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# **THE STRIKER**

THE MULTI-MILLION COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# **ANA HUANG**

  
PIATKUS

# CHAPTER 1

ASHER



I DIDN'T GET PERFORMANCE ANXIETY, BUT THERE WAS nothing like seventy thousand people watching you get fucked that really put a guy on edge.

Sweat dripped into my eyes as I received the ball from the left-winger. The crowd's cheers reached a fever pitch, and a tiny prickle of trepidation snaked through my gut.

Usually, the fans' enthusiasm revved me up. After all, I'd *dreamed* of moments like this growing up. Playing on a professional pitch, hearing thousands chant my name, being the one who took my team to glory.

Moments like this meant I'd made it and proved my critics wrong—which I had, many times over.

After all, I was Asher Fucking Donovan.

But today, in the last minute of the final game of the Premier League season, I felt like just Asher, the newest and most controversial transfer to Blackcastle.

It was my first season with the team, the match was tied, and we

were second on the league table behind Holchester United.

We *needed* a win to take home the trophy, but so far, the match had been a clusterfuck of disasters.

An intercepted ball here, a missed penalty there. We were all over the place, and I could practically see the victory slipping through my fingers.

Frustration mounted as I tried to maneuver past the swarm of Holchester defenders. Bocci, Lyle, Kanu—I knew their tricks well, but they also knew mine.

That was the problem with playing against your old team; there was nowhere to hide.

With no way out, I passed the ball to another forward and tried to ignore the time ticking down.

*Forty seconds.*

*Thirty-nine.*

*Thirty-eight.*

The ball bounced between players until, through a stroke of equally good and bad luck, Vincent gained possession through a counter-attack.

The cheers dulled to a low roar beneath the weight of my anticipation.

*Seventeen.*

*Sixteen.*

*Fifteen.*

I was in the perfect position to receive the ball. I had a clear shot at the goal, but I could see Vincent's eyes searching the pitch for someone, *anyone* else to pass it to.

My pulse hammered in rhythm with the ticking clock.

*Come on, you bastard.*

There *was* no one else. I was the only player on our team who

could feasibly score at this point. Vincent must've come to the same conclusion because, with a noticeable clench of his jaw, he finally kicked the ball to me.

The crowd's excitement pitched high, but it was too late.

Vincent's precious few seconds of hesitation gave Holchester an opening, and they stole the ball before I could connect with it.

A collective groan rippled over the pitch.

I blinked away the sweat and tried to focus, but my old team's taunting stares and the blaze of bright lights disoriented me in a way I hadn't felt since *that* match many moons ago.

*Five.*

An attempt to steal the ball back failed.

*Four.*

Flashes of news headlines and TV snippets blared in my head. *Traitor. Judas. Sellout.* Was I worth the record 250-million-pound transfer, or was I the most expensive mistake in Premier League history?

*Three.*

By some miracle, I got the ball on the second attempt.

*Two.*

No time to think.

*One.*

I kicked.

The ball went wide to the shrill of the final whistle, and the stadium fell so silent I could hear the rush of blood in my ears.

All around me, my team stood, stunned, while the Holchester players jumped and whooped in celebration.

It was over.

We'd lost.

My first season with Blackcastle—the one where everyone

expected me to bring home a trophy—was over, and we'd *lost*.

My surroundings blurred into a muffled stream of noise and movement, and I barely felt the soreness of my muscles or a teammate's consoling slap on my back.

I barely felt anything at all.



No one spoke during our walk to the changing room, but the dread was palpable.

The only thing worse than losing a match was facing Coach afterward, and he barely gave us a chance to sit before he went off.

Frank Armstrong was a legend in the football world. As a player, he was famous for his string of hat tricks in the nineties; as a manager, he was famous for his innovative approach to leadership and his hair-trigger temper, the latter of which was on full display as he laid into us.

"Are those the standards you play with?" he demanded. "Are those the fucking standards? Because I'll tell you, they're nowhere *near* Premier League level. They are fucking shit!"

Lack of focus, terrible teamwork, no cohesion—he touched on all the issues that had plagued us since I transferred in mid-season, and it didn't take a genius to know why.

Even as Coach berated us, heads swiveled between me and Vincent, who sat on the opposite side of the room.

Team dynamics had been fucked since I joined. Part of that was the natural consequence of incorporating a new member into a tight-knit club; a larger part boiled down to the fact that I, the league's top scorer, and Vincent, the club's star defender and captain, despised each other.

We played different positions, but our rivalry was infamous. He was the only true competition I had for press, status, and sponsorships—important things in our world—but the biggest source of our contention was what happened at the last World Cup.

The dive. The fight. The red card.

I tried not to think about it. If I did, I might punch him in the face, and I doubted Coach would appreciate me doing that in the middle of his rant about teamwork.

"DuBois! Donovan!"

My head snapped up at the sound of my name, and Vincent's did the same.

Coach had apparently ended his speech because the rest of the team was shuffling off to change while he glared at us.

"My office. *Now*."

We obeyed without argument. We weren't stupid.

"Do you want to take a guess as to why I called the two of you, specifically, in here?" Coach didn't wait for the door to fully close before launching into part two of his rant.

Vincent and I remained silent.

"I asked you a question."

"Because we lost," I said. My stomach tightened at the word *lost*.

