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Opening extract from

Striker 3: The Edge

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STRIKER

THE EDGE

NICK HALE

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EGMONT

Special thanks to Michael Ford
To Sara G, a dynamite Number 9

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In the intense Florida sunshine and muggy air, Jake felt as if he was slowly suffocating. He checked his watch, the silver Rolex bringing a flashback of a face he'd rather forget. Igor Popov, the billionaire Russian crime lord, had given it to him as a sarcastic 'thank you' for Jake's efforts in bringing down one of Popov's enemies. Jake wore it as a reminder that he had a score to settle.

One day . . .

But not today. Today was not about Russian gangsters or international intrigue. If his dad could take a break from the spy game, then so could Jake. Jake noticed the time and pushed revenge to the back of his mind. If he didn't hurry, he'd be late.

The main stadium, fifteen metres high with tiers of stands on three sides, loomed in front of Jake. Beyond the stadium was the rest of the Olympic Advantage Complex – or the

Ares Sports Olympic Advantage Complex, to use its full name. Nestled between the sprawling Everglades National Park and the town of Redford, the complex covered twenty acres of old swampland.

For the next two weeks, Olympic Advantage would control everything about Jake's life: his schedule, sleep patterns, nutrition. Even with the gruelling schedule and epic rule book, Jake felt like pinching himself. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

A couple of athletes sped past Jake, as if he was standing still. He recognised one as Theo, an Italian in his dorm block. Jake had attended a couple of international schools, but the mix was never this diverse. So far at Olympic Advantage he'd met a cyclist from Canada, a Kenyan runner and a gymnast from Russia. Jake shared a room with Tan Wu, a decathlete from China. He hadn't met the rest of the footballers yet, but the brochure said they'd be the best from around the globe.

Excellence was the minimum requirement.

Jake broke into a run past Theo and the other boy, through the tunnel and into the stadium, and couldn't help but gasp. It was pristine: freshly laid turf, bordered by a perfect running track that shimmered in the sun. Workmen were scattered around, putting the finishing touches to the lighting rigs and technical areas, in preparation for the opening ceremony

later that day. A couple of suits stood up in the stands, deep in conversation. Jake recognised one as the camp director Bruce Krantz, four-time-Gold Australian rowing champion. Perhaps the other was one of the international investors with big brands on the lookout for future stars. The word in the dorms, probably exaggerated, was that some of the athletes would be leaving with contracts worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Jake made for the crowd gathered at the far end of the stadium, taking the running track in long strides. An Olympic Edge banner flew above the cluster of athletes, and they were surrounded by lighting equipment and huge stationary cameras. He had been selected to star in a commercial for Olympic Edge, a new performance-aiding sports drink manufactured by the camp's main sponsor: LGE. He didn't even want to be in the stupid commercial. All he wanted to do was play world-class football. He didn't like all the politics and marketing, but he'd learned from his dad that it was all part of the game.

'Hey, you,' said the director, a skinny guy whose accent was pure Brooklyn. 'Thanks for joining us. Stand over there by the blonde, will ya?'

'My name's Veronika,' the girl said to the director, spinning a tennis racket in her hand. 'As I've told you twice before.'

'Whatever, sugar,' he replied.

Jake smiled, taking his position beside the tanned American girl. *He* certainly wouldn't be forgetting Veronika Richardson's name. She'd won last year's junior Wimbledon, and was tipped to be in the top twenty by the end of her first pro season. Up until that moment, he hadn't dared go near her. With her long blonde hair, incredible legs and model looks, she was the definition of unapproachable.

'The guy's an idiot,' he said to her.

Veronika looked him up and down, but said nothing.

'Jake,' he said, holding out his hand.

She left him hanging. 'I have a boyfriend,' she replied, and pointedly turned away.

Jake was about to protest his innocence when the director shouted out, 'Right, I want all of you together in a group. Act like you're having fun, and like you *wouldn't* kill your roommate for a shot at one of those big sponsorship contracts.'

The Olympic Advantage hopefuls came together, as instructed. A team of young women with make-up brushes at the ready descended on the group. Jake tried to protest, but everyone was getting the same make-over treatment. They didn't lay a brush on Veronika.

Jake found himself between two athletes whose differences were almost comical: his roommate Tan Wu, five-seven and

not an ounce of fat on him, and Otto Kahn, a mountainous German weightlifter. Jake reckoned the circumference of Otto's biceps was larger than Jake's quads. He'd seen him in the canteen that morning, and counted the seventeen pancakes that he'd put away . . . *after* the three bowls of cereal.

The director finally called 'action' while they all pretended to be enjoying themselves. Otto told a joke in his broken English about his father putting out his back carrying 'baby Otto' to keep them laughing.

After the director yelled, 'Cut!', they were each given a bottle of Olympic Edge, ready for close-ups. Jake held the 'Riptide' flavour, which was sickly blue. Others had red, white, green or yellow drinks. Different flavours, but all with stupid names. Jake saw that the red one Veronika held was called 'Magma'. When the director told them the advertising hook-line, they all groaned in unison.

