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opening extract from

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STRIKER



SUDDEN DEATH

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EGMONT

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To Paul, Allan and Richard – thanks for the inspiration

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1

Jake sucked in a breath through his teeth as swirls of his blood circled the shower drain.

Olly Price's studs had left a six-inch gash down his right calf. The cut was probably deep enough to need stitches. Price had stood over him with a look of innocence, but Jake knew the tackle was no accident.

Worse though were the referee's words that still echoed in his head.

Your father would be ashamed of you, Jake. Go and get changed.

Jake showered quickly then stepped out into the changing room. A chill crept over his wet skin.

I shouldn't have punched him, he told himself. *Even if he* did *deserve it*.

The challenge had been high and dangerous. A fraction higher and Price would have gone right into Jake's knee. Then there would have been all sorts of trouble: snapped tendons, torn ligaments – 'a career-ender', that's what they called it.

And Jake knew well enough about those. He'd watched the tackle that ended his dad's playing days a hundred times. Munich, 1988. Steve Bastin lying on the pitch in agony, surrounded by his England team-mates. Twenty years later, his dad still walked with a slight limp.

Jake towelled himself dry and taped up his wound as best he could. He dressed in his school uniform, thankfully for the last time. Summer was starting. If he never saw Olly Price's smug face again, it would be too soon. The tension between them had been building ever since Jake had been transferred from an international school in Paris and had taken over the team captaincy in a matter of weeks.

Jake checked his watch. Half past five. He wasn't due to meet his dad for dinner until six-thirty, but it wouldn't hurt to get there early. He caught the Tube from Camden Town towards the West End, changing at Leicester Square for the Piccadilly Line. He decided to walk from Knightsbridge Station to use up a few more minutes. His leg hurt with every step.

Jake had already decided not to tell his dad about the red card – it would only mean the usual lecture:

What good are you to your team if you're back in the dressing room? When will you learn to control your temper?

Having Steve Bastin – or 'football legend Steve Bastin', as the papers insisted on calling him – as a dad could be a curse

as much as a blessing. Even though his dad had proved himself as a coach since his injury, he'd always be remembered as a great defender. Slow and steady. He didn't have the striker's instinct. You needed a bit of a temper, a bit of flair, to play up front. At least Jake thought so. But his mum disagreed, and six months ago she'd enrolled him on a course of boxing lessons – to 'channel his anger'.

He almost laughed to himself as he remembered the blood spurting from Price's nostrils. Those boxing lessons paid off!

But he was finished with boxing lessons and Olly Price – at least for the summer.

Traffic was heavy on Brompton Road and Jake noticed a cyclist up ahead weaving his way through the oncoming cars. Jake waited to cross the road with two parents and their young daughter. The man and woman were arguing about something. It reminded Jake of his own parents before their divorce: clipped comments under their breath and a refusal to look each other in the eye.

A black cab stopped a few metres away, and the passenger door suddenly opened. The cyclist didn't have time to stop, and swerved up on the pavement, shouting a curse. He didn't see the little girl in his path, but Jake did. Jake sprang forward, scooped her under the arms and twisted out of the way as the cyclist swished past.

'Olivia!' screamed her mother.

Jake released the little girl and she looked up at him with a mixture of surprise and curiosity. Her dad took her hand and pulled her towards him. 'Olivia, are you OK?'

The girl nodded without taking her eyes off Jake. He smiled at her, his heart still pumping from the near miss. He wished he could save her from the other hurt that was sure to follow when her parents stopped fighting and found lawyers.

The mother spoke to Jake: 'Thank you so much.'

'No problem,' Jake replied.

The dad rolled his eyes. 'You know what kids are like.'

I know what parents *are like*, Jake thought.

It was six-fifteen when Jake reached the restaurant where he had arranged to meet his dad. From the outside, Obed looked like an embassy, with its lightly tinted windows and the maîtres d'-cum-bouncers standing on either side of the door. Jake peered at the discreetly mounted menu and then looked through the glass to survey the interior. Circular tables, white tablecloths and low lighting. A bar occupied the rear, with double doors to the kitchens and a corridor to the toilets. The crowd was mostly business people coming in after work, faceless suits conferring over expensive dishes and fine wine.

