family's field to the village centre. Life in her small Fijian village was simple but demanding, with everyone pitching in to support their community. Despite the hard work, Nalani's heart was full of dreams - dreams of seeing the Fijian women's rugby team play at the World Cup in England.

Rugby was more than a sport in Fiji; it was a way of life, bringing families and villages together. Nalani had grown up watching local matches, her father cheering loudly from the sidelines while her mother explained the game's intricacies. She played touch rugby with her cousins in the evenings, her speed and agility earning her the nickname "Nalani the Rocket." But for all her love of the game, the idea of traveling to England to see the World Cup felt like an impossible dream. Plane tickets and accommodations were far beyond her family's means.

One evening, as her family gathered around the kava bowl, Nalani shared her dream. "I want to go to England and watch our team play," she said hesitantly. Her father looked at her thoughtfully, then smiled. "If it's important to you, we'll find a way," he said. Her mother nodded in agreement. "The whole village can help," she added. That week, Nalani's family and neighbours began planning a fundraiser. They decided to host a village feast and rugby tournament, inviting nearby communities to join in the festivities.

The event was a resounding success. Families came from neighbouring villages, bringing food, laughter, and their love for rugby. Nalani helped organize the games, ensuring everything ran smoothly. When it was her turn to play, she darted across the field, scoring a try to the cheers of the crowd. The money raised was enough to cover her trip, but the experience meant much more. Nalani saw how deeply her community supported her dreams, and she felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

As she packed for England, her parents handed her a small woven bracelet. "This is from all of us," her father said. "A reminder that no matter where you go, your village is with you." Tears filled Nalani's eyes as she hugged them. She promised to bring back stories and memories to share with everyone. With her village's unwavering support, Nalani boarded the plane to England, ready to cheer on her team and represent her community.

CHAPTER 9:

Pounamu's Pride (New Zealand)

Pounamu Terewai stood at the edge of Lake Taupō, gazing at the mist rising from the water. The calm surface mirrored her reflection, her dark curls spilling from a loose braid. She loved the serenity of her small New Zealand town, surrounded by mountains and rivers, but her heart ached for the thrill of rugby. For Pounamu, rugby was more than a game - it was a connection to her Māori heritage and a symbol of unity and strength.

Pounamu's grandmother, her kuia, often told her stories of wāhine toa - strong Māori women who overcame challenges and led their communities. "You have that same strength, moko," her kuia said one evening, as they watched a televised match of the Black Ferns. "Never forget where you come from." Those words echoed in Pounamu's mind when she learned the World Cup would be held in England. She dreamed of seeing the Black Ferns play on the world stage, but the cost of the trip felt like an insurmountable barrier.

Undeterred, Pounamu turned to her community for ideas. Her rugby team helped her brainstorm, and soon a plan took shape: they would host a fundraiser incorporating Māori culture. The team organized a haka performance, a hangi feast, and a touch rugby tournament. Pounamu spent weeks helping prepare, weaving flax decorations and practicing the haka alongside her teammates. The event drew crowds from across the region, blending the love of rugby with the pride of their heritage.

The fundraiser was more than successful - it became a celebration of their community's spirit. Pounamu's kuia performed a karakia, a prayer of thanks, as the funds were tallied. "You've made us proud, moko," she said, embracing her granddaughter. As Pounamu packed her bag for England, she tucked a small carved pounamu, or greenstone, necklace into her suitcase - a gift from her kuia. "This will keep you connected to home," her grandmother said.

When Pounamu boarded the plane, her heart swelled with excitement and gratitude. She knew she wasn't just traveling to watch rugby; she was carrying her culture and community with her. The chants of the haka echoed in her mind, reminding her of her strength and the pride of her ancestors. With determination and love for her heritage, Pounamu was ready to represent her home on the world stage.

CHAPTER 10:

Siobhan's Determination (Ireland)

Siobhan O'Connor pushed her auburn curls from her face as she leaned over the counter of McDonagh's Café, scribbling her name on the rota for extra shifts. "Siobhan, you'll wear yourself out," said Nora, her coworker and friend, stacking plates behind her. "Not with this goal in mind," Siobhan replied, her green eyes sparkling with determination.

Rugby wasn't just a sport for Siobhan - it was a legacy. Her dad had played for the local team, and her older brother now competed in college leagues. For Siobhan, playing rugby felt like a way to stay connected to her family and her small, tight-knit village outside Dublin. When she learned about the Women's Rugby World Cup in England, she knew she had to go. "Imagine seeing Ireland on the world stage!" she told her family at dinner. But her excitement was tempered by the cost of the trip.

Determined to make it happen, Siobhan devised a plan. Between school, rugby practice, and her shifts at the café, she calculated how much she could save each week. She also started baking soda bread and scones with her gran, selling them at the village market on Saturdays. The community rallied around her. "I'll take two loaves for the price of three," joked Mr. Daly, the local postman, tossing coins into her jar. Siobhan smiled, her confidence growing with every small victory.

One afternoon, after rugby practice, Siobhan's coach pulled her aside. "You've been pushing yourself hard, Siobhan. Remember, rugby is about balance too - on and off the field." Siobhan nodded, realising she had been so focused on her goal that she was missing the joy of the game. From then on, she approached her training with renewed enthusiasm, sharing laughs with her teammates and celebrating small wins on the pitch.

As her savings grew, so did her excitement. Her parents surprised her with an early birthday gift: a ticket to the semi-finals. "You earned this," her dad said, his voice thick with pride. On the evening before her flight, Siobhan packed her Irish rugby jersey, knowing she was carrying her family's love and her community's support to England. "This isn't just about rugby," she thought. "It's about showing what determination and a little help from others can achieve." With that, she boarded the plane, ready for the adventure of a lifetime.

CHAPTER 11:

Aiko's Journey (Japan)

Aiko Nakamura adjusted her hijab as she walked past the school bulletin board, her eyes catching a flyer that read, "Community Fundraiser: Ideas Welcome!" Her heart raced. The Women's Rugby World Cup in England was just months away, and Aiko longed to see her team play on the global stage. But the trip was an impossible expense for her family. This fundraiser could be the answer.

At home in Yokohama, Aiko sat at the kitchen table, her notebook open and pen tapping against her chin. Her father, always encouraging, joined her with a warm smile. "What are you thinking of Aiko? A bake sale? A car wash?" he asked.

"Those are good," Aiko replied thoughtfully, "but I want to do something meaningful - something that represents our community." Her gaze landed on a stack of origami paper nearby. Aiko had always loved the art of folding paper, creating intricate cranes and flowers that her mother proudly displayed. An idea began to form. "What if I held an origami workshop? It's traditional, creative, and something everyone can enjoy."

Her father nodded. "Great idea! That sounds perfect. Let's make it happen."

With the school's approval, Aiko spent the next week preparing. She designed flyers with simple, colourful illustrations of origami cranes and passed them out around her neighbourhood. Her classmates offered to help, and even her rugby teammates joined in, promising to spread the word.

When the day of the workshop arrived, Aiko stood nervously in the community centre, surrounded by stacks of brightly coloured paper. For a moment, she feared no one would come. But as the clock struck ten, the room began to fill. Children, parents, and elderly neighbours gathered, curious and eager to learn.

Aiko took a deep breath and began demonstrating how to fold a basic crane. Her fingers moved with practiced precision, and soon, the room buzzed with chatter and laughter as people tried their hand at origami.

"This is harder than it looks!" one man joked, crumpling his paper in mock frustration.

Aiko smiled. "It just takes practice. Try again."

By the end of the day, the workshop had not only raised a significant amount of money but also strengthened the bonds within her community. Aiko felt a surge of pride as participants left, carrying their paper creations and offering her words of encouragement.

In the weeks leading up to her trip, Aiko continued her rugby training with renewed confidence. Her teammates noticed her growing determination, and even her coach remarked on her focus during practice. When the day finally came to leave for England, her neighbourhood gathered to see her off.

As she stood at the train station, a young girl handed her a bundle of paper cranes. “These are for good luck,” the girl said shyly.

Aiko’s eyes welled with tears as she hugged the cranes to her chest. Each one carried messages of encouragement and hope from her community. “Thank you,” she said softly.

On the plane, Aiko looked out the window, the cranes resting in her lap. Her journey to the World Cup was about more than rugby - it was about the support of those who believed in her, the beauty of her culture, and the connections she had yet to make with girls from around the world.

As the plane soared into the sky, Aiko whispered to herself, “This is just the beginning.”

CHAPTER 12:

Isa's Energy (Spain)

Isabella "Isa" Serrano twirled a soccer ball under her foot as she sat on the steps outside her family's café in Madrid. The café buzzed with customers, but Isa's mind was elsewhere - on rugby. Though football was the sport of choice for most kids in her neighbourhood, Isa had fallen in love with rugby during a school PE class. Now, the Women's Rugby World Cup in England was all she could think about. But getting there? That was a different challenge.

