

Greatest 181

Chapter 181 - An Electrifying Counter-Attack

Zachary reacted immediately on seeing Lund Hansen punch the ball away from the goal. While still gasping for breath, he bolted from the box and chased after it, his long strides eating yards of space across the green in mere seconds.

As he was mid-sprint, he felt someone try to pull at his shirt. He instantly knew his old bodyguard was trying to pull off his antics once more. So, without turning back, he stepped from side to side, his body moving from left to right and back, repeatedly—to shake himself away from his opponent's intended grip. He also upped his pace and was soon close to the bouncing ball near the touchline on the right flank—long before any other player, whether opponent or teammate.

From there, he didn't even halt to control the ball. Instead, he flicked it ahead with a deft first touch and chased after it, his stride frequency peaking to propel him forward like a rocket just out of a grenade launcher.

The counter-attack was on. Most of the Molde players, save for a few defenders, had all been mounting relentless attacks on Rosenborg's goal. They'd grown confident and, just maybe, thought that Rosenborg no longer had the capability to threaten them.

Zachary was intent on taking advantage of that laxity and creating a match-winning opportunity for his team.

So, he forced his mind to forget all about his fatigue and ran with the ball across the touchline. He zoomed towards Molde's half with incredible pace. At that moment, he felt that he could probably give Usain Bolt a run for his money if both of them ran with the ball.

Knut Olav Rindarøy, one of Molde's center-backs, soon closed him down, intending to halt his run with a reckless sliding tackle.

However, Zachary slowed down a bit before digging his right boot beneath the ball and flicking it over the defender. Without any pause, he jumped high—over the defender and then continued following after the ball amid the steadily growing cheers of the Rosenborg fans.

Etzaz Hussain, a defensive midfielder that had also stayed back to defend, was the next person to try to put a stop to Zachary's mad dash. But that time around, Zachary didn't try to dribble. Instead, he quickly passed to Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg number-9, who'd long opened himself up to receive the pass in the middle of the field.

Zachary didn't halt, though, after relinquishing the ball to Nicki. Instead, he circumvented Etzaz Hussain and continued rushing across the left flank. To his relief, Nicki reacted fast and flicked the ball to the space ahead of him immediately.

Zachary managed to get to the end of Nicki's through-pass. He began cutting into the pitch, approaching Molde's goal like the wind.

He could already feel his stamina reserves starting to dwindle and empty as he stepped into the final third. But he held on with sheer determination and continued racing towards Molde's box.

Perjan Nyland, the Molde goalkeeper, came out of his goal to meet him. But Zachary was already in high gear and wouldn't let anyone stop him at that moment. He circumvented the goalkeeper by relying on his long strides and keeping his composure. He followed that up by firing home from around the edge of the box to score Rosenborg's third goal, sending Lerkendal into a frenzy of wild cheering.

After scoring, Zachary didn't halt. He continued his run—making his way around the goal to the corner flag to celebrate the goal. By the time he made it there, his heart was already working in overdrive and his happiness so intense that it scared him.

But he still managed to remember the coach's warning and resisted the urge to take off his shirt and throw it to the fans. Instead, he spread out his hands as if he was the sole owner of the world. He closed his eyes to savor the feeling of scoring in a very tough-to-win fixture. But his teammates didn't allow him the time to immerse himself in the moment of joy by himself. They soon reached him and jumped all over him to celebrate the goal.

Tears of joy shimmered in Kristin's brown eyes as she craned her neck to watch the on-pitch celebrations. The corners of her mouth lifted into a smile when she saw the Rosenborg substitutes and

technical staff join the onfield players to celebrate the goal. At that moment, she could hardly recall a match that had made her happier and given her a level of satisfaction compared to the one that day.

"In the 88th minute, Rosenborg has managed to score and retake their lead," She heard Kjell Roar, the commentator, yell out loud. His loud voice even dwarfed the wild cheering and clapping of the passionate Rosenborg fans. "It is now three goals for Rosenborg and two for Molde. Unbelievable stuff on the field today. Rosenborg has done what was almost impossible and managed to take the lead once again. Not even the red card can stop the Troll Kids from displaying their brilliance here in Trondheim."

"What a night for both Nicki and Zachary. The two of them have worked well together and created all of Rosenborg's three goals for today. Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and his boys should be in tears now. What a game! Harald! I can see you smiling once again."

Kristin heard Harald, the pundit, chuckle softly. "When I recall that lightning-fast counter-attack, I can't help but smile," he said. "That run across the right flank by Zachary was truly electrifying. What pace! What composure! I'm at a loss for words."

"Zachary has already scored two goals with the potential to compete for the goal of the season award," Kjell Roar chipped in. "And he should also be on course to win the player of the month award this May. His tally at the moment is six goals and five assists in five matches. I think no other player in the Tippeligaen has played better than him this month."

"Yes, I agree," Harald concurred. "He should be the top candidate for the award if we factor in that bicycle kick of his a few weeks ago plus today's performance. Moreover, if Rosenborg can hold on and win this game, he'll end the night as a hero in the hearts of the Rosenborg fans."

"Then let's wait and see how the match ends," Kjell Roar intoned, his voice rising. "For now, let's take you back to the live-action on the pitch. The match has just restarted with Molde's kick-off..."

Chapter 182 - Match Ending

In the home team's technical area, Coach Johansen's face was all smiles as he watched the final few minutes of the game. He was satisfied with the levels of concentration exhibited by his players on the field, especially that late in the game. They were all playing as if their lives depended on those few

minutes. Even though the Molde continued attacking relentlessly, they still managed to hold on to their 3:2 lead until the 90th minute.

But to Coach Johansen's dismay, the referee added five minutes of stoppage time to the second half. So he decided to make his one remaining substitution in the 91st minute to waste some time and strengthen his defense. He brought on Jon Inge H?iland, the only defender on the bench, in place of Jonas Svensson, the already tired defensive midfielder.

The match recommenced soon after. The Molde players continued attacking, looking for an equalizer in those few minutes. They floated in cross after cross into the box, trying to wear down Rosenborg's defense.

But the ten Rosenborg players, left on the pitch, played like there wasn't a tomorrow as they defended against those attacks. In that way, the minutes slowly passed, and finally, the referee blew the match-ending whistle in the 96th minute.

At that instant, the stadium exploded into a wave of cheers once again. For the following few minutes, Lerkendal was on fire as the Rosenborg players and technical staff started making rounds around the field.

Coach Johansen ran onto the pitch to celebrate with his players after shaking hands with Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, the Molde coach. He went around the pitch, giving the field players bear hugs while mumbling a few words of encouragement and appreciation to them. He was in a good mood after having secured another three points from a hard-to-win fixture.

Zachary let the feeling of contentment soak right into his bones as he moved the entire length of the pitch, waving to the passionate Rosenborg fans.

It was so strange to feel that great gladness in his heart as he savored the inexpressible delight of triumph. He, who'd been dirt poor and hopeless during his past life, was finally feeling that he'd established himself in a European team. So, he was feeling dizzy with excitement.

"You were great out there," Coach Johansen said to him as soon as he'd finished making rounds around the pitch. "If you can maintain your form, you'll soon become the best player in Norway or even in Europe. So, keep up the hard work." The coach patted his back.

"Thank you for your compliment," Zachary replied, smiling. "I'll try my best to improve. My only wish is to have enough playing time so that I can quicken my development as a player."

Coach Johansen chuckled at that. "Don't worry," he said. "You'll get to play plenty of matches his season. But for now, you should go together with Nicki to the press area. The two of you are the ones who'll handle the post-match interview today."

"Oh," Zachary said, sighing. "Then I better go, right away. Do you have any tips on how I should go about the interview?"

Coach Johansen smiled. "Just be yourself and say what you really feel," he said. "But avoid negative comments about third parties, whether opponents or teammates. If you do that, you should be okay."

"Thank you for your advice," Zachary replied, beaming. "Then, I'm off to see the press." He added before turning around and trekking towards the area designated for the press.

Emily was in the best of moods as she rode a taxi cab from Lerkendal back to her hotel after the game. Zachary's shocking counter-attack that'd resulted in the winning goal was still playing through her mind, like a song looped on a replay. With that goal, he must have managed to establish himself among the Rosenborg fans. His fame had increased, and that would prove beneficial while negotiating new endorsement deals for him.

Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!

Her phone vibrated, rousing her up to full attention. She frowned, wondering who could be calling her that late in the evening. When she fished it out of her purse and looked at the screen of her smartphone, she was even more surprised. The person calling was one of the Red Bull representatives that she'd formerly been in touch with to discuss another potential endorsement deal for Zachary.

"Mr. Friedrich," she said, after placing the phone next to her ear. "To what do I owe the pleasure of receiving your call this late at night?"