'Whine all you like, but they're paying a lot of money for you to be here,' the director said. Jake was about to complain to Veronika, thinking it might get a reaction, but Otto was already sidling up.

'That line is so corny, isn't it?' the big German said.

'Like your pick-up lines,' she answered, walking away.

Jake slapped Otto on the shoulder. 'Don't worry, big fella – I got turned down myself.'

Otto's face split into a grin as he watched her speaking with the Pakistani long-jumper, Ree. 'She's very tough,' he said.

'Pretty boy!' The director clicked his fingers at Jake. 'You're up. On cue, take a long swig, kick your ball, then say the line.'

Jake nodded.

'Ready . . . Action.'

Jake took a gulp of Olympic Edge, and immediately spat it out on the grass.

'Cut!' shouted the director. 'What the hell was that?'

'It's disgusting!' Jake said. 'It tastes like petrol mixed with spinach.'

The director clicked his fingers at his sweaty assistant. 'We'll come back to you, and you can try one of the other flavours,' the director said, and then whispered something to his assistant that sent her running.

Otto laughed at Jake and chugged down his bottle of white Olympic Edge, called 'Lightning'. 'I like it,' he told Jake.

Jake passed over his bottle of 'Riptide'. 'It's all yours. But I can't imagine how you can drink that stuff.'

'You learn to like it,' Otto said, suddenly serious. 'Three times a day, for a whole two weeks. The sponsor's rules. You do not want to upset the moneymen.'

'They can't *make* us drink it, can they?' Jake asked.

Otto finished Jake's bottle and aimed for a bin. He missed.

'Basketball not my sport,' he said glumly.

Jake and Otto watched as the other athletes swigged and smiled for the camera. Veronika made it look effortless. She took a sip of 'Magma', then swung her tennis racket in a backhand action, before tossing her hair over her shoulder as she delivered the line. Tan performed his takes while hurling a discus. When Jake's turn came round again, he was told off because his hand obscured the label. He managed to fake the gulping part, taking the tiniest of sips. Then he flicked up the football and volleyed into the goal in one take. He didn't fluff the line. To his frustration, Veronika was looking the other way, miming tennis shots.

'Right,' the director said, snapping his fingers at Otto. 'You're last, Chunky.'

Otto came up, grabbing a new bottle of Olympic Edge – it was yellow and looked like urine. Jake made out the name 'Solar'. On the ground in front of Otto was a fifty-kilogram barbell.

'You know the drill,' the director said.

Otto nodded. At the action call, Otto guzzled down half the bottle, which he then crushed with one hand. He crouched and gripped the bar. In a single squat and thrust he hoisted it over his head.

'Olympic Edge gives . . .' His voice gave out and his knees seemed to wobble. Jake knew straight away that something was wrong.

'Cut!' snapped the director. 'Come on, Tubbs, it's a simple line.'

But Otto's arms were trembling too. Jake saw his skin had suddenly drained of colour.

'Help him!' Jake shouted, and tried to push past the onlookers and crew.

Otto staggered to one side. As he went down on a knee, the bar jerked aside. The weights at one end crashed into his shoulder, and Otto's head was pushed hard into the turf.

Ree screamed, and someone shouted for a doctor. Jake rushed to Otto's side. The bar was resting over the boy's neck, compressing it hideously.

'Get it off him!' Jake shouted. 'Help me!'

Tan joined him at one end and a Dutch swimmer called Anders took the other. On a count of three, they heaved and managed to pull the weight clear of Otto's neck. But Jake could see that Otto was dead.

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Dr Chow, the camp's Chinese–American head of research, hurried past one of the cameras.

'Nobody move him,' she ordered.

'Maybe he no warm up right,' Tan whispered, backing away.

Jake disagreed with Tan. Otto had been lifting for years. Surely he would have known his limits.

Dr Chow knelt beside the body and tried to check Otto's pulse in his mangled neck. She obviously couldn't find one, because she went to his wrist next. Jake couldn't take his eyes off Otto. There was a vivid red abrasion where the bar had grazed his skin beneath his jawline, and his neck was twisted like a wrung towel. Jake guessed that his vertebra had been snapped. If so, at least he wouldn't have felt anything.

Dr Chow stood up slowly, and reached for one of the Olympic Advantage flags that was lying around for the commercial shoot. She pulled it over Otto's body.

Bruce Krantz jogged up in his suit. His eyes widened when he saw the body.

'What happened?'

'An accident,' Dr Chow said matter-of-factly. 'Otto Kahn is dead.'

Krantz ran a hand over his shaven head. He pulled his companion – the guy Jake thought might be a sponsor – aside, and together they spoke with Dr Chow.

I was joking with him less than five minutes ago.