"Isa, can you help wipe tables?" her mum called from the doorway. Isa nodded and headed inside, her brain still buzzing with ideas. While cleaning, she overheard her parents discussing ways to attract more customers. That sparked an idea: a rugby-themed event at the café. If she could bring the community together for something fun, she might raise enough money to fund her trip.

The next day, Isa pitched her plan to her parents. "A Rugby Fiesta!" she said enthusiastically. "We could have games, food stalls, and a raffle with rugby prizes." Her dad raised an eyebrow but smiled. "That sounds ambitious, Isa. Are you sure you can pull it off?" Isa grinned. "I'll get the whole neighbourhood involved!"

With her parents' approval, Isa set to work. She roped in her friends to create flyers and spread the word. The local rugby club donated gear for the raffle, and her grandmother offered to make paella to sell during the event. Isa's energy was contagious, and soon, the entire neighbourhood was buzzing about the Rugby Fiesta.

The day of the event dawned bright and sunny. Isa wore her favourite rugby jersey and manned the game booth, where kids tried their hand at passing rugby balls through targets. The café's patio transformed into a mini rugby pitch for demonstrations, and the smell of freshly cooked paella filled the air. As the raffle tickets sold out and the games drew laughter from every corner, Isa felt a swell of pride. Her community had come together in a way she'd never seen before.

By the end of the day, Isa counted the money raised and realized they had surpassed their goal. Her parents hugged her, beaming with pride. "You brought everyone together, Isa," her dad said. "This was more than a fundraiser - it was a celebration."

When the time came to leave for England, Isa packed her rugby jersey and a small Spanish flag. As she waved goodbye to her family and neighbours, she felt a new sense of purpose. This wasn't just about her love for rugby - it was about showing the world the strength of her community and the power of one determined girl.

CHAPTER 13:

Amélie's Ambitions (France)

Amélie Laurent's alarm buzzed, pulling her from a restless sleep. She reached for her phone, groaning as the bright light filled the room. Another day of balancing rugby practice, school, and her part-time job lay ahead. Living in Paris had its charms, but it wasn't easy for a teenager with big dreams and limited resources. Amélie stared at the poster on her wall of Les Bleues, the French women's rugby team. She had followed every match they played, dreaming of seeing them live at the Women's Rugby World Cup in England. "One day," she whispered to herself.

After school, Amélie biked across the bustling streets to her part-time job at a bakery. While frosting éclairs, she overheard her boss chatting with a customer about a local rugby tournament. "Amateurs and enthusiasts alike!" the customer said with excitement. Amélie's ears perked up. An idea began to form. Maybe she could organise a small fundraiser tied to the tournament and use the money to fund her trip to England. "Would you sponsor me?" she hesitantly asked her boss. "I'll even wear a bakery-branded jersey."

Her boss chuckled. "Why not? It'll be good publicity. But you'll have to do the hard work."

The next day, Amélie pitched her idea to her teammates during practice. "A rugby bake sale at the tournament," she said, passing out flyers she had quickly designed. "We'll sell pastries, bread, and drinks. The proceeds can help with travel expenses." Her teammates, impressed by her ambition, agreed to help.

The tournament day arrived, and the bake sale was a hit. Spectators eagerly bought croissants and baguettes, charmed by Amélie's passion and the team's spirit. Between matches, she talked about her dream of attending the World Cup, inspiring others to donate generously. Her teammates cheered her on, and by the end of the day, they had raised more than enough for her trip.

That evening, as she biked home, Amélie reflected on how much she had learned. Her love for rugby wasn't just about the game - it was about the camaraderie and the determination it inspired in her. Checking her phone, she noticed a message from Sophie, the girl from England she had connected with on social media. "Can't wait to meet you in England!" it read.

Amélie smiled, her heart swelling with excitement. Her journey to the World Cup had already begun, not just as a fan but as a determined girl forging her path. She couldn't wait to meet the others who shared her passion and to cheer for Les

Bleues, knowing she had turned her ambition into reality.

CHAPTER 14:

Sofia's Strength (Italy)

Sofia Romano adjusted her rugby boots, looking across the field where her teammates were warming up. The smell of fresh grass mixed with the faint aroma of espresso drifting from a nearby café. Sofia loved her small town in Tuscany, but sometimes she felt like it was too small for her big dreams. Her father ran a bakery, and her mother worked long hours as a nurse. Rugby was her escape - a place where she could be herself. But it wasn't easy being one of the few girls in town playing a sport many still considered "for boys."

"Sofia! Are you ready?" Coach Vieri's voice snapped her back to the present. She nodded and ran to join her teammates. During practice, Sofia's mind wandered. She had been saving every euro she could from helping at her father's bakery, dreaming of traveling to England to watch the Women's Rugby World Cup. Seeing the Italian team on such a big stage felt like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But with her family's modest income, Sofia worried it was just that - a dream.

That evening, as she kneaded dough in the bakery, her father noticed her furrowed brow. "What's on your mind, piccolina?" he asked. Sofia hesitated, then told him about her World Cup dream. Her father smiled. "You're stronger than you think, Sofia. If you want this, we'll find a way." Inspired, Sofia came up with a plan: she would bake and sell special "Rugby Biscuits" shaped like rugby balls, with the proceeds going toward her trip.

The next day, Sofia placed a basket of biscuits on the bakery counter with a sign reading, "Support Sofia's Rugby Dream!" Customers were intrigued, and word spread quickly. Neighbours stopped by, not just to buy biscuits but to offer encouragement. Even the local rugby club pitched in, buying dozens to support her.

As the weeks went by, Sofia's savings grew. Her mother, initially hesitant about the trip, saw how hard Sofia was working and began to support her efforts. "You're showing everyone what determination looks like," her mother said one evening, hugging her tightly.

Finally, the day came when Sofia had enough money for her trip. She packed her bag with her favourite Italy jersey and a small journal to document her adventure. Before leaving, her father handed her a box of Rugby Biscuits. "For the friends you'll make," he said with a wink.

When Sofia arrived in England, she was nervous but excited to meet the other girls she had connected with online. As they shared stories of their journeys, Sofia

realised they all had faced challenges to be there. Her heart swelled with pride - not just for herself, but for the strength and resilience of her new friends. Together, they were living proof that rugby was for everyone, no matter where you came from or what obstacles stood in your way.

Sofia smiled, knowing this experience would stay with her forever. She wasn't just cheering for Italy; she was cheering for a sport that united them all.

CHAPTER 15:

Zola's Breakthrough (South Africa)

Zola Ndlovu dribbled the rugby ball across the dusty field in her Johannesburg neighbourhood. The setting sun cast a warm orange glow over the small patch of land the kids called their "stadium." Zola's dream was to play rugby on a real pitch one day, but she knew the road ahead wasn't easy. Opportunities were limited, especially for girls, and she often faced scepticism about her passion for the sport. "Rugby is for boys," some neighbours would say, shaking their heads as she practiced. But Zola's determination never wavered.

That evening, Zola sat with her grandmother, who had raised her since she was a child. Her grandmother's stories of resilience during apartheid had always inspired Zola. "You fight for what you love, Zola," she said. "That's how we change the world." Those words echoed in Zola's mind as she scrolled through her phone later that night. An ad for the Women's Rugby World Cup flashed across her screen. Zola's heart raced as she thought about watching her heroes represent South Africa on a global stage. But how could she afford such a trip?

The next day, Zola gathered her closest friends and shared her idea. "What if we host a community rugby match and charge a small entry fee? We can call it the Dream Match, and the money can help fund my trip." Her friends immediately supported her, offering to help organize the event. Word spread quickly, and soon, local businesses donated snacks, water, and even a few rugby balls. The excitement grew as the entire neighbourhood rallied around Zola's dream.

On the day of the Dream Match, the field was packed with spectators. Zola captained her team, and they played with a fierce spirit that brought cheers from the crowd. As the match ended, Zola's team celebrated their victory, but the real triumph came when she counted the donations. It was enough to buy a ticket to England. Tears filled her eyes as she hugged her friends and family. "This isn't just my dream - it's ours," she said.

A week later, Zola found herself boarding a plane for the first time. The journey felt surreal, and when she arrived in England, she was overwhelmed by the bustling crowds and the green pitches she had only seen on TV. Meeting the other girls she had connected with online was a highlight. They came from different parts of the world, but their shared love for rugby created an instant bond.

As Zola sat in the stands during South Africa's first match, she felt a sense of belonging she had never experienced before. She knew her journey was about more

than rugby - it was about breaking barriers, challenging stereotypes, and proving that dreams could come true with the support of a community. Zola cheered loudly, her voice blending with thousands of others, united by the sport she loved.

CHAPTER 16:

Camila's Passion (Brazil)

Camila Oliveira's voice echoed through the small, bustling favela square. "Vamos, pessoal! Let's show the world what Brazilian rugby is all about!" She waved her arms enthusiastically, rallying the children around her. Her vibrant energy was infectious, and soon the kids were laughing and trying their best to toss the rugby ball she had brought. Camila had always been the heart of her community, bringing people together through her boundless optimism and love for rugby.