Mr. Jerome Friedrich, the person at the other end of the line, chuckled. "Surely, it isn't late at all," he said. "According to my watch, it's just 8:30 PM. And that's the best time for discussing business, especially over drinks. Isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Emily replied. "But that's if it's just business. So, why are you calling?" She queried, hoping to get straight to the point.

Mr. Friedrich sighed audibly from the other end of the line. "I'm calling about Zachary. My bosses have finally given me the go-ahead. But they would like to meet with you first before continuing the negotiations. So, do you have time tomorrow?"

"As long as it's business, I can make time," Emily replied, beaming. "But if they wish to meet my client tomorrow, that's another story. I would have to first consult with him before getting back to you."

"That's not the case," Mr. Friedrich was quick to reply. "For tomorrow, they solely wish to meet with you alone. So, you don't have to worry about your client's schedule."

"They don't want to meet with Zachary yet!" Emily exclaimed, raising a brow. "Why?"

"You'll find out when you meet them tomorrow," Mr. Friedrich said with a bit of humor. "Don't worry. We're the leading energy drink brand in the world. So, believe me: we're not trying to land your client into any trouble. My bosses value his potential greatly. They only wish to have a simple chat with you and discuss potential business. And believe me, that business is greatly beneficial to him."

"Okay," Emily said, looking out of the taxi cab window and noticing that she was close to her hotel. "I think there's no harm in that. So, what time do you suggest I meet them, then?"

"I would recommend 9:00 AM at the Scandic Nidelven Hotel," Mr. Friedrich replied. "Is that okay with you?"

"Yes, that's fine," Emily said. "I'll be there."

"Great," Mr. Friedrich said, his voice laced with a hint of excitement. "I'll see you tomorrow then. Good night."

"Good night to you, too," Emily replied before quickly ending the call. She leaned back into the back seat and savored the feeling of contentment that had swelled within her entire being. She was delighted by the fact that Zachary was starting to attract lucrative endorsement contracts. With the six percent commission from Zachary's deals, Emily could see herself turning wealthy by the end of the year. She would then be able to start up her own agency and fulfill her long-time dream. That was what she hoped.

When Kristin returned to her apartment after the match, she quickly switched on her TV. She wanted to rewatch the highlights of the game as soon as possible. So, when she settled herself within the comfort of her sofa, she immediately picked up the remote and navigated to the TV2-Sporten channel.

She relaxed when she found the studio pundits still discussing the game while also playing the short clips of the highlights. At that moment, they were analyzing Zachary's assists during the first half.

"The connection between Nicki and Zachary during this match was incredible," André Rekdal, the studio pundit for that match, said. "For me, that connection was the only factor that gave Rosenborg an edge over Molde."

"Let's not forget about Zachary's brilliance," Erlan Berg, a former Rosenborg player and also the other pundit, chimed in. "That lightning-fast free-kick in the fourth minute was simply out of this world. Then there's the assist close to half-time and his goal in the 88th minute. What a night for the young Rosenborg number-33!"

"There's one thing the two of you are forgetting," Samantha Fladset, the female presenter, cut in. "That's concerning the decisions of the referee during this game. He ignored most of the fouls against Zachary and a few other Rosenborg players in both halves. What's your take on this?"

Both André Rekdal and ?rjan Berg sighed in unison on hearing that.

"All I can say is that the refereeing today was below par," André Rekdal intoned, shaking his head. "After watching this match, I really wish that FIFA approves the proposal to introduce VARs soon. Otherwise, we'll never do away with the human error factor, even at crucial moments."

"My thoughts exactly," ?rjan Berg concurred. "Had there been a video assistant referee during today's game, Rosenborg wouldn't have had to toil much to win this game. But I'm guessing that the referee will get a suspension for his negligence when on the pitch."

Chapter 183 - Post-Match Analysis

Kristin raised the TV volume when the pundits started discussing the referee's decisions. "And what is your take on Tore Reginiussen's red card?" She heard Samantha Fladset, the TV2 Sporten presenter, ask the two pundits in the studio. "Do you think the referee got that one right? Should it have been a straight red card? What do you think?"

"I think he got Tore's red card right," André Rekdal, one of the pundits in the studio, said. "We can try to argue that there wasn't any malicious intent in Tore's tackle. But the fact remains, he tripped a player bound for the goal within the box. For me, that's a straight card without question."

"I concur," ?rjan Berg, the other pundit, chipped in. "That was a correct decision. But I wish that he would have acted with the same sharpness during the instances when Jo Inge fouled Zachary. I know that a lot is always going on during a game. The referee can miss a few things once in a while. But this was a scuffle between the two players that started from the very beginning of the match. The referee should've paid a lot more attention to the two. I'm even more baffled by why the linesmen missed the fouls. What were they doing during the game? They could have cost Rosenborg the three points in such an important fixture."

Samantha Fladset chuckled softly. "Maybe, it's Zachary's looming physique that gives a wrong impression to the referees," she said with a bit of humor. "Think about it. He is six-four. Even if someone pulls at his shirt, he remains stationary like an immovable boulder. If I were the referee, perhaps, I would also miss out on a few fouls on him during the game."

"I highly doubt that," ?rjan Berg said, shaking his head. "The referees are trained to spot even the slightest fouls on a player with or attacking the ball. Missing all those fouls, especially in a big game like the one between Rosenborg and Molde, is quite strange."

"Maybe, Samantha is right," André Rekdal chipped in. "The referee did blow the whistle when Zachary went to the ground during the second half."

Samantha Fladset chuckled. "But was he in pain, or was he pretending?" She queried.

"Who cares?"

André Rekdal said, beaming. "Maybe, he was injured since the physician helped him off the pitch. Or maybe, he was pretending. But the fact remains: he managed to win his teammates a few minutes to rest and organize themselves during that period. Moreover, he went on to score the winning goal. He's surely the man of the match, and we can't take that away from him."

"Sure," Samantha Fladset said. "He was simply phenomenal on the pitch. But before we continue with the analysis, let's first hear from the man of the match himself. He's taking a post-match interview with Olav at the moment."

Kristin's face lit up with a smile as she saw Zachary's face appear on the screen. He'd played like a star and helped Rosenborg secure three points for the night. It was hard for Kristin to come to terms with his growth potential. Despite all that, she was happy he was at Rosenborg. She could see her team returning to trophy-winning ways with such a talented player on the squad.

"Zachary, welcome back again," Kristin heard Olav, the reporter, say.

"Thank you, Olav," Zachary replied, nodding.

"I know that I've said this again and again," the voice of Olav continued after a moment. "You're just eighteen, Zachary. But you're already on the top of the club game. Not bad. Is it?"

"Well," Zachary said, smiling slightly and scratching at his chin. "I just can't put the feeling in words. But all I can say is that I'm enjoying every bit of my time with Rosenborg."

"Let's talk about the game," Olav said. "The first half was really plain sailing for you. You linked up well with Nicki to create those two goals in the first half. We all thought you would win by at least 4:0 at the time. But then the second half happened. What went wrong?"

"I think it was one of those days when luck wasn't on our side," Zachary answered, his expression turning solemn. "Think about it. Before Tore's red card, we were the dominant side. We were dictating the tempo and had already accumulated around 14 shots on goal."

"16 shots on goal, to be specific," Olav chipped in to correct him.

"Yes, thank you," Zachary said, smiling slightly. "16 shots on goal, it is. And how many did Molde have by then?"

"Three shots on goal," Olav replied.

"We had sixteen shots on goal, yet they had only three shots on goal," Zachary said, sighing. "But with those three shots, they managed to score twice. Yet, we couldn't get anything out of our chances even though we were playing well—up front. And then the red card happened, and things went south from there. But I'm really delighted that we finally came out on top and managed to end this night with the three points in the bag."

"Nicki," Olav said, and Kristin saw the image of Nicki Nielsen's face replace that of Zachary on the screen. "You managed to score two more goals today. You're clearly on track to be the top scorer. That's if Zachary doesn't beat you to the accolade." The reporter chuckled.

"Well," Nicki said, a sunny smile lighting up his face. "If it's him, I really won't mind. Above all, we're teammates that are working together to win trophies. Individual accolades come second."

"Most of the football fans are impressed by how the two of you linked up to create all the three Rosenborg goals today," Olav said. "Do you do some extra training to hone that connection between the two of you? What's your secret?"

"Very funny," Nicki said, chuckling. "We train as a team on most days of the week. And that's enough for a genius player like Zachary to observe me and pick up my habits. So, I'm always confident that

whenever I run into space when he's on the ball, he'll spot me right away and pass to me. It's just that simple."

"Zachary," Olav said, and Zachary's face appeared once again on the screen. "There was a scuffle that was always going on between you and Jo Inge throughout the entire game. What was up with that? Do you have any bad blood between you and the bearded Jo?"