And there at a corner table was his dad. He wasn't alone.

Another man sat opposite. Bald, but not much over forty, wearing an open-necked blue shirt. A scruffy waiter with a couple of days' worth of stubble laid a bowl of soup in front of the stranger, who draped his napkin across his lap. When the waiter had gone, his dad's guest leant across the table and said something with a grin, at which Jake's dad burst out laughing.

Jake felt a pang of frustration. His dad hadn't mentioned that they'd have company. He walked towards the entrance.

'Do you have reservation?' asked one of the giants guarding the door. He spoke in a thick Russian accent.

Jake might have been wearing his school uniform, but he wasn't going to let himself be intimidated. 'I'm meeting my dad,' he said. 'He's inside waiting for me.'

The doormen shared a look. The one who hadn't spoken nodded.

'Welcome to Obed, sir.'

He held open the door and Jake entered. His dad saw him straightaway and his face broke into a wide smile. He beckoned Jake over to the table.

'Andy,' his dad said to his companion, who was slowly sipping his soup. 'I want you to meet my son, Jake.' He turned to Jake. 'Jake, this is Andrew Chernoff. He's a talent scout.'

Jake's feelings of frustration evaporated. He'd met scouts

before; they sometimes came to games in the Sunday leagues or college matches and stood on the sidelines in their fancy suits, taking notes. Jake longed for his name to be one of those scribbled down; dreamt about a call-up to the reserves of one of the big sides.

'Hi, Mr Chernoff,' he said, smiling warmly and holding out his hand.

Andrew Chernoff took it with a firm handshake. His skin was like warm leather. He had a deep tan and Jake could tell he looked after himself by the way he moved. The lines around Chernoff's eyes crinkled as he smiled back at Jake. 'You look like your dad,' he said. His voice was soft, his accent Russian.

Jake was always being told that; he couldn't see it himself. True, his dad still had a full head of hair, greying though it was, and like Jake's it became wavy if he let it grow too long. And they both had blue eyes. But that was where the similarities ended. Jake was taller than his dad. Six foot one, and still growing. His dad had at least two stone of extra weight, though none of it was fat. He was built like a rock, while Jake was leaner. And Jake was quicker too, even if his dad hadn't had a limp.

'Don't embarrass the boy, Andy,' said Jake's dad.

Jake scowled. He hated being called a boy.

The unkempt waiter arrived back with some sort of stew for his dad. 'Would your son like anything to eat, sir?'

Jake wanted to snap that he could order for himself, but he swallowed back the words. 'I'll have *Kotmis Satsivi,* please,' said Jake. 'And a Coke.'

The waiter looked at him blankly – he was obviously stunned that an English boy knew the Russian for 'chicken with walnuts'. Jake had seen the dish on the menu outside. He'd had it a few times at his Russian friend Mika's house. It was Mika's mother's speciality.

'Very good, sir,' the waiter said, blinking, and disappeared towards the kitchen.

'So, who do you scout for?' Jake asked Chernoff. He tried to sound casual.

Jake's dad chuckled. 'I told you he was keen, Andy.'

Chernoff lowered his soup spoon and said, 'I used to work for a club in Spain, but I'm employed by Igor Popov now.'

Jake hadn't heard the name, but he didn't want to admit it.

'He's just set up a new club: the St Petersburg Tigers . . .' Chernoff's eyes flicked anxiously to Jake's dad as he tailed off.

Jake suddenly felt like the last person in the room to get the joke. He smiled unsurely. 'What's going on, Dad?'

Chernoff put a hand to his mouth and gave a sharp cough. 'Excuse me a moment . . .'

He scraped back his chair and walked hurriedly in the direction of the toilets.

'Tell me, how was football practice?' Jake's dad asked.

