

# STRIKER

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Cody fought the urge to rub the back of his right leg. His mom got crazy worried if he so much as scratched — only, it was really tight and it hurt. The doctor said it would feel better in time, the one thing he didn't have. He'd already missed one season because of the tumour. He couldn't miss another.

He folded his arms across his chest and rolled the soccer ball back and forth with his foot. The tryout was in two days. He had to ask his mom to let him play — it was now or never.

“Have you thought about soccer much lately?” he said, as if he was asking about the weather.

“I haven't had time to think about anything,” his mom said. She rifled through a pile of papers on her desk, and then scrolled down the computer screen. “Where is that ridiculous file?”

Cody rolled the ball a little faster. "I mean, have you thought about me . . . and soccer. 'Cause the season is starting, and . . ."

"I can't believe this. It disappeared. Twenty minutes wasted." She ran a hand through her hair.

His mom was obviously stressed about work. Definitely not prime time to ask if she would let him try out for a rep team. "I think I might go play a bit . . . outside . . . maybe at the park. You know the one, not far . . . just down the street."

She took her glasses off. "I know where the park is. But do you have to go now? I'm right in the middle of something. Give me half an hour, and I'll drive you."

"I don't need a drive to the park."

"It's fine. Give me a few minutes, and I'll take you."

"I can go myself."

"Don't be silly. It's a far walk."

"It's five minutes."

"Cody. The doctor said you need to take it easy. Your last treatment was less than a month ago. You'll tire out . . . and what if you fell and got hurt and I wasn't there . . . or . . . It's thirty minutes. Please wait. I just need to find this file." Her phone rang. "Yes, Suzanna. I can't find it. It's maddening . . ."

Cody dribbled the ball out of the room. Typical! This treating him like a little kid. Thirteen years old and he couldn't even go to the park without his mommy. "Even you want to go, don't ya, Mr. Ball?" he said. He gave the ball a soft kick and it rolled the length of the hall to the front door. Then he rubbed the back of his right thigh.

Hard to believe what happened because he'd felt a lump eight months ago.

Cody went over and picked the ball up, spinning it in his hands. It was a bad idea; he knew it. But it wouldn't go away. The more he heard his mom talking on the phone to her boss, the more he felt the urge to give in, as if some powerful wizard had cast a spell over him. He took his skullcap from the hook and quietly opened the front door.

The air was cool, even for a late spring day. Sweatshirt weather, for sure, but going back was way too risky. His mom would hear him. She'd said she needed thirty minutes, and he'd be back before then. He could tell she didn't really feel like going, anyway; and this wasn't technically lying. She hadn't said he couldn't go by himself. He began to jog slowly, controlling the ball with his insteps.

The park was a bit further than five minutes away. He promised himself that he'd stay for only ten minutes, and then hightail it back. It was deserted, anyway, other than a couple of older kids playing basketball — not exactly a ton of fun.

Cody dropped the ball to the grass and began to bounce it up in the air. He got to seven touches before it fell.

“That was pathetic, Cody,” he told himself. He was so out of practice.

The next time he got to ten, and then twelve. On the fourth try the ball nicked his toe and bounded toward the court. Cody adjusted his skullcap and shuffled over. His head was sweaty but he wasn't about to freak everyone out at the park with his bald head. Dr. Charya said that would take time too — like everything else!

The *thud – thud – thud* of the bouncing basketball interrupted his thoughts.

“Yo. Deaf one. Wake up. Toss me the ball.”

A tough-looking kid, his jet-black hair swooped to the side and cut close to his head, pointed at a large evergreen tree. The basketball was under a branch. Cody felt himself flush. He always got scared around big kids, and this guy didn’t seem too friendly. Cody threw it over. The kid caught it and without a word of thanks began dribbling.

“Can’t stop me, Stick,” he jeered. “You ain’t got the game.”

Stick was a good nickname, Cody thought. The friend was tall and skinny.

“Big talk, Trane. You ain’t hit nothin’ all day.”

Trane cross-dribbled to his left and drove hard to the basket, banging his shoulder into Stick’s chest. Trane was bigger, and Stick bounced back a few steps. Trane laid the ball up for an easy hoop.

“Total foul,” Stick protested.

Trane passed him the ball. “That’s called a power move, loser. Get used to it. Or do you need a diaper change?”

Stick whipped the ball back and Trane caught it smoothly and laid it up again.

“Count another two,” he said.