Growing up in Rio de Janeiro, Camila had discovered rugby through a local sports program aimed at empowering youth. While football dominated every corner of Brazil, Camila was drawn to the grit and teamwork that rugby demanded. She dreamed of watching the Brazilian women's team, known as the Yaras, compete at the World Cup. But flights to England were far beyond her family's means. Determined not to let that stop her, Camila came up with a bold idea: a community rugby carnival.

The carnival quickly became the talk of the neighbourhood. Camila enlisted the help of her friends and family to set up food stalls, organize music performances, and create mini rugby games for kids. Local businesses donated supplies, and her favourite samba band volunteered to perform. "This isn't just for me," Camila told her mother as they hung colourful banners. "It's for all of us - to show the world what we can do together."

On the day of the carnival, the square was transformed into a lively celebration. Samba music filled the air, children painted their faces with the Brazilian flag, and the smell of grilled pão de queijo wafted through the crowd. Camila hosted rugby demonstrations, teaching anyone who was curious about the sport. As the day went on, people eagerly contributed to her travel fund, inspired by her passion and determination.

When the final tally was counted, Camila was overwhelmed by the support. She had raised enough money not only for her flight but also for a banner to take to England that read, "Proud of the Yaras!" Her community had come together to make her dream a reality. "You carry our spirit with you," her coach said as he handed her a small Brazilian flag.

Arriving in England was a whirlwind. Camila marvelled at the green fields, historic stadiums, and the sea of fans from all over the world. Meeting the other girls she had connected with online was like finding long-lost sisters. Despite their

different languages and cultures, they bonded instantly over their shared love for rugby.

At Brazil's first match, Camila waved her flag high and led cheers in Portuguese, her voice carrying above the crowd. She felt immense pride knowing she had brought a piece of her community with her. As the game unfolded, Camila's heart swelled with the realization that rugby wasn't just a sport - it was a force that united people, transcending borders and backgrounds.

CHAPTER 17:

The First Kick-off

Sophie was scrolling through Instagram one evening when she stumbled upon a post from the official World Rugby account. The caption read: "The biggest celebration of women's rugby kicks off on 22 August 2025, with hosts England facing the USA at Sunderland's Stadium of Light! Who's ready for history in the making?"

Sophie's heart skipped a beat. The Women's Rugby World Cup was no longer just a dream - it was happening. As she scrolled through the comments, one caught her eye:

"I can't believe I got tickets! It's my first World Cup, and I'd love to meet others who are going too. Let's make this unforgettable! – Layla from South Africa"

Sophie hesitated before typing. "I'm going too! I'd love to meet up as well."

More replies followed. Tahlia from Australia wrote about her excitement for her first trip overseas. Aiko from Japan mentioned her nerves about traveling so far alone. Camila from Brazil chimed in with her trademark enthusiasm: "This is going to be amazing - can't wait to meet all of you!"

Layla suggested creating a WhatsApp group to coordinate plans. Within minutes, Sophie received a message inviting her to the group, and soon the chat was buzzing. Introductions poured in, and the girls began sharing stories about their journeys. Siobhan shared a picture of her ticket with a note that read, "Dreams really do come true." Nalani from Fiji sent a selfie surrounded by her family, holding a sign that read, "Go Fiji, Go!"

As the weeks passed, the group became like a second family. They exchanged tips about travel, discussed what to wear for England's unpredictable weather, and planned where to meet before the opening match. Aiko suggested creating a banner for their group, and Tahlia volunteered to bring markers and supplies.

Finally, the big day arrived 22 August, 2025. Sophie arrived early at Sunderland's Stadium of Light, carrying the banner they had all planned together. The words "Girls Who Love Rugby" stretched across it in bright, bold colours. As she waited, the buzz of the crowd filled the air, and the iconic stadium loomed behind her.

One by one, the girls arrived. Layla was the first, waving a South African flag with a beaming smile. Aiko followed, shyly clutching her Japanese jersey. Soon, Camila came running, shouting, "We made it!" By the time everyone gathered, their excitement was palpable.

They posed for a group photo, holding the banner high as fans milled around them. “This is going to be iconic,” Camila declared as she snapped a selfie of their beaming faces with the stadium behind them.

Inside the stadium, the atmosphere was electric. As the English team emerged from the tunnel, the crowd erupted in cheers. Sophie glanced at Layla, who was waving her flag enthusiastically. “Can you believe we’re actually here?” Sophie asked.

Layla grinned. “Not at all, but it feels like we belong.”

As the whistle blew to start the match, the girls cheered together, blending their voices with thousands of fans. The energy of the game swept them up, and for that moment, it didn’t matter which team they supported - they were united by their shared love for rugby and the incredible journey that had brought them together.

After the match, as they walked through the bustling streets of Sunderland, they couldn’t stop talking about the game and the experience of finally meeting in person. Layla raised her voice above the chatter and said, “This is just the start. We have so many more matches to enjoy together.”

Sophie nodded. “And lots of wonderful memories to make,” she added.

That night, they made a pact to stick together for the rest of the tournament, cheering for each other’s teams and celebrating the incredible spirit of women’s rugby that had brought them from all corners of the globe to Sunderland’s Stadium of Light.

CHAPTER 18:
Lessons on the Field

The morning sun streamed through the large windows of a quaint café near the Stadium of Light. The streets outside were buzzing with rugby fans, their chatter and excitement carrying over from the previous night's thrilling match between England and the USA. Inside, the girls sat around a cozy table, cups of tea and coffee in hand, their faces still glowing with the energy of the game.

"I still can't believe we were there," Sophie said, her England scarf draped over her chair. "The atmosphere, the crowd - it was unreal."

"It was incredible," Tahlia added, stirring her coffee. "The way England played - so precise. But the USA team had such grit. I was on the edge of my seat the whole time."

Jordan nodded. "It's not just about the game, though, is it? Watching it with all of you made it even better."

As they recounted their favourite moments from the match, a conversation sparked about what rugby meant to each of them. Mele shared how rugby connected her to her Samoan heritage, while Siobhan talked about her family's deep rugby legacy in Ireland.

"It's funny," Pounamu said thoughtfully, her New Zealand All Blacks jersey catching the light. "We've all come from such different places, but we're here because of the same dream."

Sofia smiled. "It's more than a dream - it's a shared passion. Rugby brought us together in ways nothing else could."

The girls leaned in as Jordan pulled out her phone. "Speaking of shared passion," she said, scrolling through her feed, "Ruby Rose, that TikTok rugby star, posted about how she's been inspired by all the fans at the World Cup. She's hosting a meet-and-greet at Sunderland Rugby Club later today."

The group's excitement was immediate. "We have to go," Isa said, her voice brimming with enthusiasm.

Later that morning, the girls finalised their plans and took a photo together outside the café, each holding their country's flag. Sophie shared it on social media with the caption: "From all over the world, united by rugby dreams. #WorldCup2025."

As they headed off to prepare for the meet-and-greet, the girls felt a deeper connection forming. The World Cup was no longer just a dream fulfilled; it was becoming the foundation of a bond they knew would last far beyond the tournament.

In the café's quiet after they left, their laughter and conversation lingered like a warm memory - a sign of friendships built on shared dreams and a sport that knew no boundaries.

CHAPTER 19:

Meeting Ruby Rose

The girls arrived at Sunderland Rugby Club that afternoon, buzzing with anticipation. The pitch stretched out before them, a vivid green bordered by the historic clubhouse where rugby fans milled about, waiting for the meet-and-greet with Ruby Rose, the famous TikTok rugby star. A long table was set up outside, draped with banners celebrating the Women's Rugby World Cup, and the atmosphere was electric with chatter and excitement.

"This is surreal," Isa said, adjusting her Spain scarf. "I've watched all her videos, but I never thought I'd meet her in person."

"She's more than a TikToker," Jordan added. "She's an inspiration - showing that rugby is for everyone."

Ruby appeared moments later, her signature smile lighting up the crowd. She waved enthusiastically and picked up the mic. "Hey everyone! Thanks for coming out. It's amazing to see so many rugby fans here, celebrating this incredible World Cup."

The girls joined the queue, chatting about their favourite moments from Ruby's videos. When it was finally their turn, Ruby greeted them warmly. "Wow, what a group! Are you all here together?"

"We are now," Sophie said, grinning. "We've come from all over the world to see the World Cup."

Ruby's eyes lit up. "That's incredible! Tell me more."

Each girl shared her story in turn - how rugby had shaped her life, the challenges she had overcome, and the determination it took to make the journey to England. Ruby listened intently, her admiration growing with every word.

"You girls are amazing," she said finally. "This is what rugby is all about - bringing people together, breaking barriers, and inspiring others. Can I get a photo with you all?"

The group gathered close, flags draped over their shoulders, as Ruby snapped a selfie. "You've just inspired me," she said, smiling. "I'll be sharing your story with my followers. The world needs to hear it."

After the meet-and-greet, the girls wandered the grounds of the rugby club, soaking in the camaraderie of the event. They talked to fans from other countries, traded rugby pins, and even joined in on an impromptu touch rugby game organized by the club.

