

**FRED BOWEN**

**SOCCER  
TROPHY  
MYSTERY**



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# CHAPTER 1

**G**o to the middle.” Aiden Connelly quickly tapped the soccer ball from his right foot to his left foot and sprinted toward the middle of the field.

*Down a goal, he thought. We’ve got to score...fast.*

Aiden slipped a pass to Daniel Novak, his friend and Thunder teammate, who was charging down the right wing. Daniel tried to swing a crossing pass toward the front of the goal. The ball sailed wide and over the goal line. The referee signaled that it was the Avengers ball.

“Get back!” Coach Schmidt called out, waving his hands on the sidelines.

Aiden hustled back, thinking about the

game situation with every step. *Down 2-1. Just a few minutes to play. If we can't beat the Avengers, we really need to salvage a point in the county league standings with a tie.*

Aiden stepped in front of an Avenger forward to regain possession of the ball. He raced up the field, checking the defense. All the Avengers were dropping back, clogging the passing lanes.

Aiden and his teammates swung the ball from side to side, looking for an opening. Jayden Jefferson, a Thunder midfielder, sent a long, high ball in toward the goal. Thunder and Avenger players scrambled to get a head or a leg on the ball.

The ball spun loose from the tangle of players. Daniel kicked it hard with his left foot, spinning it through the air toward the net.

Just before it reached the goal, the ball smacked against the arm of an Avenger defender.

“Hands!” Aiden screamed along with his Thunder teammates.

*Tweeeeeet!*

The referee blew her whistle and pointed

to the penalty mark twelve yards in front of the goal.

The Thunder had a penalty kick!

Coach Schmidt stepped out onto the field. “Have Jayden take it!” he shouted. “Pick out a side and let it go. Just like in practice.”

Jayden set down the ball on the penalty mark. Aiden lined up with Daniel along the line in back of the penalty mark, ready to burst in if the goalkeeper made a save and the ball was loose.

The Avengers goalkeeper bounced from side to side along the goal line, trying to guess where Jayden would kick the ball. He dove to the right as Jayden made contact with the ball, but he’d guessed wrong. Jayden blasted the ball to the left.

Goal! The game was tied, 2–2.

The ball stayed in the middle of the field for the remaining minutes with neither team generating a single shot on goal. Finally the referee blew her whistle and crossed her hands over her head to signal the end of the game.

“We were *so* lucky to squeak by like that,” Aiden said to Daniel as the teammates walked slowly from the pitch. “We should have beat those guys easy.”

Daniel reached into his gym bag and pulled out his phone. His fingers moved swiftly across the screen, and the standings for the twelve-team Winchester County U-14 soccer league appeared.

<b>Team</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Points</b>
Fury	7-0-2	23
Thunder	7-1-1	22
Wolfpack	6-2-1	19
Gunners	6-3-0	18
Dragons	5-2-2	17
Tigers	5-4-0	15
Red Bulls	4-5-0	12
Avengers	3-5-1	10
Lemonheads	3-6-0	9
Vipers	3-6-0	9
United Blue	1-8-0	3
Wolverines	0-8-1	1

“They’ve already posted the results of all of today’s games,” Daniel said. “Man, they are fast.”

The boys studied the top part of the league standings. “The tie means we’re now one point behind the Fury,” Aiden said.

“Yeah, we’d better beat the Wolfpack and the Dragons in our last two games if we want to get on the trophy.” Daniel tossed the phone into his bag. “And hope somebody beats or ties the Fury.”

“We can do it,” Aiden said, even though he wasn’t 100 percent sure they could.

“Good game!” Aiden’s father called out as he walked across the field toward them.

“We were lucky,” Aiden said. “Hey, Dad. What—?”

“Two twenty,” his dad said, reading Aiden’s mind. “We’ve still got time to catch the end of Ava’s game.”

Aiden, his father, and Daniel walked quickly past several soccer fields at the Taylor Park Soccerplex. As they approached the field where his twin sister Ava’s team

was playing, Aiden saw his mother standing on the sidelines.

“Spread out!” she yelled through cupped hands. “Move the ball! Come on, hustle!”

“What’s the score?” Aiden asked her.

“Two to nothing,” she answered without taking her eyes off the field.

“How’s Ava doing?”

“Not bad. She’s scored both goals.”

Aiden’s gaze locked on his sister. He shook his head, marveling at how easily Ava controlled play—distributing the ball, directing her teammates. Always in control, never in a hurry, head up, probing the defense for a weakness.

Sensing an opening, Ava darted forward and slipped by a defender. As another defender stepped forward to challenge, Ava skidded a perfect pass to a closing wing, who then directed a shot toward the far post past the diving goalkeeper. The ball hit the inside of the post and spun into the net.

Goal!

Aiden’s mom jumped up. “Great pass, Ava! Way to keep your head up.”

Aiden threw his hands into the air in disbelief. “Did you see that pass?”

Daniel nodded. “That was sweet. Your sister’s got magic in her feet.”

A few minutes later, Ava and her Spirit teammates celebrated their 3–0 victory by thrusting their index fingers toward the sky.

“They’re awfully happy for such an easy win,” Daniel said.

Aiden’s mother smiled. “They’re excited because they won their league.”

“Already?”

“Yeah,” Aiden said. “They have two more games, but no one can catch them now.”

Daniel took out his phone and checked the U-14 girls’ standings. “I see what you mean,” he said. “They’re way ahead.”

When Ava came off the field, her face was red and streaming with sweat. She was smiling from ear to ear.

“You won!” Aiden shouted as their mom and dad wrapped her up in a big hug.

“We’re on the trophy,” Ava said with a satisfied smile. “We’re on the trophy.”