

CLASH OF CLEATS

Chapter 1

New kid at tryouts

Daylight was fading away on Max Miles. His tryout was almost over. He had to do something big, and he had to do it now.

Thirty yards from goal, Max clipped the ball off his foe's boot. His eyes up, he saw a teammate racing down the flank. Max lofted the ball toward the corner and bolted for the goal. As he dashed into the box he saw the cross sailing in, and he knew he had only one chance. *Here goes – diving header.*

Springing off the balls of his feet, Max flew like a dart. His forehead met the ball, and then his chin met the grass. Max saw the ball sizzle past the stunned keeper and snap the strings. Scrambling up, he felt his chest go *boom-boom-boom*, that special drumbeat that followed every goal. As he jogged back up the field, Max could feel every eye on him.

A short kid with stringy blond hair ran up to Max. "Cool shot!" yelled Fivehead Cannon. "How'd you do that?"

"Closed my eyes and hoped for a miracle," Max replied. He turned, and bumped shoulders with the kid who had marked him all game. "That shot *was* a miracle," Red Peters snapped. "You'll never do that again."

Max felt Red's cold eyes slicing into him. The whistle blew. "Bring it in, boys," called out Jack Pepper, coach of the Thunder, an under-twelve travel team in Chelsea, Pennsylvania. Sixteen boys jogged toward the sideline. Fifteen were already on the Thunder – everyone but Max. This was his tryout, his chance to make the team after moving from Liverpool, New Jersey.

As Max reached the bench, one question bounced in his head: *Did I do enough to make it?* Max edged to the outside of the huddle, his heart thumping hard. Coach ran a hand over the dark bristles sticking straight off his head. "Okay, boys, remind me what team won our league last year?"

"Thunder!" the boys shouted.

Coach nodded. "That's right, and that means we go into this season with a bullseye on our backs. Are we gonna let another team take our crown?"

"No!" the boys hollered.

Coach smiled. "You got that right. See you next week."

The boys grabbed their bags and walked off, but Max froze. *Do I ask Coach if I made it?* When Coach stepped away and began to stuff balls into his bag, Max turned for the lot.

"Wait up, Max," Coach called.

Max froze. Coach Pepper walked over and fixed his dark eyes on him. "Thanks for trying out, I'll call you tonight."

"Sounds good, Coach."

Max gave Coach his phone number and email address and trotted off. Fivehead ran up to him.

"Mack, you're awesome. You'll make the team, for sure."

Max smiled. "Thanks. By the way, my name's Max."

Fivehead bounced a hand off his forehead. "Got it, Max. I'm Wesley, but everyone calls me, 'Fivehead.'"

"Cool nickname, how'd you get it?"

Before Fivehead could answer, Red's voice filled the air. "Get over here, Fivehead!"

Fivehead tossed his head back, his hair swishing around his ears. "Tell ya about my name later, see ya."

Max swung his eyes to Red, standing by a car, glaring at Fivehead. *That Red kid is trouble, I can feel it in my bones.* Max spotted his mom's car. He jogged over and got in. "How'd it go?" she asked.

"These guys can play, Mom. They're way better than my team in Liverpool."

"Think you'll make it?" she asked.

"Not sure, Coach said he'd call me tonight."

Mrs. Miles drove off. "I watched the last ten minutes. Your diving header was awesome."

“Thanks. Bit my tongue, check it out.” Max stuck out his tongue, but his mom didn’t bother to look. She tucked a few strands of thick red hair behind her ear. “You had some open shots, but you passed instead.”

Max tossed his head back. “You want me to hog the ball at my tryout?”

“Just sayin’. Hey, that tall boy you were marking, he’s pretty good.”

“That’s Red Peters, the captain.”

“That’s wild,” his mom said. “You’re both tall, red-haired center-midfielders.”

“Kid kept yankin’ my arm, even stepped on my toes a few times,” Max whined. “Then he got in my face after my diving header. Maybe he’s worried cuz I play his position, and I just schooled him.”

“There’s one rascal on every team, Max.”

“One?” Max snapped. “This Eddie kid kept tryin’ to cut me down.”

Mrs. Miles shot Max a doubtful look. “Maybe you just imagined it.”

“I know when a guy tries to trip me,” Max shot back. He looked out the window, his thoughts racing back to Liverpool. “I can’t believe we moved here, moved away from all my friends.”

“You’ll make new friends on this team,” his mom said.

“Yeah, like Red and Eddie,” Max volleyed. “Plus, I gotta go to sixth grade in a new school.”

“It’s the first year of middle school,” she replied. “It’ll be a fresh start for everyone.”

“Nice try, Mom. You know I’ll be the only new kid.”