"Well," Zachary said, shaking his head. "There's really nothing to it. Both of us were trying our best to do our part and help our teams win the game. It was inevitable that we ended up colliding a few times during the tense moments. So, I've nothing against Jo Inge, especially since I managed to come out on top and win the game. But I really wish the referee would have done a better job. That's all I've got to say."

"Do you still think that no other team in Norway can compare to Rosenborg, especially after this game?" Olav probed.

"But we won, even when we were a man down," Zachary replied. "So, I'll still hold on to my belief that I'm playing for the best team in Norway. You don't expect me to say there's another team better than us! Do you?"

Olav chuckled at that. "Thank you, Zachary and Nicki, for your time," he said. "And congratulations on your win and incredible performance in today's game." He added as the images on the screen switched back to the TV2 Sporten studio.

"And that was Zachary and Nicki, the two heroes of Rosenborg, having an interview with Olav at Lerkendal," Samantha Fladset, the presenter, said. "Zachary is also complaining about the referee. We all expected that. Didn't we?"

Both ?rjan Berg and André Rekdal, the pundits, chuckled at that.

"But Nicki did raise a good point during the interview," ?rjan Berg said after a moment. "The way Zachary manages to pick out his teammates with his passes when on the pitch is simply genius. His game vision, especially at such a young age, is simply out of this world. I've just taken a look at his stats. His pass accuracy in this game was over 90%, and he managed to make six key passes during the ninety minutes. These are the stats of a Maestro in the making."

"Hold that thought," Samantha Fladset cut in before the pundit could continue. "Let's first take you back to Lerkendal, where Olav is about to interview Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, Molde's manager." She smiled, and then Kristin saw Solskjaer's face appear on the screen.

"Ole," Olav said. "You nearly made an incredible comeback in today's game? But what happened?"

"I would say Zachary Bemba happened," Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer replied, smiling a bit. "He's one phenomenal player, the likes I have only seen in the very top leagues of the world. His impact on this game was incredible. He is the sole difference between Rosenborg and us today. But that aside, we also didn't do enough—to score and win the game during the second half. We missed quite a few opportunities that would have turned the game in our favor."

"What exactly is happening at Molde?" Olav probed. "You're the champions of last season, yet you're now at the bottom of the table with only six points. And that is after having played eleven matches."

Coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer sighed at that. "Well," he said. "Football is highly unpredictable, and sometimes things don't turn out in your favor. We've struggled with a few injuries here and there. And a few times, luck hasn't been on our side. It's quite a difficult season. But I believe we'll recover and start performing again. That's what I can promise our fans out there."

"Okay, then," Olav said. "We do wish you all the good luck for the rest of the season. And thanks for your time." He ended the interview, and the screen switched back to the TV2 Sporten studio.

Chapter 184 - Good News

The morning after the match against Molde, Zachary woke up late, feeling fatigued. He opened his eyes and noticed that the golden rays of the morning sun were already streaming into his room through the drawn curtains. They lit upon his well-polished light-green bedroom wall, reflected off the surfaces of the pricy inlaid furniture, and occasionally left bright shimmering patterns on the coffered ceiling.

Zachary stared at it all, his mind replaying some of the scenes from the match against Molde the previous day, including the moment when he'd scored the winning goal. Even though hours had passed since the end of the game, his mind remained locked in those moments. He couldn't help but think his life was beautiful. Very few things could make him feel as contented as he did that very morning—after winning an important match.

A relaxed smile outlined his face as he looked around his bedroom until his gaze settled on the clock hanging on the opposite wall. When he registered that it was already 8:30 AM, he got out of bed at a leisurely pace. After washing his face, he went through his customary morning yoga routine to quicken his post-match recovery. For the following thirty minutes, he concentrated on stretching his fatigued muscles through yoga poses until he was sweating all over. He then took a shower before settling into one of the comfy sofas in his living room to pass the time. Since it was the aftermath of a game, the whole team had been given a day off from training. He could afford to laze around and think about nothing the entire day. So, he reckoned that watching an entertaining TV program would be a tolerable way to pass the time.

But just as he'd sat down and picked up the TV remote, he remembered something that had bugged him during the match the previous evening.

"System," he said, leaning back into the sofa and crossing his legs on the table before him. "Yesterday, I felt like my overall agility had already improved to another level. Yet, according to the system interface, I'm still stuck at the A-grading! Why is that?"

"The user must understand that there is quite a big divide between the A and S grades," the system AI replied in its apathetic feminine voice. "Footballers in the A-grading can have abilities that significantly differ from each other, despite being in the same grade. For instance, both players may have A-graded agility, yet one is a lot quicker than the other. So, what you are feeling right now—is your abilities slowly developing as they approach the bottleneck to the S grade."

"Oh," Zachary said, frowning. "So, how far is my agility from the S-grading if we base on my current rate of improvement?" He probed, switching on the TV with the remote.

"You'll need roughly two years to reach the S grade," the AI replied. "But that is if we're basing on your current rate of improvement."

"What!?" Zachary exclaimed, almost jumping out of his chair. "Two years to the S-grading! That is more than the time spent improving all my stats, from the lower grades to the A grading."

"The user must understand that raising any given ability to the S-grade is a tremendous task that is almost impossible to achieve," the AI intoned. "One needs talent, dedication, hard work, and more than

a little luck to achieve such a feat. That is the sole reason the majority of footballers fail to develop any of their stats to the S grade throughout their entire careers."

"Is there any way to make my progress faster?" Zachary queried. He'd already begun feeling like his speed was hindering his performance on the pitch. In the Tippeligaen, he'd found it almost impossible to run through opponents the same way he'd done during his academy days. So, he yearned to improve his agility and speed to the S grade within a short time. That way, he could gain the ability to do the same deeds at the professional stage.

"The only way to quicken your improvement is by relying on the system to some extent," the AI replied. "If you can acquire and consume an agility-enhancing-elixir at the S-grading, your agility will breakthrough to the next level for sure. But you would have to achieve some incredible feat to win such an elixir from the system."

"I hope it isn't something like winning the next Europa League with Rosenborg," Zachary commented. "That is surely almost an impossibility."

"Good guess," the AI replied right away. "The system rewards great feats that can help you cement your status as the GOAT in the future. It's that simple. So, if you can win the next Europa League, there is a possibility of winning such an elixir. Or even better: you might acquire an S-graded vitality-enhancing-elixir, which can help you improve two of your stats to the S grade within a short while."

Zachary sighed. "I would need immense luck to win the next Europa League," he said, shaking his head.

Many top teams from the top leagues of Europe had already qualified to compete in the next Europa League, the most notable ones being Sevilla FC, VfB Stuttgart, Tottenham Hotspur, ACF Fiorentina, and Spartak Moscow. So, he could see almost no hope of Rosenborg beating such powerful opponents to emerge victorious at the end of the next Europa League tournament.

"A footballer aiming to be the GOAT should focus on achieving exploits thought to be impossible by the common man," the AI intoned in its apathetic voice. "Otherwise, what would be the difference between the GOAT and the greatest players in various generations or eras? The user has to start aiming for the difficult trophies. That way, the user will manage to establish himself as a great player in a short time."

Zachary sighed once again. He understood the system's logic as he was well aware of how hard it was to ascend to the GOAT status, especially in a team sport like football. During his previous life, there had been plenty of debates on the issue. The Portuguese, Manchester United, and the Real Madrid fans all thought that it was Cristiano Ronaldo without a doubt. Maybe, all South Americans thought it was Messi, others Pele or Diego Maradona, or even Ronaldinho. And there were the French who believed with all their hearts that it was Zinedine Zidane. But there had never been a complete public consensus on who the actual GOAT was—like what happened with Usain Bolt in sprinting or Serena Williams in Tennis. But had Lionel Messi won the World Cup twice, that would have been another story since he'd been the closest to cementing his GOAT status.

So, Zachary understood that if he wished to join the ranks of potential GOATs, he would have to start raking in trophies and individual accolades that seemed almost impossible to acquire. Only then would he establish himself as one of the greatest players and start thinking about competing for the GOAT status. But to achieve such a feat required incredible luck since football was a game played by eleven players. He understood that even if he performed at his best, his team would still lose if one of his teammates made a simple mistake at a crucial moment.

Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!

His phone vibrated while his mind was still mulling over the requirements needed for a player to ascend to GOAT status. Without any dilly-dallying, he picked it up from the table beside him and glanced at the screen. A smile lit up his face as he noticed it was Emily, his agent, calling. His hopes soared since he knew that Emily usually called with good news.

"Hello Emily," he said, placing the phone next to his ear. "How is your morning?"

"It's one of my best mornings in the year," Emily replied, sounding excited. "Can you guess why?"

"Audi has raised my annual wage in the contract we just signed?" Zachary replied, deciding on humoring her. "Or maybe, your other half has proposed, and you're calling to tell me the news. Which one of the two is it?"