Cody drifted away, tapping his ball off the outsides of his feet. He soon heard a sound far more to his liking. A kid on the other side of the basketball court, much smaller than Trane or Stick, was playing soccer by himself. He was good, too. He bounced the ball off one foot so many times Cody lost count. Then he began alternating feet, and the

ball stayed up even when he walked forward. Cody had never seen a little kid with such skills. Finally, the kid tried kicking it high and doing a spin; he almost pulled it off, only the ball skidded off the side of his foot and bounced across the court.

The kid ran to get it. As he grabbed his ball, Trane backed into him.

“Watch what you’re doing, doofus? Get off my court,” Trane said. He ripped the soccer ball out of the kid’s hands.

“Thanks for the ball, loser,” he laughed, tossing it to Stick.

“Give it back,” the kid yelled. He had an accent.

“What jungle are you from?” Trane taunted.

The kid balled his fists. “I ain’t from no jungle, idiot. Give me my ball.”

“Or what?”

The kid lunged for the ball. Stick threw it to Trane. The kid charged for it again. Trane tucked the ball under his arm, caught the kid by the back of his shirt and in one motion spun him around and tossed him to the ground. The kid jumped right back. Trane threw the ball to Stick, and then, holding him by the arm, dragged the kid off the court and threw him toward a garbage can.

“Next time I’ll put you in it,” Trane growled, “so get lost.” He turned as if to go back to the court but then whirled around and added, “And why don’t you go back where you came from?” He called out to Stick, “Let’s see my new ball.” Stick bounce passed it. Trane whistled in admiration. “Nice ball — looks expensive.” He pointed to the kid. “Now beat it or I’m gonna rearrange your face for real.”

Trane and Stick began kicking the ball to each other. Cody slowly backed away, keeping an eye on the kid as he disappeared behind some trees that bordered the tennis courts. Cody wanted to help. But what could he do?

After a minute or so, Trane called out, “This is bogus. Let’s get back to some B-ball.” He rolled the soccer ball to the side and he and Stick began to play one-on-one again.

Cody sat on his ball. He could imagine how bad the kid felt. Then, just like when he’d been talking to his mom, another crazy idea popped into his head. Trying to look bored, his heart pounding harder and harder with each step, he ambled over to the side of the court.

He desperately hoped he looked natural and that Trane and Stick would ignore him, but he found it harder and harder to breathe and sweat was dripping from under his skullcap. He glanced as nonchalantly as he could to his left. Trane was dribbling to the basket, Stick pushing and shoving to keep him outside of the key. In one motion, Cody scooped up the boy’s soccer ball.

Now his heart was pounding so hard he was sure Trane and Stick would hear it!

“Two points for the king,” Trane exclaimed.

“Two lucky points for the Turd King,” Stick answered.

Cody wasted no time retrieving his own ball — it was an old one, anyway. As fast as he could without looking too obvious he headed for the tennis courts. The kid was nowhere to be seen, though. Cody walked around to the back where a thicket of trees and bushes obscured the view down to a ravine.

A hand grabbed his shoulder. “Do you have it?”

Cody jumped back. The kid had followed him.

He was greeted by a wide smile and gleaming white teeth. “Sorry about that. I guess I kinda scared you. But I saw you get my ball.” The kid’s eyes flashed eagerly.

He was smaller than Cody but he looked about the same age. Cody took a deep breath. His shoulders relaxed, and he dropped the ball to the ground. The kid drew it back with his foot, and then flicked it up into his hands.

“Thanks. Those guys are total jerks. This is my dad’s ball and he would’ve been mad if I’d come home without it.”

“It’s a sweet ball, for sure,” Cody said.

“It’s from Brazil,” he said proudly.

Cody didn’t know what to say next — probably just goodbye. He wasn’t going back to the park, not with Trane and Stick there; and he was nervous about how long he’d stayed already. “Yeah . . . Well . . . Glad to help. Take it easy — and I’d stay away from those guys. They’re pretty big.”

He shrugged. “I’m not afraid of them. I play where I want.”

Cody had to laugh — he believed him. The kid didn’t seem scared one bit.

“What’s your name?”

The sudden question startled Cody. “Um . . . It’s Cody.” He paused. “What’s yours?”

“Paulo.”

“Cool. So . . . See ya . . . Paulo.”

“See ya, Cody.” He paused. “How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“Me, too.” Paulo flashed his wide toothy grin. “I play



soccer a lot. I live down on the other side of the ravine. We should kick the ball around some time. I was watching you. You're a good player."

Cody blushed. He was nothing compared to Paulo. "Sure — sounds good. I'll see y'around. Bye."

Cody cut across the field, careful to stay as far from the basketball court as he could. On a whim, he turned to wave, but Paulo had already headed down the hill and was out of sight. He felt good about what he'd done. Soccer players had to stick together!

