

Team Players

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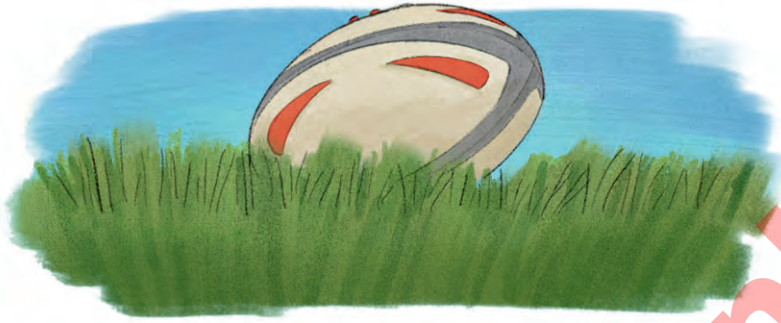
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Chapter 1

Wide Awake



It was Friday night and Carter was feeling anxious. The rain had been torrential all day, and it was still pelting down outside. If it didn't stop soon, the sports ground would be a swamp.

Carter picked up Mum's phone from the kitchen table and called his friend Joel.

"I know, I know," said Joel when he heard Carter's voice. "If it doesn't stop raining soon, they'll cancel our game. Or we'll have to turn into a swim club."

Carter tried to laugh, but he didn't feel like joking around. The fact was, there was something else that was playing on his mind. It was something he didn't want to confront because he knew it would make him feel miserable as well as anxious.

"Catch you later – hopefully tomorrow," he told Joel as he ended the call and put down the phone.

Carter went into the living room to say goodnight to Mum and then headed to bed. But almost an hour later, he was still wide awake. He reached for the small flashlight he kept under his pillow, switched it on and shone the light over his bedroom walls. They were covered in rugby posters – each one a gift from Dad, who always looked out for them whenever they were for sale in shops. Carter flicked the beam of the flashlight from one poster to another, lingering on any that featured one of the Green Ferns.

The Green Ferns was his favourite rugby team, and the current Green Ferns captain, Dan Shellbrook, was the best player of them all. Dan was a legend, and before long, he would be a world megastar – Carter was sure. He'd played twelve tests and he was the youngest captain the Green Ferns had ever had. Just as importantly, he was a good sport – he never lost his temper and he always played fair.

Carter let out a long sigh. He was passionate about rugby (that was the word Mum used). He loved playing it, being a spectator, following it on TV – sometimes he even dreamed about rugby!

Saturday morning rugby was the thing Carter most looked forward to all week, and now the rain

meant his game would probably be flooded out.

There was a soft knock.

“Wondering if rugby will be cancelled?” Mum asked from his bedroom doorway.

Carter looked up.

“I saw the light from your flashlight flickering about,” she said.



“Why does it always have to rain on Friday night?” asked Carter, miserably. “If I was a Green Fern, I’d never have to worry about my game being cancelled.”

“If you were a Green Fern,” said Mum, “you’d be playing under a covered stadium if the rain was this heavy.”

Carter trained his flashlight onto a book about the Green Ferns captain, Dan Shellbrook, which was propped up on top of his desk. Dad had sent it to him just last week.

“I still can’t believe Dad actually got to talk to Dan while he was waiting for him to autograph the book!” said Carter. “If I ever got the chance to talk to Dan Shellbrook, I think I’d lose my voice!”

Carter sank back down in his bed and stared up at the ceiling.

“Is the rain *all* that’s worrying you?” asked Mum, after a minute or two. “Or is something else bothering you, Carter?”

Carter opened his mouth to say something, then hesitated and closed it again. He wanted to confide in Mum, but the problem was so complicated, he didn’t know where to begin. Carter was also concerned that if he did manage to explain the situation to Mum, she might then go to Mr Martin,

his rugby coach, about it. Players always found out when a parent had been to see Mr Martin, and they often gave their teammates a hard time about it.

"I'm okay," said Carter, at last, but Mum didn't look convinced.

"Well, whatever it is," she said, smiling, "we've got a reason to feel more optimistic about your game being on tomorrow."

"Why?" asked Carter, gloomily.

"Because the rain has stopped," she replied.

"Listen!"

Carter lay very still. "It *has* stopped!" he said.

"I'd say it's game on, tomorrow," said Mum, as she took Carter's flashlight from him and switched it off.

Carter pulled the covers of his bed up to his chin.

"Do you think I have a chance of being a Green Fern one day, Mum?" he asked.

"If you work hard enough," replied Mum, as she went out the door. "I think anything's possible. But only if you get some sleep!"

Chapter 2

Carter's Concern



Carter did get to sleep eventually, but not before he'd done a lot of thinking about Dylan James.

Dylan was the same age as Carter, twelve, and Carter had known him since they were both six years old playing Ripper Rugby together. Now, Dylan was the only other player in the Under 13s who had the same potential as Carter.

Dylan and Carter didn't see a lot of each other because they went to different schools, but they always said hi if they met down the street. Mostly, Dylan was what Carter thought of as "a rugby mate". The two of them had fun together whenever they helped out with fundraising for the junior rugby club. When they played rugby in another town, they always shared a seat on the bus on the way, and Saturday mornings in the club room after their game, they always raced each other to wolf down their cookies.