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Mad Max

Max Miles sat in the car, his boots laced, his eyes on the sunlit soccer field. But Max wasn't going anywhere, not with his seat belt still buckled.

It was Max's first visit to Greenleaf Park, for his first practice with his new team, the Falcons. But Max couldn't move a muscle.

"Practice is about to start, Max," his mom said. "Time to go."

Max blew out a sigh. "I've never felt this nervous, Mom. I can feel my heart beating."

"Remember, Coach Ball asked you to join the team," Mrs. Miles replied. "Besides, when you played against these guys in New York, you were the best player."

"Yeah, and then I fell off my stupid bike and sprained my ankle," Max whined. "I haven't touched a ball in four weeks, haven't run at all. What if I mess up?"

"Coach Ball knows about your ankle. He knows you won't be at full strength."

"But what about Red Peters?" Max volleyed. "I already took his position once, and that didn't go so good. How's he gonna react when I do it again?"

"Red was nice to you in New York, Max."

"Yeah, but now I'm a threat to him," Max countered.

Max thought back to his first days on his old travel team, the Thunder. He was the new kid in town. Red was the star, until Max beat him out at center midfield. Red didn't step aside quietly. He went after Max in practice, went after him hard, cleats up. Then Red quit the Thunder and joined the rival Lightning. He kept hounding Max, with his elbows and his mouth.

After the fall season ended, Coach Ball had asked Max to join the Falcons. When Max decided to stay on the Thunder, what did Coach Ball do? He picked Red Peters instead. After the

spring season ended, Coach Ball again asked Max to join the Falcons. This time, Max jumped at the offer.

Max tapped a fist on his thigh. “Mom, if Red flips out again, a flock of Falcons might gang up on me.”

“Coach Ball will squash any nonsense,” his mom said. “Now get moving, Max.”

Max unbuckled his seat belt and got out. He had to cross a baseball field to reach the soccer field. As he started across the infield, Max looked up at a boy jogging toward him. Seconds later, Red Peters eased up and put out a fist. Max bumped it, and they swapped hellos.

“When I heard you were joining our team, I was so pumped,” Red said with a smile.

“Uh, thanks,” was all Max could muster.

Coach Ball’s whistle rang out. “Let’s get going,” Red said, “cuz if we’re late, Coach Ball will make us do sprints.”

Red stepped into a trot, Max matching his stride. “So Max, you and me, we’re gonna break all the records,” Red boasted.

Max nodded. *Maybe, but what will you do when I take your position?*

As Max and Red neared the huddle, Coach Ball broke into a grin. “Max Miles, great to see you!” Coach blared as he wrapped an arm around Max. “Boys, let’s hear it for our new teammate.”

The boys clapped, and Coach went on. “You remember Max. He scored two goals on us in the Big Apple Tournament.”

“Yeah, and then we buried him in the second half,” jabbed one boy. Max remembered him. Tall, blond buzz cut, mean eyes. *That’s Teddy, the kid I owned in New York.*

Coach set his eyes on Teddy. “Don’t forget, Teddy, we had to double-team him, and he still ran us dizzy.”

“Yeah, Teddy, Max gave us more trouble than any other player,” Red added. “He’s awesome. Trust me, I know.”

Max looked at Red. *What’s with Red Peters? It’s like he’s a different kid. So far.* Coach Ball fished a bag out of his backpack and tossed it to Max. His uniform. Max looked it over and then stuck it in his bag.

“So, Max, how’s your ankle?” Coach asked.

“Almost healed,” Max said, “but I haven’t worked out in four weeks.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll ease you back in,” Coach said. After some stretches, Coach set up some dribbling and passing drills. Right away, Max knew he had some rust to shake off. His dribbling felt clunky, and his passes wandered off the mark. After the drills, Coach set up a scrimmage. He put Red at center mid for the white team, Max at center mid for the red team. As Max took the field, he felt his heart pound on his chest. *This is your chance, Max, don’t blow it.*

Two minutes into the game, Max and Teddy bumped shoulders over a loose ball. Max felt his ankle buckle, and he tumbled to the grass. Max sprang up and tried to walk off the pain. Coach Ball blew his whistle. “You okay, Max?”

“I’m fine,” Max said, but he wasn’t. *Wow, my ankle’s still not right.*

Seconds later Max gathered a loose ball, but Red was on him in a snap. Max tried to shield Red, but Red poked the ball free and broke away. Max chased, but the gap grew wider. *Wow, Red’s fast, faster than I remember.* Thirty yards from goal, Red blew by a defender. As Red neared the box, Max drew closer. Red cocked his leg and Max slid. He was a whisker late. Red laced a dart that sizzled past the keeper. Max was still on the seat of his shorts when he saw the ball punch the roof. Red leaned over and put out a hand. Max took it, but he didn’t meet Red’s eyes. *I just got schooled, big time.*

Five minutes later, Red took a feed and built speed toward the box. Max jockeyed Red, but then Red scissored, Max wobbled, and Red blew by. His eyes up, Red threaded the ball between two foes into Bart's path. Bart ran on and creamed a pill into the far corner. Max was bent over, trying to catch his breath. *I better wake up, now.*

Ten minutes later, Max led his wing into the corner and broke for the box. The wing rolled the ball in front of Max, ten yards from goal. Max ran on and blasted it over the bar.

"Come on, Max," his wing wailed. "That was a tap-in!"

Max put up a hand, but then he pulled it down. *Tap-in, from ten yards? Get real, dude.*

As the game wore on, Red took full command. He beat Max to loose balls, beat him off the dribble, even scored another goal. Finally, Coach Ball ended it. As Max trotted off, he could feel lots of eyes on him.

After a water break, Coach passed out copies of the schedule. "We have a game every weekend through the fall," he said. "Over Thanksgiving weekend, we go to Boston for the Beantown Tournament. Boston's a cool city, more on that later."

Coach eyed his clipboard. "Listen up, here's our lineup for Saturday."

Max felt his pulse hammer. *He's already chosen a lineup?* Coach started with the goalkeeper, Chuck Whipple. Then the four backs, Homer Hobbs, Ron Rocker, Luke Mason, and Stu Grimm. Then he paused a few beats. "Bart Riggs is at right midfield, Max Miles on the left, Red Peters in the center." Coach finished reading the lineup, but Max didn't hear the names.

After Coach dismissed the team, Max grabbed his bag. *Should I talk to Coach? No, I'll look like a whiner. Plus, I just got burned by Red.* Max walked alone across the baseball field. He swung his boot into second base, knocking up a cloud of dust. As Max reached the lot his mom pulled up, and he got in.

"How'd it go?" Mrs. Miles asked.

“Red beat me out,” Max said. “I’m playing left midfield.”

“That’s a good spot.”

“Come on, Mom, I play in the middle. You know, I know it, everyone knows it.”

“How did you play?” she asked.

“Red stuck it to me, but it’s my ankle, I know it.” Max squeezed his water bottle. “Coach made up his mind before he saw the real me. He told me I could play anywhere I want. He lied.”

“You just said it was your ankle, Max,” his mom said. “By the way, how did Red treat you?”

“You won’t believe it, he was friendly. When some other kid gave me lip, Red defended me.”

“Sounds like Red has grown up. I’ll bet Coach Ball has a lot to do with that.”

“Doesn’t matter, Mom,” Max said. “He can be the nicest guy on the planet, I’m still taking his position.”