He wondered if he'd see Paulo again.



His mom's cheeks were streaked with tears. His dad stood behind her with his hand on her shoulder. Cody wished he'd stayed at the park.

"I was so worried I almost called the police," his mom said. "You're so selfish, Cody. Think of how I felt. Is it too much to ask for you to wait twenty minutes?"

"I think you said something like thirty," Cody said.

"Do not joke about this, mister," she snapped.

"I wasn't," he said quickly. "I just meant I didn't want to bother you . . . and it was going to take a long time and . . . I'm really sorry, Mom. I just went down the street to the corner and back, just to stretch the leg. Felt awesome, too. Really awesome. Totally awesome . . . Anyway, it was fine, and I came right back."

"Do you understand the issue, Cody?" his dad said. He

seemed more tired than angry. His mom had called him on his cell when she discovered Cody wasn't in the house and he'd raced home.

"I do understand, and I'm really, really, sorry. It was a dumb thing to do. I got so stoked about getting out and playing . . ."

His dad nodded. "I can accept that. As long as you realize how upset you made your mother."

She wiped her eyes with a tissue. "At least tell me where you're going," she said, sighing deeply. "You know the rules."

"Sorry, Mom. I will."

She held her arms wide, and he leaned his head on her shoulder as she pulled him in for a hug. It was a long time before she let him go.

He'd chickened out of asking her so many times he couldn't believe how the words tumbled out all of a sudden. "I found out about a soccer team, Mom. They practise really close . . . like, ten minutes away by car at the most. I asked dad about it and he said it would be okay and that . . . and . . . it's a new team, I think, their first year in the Major division, which is what I played last year . . . or the season before . . . before I got the cancer."

"We don't use that word," his mom said sharply.

"Right. Sorry. Anyway. The tryouts start this weekend, on Saturday, and I was thinking I should try out and maybe make it, and then I could play . . . soccer, I mean."

He stopped suddenly, not sure if he had made much sense.

His mom's eyebrows were raised — a very bad sign.

“You spoke to your father about this before me?”

Not the question he’d expected. “I did a little, about the driving and stuff.”

“Sean. Were you going to involve me in this decision?”

“Of course, Cheryl. I was . . . I’ve been working late this week, and it slipped my mind . . .”

“Slipped your mind,” she exploded. “Your son wants to risk his health and do something as crazy as play competitive soccer again so soon after . . .” Her fists were balled tightly and she punched the air as she spoke. “You remember we have a son who needs to be very careful; he’s the priority, not work.”

Cody felt his stomach tighten. His mom was always yelling at his dad about working too much, and maybe he did. He spent a ton of time at the office or doing paperwork at home.

“I think I remember we have a son,” his dad said calmly. “In fact, I left a meeting to come here when you called.”

That tone of voice meant he was angry. He seemed to be angry about something or other a lot of the time.

“Then prove it,” she snapped. “And as for you,” she added, turning back to Cody, “there will be no soccer this summer. Don’t be ridiculous. I mean, really. What were you two thinking?”

“Not sure if one tryout will be so bad,” his dad said.

“Not too bad! Not too bad! You know what the doctor said.”

“I believe she said Cody should try to get back to normal.”

“Playing sports is not normal. He’s not ready.”

They were talking as if he weren't even in the room. He couldn't hold it in. "I'm not allowed to do anything, then. I just have to spend the rest of my life watching everyone else have fun. Thanks, Mom. Why don't you lock me in my bedroom and feed me with a baby spoon."

"That's obviously not what we want," his dad said.

"Then why can't I play soccer? I did before I got . . ."

"I do not want to hear that word," his mom said. "That's over and in the past."

"It's not over," Cody fumed. "You're not cured for five years, and the cancer can come back. We all know that."

"Cody!" his dad said.

"No, it won't," his mom cried. "How can you say that? I won't listen to that."

"I don't get the big deal. I had cancer. I had an operation to remove a tumour from my leg. Cancer is just a word — like pizza."

"Not exactly the same thing, Cody," his dad said.

His mom closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. "Cody, you know how much we love you. My goodness, this has been so hard on all three of us. We had to sell the house and move to be close to the hospital, and you missed the last six months of school, not to mention Daddy has a longer drive to work . . ."

"I didn't mind that," his dad said.

She waved him off. "The point is we're all in this together. It's not about me; it's about what's best for your health. Next year I'd love for you to play. You know how much I enjoy watching you. How many practices and games have I sat through?"

Cody put his hand to his forehead. "I'm fine now, Mom. I was just at the park and walked around no problem."