"I can see that you have started learning a bit of humor," Emily replied, sounding amused. "But it's none of what you've just mentioned. I've got something better. I'm meeting the Red Bull representatives this morning—and my contact in the energy drink giant has promised me that they're willing to offer a lucrative contract to you. They may also wish to take you on as a long-time partner."

"Oh, the deals are starting to come in fast!" Zachary exclaimed. "Have the Red Bull people hinted on how much they are offering?" He probed.

"Not yet," Emily replied. "But they should be making an offer when I meet them today morning. Do you want to attend? If you wish, I can organize for you to be there."

"Do they wish to meet me this early—during the inception of the negotiation process?" Zachary countered with his own question.

"To be honest, they requested to meet me alone," Emily said, her voice lowering at the other end of the line. "So, if you don't mind, I'll go ahead and see what they've got to say. I'll then inform you about the discussion afterward. Is that okay with you?"

"That's okay," Zachary replied hurriedly. "I trust you. So, go ahead and try to negotiate another good deal for me. We shall talk afterward."

"Thank you for your trust," Emily said, her voice relaxing. "And one more thing. Susanne, the Audi representative, called and informed me that they wired your money yesterday. So, it should be able to arrive in your bank account within three days."

"Oh, that's really great news," Zachary said, his voice rising. "Thank you for negotiating this deal."

"That's my job," Emily replied. "And before I forget. Twitter has replied to my appeal regarding the fake accounts using your name as their handles. They have consented to grant the handle with your full name back to you. They've also sent the verification code for the account to your email. So, please check your inbox and open that account today. I know you have a day off. So, don't give an excuse that you're busy."

"I'll open it right away," Zachary replied. "Don't worry."

"Great," Emily said. "Then talk to you later. For now, I'm off to meet the Red Bull representatives." She added before ending the call.

Chapter 185 - Instant Popularity On Social Media

Zachary's smile blossomed into a full grin after he placed his phone down on the table beside him. He was about to receive more than five million Norwegian Kroner. He even felt a bit dizzy trying to conceptualize such a vast sum of money. It was probably enough to last him an entire lifetime if he resorted to living a humble life back in DR Congo. With that amount of money, he could even put up a large building in Lubumbashi and live off the proceeds from its rent for the rest of his days.

But he first pushed his excitement to the back of his mind, deciding to work on opening the Twitter account before thinking about anything else. He didn't want Emily to keep bugging him about the issue. So, without any dilly-dallying, he rose from his seat—and then walked across the room to pick his new laptop up from a nearby cabinet.

He'd bought the computer only a week ago so that he could easily search for information on the internet at his own convenience. Since he was about to acquire some big money, he wanted to use his knowledge from his past life to acquire more assets and make himself wealthy in the process. He had learned the hard way during his previous life not to put all his legs in one basket. He wanted to remain self-sufficient throughout his entire life, even in case of the remote possibility that he got challenges in his career and lost the system.

Zachary had thought about investing for quite some time and came up with a few ways to make big money. First, he'd decided against touching anything related to gambling.

As a pro footballer, the eyes of the press would be on him at almost all times. So, if he invested in betting and continuously won big money, someone would eventually notice the abnormality. That would attract unwanted attention, which he didn't wish upon himself. Moreover, the press could tag him as someone involved in match-fixing if his winnings became too unreasonable.

With all that in mind, he'd decided to go with investing in companies that were about to go public or selling shares. Although he wasn't so much interested in IPOs and stocks during his previous life, he still had a bit of knowledge about the famous companies that'd gone public between 2008 and 2014. That was thanks to one of the web novel group chats he'd joined in his previous life. Zachary remembered one person in the chat listing all the companies he would invest in if he ever got the chance to go back in time.

From the chat, Zachary had obtained information about famous companies like Twitter and Tesla Motors, which had shares listed at low prices during 2013. For instance, Twitter would IPO later that year. It would perform well for a few years and cause a sensation due to its success. But then, its price

per share would dip below its IPO prices in 2015, thereby disappointing the majority of its investors. So, he was planning on buying the Twitter shares and then selling them the following year—that's before the prices could start declining. On the other hand, he was well aware that the price per share of the Tesla Motors company would skyrocket over the next twelve years. So, he intended to invest most of his money in the company before other investors could start noticing its potential.

"Let's start by opening this Twitter account," Zachary mumbled, settling down back on his sofa and opening his laptop. He then quickly booted it up and connected it to the internet before going through the motions of registering a Twitter handle once again.

With the verification codes sent by Twitter, he managed to open the account without any hustle that time around. He managed to fill in all the required information within a minute. He then took a selfie and posted it as his profile picture to complete the registration. He'd finally opened his first social media account in both his lives. He sure hoped it was worth all the trouble.

Zachary was about to close his laptop and return to watching the TV but then stopped suddenly. Out of the corner of his eye, he'd noticed a lot of activity going on with his account. The notifications were populating his screen at the rate of bullets moving out of a machine gun's muzzle. A bit curious, Zachary leaned forward and clicked on the notification tab to view what was going on.

Notifications (32)

All Mentions

* Nicki Nielsen and 20 others followed you.

* Marta Romano and 15 others followed you.

* Emily Anderson and 30 others followed you.

....

....

* Emily Anderson sent you a direct message.

* Mina Rose sent you a direct message.

....

For the following two minutes, Zachary watched with mouth agape as notifications flooded his computer screen. Within that short time, his followers had already increased to more than a hundred. He couldn't help but wonder whether Emily had put up an announcement somewhere that he would be opening an account that morning. Otherwise, he could not find a reasonable explanation of why he was gaining followers and receiving messages at an abnormal rate. But Zachary decided to first open Emily's message before thinking about anything else. So, he clicked on the message tab right away before opening it to view its contents.

<- Emily Anderson

@Emily_Anderson

A Football Agent that is working for CAA Base Limited. Also, a lawyer by profession.

12K following 30K followers

Joined March 2009

Hello Zach,

Congs upon opening the account.

Ignore the notifications and messages and trying tweeting something for a start. It can be the Tippeligaen table, your picture, or anything else that relates to you.

Cheers,

Emily, your agent.

Zachary closed the message tab and then deliberated for a moment about what to post. Since he didn't want to post anything too personal, he decided to go with the Tippeligaen table.

So, he just searched for its image on the internet before uploading it as his first tweet on his verified account. When he completed the process, he leaned back into his sofa and observed his handiwork.

<- Tweet

Zachary Bemba

@ZacharyBemba

I just looked at the Tippeligaen table and got more motivation to train with all my effort this week. We're almost back to the top. #Rosenborg #Tippeligaen.

1 Strømsgodset 26

2 Rosenborg 25

3 Aalesund 20

4 Viking FK 20

5 Brann 18

6 Haugesund 17

7 Tromsø IL 15

8 Sogndal IL 15

9 Sarpsborg-08 14

10 Hønefoss 13

11 Vålerenga 13

12 Lillestrøm SK 12

13 Start 12

14 Sandnes Ulf 10

15 Odds BK 8

16 Molde 6

No sooner had he posted the table with the teams and their respective points than the number of notifications from his new followers started increasing. His eyes couldn't even take it anymore. Some followers were retweeting his post, others commenting, while a few were sending him direct messages. But since Zachary didn't want to get in a battle of words with his new followers, he closed the browser and shut down the laptop before starting to watch the morning sports news on his TV. In the meantime, he made a mental note to request Emily to hire someone to manage the account. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to handle all the notifications and messages from his fans—that's if they were to continue flooding his account at such a fast rate.

Emily arrived at the restaurant of the Scandic Nidelven Hotel at exactly 8:45 AM, to the minute. She found the three Red Bull representatives waiting for her on one of the tables at the far side of the eating place.

Among the three representatives, Emily recognized only one: Mr. Jerome Friedrich, the person in charge of marketing for Red Bull in Norway. He was a giant of a man, probably six feet tall, and with a big face and bushy beard. He appeared to be a comical and fun-loving person. Emily at least thought so. His face was always outlined by a warm smile whenever she chanced upon him.

"Good morning, Emily," Jerome said as soon as Emily approached the table. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with us today." He added, extending his giant hand for a handshake.

"Good morning to you, too," Emily said, taking the hand without any hesitation. "Thank you for having me."

Mr. Jerome Friedrich smiled, nodding. He then turned to the two middle-aged men beside him. "Allow me to introduce my friends first before we get down to discussing business," he said, his tone casual. "This here is August Fassbender. He is the head of marketing for Red Bull GmbH in Germany. The thin man next to him is Thomas Koch. Don't just judge him by size alone. He's the overall head of marketing for the entire Red Bull GmbH company all over the world. I think with this line-up, you can see how serious we're about Zachary." He added with a bit of humor, triggering amused smiles from the two men.