As the sun began to set, they gathered on the clubhouse steps, watching players of all ages laughing and competing on the pitch.

“I feel like we’ve become part of something so much bigger than ourselves,” Tahlia said.

“We have,” Sofia agreed. “This is what rugby does - it connects people, no matter where they’re from.”

As the evening wrapped up, the girls made a pact to keep their friendship alive. They agreed to start a group social media account to share their journey and promote the values of rugby. They knew this was just the beginning of something extraordinary.

As they left the club, the floodlights illuminating the pitch behind them, their bond felt unshakable - a testament to the power of shared dreams and the sport that had brought them together.

CHAPTER 20:

Sophie's New Goal

Sophie sat on the bus ride back to her small town in England, her heart brimming with excitement and purpose. Watching England play in the World Cup and meeting the other girls had reignited her passion for rugby. But it wasn't just about her anymore - Sophie wanted to make rugby more accessible to girls from state schools like hers.

At school the next week, Sophie approached her PE teacher, Mr. Miller. "I want to start a rugby club," she said. "For girls like me who don't think they belong on the pitch."

Mr. Miller raised an eyebrow. "That's ambitious, Sophie. You'd need to recruit players, get permission from the headteacher, and find equipment."

Sophie nodded, undeterred. "I know, but I think it's worth it. Rugby gave me confidence, and I want other girls to feel that too."

Over the following weeks, Sophie worked tirelessly. She created posters for the club, listing reasons to try rugby: building confidence, making friends, and having fun. She spent her lunch breaks explaining the sport to curious classmates, sharing her story of how rugby had transformed her life.

To her surprise, a group of girls signed up, eager to give rugby a try. Sophie organised their first practice, borrowing old equipment from the boys' team. It wasn't perfect, but as the girls laughed and cheered each other on, Sophie felt a swell of pride.

"We're actually doing this," said Leah, one of the new players, after scoring her first try.

Sophie grinned. "We're just getting started."

By the end of the term, Sophie's club had grown. The headteacher agreed to allocate a small budget for proper equipment, and Mr. Miller volunteered to coach alongside Sophie.

At their first inter-school match, Sophie watched from the sidelines as her team played with determination and joy. They didn't win, but the girls walked off the pitch with smiles and muddy knees, already excited for the next game.

As Sophie packed up, Mr. Miller patted her on the shoulder. "You've done something amazing here, Sophie."

Sophie looked out at her teammates, her heart full. "I just wanted them to feel what I felt," she said. "And to know they belong."

That night, Sophie posted in the group chat with the other girls from the World Cup. Started a club today. We didn't win, but we had a blast. Thanks for inspiring me to make this happen!

The replies came quickly, filled with encouragement and pride. Sophie smiled, knowing that no matter where they were in the world, her new friends were rooting for her.

CHAPTER 21:

Tahlia's Wave

Back home in her coastal town in Australia, Tahlia stood on the beach, watching the waves crash against the shore. The World Cup experience had changed her - seeing the world's best players, meeting the girls from different countries, and sharing their stories had filled her with a new sense of purpose.

Her small town had always lacked resources for sports, especially for girls. The rugby field was uneven, the equipment outdated, and most of the focus was on boys' teams. Tahlia decided it was time to change that.

Tahlia approached her school principal, Mr. Edwards, with an idea. "We need better facilities for rugby, especially for girls," she explained. "We can't inspire future players if we don't give them the basics to start with."

Mr. Edwards looked intrigued. "That's a tall order, Tahlia. Where do you suggest we get the funding?"

Tahlia had already thought about this. She proposed organising a community event - a beach rugby tournament with food stalls, live music, and games. "We could use the funds to upgrade the field and buy new equipment," she said.

The principal hesitated but saw the determination in Tahlia's eyes. "Alright," he said. "I'll approve it, but you'll need to lead the charge."

Tahlia threw herself into the project. She rallied her friends, spoke to local businesses for sponsorships, and even convinced her dad to host a barbecue stall. Flyers went up around town, and excitement grew.

On the day of the tournament, the beach was buzzing with activity. Teams of all ages competed, laughter filled the air, and Tahlia's dad flipped burgers non-stop. Tahlia played in an exhibition match with her friends, showing off some of the moves she'd learned from watching the World Cup players.

By the end of the day, they had raised enough money to start upgrading the rugby field. The town mayor even promised to allocate additional funds for girls' sports programs.

A few months later, Tahlia stood on the newly levelled field, watching as girls of all ages practiced passing drills with shiny new rugby balls. The sight filled her with pride.

Her coach, Mr. Lane, approached her. "You've done something incredible here, Tahlia. This field is going to make a difference for years to come."

Tahlia smiled. "It's not just about the field - it's about showing everyone that

girls deserve just as much space in rugby as anyone else."

That evening, she updated the group chat. We've got a new field, thanks to our beach rugby event. Can't wait to see how many girls we inspire here!

As the replies poured in, Tahlia felt connected to the global sisterhood of rugby once again. Their shared dream of making the sport more inclusive was no longer just a dream - it was becoming reality.

CHAPTER 22:

Jordan's Leadership

Back in Atlanta, Jordan Smith walked into her high school gymnasium, her heart racing with excitement. The World Cup had been a transformative experience, and the bond she had shared with the other girls reignited her passion for creating change. Now, Jordan was determined to bring rugby into her community and make it a space where everyone could belong, including those who, like her, had felt out of place before.

At her school, rugby was an afterthought. Basketball and track dominated the sports scene, and many of Jordan's classmates had no idea what rugby was, let alone considered it a sport for girls. Still, she refused to let that stop her. Armed with the confidence she had gained during her trip, Jordan approached Mr. Harper, the athletic director.

"I want to start a girls' rugby club," she said, standing tall despite her nerves.

Mr. Harper tilted his head, intrigued but sceptical. "Rugby? That's not exactly common around here. Do you think there's enough interest?"

Jordan smiled. "There's only one way to find out."

With Mr. Harper's tentative approval, Jordan got to work. She designed colourful posters that read, "Join the Rugby Revolution!" and handed out flyers between classes. Her pitch wasn't just about the sport - it was about the inclusivity and camaraderie she had experienced in England.

On the day of the interest meeting, Jordan paced nervously in front of the gym. She worried no one would come, but slowly, a few girls began to trickle in. Among them were basketball players, track stars, and even a couple of band members curious about trying something new.

"What's rugby about?" one girl asked sceptically.

Jordan grinned, sharing her story. She described the energy of the World Cup matches, the thrill of the game, and the friendships she had built. "Rugby is for everyone," she said. "It's about teamwork, resilience, and having fun. It doesn't matter how fast, tall, or strong you are - there's a place for you."

By the end of the meeting, most of the girls had signed up, their curiosity sparked by Jordan's enthusiasm.

The first practice was chaotic but full of laughter. Jordan borrowed rugby balls from a nearby club and used cones to create a makeshift field. The girls struggled with passing and tackling, and there were more dropped balls than successful

plays. But Jordan was patient, channelling the encouragement she'd received from her coach back in England.

"Every great player started as a beginner," she said, smiling at a girl who had just tripped over her own feet.

Over the weeks, something amazing happened. The group began to gel. Shy girls found their voices, quiet leaders emerged, and hesitant players dove into tackles with newfound confidence. Jordan could see the transformation in their smiles and the way they supported each other on and off the field.

One afternoon, after a particularly intense practice, Mr. Harper approached Jordan. "You've done something special here," he said. "We're seriously considering making rugby an official school team next year."

Jordan's eyes lit up. "That's incredible! I'll do whatever I can to help."

Their first match against a local club team was a whirlwind. Though they lost, the girls left the field with grins on their faces and mud on their jerseys.

Later that evening, Jordan messaged the group chat: We've got a rugby club now - and this is just the beginning!

Her phone buzzed with replies, each one filled with excitement and pride. As Jordan read the messages, she felt a deep sense of fulfilment. Rugby had given her a voice, a community, and a purpose. Now, she was passing that gift on to others.

Jordan realized that leadership wasn't about being the best player - it was about inspiring others to believe in themselves and building something greater together. And with every practice and game, she knew they were laying the foundation for something that could change lives for years to come.

CHAPTER 23:

Mele's Community Impact

Back in her Samoan village, Mele felt the warmth of the tropical sun on her face as she walked home from the market. Her bag was heavy with groceries, but her mind was even heavier with ideas. The trip to England had been transformative. Seeing the World Cup and meeting the other girls had sparked a desire to bring rugby closer to her community.

The next day, Mele approached her father, who had always been her biggest supporter. "Papa, I want to start a rugby tournament here in the village," she said.

Her father raised an eyebrow. "A tournament? For who?"

"For everyone," Mele replied. "Men, women, kids - anyone who wants to play. I want rugby to be something we all share."

Mele spent the following weeks rallying support. She spoke at village meetings, reached out to schools, and even got her rugby coach involved. The community, known for its close-knit spirit, quickly got behind her idea.

"Let's call it the Fa'atasi Rugby Festival," suggested her best friend Lani. Fa'atasi meant "together" in Samoan, perfectly capturing the essence of the event.

