

CRACKED CLEATS

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Roll with the Thunder, or fly with the Falcons?

Max Miles slid off his bed and swung his foot into the tennis ball. Swung too hard. The ball flew up. It didn't hit the wall, it hit glass. Max heard the noise. He was afraid to look. When he did, he saw the crack in his window pane, bottom right corner. *At least I hit the corner.* Max thought fast. He grabbed a picture off his bookshelf and placed it in front of the crack.

Max flopped on his bed and squeezed his eyes shut. *This is crazy. I've changed my mind fifty times, and now I'm breaking windows.* Two soccer teams wanted Max, but he could choose only one. He loved the Thunder, his travel team in Chelsea, Pennsylvania. But now Max had an offer to join the Falcons, the best under-thirteen academy team in the state.

Max tried to drift off, but his phone dinged. He read a text from Wesley "Fivehead" Cannon, his best friend, neighbor, and Thunder teammate. *Hey pal, I know you're sweatin' your decision. Wanna knock a ball around?* Max tapped, *See ya on the Square.*

Max threw on his workout gear. He took the stairs two at a time, stepped out to his deck, and laced his boots. A light mist floated in the air. Max fished a ball from the bin and jogged to the Square, the mini soccer field in his backyard. He was nine touches into a left-footed juggle when he heard the gate rattle. Still juggling, Max looked up to see Fivehead stepping into the yard. Marching in behind him was every one of Max's Thunder teammates.

Max felt his heart hammer. Fivehead walked up and put an arm around him. "Dude, we just took a vote. It was sixteen-zero, you're staying on the Thunder."

"Hah!" Max snorted.

"What's so funny?" Fivehead snapped. "Your decision is made, you should be relieved."

“You’re quite the comic, Fiver.”

Max and Fivehead chose up sides for a pick-up game. Max was the only guy in cleats, the other boys wore sneakers. Playing on the damp lawn, the boys racked up more grass stains than goals. After the short game ended, Max watched his teammates trail out through the gate. *Man, I love those guys. I’m really gonna miss ‘em.*

Max kicked off his boots and climbed on his trampoline. He bounced the ball on the rubber floor. As the ball reached its apex, Max sprang up and lashed a bicycle kick into the netting. He was about to launch into a second smash when he heard the gate swing open. Fivehead again, this time alone. Max jumped off and they sank into the grass. Fivehead tucked his long blond hair behind his ears. “So, Max, I figured it out. You stay with the Thunder one more season, then you can fly off with the Falcons.”

Max grabbed a few blades of grass and tossed them in the breeze. “The Falcons want me now, Fiver. What if it’s now or never?”

Fivehead tried another angle. “Think about this, Max. Thunder is powerful, it roars across the sky. Falcons? You wanna be some beady-eyed bird? I mean, thunder scares the white stuff out of a falcon.”

Max chuckled. Suddenly, the rain fell harder. Fivehead stood. “I gotta go. Call me with the good news, deal?” Max said nothing, and Fivehead walked out.

Max got up, grabbed his boots, and jogged inside. Plodding up to his room, he thought about Fivehead’s description of a falcon. “Beady-eyed bird.” Max opened his computer and searched ‘Falcon.’ He read: *The peregrine falcon reaches over two hundred miles per hour during its hunting dive. That makes it the fastest member of the animal kingdom. Falcons have large eyes that help them survive in the wild. They can see at least one mile and keep track of three moving objects at one time.* Max’s jaw flew open. *Wow, falcons have great speed and*

great eyes, perfect for soccer. But then he read the next fact: *Only twenty percent of a falcon's high-speed dives end in a successful kill.* Max shook his head at that. *That's weird. They take a lot of shots, but four out of five miss the target.*

Max picked up a pen, opened his note pad, and drew a line down the center of the page. On one side he wrote his reasons to stay on the Thunder. On the other, he listed why he should join the Falcons. He counted, four to four. *I hate ties.* Max rolled onto his bed. *I could flip a coin, but it would probably stand up in my carpet.*

Then Max grabbed his pad and re-read his first reason to join the Falcons – *get away from Red.* Red Peters, Max's enemy ever since he moved to Chelsea last summer. First, Red schemed to keep Max off the Thunder. When that didn't work, Red quit the Thunder and joined their rival, the Lightning. Then Red hit Max with cheap shots in two games, and bullied him in school. Max picked up his pen and drew a line through Red's name. *If I join the Falcons, I'll never have to play against that loser again.*

Max blew out a sigh. *Okay, I've made my decision, I'm a Falcon.* But then his eyes swung to three photos pinned on his bulletin board. One showed Max and his teammates, clowning around by the Liberty Bell before their tournament in Philadelphia a month earlier. Another showed Max and Fivehead holding the trophy after winning that event. In the third shot, Max hugged his coach, Jack Pepper. Max dropped on his bed. *I'm doing it again...making a decision, and then unmaking it.*

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That night, Max was last to the dinner table. An uncomfortable silence hung in the room, until it was broken by Max's older sister, Betsy. "So, time's running out, Max. You decide?"