Everyone hated losing, but today's loss stung particularly hard for me when I knew there were people actively rooting for me to fuck up at Blackcastle—namely, Holchester United fans who hated me for transferring to their biggest rival.

I'd had plenty of naysayers growing up—teachers who thought I'd never amount to anything, football fans who thought I was a flash in the pan, press who dug for dirt in every aspect of my life—and I couldn't stand proving my critics right.

"No. It's not because we lost," Coach snapped. "It's because you

two are the ones the rest of the team looks up to the most, but you've let your stupid rivalry affect your game. Worst of all, it's affecting morale."

We slunk lower in our seats beneath his glare.

"I knew there would be a transition period, but I thought you would get over it and work things out because you're adults. However, it seems like I'm dealing with children because here we are, post-season, and we have nothing to show for it except a host of mistakes that could've been easily avoided if you'd learned how to *bloody work together!*" Coach's voice rose with each word until it was loud enough to seep through the walls.

The muted chatter from the locker room noticeably died down, and a flush of shame crawled across my face.

Coach's disappointment was almost as unbearable as not winning the league. I'd idolized him growing up, and the opportunity to work with him had been a major factor behind me handing in my transfer request.

This had *not* been how I'd envisioned ending our first season together.

Vincent shifted beside me. "Coach, I—"

"Don't get me started with you." Coach cut him off. "What the hell was that in the last twenty seconds? Donovan was *right there*. You should've passed him the bloody ball when you had the chance. See opening, pass ball. It's football 101!"

Vincent's mouth tightened. He couldn't say what we all knew: he hadn't passed the ball immediately because he hadn't wanted me to score the winning goal. The press would've replayed that kick over and over, and I would've received all the glory that came with it. Vincent wouldn't have been able to stand it.

*Selfish prick.* I didn't dwell on whether I would've done the same

had I been in his place.

Coach's stare sharpened. He'd been a club manager long enough to figure out Vincent's motivations without him verbalizing it.

"Since you want to act like children, I'll treat you like children," he said. "Normally, I leave off-season training up to the individual players, but not this summer. This summer, you're both cross-training at the Royal Academy of Ballet. Together."

"*What?*"

Vincent and I exploded at the same time.

My sense of self-preservation couldn't override my shock at Coach's edict. Clubs almost *never* dictated the specifics of how we spent our off-season. Players hailed from all over the world, which meant summer was their chance to go home, see their families, and train as they saw fit.

"I already spoke with RAB's director. She's on board," Coach said. "I didn't say anything before because I wanted to see if you two could pull it together by the last match and fucking win. You couldn't, so you'll be taking private lessons with the *same* instructor for the summer. She's one of their best, and she has an intimate knowledge of football. You'll be in good hands."

I didn't want to be in any fucking hands except my own. I had nothing against ballet. Though I'd never cross-trained using its techniques, I knew players who had, and they sang its praises for improving their strength, flexibility, and footwork techniques.

However, I'd already created my training plan. I didn't need a stranger jumping in and telling me what to do.

Vincent straightened, his face taking on a ghostly pallor. "Don't tell me she's..."

"Your instructor will be Scarlett DuBois." Coach offered a mirthless smile. "You're welcome."

*DuBois?* As in...

“Vincent’s sister?” I sputtered. “You’re joking. That’s a conflict of interest!”

I’d never seen or met Vincent’s sister, though I’d heard him talk about her. The two were close, which was just my luck. I didn’t need the DuBois siblings conspiring against me together.

“I don’t want to train with my sister,” Vincent said. “That’s not... *no.*”

“It’s a good thing neither of you has a say in the matter.” The volume of Coach’s voice dropped back to normal levels, though it was no less cutting. “The director assured me she’s the right person for the job and that she won’t let personal ties affect her work. I believe her. That means you two *will* train with Scarlett and you *will* take it seriously. And gentlemen?” He pinned us with a warning glare. “When you return, you’d better convince me you’re goddamn capable of working together instead of against each other, or you’ll be riding the bench. I don’t give a shit if you’re the captain or the top scorer on the team. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” we muttered.

Coach’s mind was made up. There was nothing we could do or say to get out of it, which meant I was stuck with the DuBois siblings for an entire fucking summer.

My jaw tightened.

I didn’t know much about Scarlett DuBois, but given she was related to Vincent, I knew one thing: I wasn’t going to like her.

At all.

## CHAPTER 2

### SCARLETT



“NOW WE GO A LITTLE QUICKER. BACK, SIDE, BACK, SIDE.” I walked through the studio, correcting the students’ posture and alignment. “Don’t overcross to the back. Now demi-plié...”

My leg ached, but I ignored it. It was manageable compared to true flare-ups, which could last days or weeks or months, and there were only ten minutes left until class ended. I’d deal with it then.

The studio was quiet except for the sound of my voice and the piano music keeping pace with the movements. I taught the advanced and masterclasses, and at this level the students were so focused, a nuclear bomb could go off and they wouldn’t notice.

I used to be one of those students, and as much as I loved teaching, I wished I could rewind time so I was on the other side of these lessons. Things had been so different then, and—

*Stop it. No more self-pity, remember?*

I shook my head and refocused on the task at hand.

“Faster with the beat, Jenna. Up and stay...” I faltered when my aches intensified but quickly recovered. “Good. Open the supporting