With help from her family and neighbours, Mele marked out a pitch on the village green. They borrowed goalposts from a nearby school and set up tents for shade. Everyone pitched in - some brought food, others donated equipment, and the local musicians volunteered to play during breaks.

On the day of the festival, Mele stood in the centre of the field, her heart pounding with excitement. Teams of all ages and skill levels were ready to play. Even the village elders had formed a team, calling themselves the "Golden Turtles."

The festival was a resounding success. Mele played in the women's match, scoring two tries and receiving cheers from the crowd. But what moved her most was watching the younger girls on the sidelines, their eyes wide with admiration.

"Can we play too?" one of them asked after the match.

Mele knelt beside them, a rugby ball in her hands. "Of course! This festival is just the beginning. Rugby is for everyone, and you're always welcome to join."

By the end of the day, the green was filled with laughter, cheers, and a sense of unity Mele had never experienced before.

As the sun set, Mele's father tapped her on the shoulder. "You've done something special today, Mele. You've brought the village together in a way I haven't seen in years."

Mele smiled, her heart full. “Rugby isn’t just a game, Papa. It’s a way to build something bigger, a community, a family.”

That night, as she lay in bed, Mele thought about her friends from England and the dreams they had shared. She felt proud to have brought a piece of that dream back home.

Mele’s Fa’atasi Rugby Festival became an annual tradition, inspiring generations of players and reinforcing the values of togetherness, resilience, and joy. For Mele, rugby had always been about more than the game - it was about the connections it created. And now, her village would feel those connections for years to come.

CHAPTER 24:

Harper's Advocacy (Canada)

The crisp morning air of rural Alberta greeted Harper Sinclair as she walked down the familiar dirt road toward her high school. The World Cup experience in England was still fresh in her mind, and it felt like a dream she didn't want to wake from. But now, back in her small town, she couldn't help but notice the stark difference between the polished stadiums she'd visited and the patchy, uneven field where she and her teammates practiced. Harper's thoughts buzzed with determination as she decided it was time to act.

The next day, Harper approached her school principal with an idea. "We need better facilities for girls' sports," she said, her voice firm. "We deserve a proper place to play, just like the boys."

The principal looked up from her desk, intrigued. "What exactly do you have in mind, Harper?"

"A real rugby pitch," Harper replied. "And equipment that isn't falling apart. I know it's ambitious, but I'm willing to help make it happen."

The principal smiled. "If you're willing to lead the charge, I'll support you. Let's start by presenting your idea to the school board."

Harper poured her heart into her proposal. She spent evenings drafting letters and weekends rallying her teammates and their families for support. At the school board meeting, she stood confidently before the room, sharing how rugby had shaped her and how improved resources could inspire other girls to pursue the sport. Her passion was undeniable, and by the end of her presentation, she had earned the board's interest.

Encouraged by the positive response, Harper didn't stop there. She wrote to provincial rugby organisations, sharing her story and asking for advice. She started a petition in her town, gathering hundreds of signatures from students, parents, and local businesses. Her efforts drew the attention of a regional sports organisation, which offered a grant to help fund the project.

The community rallied around her vision. Volunteers showed up to help level the field and install goalposts. The local hardware store donated paint for the lines, and parents brought food and drinks to fuel the workers. Harper's small idea had become a community-wide effort.

Months later, Harper stood on the newly finished rugby pitch, her heart swelling with pride. The field was lush and green, complete with proper goalposts and

benches. Girls from across the town showed up for the inaugural practice, their excitement palpable.

As she coached a group of younger players, Harper caught sight of her parents watching from the sidelines. Her dad gave her a thumbs-up, and her mom's eyes glistened with pride. Harper realised that this wasn't just about rugby - it was about creating opportunities for others.

That evening, as the sun set over the field, Harper joined her teammates for a celebratory game. She felt a deep sense of satisfaction knowing that her efforts had made a difference. The World Cup had shown her the power of sport to unite and inspire, and now she was bringing that lesson home.

For Harper, this was only the beginning. Rugby had taught her resilience, teamwork, and leadership. Now, she was using those lessons to pave the way for others to dream big and play hard.

CHAPTER 25:

Cat's Courage (Scotland)

Back in her Highland village, Cat MacGregor walked the winding path to her small school, her breath visible in the crisp morning air. The World Cup experience had given her a spark of confidence she had never felt before. As she passed the village noticeboard, a flyer caught her eye: "Community Day: Share Your Stories." Her heart skipped a beat. She knew she had a story to tell - her journey from a shy girl to someone who had stood with rugby fans from around the world.

"Could I really stand in front of the entire village?" she whispered to herself. The thought made her stomach churn, but she couldn't shake the idea. That afternoon, she walked into the head teacher's office, clutching the flyer. "I'd like to speak at the event," she said, her voice trembling slightly.

The head teacher, Mrs. Fraser, beamed. "That's wonderful, Cat! Your story will inspire so many."

Over the next few days, Cat practiced her speech relentlessly. Her father offered to listen, sitting at the kitchen table as she nervously began. "I've always been quiet," she started, "and rugby seemed like a strange choice for someone like me. But it taught me how to be brave." She stumbled over her words, but her father nodded encouragingly. "You're doing great, lass," he said, patting her shoulder.

By the time the event arrived, Cat had rehearsed so many times that the words felt like part of her. Standing backstage at the village hall, she peeked through the curtain. The room was packed with familiar faces - her classmates, neighbours, and even her rugby coach. Her palms grew sweaty, and for a moment, she thought about running.

But then she remembered the World Cup. She thought about the roar of the crowd, the encouragement from the other girls, and the feeling of belonging she'd carried home. Taking a deep breath, she stepped onto the stage.

As Cat spoke, the room grew silent. She talked about how rugby had pushed her out of her comfort zone, how meeting girls from around the world had shown her the power of connection, and how she had learned that courage wasn't about being fearless - it was about trying despite the fear.

When she finished, the room erupted in applause. Her classmates looked at her with new admiration, and Mrs. Fraser stood clapping in the front row. Afterward, a younger girl approached her shyly. "I'm scared to join the rugby team," the girl admitted, "but maybe I'll try now."

Cat smiled, feeling a swell of pride. “You should. It’s the best thing I ever did.”

That evening, as she walked home under the Highland stars, Cat felt a quiet sense of accomplishment. For the first time, she didn’t feel like the shy girl hiding in the background. She felt like someone who could inspire others. The World Cup had changed her, but now she was changing her community in return.

CHAPTER 26:

Eira's Resilience (Wales)

Eira Davies returned home to Aberystwyth feeling both inspired and anxious. The joy of attending the World Cup and meeting the other girls had filled her with a sense of belonging, but as she walked into her family's home, the tension in the air was unmistakable. Her parents' divorce was no longer just whispered conversations; it was a reality.

Her younger siblings, 10-year-old Rhys and 8-year-old Carys, were sitting on the sofa, their eyes glued to the TV. They looked up briefly when Eira walked in, but their smiles didn't reach their eyes. Eira set her bag down and knelt by them. "How about we do something fun today?" she suggested, her voice bright.

Rhys shrugged. "Like what?"

Eira thought of the camaraderie and unity she had felt with her teammates and decided to bring that spirit into her home. "We could have a family game night," she said. "I'll make snacks, and we can play your favourite board games."

That evening, Eira transformed the dining table into a game central. She brought out Monopoly, made bowls of crisps and popcorn, and even added some homemade lemonade. At first, her siblings were hesitant. "Mum and Dad aren't playing?" Carys asked quietly.

Eira shook her head but smiled. "It's just us tonight. But we're going to have so much fun."

Slowly, the atmosphere in the room shifted. Carys giggled when Rhys made a dramatic play, and Eira cheered loudly when Carys won her first game. The tension eased, replaced by laughter and a sense of togetherness.

Eira realized something important that night: just like on the rugby field, creating unity required effort and encouragement. She couldn't fix her parents' situation, but she could help her siblings feel less alone.

Over the following weeks, Eira made it her mission to keep her family connected. She organized Sunday picnics at the park, introduced a new tradition of Friday movie nights, and even taught her siblings some basic rugby drills in the garden. Rhys and Carys began to open up more, sharing their worries and dreams during these moments of connection.

One evening, as they were playing a game of tag rugby, her mum came outside to watch. "You're doing so well with them, Eira," she said softly. "Thank you."

Eira shrugged, but her heart swelled. "It's like rugby, Mum," she said. "You can't

do it all alone. You've got to rely on your team."

Her mum smiled. "I think you're the best captain this family could have."

By finding ways to bring her siblings together, Eira discovered her own strength. The lessons she had learned on the field - teamwork, resilience, and the importance of showing up for others - helped her lead her family through a difficult time.

Though life at home wasn't perfect, Eira felt proud knowing that she was helping to create moments of joy and connection. Just like rugby, family life was about working together, celebrating small victories, and staying strong through challenges.