"Oh" was all that Emily could manage. She had come hoping to meet some marketing people from Norway and possibly a local CEO. But instead, she was face-to-face with the overall head and another representative of the energy drink from Germany. Emily's mind couldn't process why Red Bull, an energy drink giant popular all over the globe, would commit such a line-up to negotiate a simple endorsement contract. Moreover, that contract was for a budding footballer that'd just started his professional career in Norway. It was simply absurd.

Chapter 186 - Red Bull's Tempting Offer

Emily exchanged brief greetings with the two Red Bull executives before settling down in a seat opposite theirs. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure of meeting three of the top dogs of Red Bull here in Trondheim?" She asked, her signature professional smile outlining her face. [Vissit novelbin\(.\)c.om](#) for updates

Jerome smiled before tilting his head and making eye contact with Thomas Koch, the overall marketing head of Red Bull, who was seated beside him. The latter nodded at him as if they were exchanging some bit of mental communication in that brief moment.

Jerome then turned back towards Emily and said: "First, we'll start by making an offer to your client before discussing anything else." He grinned.

"I'm listening," Emily said, fishing out a notebook from her handbag.

"But first things first," Jerome said, a grin still outlining his face. "Shouldn't we order some breakfast first? I don't think it's a good idea to discuss business on an empty stomach."

"Agreed."

"Agreed."

August Fassbender and Thomas Koch, his two colleagues, immediately echoed one another, agreeing to his proposition without allowing Emily a moment to reply.

Emily could only smile and shake her head before also agreeing to order the breakfast first. She didn't mind spending more time with the Red Bull big shots. She understood she could negotiate a better deal for her client if she could get onto their good side. So for the next half an hour, they didn't talk about anything business-related but just concentrated on enjoying their meal. They were simply like old friends that were making small talk over breakfast. That way, they soon completed their sumptuous breakfast—and without delay, Jerome initiated the topic about endorsements once again.

"So, as I already said," he began, "We value Zachary's potential greatly. We're very serious about signing him as our ambassador. To show our sincerity, we're willing to offer Zachary 12 million Norwegian Kroner a year—that's if he agrees to sign a five-year endorsement contract with us. We're also willing to pay the 10 million of the first year right after signing."

"Oh," Emily replied, raising a brow. "That is quite the offer. But why do I feel that there seems to be a catch on this deal?"

Jerome smiled before turning to Thomas Koch once more. The latter nodded before locking eyes with Emily. "I can assure you that your guess is wrong," he said, smiling a bit. "We're only offering such an amount to establish a good relationship with your client. We won't even attach any strict conditions to the 12 million endorsement deal."

"Then, what are you after?" Emily probed, her brows drawing together into a frown. "It doesn't make sense for two Red Bull representatives, one from Germany and another from Austria, to be the ones negotiating a 12-million-Kroner deal. So, I'll ask again: What are you after?"

"Then I'll get straight to the point," Thomas Koch said, half smiling. "The thing is this: A few years back, our company bought the playing rights of SSV Markranst?dt, a fifth-tier German team, with the intent of advancing a new club to the top-flight Bundesliga within a few years. We named the new club RB Leipzig and are now looking for young players to join the side. We've identified Zachary as a player with great potential and are willing to build our fast-growing team around him. If he agrees to join us, we shall offer him the best contract money can get. That's my promise."

"Oh," Emily said after a moment, leaning back into her seat to observe the marketing manager's face. "If I may ask, in which division of German football is this RB Leipzig playing at the moment?"

Thomas Koch smiled, a few wrinkles forming on his forehead. "We have just qualified for the 3rd Liga after winning the Saxony Cup this month," he replied. "We've also qualified for next season's DFB-Pokal after winning the cup. So, you don't have to worry that your client won't get to play against top footballers if he joins our club..."

"Wait, wait," Emily said, raising her hand slightly to interrupt the man. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves here. I really appreciate the endorsement offer Red Bull is making to my client. Twelve million Norwegian Kroner a year is not a small sum, especially for a player at his age. It's quite a good deal for sure. But my client will most likely reject your deal because of that extra condition. Think about it. Do you think he will leave Rosenborg, a team where he's performing well and developing at a fast rate, for a third division team, in a completely new country?"

"First listen," Jerome chipped in, his signature smile outlining his face despite the situation. "Let me also ask you this. Have you ever seen any teams under Red Bull performing poorly in their respective leagues? The answer is no. So, I can promise you that RB Leipzig will grow into a European giant in only a few years. That's without a doubt. If your client joins us, he'll be well on his way to starting a unique legacy in a completely new place. And as Mr. Koch said, we'll ensure the coaches build the team with him as its core. We're very willing to build him into someone like Barcelona's Messi in Leipzig."

"I do get your point, Jerome," Emily said, smiling. "But the question remains: do you think my client will even think about leaving his club for a third division side? Mind you: he previously refused offers from Zenit and Tottenham."

"And that's the very reason we've decided to first meet you instead of him," August Fassbender, the other Red Bull representative, cut in. "As an agent, you should be able to see the trends of most things in football. If you do a bit of research about Leipzig, you will notice that the team has immense potential. In two to three years, we'll most likely be entering the Bundesliga. For instance, this coming season, we've already signed several promising players that will most likely help us win the 3rd Liga. If Zachary can join us, we would surely make it to the Bundesliga within two years. He would then have the chance to play against teams like Bayern and Dortmund. Tell me why you, as an agent,

would say no to such an opportunity for your client? Can't you see the possibilities that are there, especially within a team supported by Red Bull itself?"

"I do get your point," Emily said, sighing and shaking her head. "But, it's not me that can make this decision. It has to be my client. I can only promise that I'll bring up the issue to him and see how he reacts. But don't get your hopes up, as his answer will most likely be negative. How much are you willing to offer him as his salary, by the way?"

"You've got to understand that money has never been a problem for Red Bull," Thomas Koch said, smiling a bit. "Let's say that if he can join us during this summer transfer window, we're willing to even offer him 40,000 Euros as his starting salary. And that's weekly, not monthly, like what he is getting at Rosenborg. So, tell me: Haven't we been sincere enough?" He asked, his voice taking on a pleading tone.

Emily chuckled. "I'm not buying into that poker face of yours, Thomas," she said. "That's quite the sum of money, especially for a player at his age. But you've got to remember that money isn't everything. He may not wish to join your team even if you offer 300K per week to him. That aside, he has just signed a contract with Rosenborg. Do you guys expect him to abandon his team in the middle of the season? You people are putting me in a difficult position."

"We only wish for you to focus on convincing Zachary," Thomas Koch said, grinning. "As you have just said, he may be totally against the idea of joining a third division side. But I believe that you can make him see reason—that's if you try. You can then leave the issue of dealing with the Rosenborg higher-ups to us."

Emily frowned as she deliberated about the issue for a moment. She wasn't totally against the idea of Zachary joining a rapidly rising German side and earning more money in the process. She was well aware that the Red Bull Energy Drink company was a miracle worker when investing in sports. The teams under them, such as New York Red Bulls and Red Bull Salzburg, were doing well in their respective

competitions. So, she didn't doubt Thomas Koch in the slightest when he declared that Leipzig would make it to the Bundesliga in two to three years.

If the Red Bull higher-ups could keep their promise and make Zachary the core of their team, he would become someone with the fame like that of Barcelona's Messi a few years later. He would for sure be a legend, like no other, if he got involved in the rise of such a fast-developing team. But the challenge was that Zachary was steadily beginning to fit into his current team. As his agent, Emily didn't want to mention any prospects of moving to another club to him, as that might destabilize his growth. So, she was in a bit of a dilemma.

Chapter 187 - Running Into A Friend

When the clock hand pointed to 11:00 AM that morning, Zachary immediately switched off the TV, put on his sneakers, and exited his apartment. Even though it was his day off, he didn't want to spend all his free time cooped up indoors, within his living room. There was nothing much else to do to pass the time at home since watching TV had already started to bore him. So, he'd decided to utilize his free hours to hasten his post-match recovery by going for a massage in town and heading to the Lerkendal gym for a simple workout afterward.

But just as he began descending the steps—on his way out of the apartment building, his phone vibrated. When he fished it out of the side pocket of his tracksuit and noticed that it was Emily calling, he immediately accepted the call.

"Hello Emily," he said, placing the phone close to his ear while continuing to descend the stairs. "What's up? Have you finished meeting the Red Bull representatives already?"

"Hello Zach," he heard Emily's voice from the other side of the line. "I've just concluded the meeting with them right now. So, can we meet so that I can brief you about my discussion with them? Where are you right now? I can come to you right away if you're not too busy at the moment."

"I'm quite free and was just leaving my apartment to look for something to do—to pass my free time," Zachary replied. "So, why don't I come to you instead? Remember, it's easier for me to move around Trondheim." He added, deciding to change his plans within the heat of the moment. He was very excited to hear about whether the Red Bull representatives had come through and offered him another good endorsement contract.

"That's even better," Emily said. "You can find me at our usual meeting place—at the other cafe near Trondheim Square."