'Fine,' Jake replied. 'I scored.'

'You always do. And did you win?'

'Yes,' Jake lied. He didn't know the final score. 'What's wrong with Mr Chernoff? He seemed like he was in a hurry to get away.'

Jake's dad fiddled with his cutlery. 'He must have had something caught in his throat, I guess.'

Jake could tell he wasn't getting the full story. He knew that plenty of dodgy deals went on behind the scenes in football: secret meetings with agents, players being 'tapped up', but he didn't think his dad would be involved in all that.

'Why are you even meeting him?'

Jake's dad took a sip of water and looked at Jake seriously.

'There's something I have to tell you. Igor Popov . . . he's offered me a job: head coach of his new team.'

It took Jake a moment to process this.

'You mean we're going to Russia? That's great. I *love* Russia. I mean, I've just started at a new school, but, y'know,

changing school again is no big deal.' *No more Olly Price*, he thought. 'What about the apartment?'

His dad held up a hand. 'Jake . . . I can't take you with me.'

Jake felt like he'd been punched in the gut. 'What are you talking about? Of course you can.'

'I'm sorry, Jake. Not this time.'

There was no room for negotiation in his dad's voice. Jake balled his fist under the table. The waiter returned and clumsily set down Jake's walnut chicken; a little of the sauce splashed over the rim of the plate. Jake waited until he'd gone.

'I've just come to London,' he hissed. 'To live with *you*.'

'I know that, Jake,' said his dad. 'With your mother travelling all over the place doing her photography it seemed the best idea.'

'Not that I had any say in it.'

His dad leant forward. 'Jake, listen . . .' His voice tailed off as Chernoff emerged from the toilet door and made his way back to the table. He looked a little unsteady on his feet and his skin appeared paler.

Jake's dad didn't seem to notice, and absently stirred his stew.

'Mr Chernoff, are you OK?' Jake asked.

'I'm fine . . . I think.' Chernoff took his seat.

The three of them sat in silence. The sound of their cutlery

against the plates was deafening to Jake's ears as he chewed his chicken, trying to keep his temper from erupting again.

'There are some good Russian restaurants in Paris,' Jake's dad said. 'Did you go to many, Jake?'

'A couple,' Jake replied coldly.

The silence resumed. Chernoff kept taking nervous sips of water.

Jake ate until he could stand it no longer. He didn't care if they had company. 'Were you even planning to tell me?' he asked.

Jake's dad paused with his fork in front of his mouth, then laid it on his plate again. 'Of course. The offer only came up . . . today.'

Now Jake understood: the offer had come from Chernoff. He looked across at him. Chernoff's face was flushed. He was fiddling with his collar, as though he was too hot. Jake's warm feelings for his new acquaintance disappeared, scout or not.

'Maybe I should leave you two alone?' Chernoff said in a slightly rasping voice. He coughed again.

'Don't worry, you do what you have to,' Jake said to his dad. *Football first, everything and everyone else second*.

But his dad wasn't paying attention. He was leaning across the table towards Chernoff. 'Andy?' he said. 'Are you all right?'

Chernoff's fingers were tugging at the neck of his shirt.

His eyes were wide with panic. Jake instinctively pushed back his chair as Chernoff's face went from scarlet to purple. The veins across his temples stood out like worms under his skin. He tried to stand but his knees caught the underside of the table and he fell back in his seat, which threatened to topple over. A choking gurgle emerged from his mouth and saliva bubbled over his lower lip and chin.

Jake looked to his dad in horror. 'What's happening?'

Chernoff suddenly pitched forward, his face slamming into his soup. The brown liquid cascaded over the edge of the bowl as Chernoff rolled out of his seat and crumpled to the floor.

'Jesus, Andy!' Jake's dad jumped from his seat and rushed to help his friend.

Soup dripped from Chernoff's motionless face on to Jake's shoe. He pulled it back, stunned and revolted at the same time.

There was no doubt in Jake's mind that the Russian man was dead.