

# ★ Chapter 1 ★



Max Harding ducked, scrambled, and threw. He looked to see if Lara or Miles was anywhere near where the ball would come down, but he couldn't see a thing. A mob of players from the other team ran down the field. The Buffalo players were all huge, and they blocked Max's view. All he could make out was the red of their jerseys.

A moment later, Max saw a red streak burst from the crowd. A kid with a buzz cut held the football high in the air. That was it. The game was over. It was another

loss for Max's team, the Walruses. He guessed the Walruses were the worst team in the whole flag football league.

Lara and Miles ran over, along with the rest of the team. Max took off his jersey and knelt down to pet the coach's dog, a handsome husky named Hutch. Max only half listened to the post-game speech. Like always, the coach insisted that they had done their best and had fun. Coach said that was what it was all about. Then they all headed home.



Lara and Miles jogged to catch up with Max as he walked toward the other side of the park. “That was a good pass,” Miles said. “I almost had it, but then one of the Buffalos batted it away.”

“Sorry,” Max replied.

“You don’t need to apologize,” Lara said. “We’ll get them next week.”

Max rolled his eyes. Unless they all magically grew six inches in seven days, Max was sure next week would be just like this one.

“Yeah,” Max said, not wanting to hurt Lara’s feelings. She always played hard. She never let the other teams get to her.

“This is our street,” Miles said.

“See you on Monday,” Lara added, and the twins waved before turning off.

Max cut across the grassy meadow. As he passed a group of older kids wearing yellow jerseys, they fell into pace next to him.

“Hey, it’s our competition for next week,” a kid with blond hair announced. Max recognized him from school. His name was Jason. He had been teammates with Max, Miles, and Lara last year. This season, he was on a different team.

“You guys are the smallest walruses of all time,” Jason said. Max’s head barely reached the other boys’ shoulders. It was hard to believe they were in the same league. Jason and his teammates were all one or maybe two years older.

“Yeah, but I think the walrus is the perfect mascot for your team,” one of Jason’s friends added. “Because a walrus can’t catch a ball, and you guys can’t catch either.”

Immediately, Max pictured a giant walrus lumbering around on a slab of ice, attempting to grasp a football in its floppy flippers. *Seriously. Who thought of the team names anyway?* Max wondered. The other

mascots were fierce animals like bulls or wolves. Why did his team have to be a blubbery sea mammal?

The group of older boys fell silent but stuck with Max. Max wanted to say something back — something clever — but he knew it wouldn't fix anything. Still, he wanted to defend his team. They could catch and run good plays, just not against kids who were so much bigger.

Max wasn't scared of Jason or the other kids, but he didn't like the way they made him feel. He was relieved when they didn't follow him out of the park.

“The Bulldogs are all really scared to go up against the Walruses next week,” Jason called as Max crossed the street. “Please don't scratch us with your long whiskers.” Max could hear the other kids laughing. He imagined one of them slapping Jason on the back, congratulating him on a good joke.



Max was not looking forward to playing them. The Bulldogs. Max couldn't believe such a good name was wasted on Jason and his friends. Why couldn't Max's team have been some dog breed? Their coach had a husky. They should have been the Huskies.

Max loved dogs. He had always wanted one. His parents had talked about getting one a few years ago, but then he got a baby sister instead.

As he turned down his street he noticed his mom's minivan in the driveway, which meant she was back from the doctor. His little sister, Rina, had had a checkup. The car that his dad drove wasn't there. Max guessed that his dad and his big brother, Kazu, were still at the soccer tournament. Since his parents had been busy with his sister and brother, Max had been on his own that morning. He liked that, most of the time.

"Hey, Mom. Hey, Rina," Max said as he dropped his backpack on the floor and headed straight for the kitchen.

"Hey! How was your game?" Mom called from the other room.

"Fine," Max answered. He grabbed a granola bar and went back to the dinner table where Rina was finger painting. Their mom was next to her, chopping squash. Between them, the table was

covered with paper, paints, books, and vegetables.

“How was your checkup?” Max asked Rina.

“Boo-boo,” his little sister said, pointing to a purple Band-Aid.

Mom looked up. “It was from her shots,” she said. “You were brave, weren’t you, Rina?”

Rina nodded twice. She had just turned two and didn’t say much, at least not much that Max could understand.

“Max, I didn’t expect you home yet,” Mom said, glancing at him as she sliced. “I thought you were volunteering today.”

“I am, but I wanted to drop off my stuff. And get a snack,” Max explained. He and his friends Lexi, Henry, and Sadie had just started volunteering at the local pet center. They were meeting there that afternoon.

“Okay, because your dad is planning to pick you up from Power’s Pets later. He



has a surprise for you,” she said. She looked up at him. Dimples dotted her cheeks when she smiled.

“Yeah? What is it?” Max asked, hoping for a clue. He popped the last corner of granola bar in his mouth.

“I’m not telling,” his mom answered, eyebrows raised. “But it’s a good one.”