"You mean Café le Frère?" Zachary asked for confirmation. He slowed down his steps as he approached the exit of his apartment building.

"Yes," Emily said. "That's the name, I think. I'm just heading there right now. I will get there in about ten minutes."

"Okay, let's link up there," Zachary said, halting beside the exit. "I should be able to make it there in about fifteen to twenty minutes, depending on traffic. But that means that you'll have to wait a bit for me."

"That isn't a problem," Emily was quick to reply from the other end of the line. "If you don't mind, I'll go ahead and order a cappuccino and a cake for you as I wait."

"That's okay," Zachary said. "Can you also order some fried bacon and fries? I had a really light breakfast this morning. I'm already feeling famished."

"Okay, then," Emily responded before ending the call.

Zachary immediately shoved the phone back into the side pocket of his tracksuit trousers. He then pushed the doors, intending to quickly get into his car and head towards Trondheim Square to meet Emily.

But just as he was about to take a step out of his apartment building, he came close to bumping into someone. He almost collided head-on with a young lady, dressed in a formal black skirt suit, who was rushing back inside.

Zachary immediately reacted with the swiftness of a pro athlete. He jumped to the side and gave her a hand to stop her from tumbling to the ground.

But a moment later, he noticed that it was Kristin, his neighbor from the fourth floor, who'd almost crashed into him. He hadn't recognized her immediately since she'd changed her entire look. She seemed almost like a different person. She looked prettier and much more mature—after having changed her hairstyle and wearing a bit of makeup that matched well with her formal attire.

"Sorry about that," Kristin said, clearly still recovering from the incident. She even didn't seem to have recognized Zachary yet. "I was just in a rush, and my mind was wandering..." She stopped midsentence as her eyes finally settled on Zachary's face.

"So, it's you, Zachary," she exclaimed, her brown eyes crinkling at the corners. "Good morning!"

As soon as Zachary locked eyes with her, his mind immediately jolted awake. He then recalled that he'd promised to go with her to see her grandpa in Bergen on the day after Rosenborg's match with Molde. But the subject had totally escaped his mind that morning. So, he was feeling guilty at that moment.

"Yes, it's me," Zachary said, returning her smile and hoping that she'd forgotten about the promise. "And good morning to you too."

"By your expression, I'm guessing that you've just recalled that we had to travel together Bergen today morning," Kristin said with a smile.

"I'm really sorry," Zachary replied, smiling ruefully and shaking his head. "But that is exactly the case. The week leading up to the Molde game was quite a busy one for me. So, I completely forgot about the trip."

"I'm really feeling down right now," Kristin said, pouting a bit and holding his gaze. "You can't even remember a small promise to me."

"But the fault doesn't entirely rest with me," Zachary countered with a smile. "You didn't even remind me about the trip yesterday. And you don't look ready to head to Bergen right now. Maybe, you also forgot about the trip."

"But that doesn't exempt you from breaking your promise," Kristin countered back, still smiling. "If I recall correctly, your exact words were along the lines: you have my word, and I won't forget. But you clearly forgot!"

Zachary could only smile ruefully at that.

Kristin chuckled on seeing his reaction. "I got you this time around," she said. "So, how are you going to make it up to me?"

"I can make time next Sunday so that we can go and visit your grandpa then," Zachary said. "That'll be the day right after our game with V?lerenga. So, I'll be free and won't forget this time around."

"Aren't you supposed to be heading back home to Congo after the match?" Kristin queried. "As I recall, the V?lerenga game is the last match before the break. Isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Zachary replied, nodding. "But I can first take a trip with you to Bergen before returning home. I can even take my flight back to Congo from Bergen Airport."

"Then, it's a deal," Kristin said, beaming. "This time around, I'll remind you two days before time so that you don't forget."

"That will be best," Zachary said. "But tell me the truth. Were you actually ready to head to Bergen with me today? Basing on your attire, you look like you're heading to an office."

Kristin smiled. "I've got to go now," she said, pushing past Zachary and starting to head towards the stairs. "If you wish, we can talk more later in the evening. But for now, I really have to go. And congs on your incredible performance against Molde yesterday."

"Thank you," Zachary replied, turning around to watch her start to ascend the stairs. She looked even more stunning from his new vantage point. "And please be careful along the way. Don't go knocking over people while opening doors." He added with a bit of humor.

Kristin chuckled on hearing that. She then halted at around the fourth stair before turning around to face him. "Where did you put my very always-earnest Zachary," she questioned, still beaming. "Are you sure that you're not some alien imposter that has taken over his mind? The Zachary I know would never tease a girl who'd just been so close to getting involved in an accident."

"Maybe, you don't know that Zachary well," he replied, scratching at his chin. "I'll be happy to introduce him to you. That is if you wish."

"You've said it yourself," Kristin said, beaming. "I'll be happy to hear all about this new Zachary over dinner at my place today evening. Are you up for it?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Zachary said, matching her smile.

"Then, see you later," Kristin said. "Don't go making any excuses now. I'll start preparing dinner very early today. So, you have got to attend by hook or crook. Are there any specific foods that you don't eat?"

"Yes, there's one," Zachary said, his voice solemn. "I don't eat chicken feet. That's a big no for me."

Kristin chuckled. "Don't worry," she said, casting a glance on her wristwatch. "I won't be cooking any chicken feet today evening. Okay, then. I really have got to go now. See you later then." She waved before quickly jogging up the stairs.

Zachary sighed, shaking his head on seeing her figure disappear. Since his mind had calmed down a bit, he couldn't help but wonder why he'd said so much to Kristin and even agreed to eat dinner at her place. [Is the boredom from this morning taking a toll on me?] He mused, casting a fleeting glance at his watch. On noticing that it was already seven minutes past eleven, a light bulb went on in his mind. At that moment, he remembered that he'd promised to meet Emily in about eight minutes. So, without any dilly-dallying, he rushed out of the building and quickly got into his car. A minute later, he'd already pulled out of the parking space beside the apartment building and begun cruising like the wind towards Trondheim Square to meet with Emily.

Chapter 188 - Zachary's Stand

"Did you make it all the way here running?" Emily asked as soon as Zachary settled in a seat opposite hers at a corner table within Café le Frère. "Why do you look so out of breath?"

Zachary just smiled at her without bothering to reply. He'd run from the Trondheim Torg parking lot to avoid being late for the appointment with Emily, but he was sure as hell not going to mention that to her. He didn't want to go into further explanations of what exactly had delayed his arrival.

On seeing him remain silent, Emily just shook her head. "In any case, that doesn't matter," she said, smiling. "I've already ordered the food. But for now, we can go ahead and discuss the business at hand as we wait. Is that okay with you? Or should we wait for the food and first eat?"

"Let's get straight to business," Zachary was quick to reply. "I'm eager to hear what the Red Bull representatives had to say."

"Well, then," Emily said, nodding. "As I'd already speculated, Red Bull is quite interested in signing you as one of their ambassadors. They are even offering quite a large sum as an initial wage plus a very tempting lucrative contract." She paused for a few seconds as the waitress carried their dishes of choice over and began placing them on their table. When she finished arranging the food between them, they thanked her and then savored the taste of their meal before returning to their discussion.

"So, how much is Red Bull offering?" Zachary probed as soon as the waitress was out of earshot. He was already feeling his heart start to palpitate with excitement after hearing that there was a possibility of signing another endorsement contract. Moreover, it was with another world-famous brand.

"They are offering 12 million a year," Emily said after sipping on her cappuccino. "But don't get excited. The deal is a front to build a relationship with you and get you to sign for one of their clubs. I guess you are aware of Red Bull and its keen interest in investing in sports. Aren't you?"

"Yes, of course, I know about their sports investments," Zachary replied, nodding. "So, which of their teams do they want me to join? Is it the Austrian club, Red Bull Salzburg, or the German one, RB Leipzig?"

"You seem to be quite informed about the Red Bull teams," Emily said, raising a brow. "You even already know about RB Leipzig. I just got to know of it today. How is it that you already have this information? Did the Red Bull representatives contact you?"

"Nah," Zachary said, smiling wryly. "I just did some digging on the internet after hearing that you were meeting the Red Bull representatives. I wanted to understand what kind of company they were and ended up chancing upon the information." He decided to lie since he couldn't admit that the information about Red Bull was common knowledge to every football-lover during his previous life.

"RB Leipzig is the club they would like you to join," Emily said, placing her cup on the table and locking eyes with Zachary. She then went ahead to narrate the entire discussion with the Red Bull representatives, even going into details about what kind of weekly wage they were willing to offer. She even told him about Red Bull's master plan to quickly advance the new club to the Bundesliga within a maximum of three years.

Although Zachary was already privy to the info about RB Leipzig from his previous life, he still listened with rapt attention—so as to not miss any small details.