A Jamaican sprinter called Dom had his arms round Ree, and she was crying into his chest. At last, Jake heard a distant ambulance siren. *No hurry*, Jake thought grimly. Veronika stood alone to one side, very still. She was the only one not staring at the body.

Krantz broke away from the group, talking on a mobile phone: '. . . We can't go ahead with the ceremony after this. We'll get a statement out within the hour . . .'

Jake realised his arms ached. He must have pulled muscles trying to shift the barbell, the adrenalin of the moment hiding it from him.

'The rest of you, back to your rooms,' Krantz said, shutting off his phone. 'I know it'll be hard to forget . . .' His tone suddenly softened. 'Er . . . I'll post some details in the administration block about grief counselling. I don't want anyone to feel they

can't come to me with their problems. But, please, I can't stress this enough, don't talk to *anyone* outside the complex.'

Jake's phone buzzed and he pulled it out of his pocket. His dad's number. He couldn't take it now. Not when all this was happening around him. He put it away, letting the call go to answerphone.

As Jake was walking away with his roommate, Dr Chow called after him.

'Jake, don't forget your physical this afternoon,' she said.

'The show must go on,' Jake muttered so that only Tan heard.

'One death not enough to close the camp,' said Tan, shaking his head.

They joined Ree and Dom and made their way out of the stadium as the ambulance drove straight across the middle of the new pitch. Outside, a tree-lined path led to the dormitory buildings and canteen. Surrounding the stadium were more sports pitches of all descriptions – tennis courts, an Olympic-size swimming pool and a lake for sailing. Beside the football practice pitch were the medical centre and physio rooms, where Jake was due to meet Dr Chow after lunch. The whole complex was surrounded by a wire fence. Apparently the Everglades to the south were infested with alligators.

'Do you think they might send us home?' Dom asked.

Jake shrugged.

'I don't understand,' Ree said. 'He seemed so strong. So *healthy*.'

'Maybe it was drugs,' Dom said. 'A boy shouldn't be so big. Maybe steroids. Or maybe –'

'I think we should not say these things,' Tan interrupted. 'It is too soon to know.'

Jake's phone went again. His dad. He had promised to stay in a hotel in neighbouring Miami. Even a whiff of Bastin Senior at Olympic Advantage and Jake knew any chance he had of making a name for himself, based on his own skill, would be lost. Jake drifted away from the rest of the group. 'Hey, Dad,' he started, but his dad didn't let him finish.

'Thank God, Jake. Are you all right? Why didn't you answer?'

'I'm fine, Dad, but –'

'I was worried sick. I heard a report that a young male athlete had been badly injured at Olympic Advantage.'

'He's dead, Dad,' said Jake. 'It was horrible.' He told his father what had happened, but another part of his mind was wondering how his dad had found out so quickly. They couldn't have despatched a press statement in such a short time. He doubted even Otto's parents had received the awful news yet.

'Are you spying on me?' he asked.

'What? No,' his dad said. 'I just keep my ear to the ground, that's all.'

'And does MI6 keep tabs on Olympic Advantage?' Jake whispered into the phone.

'They keep an eye on any international gathering of this calibre.' His dad paused. 'Yes, all right. I asked them to keep me informed if anything unusual happened. With everything that's gone on in the last few months . . . I'm just worried about you.'

'Well, you don't have to be,' Jake said. 'It was an accident. And I think I've proved I can take care of myself.'

This was no overstatement. In the last few months, Jake had discovered his dad was a spy for MI6, he'd teamed up with him to apprehend a murdering father and son in Russia and stopped a diamond tycoon's killing spree. Death and destruction had seemed to hunt Jake, but he'd dodged them as skilfully as he'd ridden bad challenges on his school football field.

'OK, son,' his dad said. 'You be careful. And enjoy yourself. In that order. Understood?'

'Understood.' Jake spotted Veronika leaning against a wall off to one side of the stadium. The others didn't seem to have noticed her. 'I've got to go.'

He hung up and walked towards her. They might have got

off on the wrong foot, but she must be as traumatised as the rest of them by what had happened.

He was twenty metres away when a black Mercedes 4x4 pulled up beside her. Veronika stood straighter, but didn't move as the doors popped open. Three white guys, all in suits, stepped out. One faced her, the other two flanking.

'Hey, Tan,' Jake called over without taking his eyes off Veronika. 'Come here, would you?'

The lead man tried to take Veronika's hand and kiss it, but she pulled it away. He spread his arms and began speaking, but Jake wasn't close enough to hear. She shook her head, and the man said something to his friend. All three started laughing, and he reached again, this time grabbing the top of her arm and pulling her towards the car. Veronika jerked free.

Tan arrived at Jake's side.

'Veronika's got trouble,' Jake said.

As they watched, Veronika unleashed a vicious slap across the man's face. All three stopped laughing. Jake expected them to retaliate, but nothing happened. The man smiled and spoke again. He pulled open his jacket, which Jake thought was an odd gesture until he caught a glimmer of gun-metal inside.