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THE DEFENDER

THE MULTI-MILLION COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANA HUANG



PIATKUS

CHAPTER 1

VINCENT



IN MY DEFENSE, THE PUB DIDN'T HAVE AN EXPLICIT NO *Miniature Pigs* rule. The owner was a stickler about no cameras and no fighting, but when it came to adorable porcine companions? Not a single warning until he spotted Truffle in my arms and lost his shit over “unhygienic animals.”

Ironic, considering his pub was called the Angry Boar. You'd think he'd be more understanding when it came to swine.

“It's not your fault,” I told the teacup pig nestled in my arms. “Mac doesn't like any living thing, human or animal. Besides, I bet you're cleaner than half the people in there.”

Truffle snorted in agreement.

“So much for our big night out,” Adil grumbled. “We won our first match against Holchester this season”—an expected chorus of jeers erupted at the mention of our longtime rival—“and instead of celebrating, we're out in the cold. Literally.”

My team was gathered on the pavement outside the pub, trying to decide what to do next. So far, the only thing we'd agreed on was that

pigs were cute, and pub rules sucked.

“Whose fault is that? I told DuBois not to bring Truffle.” Stevens gestured at me. “That’s *my* pet, but our dear ol’ captain decided to make him the team mascot instead.”

“Captain’s privilege,” I said with a grin. “I can make anyone the team mascot, so watch your mouth or you’ll find yourself in a costume instead of a kit during next week’s match.”

The earlier jeers morphed into laughter and good-natured ribbing. The tips of Stevens’s ears turned red, but he took my words in stride, as I knew he would.

I was only messing around. My role as a captain of Blackcastle, one of the Premier League’s top football clubs, included a lot of things—giving team talks, operating as the middleman between management and players, making sure these Neanderthals behaved both in and out of the changing room—but it didn’t include team mascot assignments. Not officially, anyway.

Unofficially? I had the power to elevate anyone’s pet to the lauded role of team mascot. Tonight, that honor belonged to Truffle, the cutest pig you’d ever see.

“Okay, enough about the pig,” Adil said. “Where are we taking this party? Your house? Another pub? Neon?”

“How about Legends?” Asher named a famous American sports bar whose London branch was as popular as its New York one. “I know the owner. I can easily get us a last-minute private room.”

“Yes to Legends, no to the private room,” Stevens said. “No offense, lads, but I’m not trying to be part of a sausage fest all night. I’d rather meet some girls.”

“You can meet them, but you wouldn’t know what to do with them,” Adil cracked.

“Oh, that’s rich coming from you. When’s the last time *you* were

on a date?”

“As a matter of fact...”

A ping from my phone distracted me from their inane argument.



THE DAY (*Do Not Contact*)

Oh, fuck. It was midnight, which meant it was October third.
THE DAY.

With all the stress leading up to the Holchester match and then the high of winning, I’d almost forgotten.

My stomach bottomed out, and any interest I’d had in continuing tonight’s celebration vanished.

I’d set the annual reminder for myself five years ago. It was an act of masochism, considering I couldn’t do anything about it—without hurting the people I loved, hence the *Do Not Contact* note.

But I needed the evidence that it was there. That I *could* do something about it if I wanted to. The question was...did I want to?

Truffle let out a small squeal. *Double fuck*. I was squeezing the poor thing so tightly with one arm that he was squirming.

“Sorry, buddy.” I loosened my hold, but the knot in my throat remained.

It would be so easy. I had the information stored on my phone. All I’d have to do—

“DuBois, you down?” Asher’s voice interrupted my mental spiral.

I jerked my head up. “What?”

“Legends. You down?”

“Um.” I tried to think through the buzzing in my ears. It was funny how a single reminder could flip my mood upside down. “Nah. You guys go. I’m calling it a night.”

Asher’s brows pulled together. “You okay? You look a little pale.”

"I'm fine, just tired. Adrenaline crash, I think."

He didn't look convinced. "Tell me if you're about to have a heart attack or something. Scarlett would never forgive me if I let you die in the middle of the street."

I cracked a small smile. Besides being our team's star striker, he was also my sister Scarlett's boyfriend.

Asher and I were once massive rivals, but we developed a begrudging friendship after he transferred to Blackcastle from Holchester and started dating my sister. I was convinced she used him to spy on me sometimes because, well, she was my sister, and sisters were universally nosy.