A soft smile outlined his face, softening his often intense features, as Emily started going over more of the promises Red Bull had made so as to convince him to join their team. His spirits brightened as he felt waves of contentment washing through him.

He could tell that the Red Bull officials were quite sincere in making their offer. They really wanted to sign him to their team. And that made him proud of his recent achievements in the Tippeligaen. He was even more confident that he was on the right track to becoming a great player in a short time. But he also understood that he couldn't rush his career progress in any way. Otherwise, he would stumble and fall before facing down a fate full of hopelessness like that of his previous life.

When Emily finished her narration, she leaned forward and made a steeple of her fingers. "So, what do you think about this offer?" She asked, her voice solemn. "Is there any possibility you would consider joining RB Leipzig before the end of August? That is when the transfer window in Germany will be closing."

"Their entire offer is quite tempting," Zachary said after deliberating for a moment. "But the timing is quite wrong. I only signed my contract with Rosenborg two months ago, in March. So, there isn't a possibility that I'll leave my team in the middle of the season. That would be a bit unprofessional and irresponsible. Moreover, leaving a club before achieving anything doesn't sit well with me. Had the offer come a year later, I would maybe promise to think about it. But right now, it's a different story."

"Oh," Emily said, smiling a bit. She didn't seem bothered in the slightest by Zachary's answer. "Don't you even wish to sit down with them and listen to what they've got to say?"

"Nope," Zachary was quick to reply. "I'm not good at out-and-out rejecting people. If I meet those representatives, I may get tempted by them and end up joining their club, especially considering the

money they're offering. So, it's better for me to stay far away from them to avoid such a scenario from happening." He smiled, shaking his head.

If he was to be one hundred percent honest, he was pretty much tempted by the 40,000 Euros a week offer. But if he agreed to join Leipzig within that very transfer window, he would be abandoning his team even before the middle of the Tippeligaen season. That would affect his reputation and credibility as a professional footballer to a great extent. For the next few years of his career, the other clubs that wanted to acquire his services would wonder whether he would abandon them right after signing a contract.

Moreover, he was well aware that switching clubs at the genesis of his career was not an advisable course of action. During his previous life, he'd watched Nicolas Anelka, a player with immense skill and incredible talent, fail to reach his full potential partly because of a similar reason. The French striker went through several transfers very early during his career that destabilized his development as a professional footballer. Zachary didn't want to follow the same path.

He was not against transferring to a different club when the time was right. But for the moment, he wanted to develop his skills in a familiar environment before thinking about joining the bigger stage. That way, he would minimize all the external factors that might destabilize his growth until a few of his stats progressed to the S grade.

Emily nodded expressionlessly on hearing Zachary's response. "Since you seem to be very sure and clear about this, I'll go ahead and reject Red Bull's offer," she said. "But you have to be sure that it's what you want. Otherwise, if we go ahead and reject them, and then you change your mind later, that'll be quite problematic."

"Don't worry," Zachary replied, his voice firm. "I've thought about the issue for quite some time, even before today. I'm sure that I want to continue developing my skills at Rosenborg before thinking about joining any other clubs."

"Then, that's good," Emily said, a smile lighting up her face and dissolving the solemn atmosphere on the table. "I'll go ahead and do the needful. However, you've got to remember that we can only bar the parties that want to sign you—only if they approach us. It would be an entirely different story if they decided to deal with the club directly—and then trigger your release clause. You've got to be ready for such a scenario, especially considering the form you're on at the moment."

"Then we can go ahead and ask for some abnormal personal terms during the negotiation process if such a scenario develops," Zachary replied, grinning like a rogue. "For instance, you could ask for 90K Euros per week and then request for a clause in the contract that promises regular first-team football. If the interested parties could fulfill such conditions, I would force myself to forget my worries and then transfer. But otherwise, I'll remain a Rosenborg player for some time."

"That's a good idea," Emily said, a soft smile still outlining her face. "I'll watch out for such an opportunity in the future. But the endorsement offer negotiations are not dead yet. Red Bull might still want to take you on as a brand ambassador even if you reject the prospect of transferring to Leipzig. But that way, they'll get many opportunities to badger you and try to convince you to change your mind and join their club. Are you willing to accept their endorsement offer of twelve million Norwegian Kroner a year even after knowing that?"

"If they can remove the condition of transferring to Leipzig during the following transfer window, then I'm okay with the deal," Zachary replied confidently. "I can easily withstand their badgering if they're paying me that twelve million a year."

Chapter 189 - Emily's Concerns

"That's good to know," Emily said, beaming. "I'll keep that in mind. But putting endorsement deals aside, will you be returning to your home country during the upcoming break in the Tippeligaen season?"

"Yes, of course," Zachary replied matter-of-factly. "I haven't been back even once ever since I arrived in Norway to start my training at the academy. So, I'll surely be going back this time around."

"Oh," Emily said, sipping on her coffee. "But I've recently heard some news that there's a rebel conflict going on in DR Congo. Are you sure that it won't affect you when you go back?"

Zachary smiled. "The rebel conflict is currently taking place in the eastern part of DR Congo," he elaborated. "It is mainly around the regions of North Kivu, Goma, and Beni. But, I'll be heading to Lubumbashi, which is in the southern part of the country. The two places are over 1,500 Kilometers apart. So, there isn't a chance that I'll get affected by the civil strife."

"That's reassuring," Emily said, running a hand through her wavy dark brown hair. "What about Lubumbashi? Is it safe?"

"It's very safe," Zachary was quick to reply with a confident tone. "The city is one of the safest in DR Congo. You have to know that it's in the far south, close to DR Congo's border with Zambia. It's quite peaceful and hardly ever experiences any armed conflicts."

Emily sighed. "Then how come that I recently chanced upon some news of a militia group consisting of one hundred fighters attacking Lubumbashi and seizing a United Nations compound?" She queried, her brows drawing together into a frown. "Moreover, this attack was only two months ago, in March. From what I heard, the attack was a deadly one. It even resulted in an armed face-off between the militants and the Congolese soldiers. And there were even some fatal casualties and deaths from the fighting."

Zachary's eyes widened on hearing that. "You know quite a lot about Congo, for someone that is from the UK," he said. "Are you a part-time journalist or something?"

Emily chuckled. "You're my client," she replied, her voice softening. "So, I conducted a bit of research about your home country. And what I discovered was quite worrying. It's my wish that you avoid the place until things settle down."

"It's my home," Zachary said, shaking his head. "I've got to go back and visit my grandmother this time around. You don't have to worry, though. The situation in the country always looks worse in the news than what is actually on the ground. The conflict is not as serious as the press is making it out to be. So, I'm sure I'll be safe there."

"Let's hope so," Emily said, nodding. "But you've got to be careful when you go back. We don't want anything bad to happen to you when you are just starting to solidify your status as a pro athlete."

"Don't worry," Zachary replied. "I'll be extra careful. Moreover, no one should recognize me when I'm back there. The locals don't watch the Tippeligaen matches. So, I shouldn't have any trouble moving around since I'll almost be anonymous."

"Then, I'm assured."

For the next few minutes, they continued making small talk as they ate their light meals. They discussed how Zachary would train during the break and made plans for when he would be returning to Trondheim from DR Congo. They even laid strategies on how to attract more endorsement offers. That way, they slowly emptied their cups and plates and then said their goodbyes.

Zachary immediately headed to the Lerkendal gym to put in some light exercise. As an exercising maniac, he always felt like he wasn't complete on the days he didn't work out and expend some sweat.

So, for the next hour, he stretched his muscles on a foam roller and did some weight lifting to quicken his post-match recovery. He only stopped when he felt light-headed and almost out of breath. But Zachary could already feel his mind becoming more active due to the intense exercise. He was pretty pleased with the results of the session.

After the gym work, he immediately headed to the training ground. Since he was already on the pitch at Lerkendal, he decided to add a bit of exercise. He came across a few of his teammates, mostly those on the second team, on the field. They were also putting in some hours of extra training with undivided attention.

Zachary waved to them in greeting before concentrating on going through agilities and endurance-enhancing drills close to the goalposts on one side. As usual, he put all his focus into the routine—until he was sweating all over.

At around 2:00 PM, he ended his session by practicing his shooting from different angles in the final third. He then took a shower and cruised back home to rest for the day.

He spent the rest of the day lazing off in his apartment until it was six in the evening. Without any dilly-dallying, he took a shower, donned one of his better-looking tracksuits, and headed downstairs to Kristin's apartment for dinner.

He didn't expect much when heading there. He was even anticipating that he would have to make an excuse and escape after spending a few minutes at Kristin's. But he was pleasantly surprised as the dinner progressed. The evening was pleasant and even made him forget the passing of time.