CHAPTER 27:

Nalani's Family Legacy (Fiji)

Nalani Koro returned to her village in Fiji with her heart full and her mind buzzing with ideas. The lush green hills and coconut trees seemed even more vibrant than before, as if they shared in her excitement. The World Cup had shown her what rugby could do: unite people, inspire change, and bring joy. Now, she wanted to bring those lessons home.

As soon as she arrived, her younger siblings swarmed her with hugs. "Did you see England? Did you meet famous players?" her brother Mateo asked, his eyes wide with curiosity.

"Yes, and it was amazing," Nalani said, setting her bag down. "But I have something even more amazing planned for us here."

The next morning, Nalani gathered her siblings and cousins in the clearing behind their house. She had drawn makeshift goalposts in the dirt and brought out a weathered rugby ball. "We're starting a family rugby practice," she announced.

Her siblings exchanged sceptical glances. "But we're not players," her sister Lila said, frowning.

Nalani laughed. "Neither was I, at first. But rugby is for everyone. It's not just about winning - it's about playing together, having fun, and growing stronger as a team."

She began teaching them basic drills: passing, running, and tackling techniques. The younger kids stumbled over their feet, laughing as they tried to follow her instructions. Even their parents came to watch, chuckling at the chaotic energy of the first session. "You've brought the World Cup home with you," her father teased.

Over the weeks, the family rugby sessions became a highlight of their days. More relatives and neighbours joined, until the clearing was filled with players of all ages. Nalani noticed how her younger siblings began to change. Mateo, once shy and quiet, started calling out plays with confidence. Lila, who often avoided physical activities, found joy in running and scoring tries.

One Sunday, Nalani organized a small tournament, inviting other families from the village. They called it the "Unity Cup," and the day was filled with laughter, cheering, and a renewed sense of community. Nalani's team didn't win, but she didn't care. Watching everyone come together was the true victory.

After the matches, an elder approached her. "You've done something special, Nalani," he said. "You've shown us that rugby isn't just a sport - it's a way to con-

nect and build something bigger."

As the sun set, Nalani sat on the porch with her siblings, who were still buzzing from the day's excitement. "Do you think we can do this every weekend?" Mateo asked, resting his head on her shoulder.

"Of course," Nalani replied, smiling. "This is just the beginning."

Nalani's rugby sessions became a cherished tradition in her village, strengthening not just her family but the entire community. Through her love for the game, she had passed on a legacy of togetherness, resilience, and joy - a legacy that would last for generations.

CHAPTER 28:

Pounamu's Cultural Pride (New Zealand)

Back in Rotorua, New Zealand, Pounamu Terewai sat on the shores of Lake Rotorua, watching the sunrise paint the sky with hues of pink and orange. The quiet hum of the morning mirrored the sense of clarity she had gained from her trip to the World Cup. For Pounamu, rugby had always been more than a sport - it was a connection to her Māori heritage and a reflection of her community's strength.

But the World Cup had shown her something even greater: the universal power of stories. Watching women from different cultures come together for rugby made her proud, not only of her team but also of her roots. She wanted to share that pride with others.

Inspired, Pounamu decided to start a blog. She called it Whakatipu Whānau, which meant "Growing Family" in Māori. Her first post featured the haka - its origins, its meaning, and how her team performed it before each match as a symbol of unity and strength. She included photos from her trip to England, showing the friends she'd made and the cultural exchanges they shared.

At first, she was nervous about sharing her thoughts. "What if no one reads it?" she asked her older sister, Tiare.

"Even if just one person does, that's enough," Tiare replied. "Your voice matters."

Encouraged, Pounamu poured her heart into the blog. She wrote about her journey to the World Cup, her experiences meeting the other girls, and how rugby had shaped her identity. She shared stories of her grandparents teaching her traditional Māori songs and dances, connecting them to the discipline and teamwork she learned through rugby.

To her surprise, her blog began to gain traction. Messages poured in from young girls across New Zealand who saw themselves in her words. "I've always felt too shy to play rugby," one girl wrote. "But your story makes me want to try."

Pounamu also received comments from parents thanking her for highlighting the importance of culture in sport. "You've made my daughter proud to be Māori," one mother wrote. "Thank you for showing her that her heritage is a strength, not a limitation."

Emboldened by the response, Pounamu started a new project: a rugby workshop for young Māori girls. She collaborated with local coaches and elders to teach not only rugby skills but also traditional Māori practices like kapa haka and story-

telling. The workshop became a space where girls could celebrate their identities while growing stronger as athletes.

One afternoon, as the workshop ended, a young girl approached Pounamu, clutching a rugby ball. “I want to play like you one day,” she said, her eyes shining with determination.

“You can,” Pounamu replied, kneeling down to meet her gaze. “And you’ll bring your own stories to the field.”

Pounamu’s efforts not only brought rugby to more young girls but also deepened the pride they felt in their culture. Through her blog and workshops, she wove together the threads of her heritage, her passion for rugby, and her commitment to empowering others. And as she watched the next generation of players grow, she knew that the legacy of cultural pride would endure far beyond the field.

CHAPTER 29:

Siobhan's New Perspective (Ireland)

Back in the green hills of County Kerry, Siobhan O'Connor was greeted by the familiar rhythm of life: schoolwork, part-time shifts at the family pub, and rugby practice. But something had changed within her after the World Cup. The trip to England had ignited a sense of purpose, a determination to chase bigger dreams while honouring her roots.

One evening, while clearing tables at the pub, Siobhan overheard a group of locals talking about the World Cup. "Did you see the Irish girls play? They gave it their all," one man said. Siobhan couldn't help but smile, feeling proud to have witnessed it live.

Her dad noticed and nudged her. "Thinking about the trip?"

She nodded. "It made me realise how much I want to play for Ireland someday."

"Then you'll have to work harder than ever," he replied with a grin.

That night, Siobhan wrote out a list of goals: improve her fitness, refine her skills, and balance rugby with her school and work responsibilities. It wouldn't be easy, but she was ready to commit.

Siobhan's first challenge came the following week. Her rugby coach announced trials for the county team, a stepping stone to national-level play. "This is your chance to shine," the coach said.

The thought excited and terrified her. She had always been a solid player, but stepping onto a bigger stage felt daunting. "What if I'm not good enough?" she asked her best friend and teammate, Aoife.

"You'll never know unless you try," Aoife replied.

At the trials, Siobhan gave it everything she had. She sprinted faster, tackled harder, and played smarter than ever before. Even when she made mistakes, she refused to let them shake her focus. By the end of the session, she felt exhausted but proud.

The next week, she received the news: she had made the team. Her parents threw a small celebration, complete with her favourite shepherd's pie. As they toasted to her success, Siobhan reflected on how far she had come. The World Cup had taught her that dreams were worth chasing, even when the path seemed uncertain.

But rugby wasn't the only thing on her mind. Inspired by the girls she had met in England, Siobhan started volunteering at a local youth centre, teaching younger girls how to play rugby. "It's not just about the game," she told them during prac-

tice. “It’s about learning what you’re capable of.”

One of the girls, a shy 10-year-old named Maeve, approached her after a session. “Do you think I could play for Ireland someday?” she asked hesitantly.

Siobhan smiled. “If you work hard and believe in yourself, absolutely.”

Maeve beamed, and Siobhan felt a surge of pride. She realised that her journey wasn’t just about achieving her own dreams - it was about inspiring others to pursue theirs. Whether on the field or in her community, Siobhan was determined to leave a legacy of resilience and hope.

CHAPTER 30:

Aiko's Cultural Exchange (Japan)

Back in Yokohama, Aiko Nakamura sat at her desk, a stack of origami paper in one hand and a rugby ball in the other. The World Cup had shown her how rugby could connect people from different cultures, and she wanted to share that connection with her own community.

The idea came to her as she reflected on her experience in England: what if she used rugby to teach cultural exchange? Aiko envisioned workshops where children could learn not only the basics of rugby but also the values and traditions from other countries she had encountered.

She approached her school's headteacher with her idea. "I want to start a program called 'Global Rugby,'" she explained. "It will combine rugby drills with cultural activities like haka dances from New Zealand, traditional Samoan songs, and even sharing dishes from different countries."

The headteacher raised an eyebrow. "That's ambitious, Aiko. Do you think the students will be interested?"

Aiko nodded. "They loved the origami workshop. This will be even more interactive."

With her headteacher's approval, Aiko got to work. She designed posters featuring rugby players from around the world and included the tagline: "Learn the Game, Share the Culture." She also reached out to her friends from the World Cup, asking for tips and ideas.

On the first day of the program, the gymnasium was filled with curious students. Aiko began by teaching basic rugby drills, but instead of just passing the ball, she shared the story behind each drill. "In Fiji," she explained, "rugby is a family tradition. When you pass, think about sharing something valuable with someone you trust."

As the program continued, Aiko introduced cultural activities. She taught her classmates how to fold origami cranes, explained the significance of the haka, and even organized a food day where students brought dishes inspired by the countries they'd learned about.

The program became a hit, with more students joining each week. Parents started attending, curious about the unique blend of sport and culture. One mother approached Aiko after a session. "You've done something special here," she said. "My son never cared about rugby before, but now he's excited about both the game

and the world."