Max steered his eyes away from his mom. "I'm staying with the Thunder."

Out of the corner of his eye, Max caught his mom's sour expression. She snapped, "I hope you're doing this for you, Max, and not for Fivehead and your other teammates."

Betsy piled on. "Max, you join the Falcons and you'd be surrounded by really good players. You wouldn't get double-teamed all the time."

"I thought about that," Max said. "But I love my teammates. I'm not gonna take a chance with a bunch of guys I don't know."

"Sometimes you take chances," Betsy shot back. "If it was me, I'd join the Falcons in a snap."

"But it's me, not you," Max fired back.

Mr. Miles put a hand on Max's shoulder. "I know it's a hard decision, Max. I'm proud of how you've weighed the pros and cons."

"Thanks, Dad, but now I gotta tell Coach Ball I'm not joining the Falcons. Guess I'll send him an email."

"No, you need to call him," Mr. Miles pushed back. "You owe him that."

Max dug his fingers into his forehead. "I'll be so nervous, Dad. Can you do it?"

"Nice try, Max," said his dad. "Just thank him and say you're comfortable on the Thunder."

Max excused himself and pushed away from the table.

"What about the rest of your steak?" his mom called out.

"Lost my appetite," Max called over her shoulder. He climbed the stairs and grabbed Coach Ball's card from his desk. His heart thumping on his chest, Max tapped in the number. Half way through the first ring, he ended the call. *Maybe I'm not ready to decide after all.*

Max paced across his gray carpet. His phone dinged, the name *Gary Ball* on the screen. For three rings Max stared at the phone, and then he answered.

“Max, it’s Coach Ball, I think you called.”

Max tried to speak, but the words got trapped in his throat. Finally, he said, “Uh, Coach Ball, thanks for the chance to join the Falcons. I’m really sorry, but I’m staying with the Thunder.”

After a long pause, Coach Ball spoke. “I’m sorry to hear this, Max. I know you’d be a great fit on the Falcons.”

Max felt his chest harden like a block of ice. He fumbled for words but came up empty. “Max, are you there?” Coach Ball asked. At last, Max found his voice. “It was a hard decision. But I really like my team.”

“I understand,” Coach Ball replied. “Hey, the Thunder and the Falcons both play in the Big Apple Tournament in New York City this May. Maybe I’ll get to see you then. I hope you have a great season with the Thunder, Max.”

“Thanks, Coach Ball.” Max hung up. *Coach Ball sounds cool. Did I just screw up?*

A bit later, Max punched in Coach Pepper’s number. Coach answered on the first ring. “Coach Pepper, it’s Max. I’m staying with the Thunder.”

“That’s wonderful news, Max!” Coach blared. “Your teammates will be so pumped.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Max said. “I really sweated over this. But I got the best teammates, the best coach. I’d be crazy to leave.”

“Yeah, especially since you’re gonna be captain of the Thunder.”

“Coach, did you say, ‘captain?’”

“That’s right, captain Max.”

Max felt a bolt of excitement – and alarm. “Coach, you sure about that? I mean, last fall you picked different captains for each game.”

“True, Max, but you’ve earned this role,” Coach replied.

“But all the other boys have been on the team much longer than me.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Coach shot back. “You’re always positive and you play your tail off. The boys look up to you, Max. They see you as their leader.”

Max didn’t know what to say to that. Coach went on. “I’ll announce it at our first indoor practice. We can meet up before then, go over what I expect.”

A minute later Max clicked off, and then he popped Fivehead a quick text. *Staying with the Thunder*. The reply came in a flash. *Pump me up, bro!*

Two mornings later, Max was pouring syrup on his French toast when he heard the newspaper land on the porch. He went out and scooped up the *Chelsea Chimes*. A chilly gust nudged him back inside. Max sat and took out the sports section. The headline screamed at him.

Red Peters Picked for Falcons Soccer Team