Zachary got to eat a very well-cooked sumptuous feast in the company of two beautiful girls. One was Kristin, herself. The other was her flatmate, Monica, a professional skier working hard to make the Norwegian team for the Winter Olympics scheduled for the following year. He enjoyed their company since they were also quite interested in sports—his principal hobby. They talked at length about the previous year's world cup, the Tippeligaen season, and even delved into discussing Rosenborg's prospects in the following Europa League tournament.

That way, the hours quickly passed as Zachary enjoyed himself for the first time in quite a while. By the time he was saying his goodbyes to the two girls, he'd already recovered from the post-match fatigue. Zachary felt as light as a feather while moving up the stairs back to his apartment. His mood was lighter, and his mind refreshed. He couldn't believe that talking to people over a meal would cure fatigue almost as well as a massage. But he was glad that he'd discovered another way to deal with mental burnout.

Chapter 190: Against V?lerengen Fotball

Saturday, May 25th, 2013.

"V?lerenga... *clap*clap*... V?lerenga... *clap*clap*... Rosenborg... BOOO!"

It was craziness beyond imagine prior to the match between V?lerenga and Rosenborg that was supposed to have commenced at 6:00 PM within the Ullevaal Stadion in Oslo.

Mouth agape, Zachary stood close to the center circle, watching the passionate and wild V?lerenga fans in the stands. Some were waving blue flags, others lighting firecrackers and throwing them behind the goalposts, while the rest sang at the top of their voices. They were a chaotic blend of passion and mayhem.

[What the hell is happening?]

The question ran through Zachary's mind.

He'd previously thought that the Rosenborg fans were the most intense and crazy supporters during matches. But right after stepping into the Ullevaal Stadion, V?lerenga's home ground, he'd immediately cast that assumption out of his mind. That evening had shown him just how extreme football fans could be.

His mind was still in shock after witnessing the insanity of some of the V?lerenga fans. Their passion was clearly way beyond what a sane person would consider reasonable support for their team.

A few minutes prior, just moments to the scheduled start of the game, two V?lerenga fans had stunned everyone present. They'd somehow managed to get through security and race onto the pitch, catching most of the players by surprise. What was even more shocking was that they'd managed to snatch Rosenborg's flag from Mikael's outstretched arm—just as he was about to complete an exchange with the other captain.

Before the Rosenborg acting captain could react, the two fans had already left him in the dust, leaving him in a state of complete shock. Mikael Dorsin had been left to watch them helplessly as they bolted across the pitch—and made their way back towards the stands, speed like the wind. The two men somehow managed to escape the pursuit of the policemen, who'd tried to stop them, long enough to throw the flag to their counterparts in the stands.

A few of the V?lerenga fans in the stands had reacted right then. They'd wasted no time receiving the flag and then setting it on fire to send the whole Ullevaal Stadion into chaos.

The traveling Rosenborg fans reacted immediately by throwing various items, including firecrackers, onto the pitch. It was sheer madness—the likes of which Zachary had never experienced.

The referee had immediately decided to postpone the kick-off as the security personnel tried to bring the chaos under control. Ten minutes had already elapsed since the burning of the flag, yet the fans had not settled down yet. The players had even assembled in their respective halves of the pitch to wait for the disorder to pass.

"Do you think there's a chance the game will be postponed?" Zachary asked Mikael Dorsin, Rosenborg's acting captain, who was doing a few stretches beside him. Even though he'd just faced an assault by the fans, he didn't seem rattled in the slightest. Mikael behaved as if the incident had happened to someone else while continuing to go about his business. He acted with the composure befitting the veteran Rosenborg defender he was. Zachary could only sigh in admiration as he witnessed how he'd handled the incident.

"Nah," Mikael replied, shaking his head. "I hardly doubt that the officials will postpone the match. The fans will settle down after a few more minutes, and then we'll be able to play. So, make sure you keep your mind sharp—and your body warmed up as you wait for the chaos to pass."

"Oh, okay," Zachary said. "Is it always like this every year?" He queried as he started doing his own stretching routine.

"The chaos has never escalated to this level during my time with Rosenborg," Mikael replied, switching from a forward-bend posture and starting to do some leg lifting. "But the V?lerenga fans have always been very energetic whenever we play them. They have always supported and cheered their team on as

if their lives depend on it. The sheer intensity of the yells from the fans can even cause you to make a few mistakes if your head isn't totally into the game."

"Makes me wonder what they would do if their team managed to become champions!" Zachary commented, starting to go through a routine of leg swinging.

Mikael chuckled on hearing Zachary's comment. "But our fans aren't bad either," he said. "They're even more passionate than the V?lerenga supporters. That's if you take away all the craziness. You'll notice their intensity if we manage to win a cup this season."

Zachary continued making small talk with Mikael as they continued stretching. Since he'd already warmed up before the scheduled time of the match, he was only focused on his lower body to keep it ready for the action that would start any time.

The session turned into a serious one a few minutes later. A few other teammates joined them in the exercising routine as they waited for the fans to settle down. In that manner, fifteen minutes quickly passed, and order returned to the stadium.

Within the visiting team's technical area, Coach Johansen felt a bit unsettled as he watched the referee finally blow the whistle, signaling for the start of the match at exactly 6:30 PM. He feared that the disturbance that'd preceded the kick-off might have disrupted the focus of his players. So, he decided to motivate them before they made any mistakes that could cost the team dearly.

"Focus and keep your heads in the game," he yelled at the top of his lungs as soon as he saw Nicki Nielsen, the Rosenborg center-forward, kick-start the game with a pass back into the midfield. "First, concentrate on settling down and holding possession. Play with a swift passing style and don't allow the V?lerenga players to win possession easily."

Coach Johansen continued shouting at the Rosenborg players until he made sure that all their heads were in the game. He finally relaxed and started studying the formation of the opposing team.

Kjetil Rekdal, the V?lerenga coach, had also used the 4-3-3 attacking formation. It was similar to his in every detail. V?lerenga had fielded four defenders, one defensive midfielder, two attacking midfielders, and one center forward—shaping up into mostly triangles as the game progressed. Moreover, he was also using high-pressing tactics, most likely in an attempt to pressure Rosenborg into losing possession much more quickly. Even in the first four minutes of the game, his attacking players were all over the Rosenborg defenders, running at them whenever they received the ball in the backfield.

Furthermore, the V?lerenga coach had organized a pressing zone around Zachary and Jonas Svensson, Rosenborg's two attacking midfielders. Whenever any of the two was on the ball, two of the V?lerenga midfielders would double team the one in question—and then manage to nip Rosenborg's attacks in the bud. Moreover, V?lerenga was playing a high defensive line, probably to counter Zachary's through-passes to Nicki, which could come at any time.

Coach Johansen instantly decided that his opponent was not an easy man to defeat, considering his choice of tactics. Kjetil had almost sealed off all the strong points of Rosenborg. Coach Johansen anticipated a tough 90 minutes because of that.

The first fifteen minutes passed by quickly as the two teams tried to establish their dominance on the field. Zachary played well as usual. He was unleashing passes left and right—into both wings to initiate a few Rosenborg attacks. When there weren't any passing options, he coordinated well with the other midfielders to help Rosenborg dictate the tempo as the game progressed. Thanks to his incredible vision and passing ability, Rosenborg started hoarding all the possession amid the growing booing of the V?lerenga fans.

However, the game remained deadlocked at a score of 0:0 until the 20th minute, when an unfavorable change occurred. Christian Gamboa, the Rosenborg right-back, made a mistake and lost possession just after receiving a pass close to the centerline. It was a simple mistake born of a bit of laxity while controlling the ball. But it cost Rosenborg dearly.

Diego Calvo, V?lerenga's left-winger, pounced on the loose ball before any Rosenborg player could react. Without any pause, he controlled it mid-sprint before continuing to bolt across the green. He managed to race along the touchline on the left flank for more than a dozen yards before the Rosenborg defensive players could organize themselves into a proper defensive shape.

Amid the rising cheers of the home fans, the left-winger sent a lofted teasing cross towards Rosenborg's box just as he was about to step into the final third.

Mustafa Abdellaoue, the V?lerenga center-forward, managed to get to the end of the cross and plant a header into the top left corner from around the edge of the box. With that attempt, the tall forward succeeded in beating Lund Hansen, Rosenborg's goalkeeper, to score the first goal.

1:0.

V?lerenga IF, the pride of Oslo, had managed to strike and draw first blood in the 21st minute. The V?lerenga fans even became crazier than they'd been. They jumped up and down in the stands while shouting and clapping their hands to celebrate. The goal sent them into a frenzy of wild cheering that shook the entire Ullevaal Stadion to its very core.

Coach Johansen sighed, shaking his head as he watched the V?lerenga players celebrating their first goal. What he'd feared had happened. Some of his players were clearly still unfocused, mainly because of the chaos that'd ensued at the start of the game. That was why a few of them were starting to make amateur mistakes that early in the match. So, he decided to take a harsh decision and make a substitution right away to shake them up a bit.