Aiko smiled, her heart full. Rugby had given her a way to bridge gaps and foster understanding, proving that the sport was about more than just the game - it was about building connections.

CHAPTER 31:

Isa's Creative Legacy (Spain)

The warm streets of Seville bustled with life as Isa Serrano rode her bicycle through her neighbourhood, a rugby ball tucked under one arm. The vibrant energy of the city mirrored her own excitement. Since returning from the World Cup, Isa had been brainstorming ways to bring rugby to her community. Watching the games in England and meeting the other girls had shown her the unifying power of sport. Now, she wanted to share that joy with others in her hometown.

Her first step was to talk to her childhood friend, Elena, who worked at the local community centre. "Rugby? In Seville?" Elena asked, raising an eyebrow. "That's not exactly a tradition here."

"Exactly!" Isa exclaimed. "That's why we need to start. Kids here don't know how fun and empowering it can be."

Elena smiled. "Alright, I'll give you a space on Saturday mornings. Let's see what you can do."

Armed with her creativity and determination, Isa got to work. She designed colourful posters inviting children to join a free rugby workshop. She even added her own flair, drawing caricatures of herself and the World Cup players she admired. She plastered the posters on shop windows, cafes, and community notice boards, and shared them online. "Let's bring rugby to Seville!" she wrote in the captions.

The first Saturday, Isa arrived early, her bag full of cones, whistles, and rugby balls. She didn't expect much turnout, but as the clock struck ten, a small group of children and parents gathered on the field. Among them was Nico, her neighbour's shy seven-year-old, clutching his mother's hand.

Isa knelt beside him. "Ready to have some fun?"

Nico nodded timidly, and Isa led the group through warm-ups, passing drills, and mini games. She made sure to keep the atmosphere light-hearted, cheering loudly for every effort. By the end of the session, Nico was laughing and running with the other kids, his initial shyness forgotten.

As the weeks went on, the group grew. Isa's workshops became the highlight of the children's weekends. Parents stayed to watch, chatting and sharing snacks as their kids learned to pass, tackle, and play as a team. Isa added her own touch to each session, incorporating Spanish music and playful challenges that kept everyone engaged.

One day, Nico approached Isa with a wide grin. "I scored my first try today!" he

announced proudly.

"That's amazing, Nico!" Isa said, giving him a high-five. "You're a natural."

His mother smiled. "He's been counting down the days to rugby every week. Thank you for giving him something to look forward to."

Isa felt a surge of pride. What had started as an idea had turned into something real - a community united by rugby. She decided to organise a neighbourhood tournament, complete with prizes and a celebration for the families. The event was a resounding success, with laughter, cheers, and new friendships formed.

As Isa watched the kids run across the field, she thought about her time in England and the friends she had made. Rugby had taught her resilience, teamwork, and the joy of pushing boundaries. Now, she was passing those lessons on, one child at a time.

For Isa, this was just the beginning. Rugby wasn't just a game; it was a way to bring people together and create something lasting.

CHAPTER 32:

Amélie's Girls' League (France)

In the bustling streets of Paris, Amélie Laurent sat at a café, watching children play tag in the nearby park. Since returning from the World Cup, she couldn't stop thinking about the lack of opportunities for girls to play rugby in her city. Many of her peers had told her rugby was "too rough" or "not for girls," but Amélie knew better.

One afternoon, she called her old rugby coach, Monsieur Dupont. "I want to start a girls' rugby league," she announced.

Monsieur Dupont laughed. "That's a big dream, Amélie. How will you convince them?"

"By showing them rugby is more than a sport - it's a way to build confidence and find your voice."

With her coach's help, Amélie started small. She visited local schools, speaking to PE teachers about hosting rugby sessions. She created a presentation that featured stories of women in rugby, including her own journey to the World Cup.

At first, only a handful of girls showed interest. Amélie didn't let it discourage her. She organized a free trial session in the park, inviting girls of all ages to come and try rugby. She kept the drills light-hearted and fun, encouraging teamwork and laughter.

Slowly but surely, the league began to grow. Amélie secured funding from local businesses and grants, which allowed her to purchase equipment and rent a proper field. Parents began to take notice, especially as their daughters came home brimming with excitement.

By the end of the first season, the league had three teams. Amélie watched proudly as the girls played their first official match, their faces lit up with determination and joy. One mother approached her after the game, tears in her eyes. "Thank you," she said. "You've given my daughter a place to belong."

Amélie smiled, knowing she was doing more than teaching rugby - she was building a future where girls could dream big and break barriers.

CHAPTER 33:

Sofia's Culinary Outreach (Italy)

Back in her Tuscan village, Sofia Romano stood in the family bakery, rolling out dough for her famous Rugby Biscuits. The World Cup had changed her perspective - not just about rugby, but about the power of bringing people together. Inspired by her journey, Sofia decided to use her baking skills to give back.

She proposed an idea to her parents: "What if we host a monthly baking workshop for kids? We can teach them to bake while also introducing them to rugby values like teamwork and perseverance."

Her parents were hesitant at first. "Do you think the kids will be interested?" her father asked.

"They will be if we make it fun," Sofia replied with a grin.

The first workshop was chaotic but successful. Sofia taught the children to shape biscuits into rugby balls and decorate them with icing. As they worked, she shared stories from the World Cup, emphasizing the importance of determination and unity. "Baking is like rugby," she explained. "It's about patience, precision, and working together."

Word spread quickly, and soon the workshops became a village tradition. Parents joined in, and the bakery became a hub of laughter and creativity. Sofia even started a "Bake and Play" day, where the kids would spend half the time baking and the other half playing touch rugby in the nearby park.

The initiative didn't just bring joy to the children - it also strengthened the sense of community in the village. One day, an elderly woman approached Sofia after a workshop. "You've brought new life to our town," she said, her voice filled with gratitude. "Thank you for reminding us of the power of togetherness."

As Sofia looked around the bustling bakery, she felt a deep sense of pride. Rugby had taught her resilience and creativity, and now she was using those lessons to make a difference in her community. For her, the World Cup wasn't just an event - it was the start of something much greater.

CHAPTER 34:

Layla's Inspiration (South Africa)

The bustling streets of Johannesburg seemed brighter to Layla Ndlovu as she walked to her former primary school. She carried a rugby ball in one hand and a notebook filled with scribbled ideas in the other. The World Cup had given her more than unforgettable memories; it had shown her the power of breaking barriers. Now back home, she was determined to share her story and inspire others to dream big.

Layla's first stop was her old classroom. The principal had invited her to speak at the school assembly after hearing about her journey to England. Standing in front of hundreds of eager young faces, Layla took a deep breath.

"When I first picked up a rugby ball," she began, "people told me girls shouldn't play. They said rugby wasn't for us. But I didn't listen, and guess what? I got to watch the World Cup and meet girls from all over the world who love rugby as much as I do."

The students clapped, and Layla noticed a few girls sitting up straighter, their eyes sparkling with curiosity. She continued, "Rugby taught me that we can do anything, no matter what anyone says. It's not just about winning games; it's about believing in yourself and working hard."

After her talk, a group of students surrounded her, peppering her with questions. "How do you play rugby?" "What was it like in England?" "Can I try it too?" Layla grinned, thrilled to see their enthusiasm.

Encouraged by the response, Layla decided to take her message further. She approached local schools and community centres, offering to run workshops. At first, some were sceptical. "Girls playing rugby?" one principal questioned. "Will there even be interest?"

Layla stood her ground. "Let me show you."

Her first workshop drew a modest crowd of children, many of whom had never seen a rugby ball before. Layla started with the basics, teaching them how to pass and catch. She wove in her story, sharing how rugby had taught her confidence and resilience. By the end of the session, the field buzzed with laughter and energy as kids ran and cheered.

Word spread quickly. Layla's workshops grew, attracting not just girls but boys as well. She noticed how the sport brought them together, breaking down barriers and fostering a sense of equality. Parents started attending, curious about this

young woman who was transforming their community.

Layla's impact didn't stop there. A local newspaper picked up her story, dubbing her "The Rugby Dreamer." Soon, she was invited to speak at events across Johannesburg, sharing her journey and encouraging others to challenge stereotypes. At one event, a young girl approached her shyly, clutching a piece of paper.

"I drew this for you," she said, handing Layla a picture of a girl holding a rugby ball with the words, "Girls Can Do Anything."

Layla felt her throat tighten with emotion. "Thank you," she said, hugging the girl. "This means so much to me."

As Layla walked home that evening, she reflected on how far she had come. From being doubted to becoming a voice for change, rugby had given her a platform to inspire others. She knew her journey was just beginning, but she was ready for whatever came next.

For Layla, empowerment wasn't just about breaking stereotypes; it was about showing others they could too.

CHAPTER 35:

Camila's Leadership (Brazil)

The vibrant streets of São Paulo buzzed with activity as Camila Oliveira walked through her neighbourhood, a clipboard in hand. The World Cup had been a whirlwind of excitement, but it also left her with a new sense of purpose. She wasn't just going to return to her old routines - she had a plan.