"You went to the park?" she said. "I thought you only went to the corner."

"I meant the corner."

"Cody?"

Soccer was over. He knew it. May as well come clean. "I went to the park to kick the ball around and test my leg. I knew you wouldn't let me if I asked. Sorry. But I had to. And I was fine, by the way."

"I would have taken you," his mom said.

"And you would've had a heart attack if I'd ran faster than a turtle, and you know it."

"Cody, you may be upset, but let's not be rude," his dad said.

"Mom's being crazy overprotective. Soccer isn't going to make the cancer come back."

"Don't say that word!" she said.

"Then don't say I can't play soccer until next summer. It's not so easy to make a rep team, and if I miss this season I won't have the skills. It's been forever since I played, and this is the only team at the Major level that practises near us. The other teams are too far away."

His dad put up his hand. "Hold on, you two. I have an idea." He looked at Cody. "When is the tryout, again?"

"Saturday afternoon — three o'clock."

"And how long is it?"

"Two hours, I guess."

"So that gives us two days to see how your leg feels after your run in the park. We can all go tomorrow and test it

out again, too.” He turned to his mom. “Cheryl, one tryout won’t be a problem. If his leg hurts, either after a run in the park or at any time during the tryout, then absolutely I say that’s the end. But . . . what’s the harm in giving it a shot?”

Cody pleaded with his eyes. Would she let him — this one time?

“I worry too much. I know that,” she said softly. Cody allowed himself to hope. “I also know you love to play soccer and you’re good at it.” The briefest of smiles appeared. “You forget sometimes that I’m also a soccer player.”

That was true. She’d been good enough to play at university on a scholarship.

His mom crossed her arms and she sat up straight. “If anything happened to you I’d never forgive myself. I just think it’s too soon.”

Cody felt a tear fall down his cheek.

His dad leaned forward. Here comes the “Don’t worry about it” speech, Cody thought. Dad always gave in to her.

But he surprised Cody this time.

“It’s only one tryout, Cheryl. We’ll both go, and if you see any problem . . .”

Her shoulders sagged. “You two are relentless.” A few seconds passed. “Fine. Go. But I’m not watching,” his mom said. “I can’t. You have to take him, Sean. And if anything happens, I swear, I’ll never . . .”

“Nothing will happen,” Cody practically shouted. He couldn’t control the huge smile that burst out across his face. “Thanks, Mom. I feel great — never better. You should’ve seen me running around the park like a maniac.”

“Now you were running around?”

“I didn’t really; it’s just a . . . I didn’t mean that . . . I ran to the tennis courts and back.”

She held out her arms, and he dutifully laid his head on her shoulder.

“We’ll get through this together. Don’t worry. Things will all be better soon,” she said, rocking him side to side.

He tried to pull away but she wouldn’t let go. Cody began to feel silly, all bent over; he also had a feeling that his mom was crying. He waited a bit longer, and then began to wiggle out of her arms.

She let go and wiped away her tears. “I’m sorry I love you so much. I can’t help it.”

“I know, Mom. It’s just . . .” He wanted to tell her to let him be a kid again, even though he’d had cancer, that he’d never feel healthy until he could play soccer again, and that the doctor had told him not to let the cancer control him. But looking at the expression on his mom’s face, he figured that could wait for another day.

“Can I go soak my leg in the bath? I’m supposed to do it once a day . . .”

“Of course, honey. Do you want me to run the water for you?” She got up.

“No, that’s okay. I’ll do it.” His mom would probably stay in the bathroom and talk to him. “I feel like reading . . . by myself.”

“Excellent idea,” his dad said.

“Okay. If you need anything, just holler,” his mom said.

“Will do,” Cody said. He stepped toward the hallway—and felt a sharp pain sweep up his right leg. A groan escaped his lips.



“Cody?”

“My leg just fell asleep when I was sitting. I’m good. No problem. Look.” He jumped up and down a few times, ignoring the tightness that ran up his leg each time he landed.

“Go soak, Mr. Jumping Jack,” his mom said.

He managed not to limp until he got out of the kitchen and turned the corner. Then he hopped on his left foot to the stairs and, using the handrail for balance, hauled himself up. The doctor had said his leg would be very stiff and feel weak when he started to move around on it. That was probably it, just a little stiff. A hot bath, and he’d be fine.

Cody turned on the water, and then ran his finger slowly along the scar where they’d taken out the tumour. His right leg was really skinny compared to his left. He had to get to the park tomorrow and stretch and run around a bit more. He’d never make the team with his leg like this.

And he had to make that team.