"I promise I'm not going to drop dead." I reluctantly handed Truffle back to Stevens. I'd adopt him for the weekend, but I'd already "kidnapped" him from Stevens's parents earlier when Stevens took them around to meet the team. "I'll see you guys on Monday, okay? Enjoy Legends."

The other players groaned and complained good-naturedly about me abandoning them, but they didn't stop me from hailing the next taxi home.

I sank into the back seat and gave the driver my address. Thankfully, he either didn't recognize me or didn't make a fuss of it because he simply started driving, no questions asked.

THE DAY (Do Not Contact).

I rubbed a hand over my face. I couldn't shake the reminder from my brain, and I hated how much power it held over me after all these years. More than that, I hated *myself* for giving it that power in the first place.

My phone vibrated. I shot upright, my heart rate skyrocketing to dangerous levels. It was completely improbable, but maybe—

No. It was just Scarlett.

I wiped a hand over my face again and took a calming breath before I answered.

"You picked up." Her surprise was evident over the laughter and what sounded like a truck backing up in the background. "I thought you'd still be out with the team."

"Nah." I forced an even tone. "They went to Legends, but I wasn't feeling it so I'm going home."

"Since when do you turn down an excuse to party?"

"Since I'm not twenty-one anymore."

"Please. Don't act like you've grown up *that* much when you spent two weeks in Ibiza over the summer."

"Hey, you don't know what I did in Ibiza. Don't assume."

"Everyone knows what you did, Vincent. It was in the tabloids."

"Yeah, because tabloids are famous for being the arbiters of truth."

Scarlett scoffed, but her voice softened with her next question. "How are you holding up?"

My shoulders bunched. Of course. *That* was why she called. She was the only other person in the world who knew about my fixation on October third.

"Fine," I lied. "I barely thought about it. Too distracted by today's match."

To her credit, she let my blatant lie slide. I don't think she expected me to tell the truth; she just wanted to make sure I knew she was there if and when I spiraled.

"Good," she said. "I'm here if you need me."

"I know. Love ya, sis."

"Love you too, idiot."

I smirked at her familiar sign-off, but my smile faded soon after I hung up. I wished I were more like Scarlett when it came to these

things. She didn't give a fuck about her version of October third, but me? I couldn't stop obsessing over it once or twice a year.

I finally arrived home. I paid the driver and hopped out, my footsteps crunching on gravel.

A lot of players preferred to live in outer London for more space and privacy, but I'd chosen a swanky five-bedroom house right in the heart of the city. Too much quiet was an invitation for unwanted thoughts.

I reached the entry gate, ready to punch in my security code, when a small movement caught my eye. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled.

The gate was already open.

It swayed in the night wind, the motion so subtle I would've missed it if I hadn't been standing so close. A low creak rippled through the silence.

I thought I'd locked it when I left that morning, but maybe my memory was playing tricks on me. My security system would've alerted me if anyone had tried to break in. Right?

I entered the front garden and firmly locked the gate behind me. I held my breath as I walked to the front door, grabbed the doorknob, and twisted.

It didn't budge.

I exhaled a sigh of relief. I must've forgotten to secure the gate earlier after all.

Once I was inside, I flipped on the lights and debated whether to watch TV or play a video game before bed. I was too amped up to fall asleep, and I needed a distraction.

I tossed my keys in the shallow dish by the door and was about to make my way to the game room when something caught my eye for the second time that night.

A small box sat next to the key holder. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with a red ribbon. No note as far as I could tell—nothing to indicate who'd put it there because I sure as hell didn't put it there myself.

A metallic taste filled my mouth. The hairs on my neck prickled again, this time in frantic warning, but morbid curiosity got the best of me.

I opened the box.

I stared at its contents, unable to believe my eyes.

“What the *fuck*?”

CHAPTER 2

BROOKLYN



“NO, NO, NO. DON’T DO THIS TO ME. COME ON.” I JABBED at my phone like that would somehow charge its battery, but no dice. I caught one last glimpse of my pastel fruit-print wallpaper before everything turned black. “*Dammit.*”

That was what I got for doomsscrolling social media during the cab ride to my dad’s house *and* for not charging my phone before I left home.

I was almost at my dad’s place, and I normally wouldn’t freak out this much if I weren’t waiting for a call from my mom. She said she had something important to tell me, and getting her on the phone was usually harder than trying to break into MI5 headquarters. If I missed today’s call, I probably wouldn’t hear from her again for another two months.