Camila stopped in front of the community centre where she had spent countless afternoons as a child. Its worn walls and chipped paint didn't dim its potential. This was where her dream of a youth rugby program would begin.

Camila gathered a group of local parents and community leaders to pitch her idea.

"Rugby isn't just a sport," she began, her voice steady with conviction. "It's a way to teach teamwork, discipline, and confidence. I want to start a program here, for our kids, to give them something positive to focus on."

The room was quiet at first, but then someone asked, "How will we fund this?"

Camila smiled. She had anticipated the question. "I've already reached out to local businesses for sponsorships. I'm organising a fundraiser event - a rugby day with food stalls, music, and games. We'll make this happen together."

The community rallied behind her. Volunteers stepped forward to help with planning, while local vendors offered to contribute a portion of their sales to the program. Camila's energy was contagious, and soon the entire neighbourhood was buzzing with excitement.

On the day of the fundraiser, the community centre's field was transformed into a lively hub. Kids ran around with rugby balls, parents mingled by food stands, and local musicians performed upbeat tunes. Camila worked tirelessly, overseeing every detail and making sure everyone felt welcome.

By mid-afternoon, Camila took the microphone. "Today isn't just about rugby," she said, addressing the crowd. "It's about giving our kids a chance to dream, to grow, and to learn the values that sports teach us. Thank you for being part of this."

The crowd erupted in cheers, and Camila felt a surge of pride. By the end of the day, they had raised enough money to launch the program.

The following weeks were a whirlwind of activity. Camila recruited volunteer coaches and organised training sessions. At the first practice, a group of hesitant kids gathered on the field.

"I've never tried playing a game of rugby before," one boy admitted.

"Neither had I," Camila said with a smile. "But once you start, you'll love it."

As the weeks went by, the kids grew more confident. Camila watched as they learned to pass, tackle, and strategies. But more importantly, she saw them develop self-belief and camaraderie.

The programme quickly became a cornerstone of the neighbourhood. Parents praised the positive impact it had on their children, and local media began to take notice. Camila was even invited to speak at a city council meeting about expanding youth sports programs across São Paulo.

One evening, after a particularly lively practice, a young girl approached Camila. "I want to be like you when I grow up," she said shyly.

Camila knelt down and handed the girl a rugby ball. "You can be even better," she said. "Just keep dreaming big."

As Camila walked home that night, she felt a deep sense of fulfilment. The World Cup had given her more than memories - it had shown her what was possible. Through rugby, she wasn't just changing her neighbourhood; she was building a legacy.

For Camila, leadership wasn't about personal success. It was about lifting others up and creating opportunities for everyone to thrive.

CHAPTER 36:

Lifelong Bonds

A few months had passed since the World Cup, but the memories were as vivid as ever for the girls. Their WhatsApp group buzzed constantly with updates about their lives, and every now and then, someone would post a photo of a rugby practice or a new project they had started. It was a digital lifeline that kept them connected across continents.

One afternoon, Sophie sent a message: "We should have a video call! Catch up properly, you know?"

The idea was met with enthusiastic replies

> **Tahlia (Australia):** "Yes! I need to tell you about the fundraiser we just ran!"
> **Jordan (USA):** "Count me in. I miss you all!"
> **Pounamu (New Zealand):** "I've got up dates about my blog! Can't wait to share."

A week later, they all logged onto the video call, excitement lighting up their screens. Some were in rugby kits, fresh from practice, while others were in cozy home settings, sharing a glimpse of their daily lives.

"Hey, everyone!" Sophie beamed. "It's so good to see your faces."

The conversation flowed effortlessly. They shared updates, laughed about the challenges of balancing rugby with school, work, or family, and celebrated each other's achievements.

"I started coaching a junior team," Eira shared. "It's so rewarding seeing the kids learn what rugby taught me."

"I've been speaking at schools," Layla added, her voice brimming with pride. "The girls are so inspired when they hear our story."

Pounamu smiled. "My blog's been getting more readers. I've been writing about how rugby connects us to something bigger."

The group cheered, each story adding a new layer to their collective journey.

As the call went on, the conversation turned nostalgic. Sophie held up her England scarf. "Remember the first match? Sunderland? I still can't believe we were there."

"And the café the next morning!" Isa laughed. "We didn't stop talking about

rugby the entire time."

Camila leaned closer to her screen. "That was just the beginning. Look at everything we've done since then. It's amazing."

The girls fell quiet for a moment, reflecting on how far they'd come - not just in rugby, but in life. Their shared dream of attending the World Cup had become the foundation of something much greater.

Before the call ended, Tahlia suggested, "We should plan to meet again. Maybe for the next World Cup?"

"Definitely," Jordan agreed. "But until then, let's keep supporting each other."

The girls raised their mugs, water bottles, and energy drinks to the screen in a virtual toast.

"To rugby," Sophie said.

"To friendship," Mele added.

"And to dreams," Nalani finished, her smile wide.

As the call ended, the girls logged off one by one, carrying with them the warmth of their connection. Though they were separated by miles and oceans, their bond remained unbreakable.

For these girls, the World Cup had been much more than a sporting event - it was the beginning of lifelong friendships, a testament to the power of dreams, and a reminder that rugby's greatest gift wasn't the game itself, but the people it brought together.

CHAPTER 37:

Passing the Torch

The months after the World Cup had transformed the girls in ways they couldn't have imagined. Their experiences had sparked change not just in themselves, but in their communities, families, and even strangers they had yet to meet. While their stories continued to unfold, Sophie had an idea that would tie their journeys together: a global mentorship program.

Sophie sat in her local café with her laptop, typing furiously. Her plan was ambitious but simple: the girls would work together to create an international initiative to inspire young girls to take up rugby. The program, named "Passing the Torch," would provide resources, mentorship, and support for aspiring players, regardless of where they lived.

Sophie reached out to her friends through their WhatsApp group: "I have an idea I think you'll love! It's about using rugby to inspire the next generation. Who's in?"

The response was immediate and overwhelming.

> **Tahlia:** "Absolutely! I'd love to get rural girls involved."
> **Jordan:** "This sounds amazing. Count me in to help with planning."
> **Pounamu:** "I could share their stories on my blog and connect with com munities here."
> **Camila:** "This is perfect! I can run work shops for young players."

Their first brainstorming session took place over a video call. Each girl brought her unique perspective and experiences to the table. Isa suggested adding art and creativity to the program to make rugby more appealing to younger children. Layla proposed holding virtual seminars with professional players to inspire confidence and break stereotypes. Eira offered to create a toolkit for new coaches, based on her own coaching experience.

"Every girl, everywhere, should feel like rugby is for her," Mele said, her voice full of passion. The group nodded, their determination palpable.

Over the following months, Passing the Torch became a reality. The girls worked tirelessly to launch the initiative, each taking on responsibilities that suited their strengths. Sophie coordinated logistics, while Jordan handled outreach to schools and communities. Tahlia and Camila focused on organising in-person workshops, and Pounamu shared the program's journey through her blog and social media. Isa

created vibrant promotional materials, while Nalani used her family's network to spread the word in Fiji.

The program's first event was held virtually, connecting girls from around the world. Professional rugby players joined as guest speakers, sharing their stories of resilience, teamwork, and perseverance. Young girls from cities, villages, and everywhere in between watched in awe, inspired by what they could achieve.

As the inaugural event came to a close, Sophie looked at her friends on the screen. "We did it," she said, her voice filled with emotion. "We turned our dream into something bigger."

Tahlia smiled. "It's just the beginning. Imagine what this can grow into."

The girls logged off, proud of what they had accomplished together. Though their lives were now spread across the globe, Passing the Torch ensured that their bond, and their impact, would continue to grow.

For the girls, rugby had given them more than just memories. It had given them the tools to inspire others, to create change, and to leave a legacy. And through their collective efforts, they were showing the world that the true power of rugby lay not in the game, but in the people it brought together.

Beyond Borders: A Rugby Dream

From dusty village fields to the roaring stadiums of the Women's Rugby World Cup, Beyond Borders: A Rugby Dream tells the extraordinary story of 16 girls from across the globe, united by their love for the game and their determination to overcome the odds.

Sophie, a state-school player in England, struggles to find her place on a team dominated by privilege. Tahlia, a small-town Australian, dreams of leaving her rural roots behind. Jordan, the only girl on her U.S. high school team, fights to balance her identity and ambitions. From Fiji to France, Samoa to South Africa, these girls' journeys reveal the power of rugby to transform lives.

Together, they form a bond that transcends borders, cultures, and languages. But the World Cup is just the beginning. Inspired by their experiences, they return home to create change, proving that rugby's greatest gift isn't the game itself, but the connections it forges and the courage it ignites.

This heartwarming and empowering novel celebrates friendship, resilience, and the dreams that connect us all. Beyond Borders: A Rugby Dream is a must-read for fans of sport, stories of triumph, and the belief that a shared passion can change the world.

Are you ready to join the team?