



CHAPTER 1

Frankie pushed the bell beside Charlie's front door.

DING-DONG!

"It must have been a dream," said Louise, who was standing next to him.

"But we all had the *same* dream," said Frankie.

Louise rolled her eyes. "There's no such thing as a magic soccer ball," she said. "And even if there were, it wouldn't look like that." She pointed to the ball under Frankie's arm.

He smiled. The ball looked like it had been chewed up and spit out. Half the leather had peeled away, and it sagged like an old balloon. He'd won it at a carnival from a strange old man, but something very weird had happened when they had played with the ball in the park. A portal into another world had opened up, and they'd found themselves on a wooden ship,

playing soccer against pirates. Well, three pirates and a talking parrot, which was even weirder.

“We can’t have been dreaming,” said Frankie. “It was the middle of the day.”

He heard the sound of footsteps in the house. Max, Frankie’s dog, barked.

“And dogs don’t talk, either,” said Louise.

Max glanced up. On the pirate ship, he’d been chatting away like one of them. But back in the real world, it was just his usual barks, whines, and growls.

The door opened and Charlie stood there. He was wearing his goalie gloves, as always, and was holding a slice of toast.

“Sorry, guys, just finishing my breakfast,” he said.

Louise laughed. “It might be easier if you took those off,” she said, nodding at the gloves.

Charlie shook his head. “No way. The best goalies are —”

“— always ready!” said Louise and Frankie together. They had heard it a million times.

Charlie swallowed the last bit of toast. “Let’s go.”

Just as he stepped through the



door, his kitten, Jinx, slipped out after him. Max leapt into the air, then scurried away, tail between his legs. Jinx purred and narrowed her green eyes.

“She’s nothing to be frightened of,” said Frankie, scratching Max behind the ears.

Jinx leapt up onto the front fence and arched her back.

“She’s just a pussycat,” said Louise, running her hand over Jinx’s fur.

As the friends set off toward the park, Max seemed to recover, trotting a few steps ahead of them and sniffing around.

"It's funny how your dog is so fearless about everything else," said Charlie, "but he's terrified of Jinx."

Frankie shrugged. "I guess we're all scared of something. It doesn't have to make sense. I don't like heights."

"I *hate* spiders," said Louise.

They were silent for a few seconds, then Louise asked, "What are you scared of, Charlie?"

"I don't know," said Charlie, chewing his lip. "Nothing, I guess. No, actually, I do know! I'm scared of . . . not saving goals."

Frankie and Louise burst out laughing.

“That doesn’t count!” said Frankie.

“Well, I suppose I’m scared of sharks,” said Charlie.

“We’re *all* scared of sharks,” said Frankie. He shuddered as he remembered seeing shark fins cutting through the waves beside the pirate ship. “Do you think it was real?” he asked.

Charlie shrugged. “It felt real to me. Has anything else happened with the ball since?”

Frankie shook his head. “Nope.” He’d tried playing with it in his backyard and even in his bedroom. No more portals had opened up.

It was sort of a relief—on the pirate ship, they'd almost ended up marooned on a desert island. But Frankie couldn't help feeling disappointed, too. "I've got a theory, though," he said. "Maybe it only works when we're all together."

"Frankie's FC might not be finished yet!" said Louise.

A light drizzle had started by the time they reached the park, so there weren't many people around. Frankie dropped his ball and kicked it into Charlie's gloves.

“Looks like we’ll get the field to ourselves,” said Charlie as they made their way to the grass where they played.

“Or not,” said Louise, pointing ahead. “Uh-oh.”

Frankie looked up and his heart sank. His older brother, Kevin, was already there with his friends Liam, Rob, and Matt. Matt was in goal between the two posts. They were kicking around a brand-new soccer ball.

“Whoa!” said Charlie. “That’s a ‘Pro Infinity.’ They cost a lot.”

Frankie felt himself blushing. He suddenly wanted to hide his

battered old ball. "Come on, let's go somewhere else."

But it was too late. His brother blasted a shot past Matt and the ball rolled toward Frankie. He stopped it under his foot.

"Look who it is!" said Kevin. "*Frankenstein* and his loser friends."

Frankie's embarrassment turned to anger. He put up with his brother picking on him, but not his friends. *Time to teach them a lesson*, he thought. "Hi, Kev," he said. "Can we play, too?"

Kevin glanced at his friends as he walked over. "No way," he sneered. "It's not a *children's* game."



Kevin tried to kick the ball from under Frankie's foot, but Frankie rolled it back out of reach.

"Give me the ball, Frankenstein," said Kevin, his face darkening. "Or else."

"Sure," said Frankie. He dribbled

the ball over to his brother, then tipped it through his legs.

“Hey!” said Kevin. “I said, give —”

Frankie wasn't listening. He passed the ball to Louise. Liam and Rob were closing in. Louise faked a pass back to Frankie but took the ball around Rob. Charlie was laughing. “Go, Frankie's team!” he shouted. Liam was a big kid, and he was quick. He ran at Louise, but she kept steady and flicked the ball over his head. It came to Frankie, who was now in front of the goal.

Matt spread his arms. “You're not getting past me,” he said.

Want to bet? thought Frankie.

“Hey, that’s ours!” came Charlie’s voice.

Frankie turned, forgetting about shooting. Max was barking, running in circles around Kevin, who was holding their soccer ball from the carnival.

“*Children* play in the *children’s* area,” Kevin said. “Now, beat it!” He tossed the old ball in the air, then booted it high and far.

Frankie watched his ball fly toward the toddlers’ play area.

Suddenly, he was on the ground, as Liam tackled him roughly and took the other ball.

“Great shot, Kev!” called Matt. He lowered his voice and muttered to Frankie, “Told you that you wouldn’t score.”