“We’re here.” My unsmiling driver dropped me off in front of a familiar Georgian-style house. Not a very friendly guy, but he didn’t talk and he got me here in one piece, so five stars.

I thanked him and exited the car, my worry over missing my mom’s

call replaced by a stomach full of nerves. They were little fluttery things that zipped inside me like a hive of bees ready to explode, and the closer I got to the door, the stronger they buzzed.

Was it weird to feel this anxious about dinner with a parent? Maybe, but the truth was, after a year and a half of living in the same city, my dad still felt like a stranger. I knew he loved me in his own way, but we’d yet to have a single conversation that didn’t revolve around football or small talk.

I guess that was inevitable when we both worked for Blackcastle—me as a sports nutrition intern, him as the head coach and manager (yes, my dad was *the* Frank Armstrong).

I get why he defaulted to the topic of work when we were together, but I hoped we could finally have some real father-daughter bonding time tonight.

I rang the doorbell. My dad answered it in record time.

“Wow. You’re dressed up.” I took in his suit and tie. He hated suits and ties. I was flattered that he was making such an effort, but now I felt underdressed in my sweater and jeans. “You look really nice, but the restaurant’s dress code isn’t that strict.”

His brow furrowed. A flash of confusion crossed his face before the groove between his eyes deepened. “Shit.”

My stomach plummeted. “You forgot.”

I should’ve reminded him yesterday, but I’d called out “sick” and missed the Holchester match (though I did watch it online after). He didn’t like texting or talking on the phone, so I relied on our shared work hours to talk to him.

“No. It’s on my calendar. I didn’t forget about dinner, but I forgot to call and tell you we have to postpone.” He looked like he’d rather walk into a den of lions than have this conversation. “Vuk is in town, and he wants to meet tonight to discuss some team business. I tried to

Vuk Markovic was Blackcastle's owner. He lived in New York and was pretty hands-off with club operations, but when he was in town, everyone jumped to accommodate him.

"Oh!" I forced a bright smile. "I totally understand. We can take a rain check. No big deal."

"I'm sorry." A hint of apology softened my father's gruff voice. "I meant to tell you sooner, but I got caught up in pre-meeting prep. It was all last minute."

"It's okay." My voice pitched higher on the last syllable, and I blinked back an alarming burn behind my eyes. What was *wrong* with me? I couldn't be tearing up over a postponed dinner when I'd gone through much worse shit without so much as a flinch. "I get it. Really. We'll have plenty of opportunities for dinner later. Work is more important." I cleared my throat and waved my phone in the air. "Do you mind if I come in and charge this for a bit though? It's dead, and I'm waiting for a call from—from someone."

I almost said *Mom*, but bringing her up was a sure way to nuke the conversation.

"Go ahead. I have to run, but make yourself at home." He handed me a wad of cash. "Feel free to order in."

"Thanks."

We awkwardly hugged goodbye. Then he was gone, and I was alone in the silence.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. *No crying*. I didn't care that no one was around to see it. If I cried over something as stupid as dinner, I'd never forgive myself.

I took a deep breath, straightened my shoulders, and marched upstairs, where I found a charger in my dad's office. By the time I plugged my phone in, I'd shoved my wayward emotions into a box

where they belonged.

The cash he gave me burned a hole in my pocket, but I wasn't hungry anymore.

I checked my cell. It'd charged enough to turn on again, but there were no missed calls. San Diego was eight hours behind London so it was still early there, but I couldn't sit around all night waiting for my mom.

I dialed her first instead. As expected, it went straight to voicemail. "Hey, Mom, it's me. Just wanted to check in since you said you wanted to talk today. Um, you're probably busy with Harry and Charlie, but give me a call back when you get this." Harry and Charlie were my stepfather and half-brother, respectively. "Oh, say hi to them for me. 'Kay, bye." I hung up and dropped my head back with a groan. "I'm *such* a loser."

I was young, hot, and single in London, and my Sunday plans revolved around my parents *who weren't even here*.

"Fuck this." I sat up straight, my self-pity sharpening into a sudden burst of motivation.

I had friends. I had a life. Why was I wallowing like a grounded teenager?

I checked my phone again. Twenty-five percent charged. *Good enough*.

I unplugged it and left.



Thirty-five minutes later, I arrived at one of the poshest mansions in London. The white, four-story behemoth occupied a prime lot in the city's most expensive neighborhood, and no matter how many times I visited, I never quite got over how grandiose it was.