Max stuck in his earphones for the rest of the ride home. A bit later he was standing in the shower, replaying his diving header. *I scored a nice goal, but maybe Mom’s right. What if I had banged in a few more?* His shower done, Max toweled off and put on shorts and a T-shirt. He paced across his cocoa-colored carpet, his eyes darting to the digital clock on his desk. 5:53. *Seems like every minute lasts an hour. Coach Pepper better call soon, or I’m gonna wear a hole in this carpet.*

“Dinner’s ready!” called his mom. Max grabbed his phone and scooted downstairs. He joined his parents and his thirteen-year-old sister, Betsy, at the kitchen table. Betsy looked at Max.

“How’d your tryout go?” she asked.

“One kid left his fingerprints all over my arms, but I did okay,” Max replied. “I’ll find out tonight if I made it.”

Max squirted a wavy line of mustard on his hot dog. He was about to take his first bite when his phone dinged. Max looked at his mom. She nodded, and he snatched his phone and scurried into the mud room.

“Hello,” Max said.

“Max, Coach Pepper here. Welcome to the Thunder!”

Max felt a bolt of joy rocket through him. “Coach, that’s awesome!”

“I know you’ll do great things on the Thunder, Max. I’ll send out an email to let everyone know. Our schedule will be attached.”

Max thanked Coach and clicked off. He stepped back into the kitchen. “I made it!”

“Way to go, Max!” Mr. Miles shouted. Max hugged his parents and high-fived with Betsy.

“I knew you’d make it, bro,” Betsy said. “You’ll be the best player on the Thunder.”



Later that night, Max got the email from Coach Pepper. He read it and jabbed a fist at his ceiling. Minutes later, he was tapping a tennis ball across his carpet when his phone beeped. It was another email, with the subject ‘Thunder Soccer.’ He opened it.

“No one on the Thunder wants you. Don’t even THINK about joining our team.”

“Mom, come here!” Max called. Mrs. Miles raced up the stairs, and Max gave her the phone.

“Read that.” She read the message. “This is crazy, Max. Who would do such a thing?”

Max booted his tennis ball into the wall. “Bet it’s Red Peters.”

“I’m calling Coach Pepper.”

“No, Mom, I’ll look like a wimp.”

Max flopped on his bed. “The Thunder’s been together forever. They’re league champs. They don’t need me, it’s like I’m butting in. Maybe I should look for another team.”

Mrs. Miles sat. “Max, you’re a great player. You need to play for the best team.”

“But some guys don’t like me. You should see Red’s eyes. It’s like they burn right through me.”

His mom crossed her arms. “Look, you’ve had a long day, time for bed.”

A bit later Max climbed into bed. He rolled over, his eyes landing on the picture on his windowsill. It showed Max on his first soccer team, standing next to his first coach, his mom. Mrs. Miles had played soccer in college, on a full scholarship. She was an All-American striker. She was going to turn pro, until she tore ligaments in her right knee, for the third and final time.

Max thought about his mom’s words. *You had some open shots, but you passed instead.* Max blew out a sigh. *That’s my mom. Whatever I do, it’s not quite good enough.* Exhausted from his tryout, Max drifted off, his light still on.



When Max woke the next morning, the email rattled in his head. He grabbed his phone, read the message again, and hit ‘delete.’ *This is creepy. Back in Liverpool, no one treated me like this.*

Max pulled back his window shade and eyed his new backyard. It was the same size as his old yard, but it looked nothing like it. There was no ‘Square,’ the mini-soccer field covered with cleat marks. No goals. No friends. But he did see one thing he didn’t have in Liverpool. Yellow weeds sprouting up everywhere, some white and purple ones mixed in. Max shook his head. *I had the best yard in Liverpool. Here, I got a weed garden. Purple weeds, who knew?*

Max heard the clatter of pans in the kitchen. He went downstairs and found his dad making pancake batter.

“Morning, Max,” Mr. Miles said. “You want strawberry or blueberry?”

“Strawberry, I guess,” Max mumbled.

Mr. Miles eyed his son. “Max, you okay?”

“I miss our yard in Liverpool, Dad. I mean, look out back. We got more weeds than grass.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll whip this yard into another Square. The goals are coming tomorrow.”

Mr. Miles slid three pancakes in front of Max. The bits of strawberry reminded him of Red Peters. *I’ve met that kid once, and he already haunts me.* As Max poured out a pool of syrup, his mom

walked in. “So, Max, I just got a call from our neighbor, Lori Cannon. Their son Wesley plays for Thunder, you met him at your tryout. They asked us to come over later.”

Max perked up. “Sounds good. By the way, Wesley goes by, ‘Fivehead.’”

“Fivehead?” Mrs. Miles repeated. “How’d he get that nickname?”

“Don’t know, but I’ll find out.”



That afternoon, Max and his mom walked up Hickory Lane to the Cannons’ house. A woman answered the doorbell. “Welcome to the neighborhood!” Mrs. Cannon bellowed. Her curly blond hair reminded Max of Fivehead. She eyed Max. “Wesley said you crushed the tryout, Max. He’s in his room, why don’t you run up?”

Max smiled as he climbed the stairs. He found Fivehead hanging from his door frame, his legs bent off the floor. “Five more seconds,” Fivehead blurted. He held on a bit longer, dropped, and flipped his mop off his forehead. “I hang from there for twenty seconds every day,” Fivehead said. “I’m so dang short, gotta do what I can to get taller.”

Fivehead waved Max into his room, and they dropped onto the thick gray carpet.

“So, Fivehead, how’d you get your nickname?” Max asked.

“We were playing soccer in the backyard, and I kept heading in goals. My brother’s friend said, ‘Dude, you got the biggest forehead I ever saw. It’s not a forehead, it’s a fivehead.’ It kinda stuck from there.”

“You like it?”

“Seemed weird at first, but I’m used to it.”

“Bet you’re the only ‘Fivehead’ in the world.”

“Bet you’re right. So Max, it’s great to have you on the Thunder. With you, we’ll be untouchable.” Fivehead pulled a scrapbook off his bookcase. Max eyed the cover. ‘THUNDER, 2018 LEAGUE CHAMPIONS.’ They flipped through it, Fivehead stopping at the team photo on the last page. “I’ll tell you about the guys you’ll be playing around.” Fivehead put his finger on an Asian boy who wore

his long black hair in a ponytail. “Ben Kwan, left midfielder, team genius. Kid sleeps with an open dictionary on his face.”

Max chuckled, and Fivehead pointed at Artie Moss. “Good defender, but bossy. You goof up, he’ll howl at the moon.”

Fivehead moved to Eddie Hazard. “Kid’s a scoring machine, but he’s always ticked off about somethin’. Known him for five years, seen him smile twice.”

“Eddie kept tripping me at the tryout,” Max said.

“Cuz he couldn’t keep up with you,” Fivehead replied.

Fivehead’s finger landed on Red Peters. “Best player in town. Big mouth, big head. When he looks in the mirror, he sees his hero.”

Max snorted at that. Finally, Fivehead pointed at himself. “Watch out for this kid. He’s proof that dynamite comes in small packages.”

Max smiled. Fivehead stood and grabbed two slips of paper off his desk. “I got two coupons for free ice cream. Wanna ride bikes to Mort’s Cone Zone?”

“Sounds great!” Max bounded downstairs and got the okay from his mom. He ran over to his garage, fished out his purple junker, and pedaled up to Fivehead on the sidewalk. Fivehead studied Max’s bike.

“Never seen a purple bike, pretty cool.”

Max eyed the wide tires on Fivehead’s lime green bike. “Serious tires, Fivehead.”

Fivehead nodded. “Like I say, better to have a fat tire than a flat tire.” Fivehead pointed up the sidewalk. “Follow me, we’re takin’ the trail, not the tar.”

Fivehead built speed, popped a wheelie, and held it for ten yards. Then he cut left onto a tarred path leading into the woods behind his house, Max close behind. They pedaled across a footbridge that ran over a creek and picked up a path covered with wood chips. Max watched two squirrels dart across the path and scurry up the trunk of an oak tree. *I got no clue where I am, but this is pretty cool.*

The boys rode through the woods for a half-mile until they reached a clearing behind a row of shops. Max saw the sign for Mort's, and they wheeled up. He ordered a mint chocolate chip cone, Fivehead chose peanut butter twirl, and they sat at a table outside. As Max tore into his cone, his mind raced to that email. It was eating at him. "So Fivehead, I got an email last night. It said the Thunder doesn't want me."

Fivehead scrunched his face. "That's crazy, who sent it?"

"Nobody signed it."

"Maybe it's Red Peters," Fivehead guessed. "Like my mom says, he's a cherry short of a chocolate sundae."

"He kept grabbing my arm at my tryout, said my header was lucky."

"Red has a wicked temper," Fivehead said. "Last year, some kid kept tripping him. Red elbowed the kid, knocked out two teeth. I can still hear the kid screamin'."

Max felt a chill shoot through him. Fivehead put up a hand. "Don't worry, Coach Pepper is hard as nails. He puts up with nothin' from nobody."

They finished their cones and pedaled back into the woods. When they reached Fivehead's driveway they stopped, side by side. "Thanks for the cone," Max said.

Fivehead took out his phone. "Give me your cell number, I'll give you mine." The boys swapped numbers, and Max pedaled toward his house. Rolling into his garage, he broke into a grin. *Fivehead's a crack-up. At least there's one cool kid on my team.*