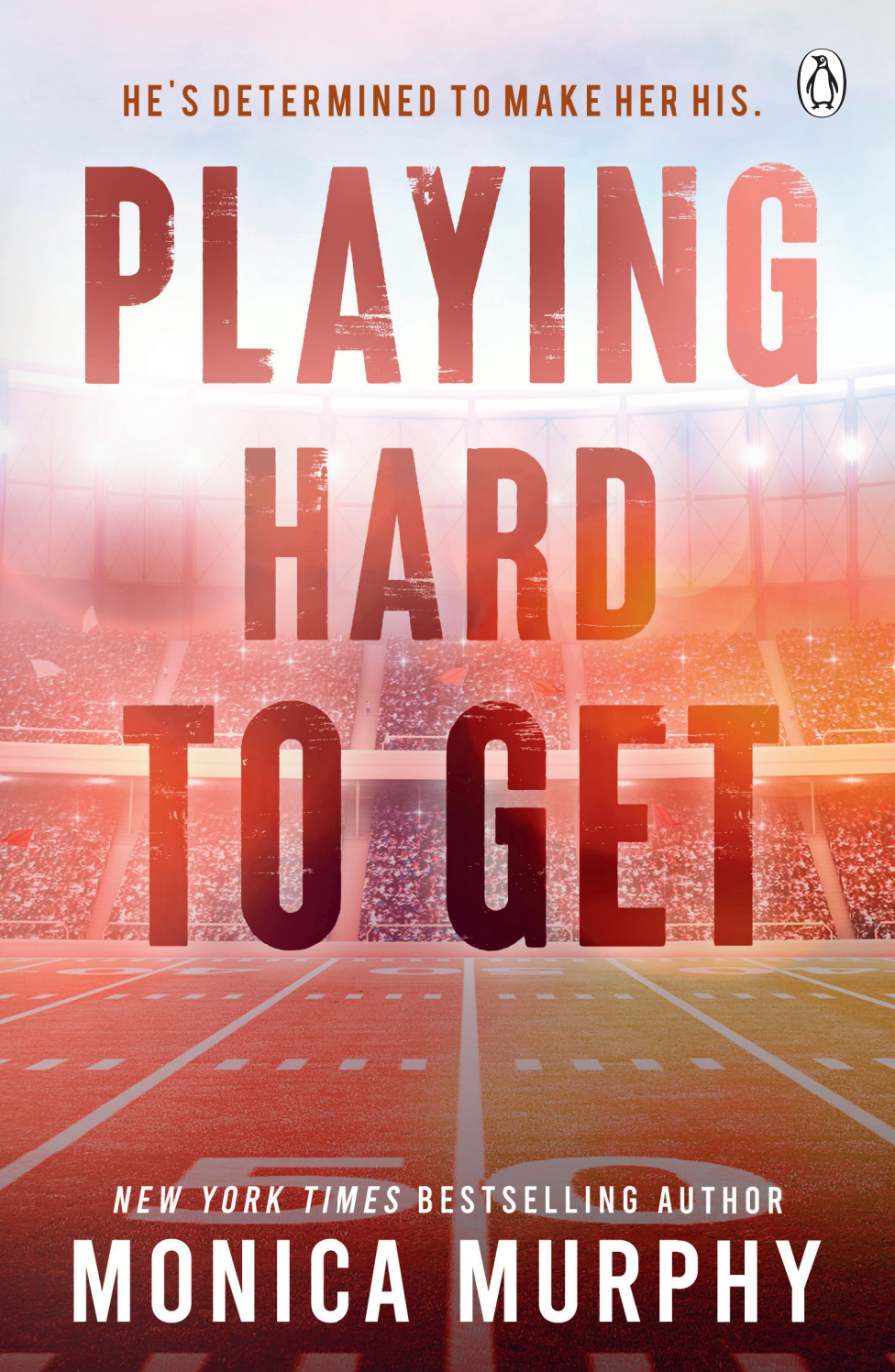

HE'S DETERMINED TO MAKE HER HIS.
PLAYING HARD TO GET
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MONICA MURPHY

PENGUIN BOOKS

PLAYING HARD TO GET

Monica Murphy is a *New York Times*, *USA Today* and international bestselling romance author. Her books have been translated in almost a dozen languages and have sold over two million copies worldwide.

A native Californian, she lives on fourteen acres in the middle of nowhere with her husband, two kids, one dog and four cats. When she's not writing, she's an assistant coach for her daughter's high school cheer team. Maybe someday, she'll even write about this experience.

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Playing To Win

Lancaster Prep

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A Million Kisses in Your Lifetime

Birthday Kisses

Promises We Meant to Keep

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To those who live for the hope of it all
This one is for you

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PLAYLIST

"august" - Taylor Swift
"Come Kick It" - Tesia
"Falling in Loves too Mean" - Hether
"laugh with me" - Korantemaa
"I Don't Really Know" - FLOOR CRY
"Bad Habit" - Steve Lacy
"Aloha" - Valley Boy
"You&I." - milk.
"The Boat I Row" - Tame Impala
"In the Strangest Way" - The Hails

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http://bit.ly/3A4XyA8

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1

JOANNA

Athletes. They kind of...scare me.

Specifically football players.

There are plenty of reasons why they freak me out. First up is their sheer size. These guys are huge. Massive. Most of them are freakishly tall and overwhelmingly bulky, and when you first see them, they're intimidating.

Second, they're just so dang loud. They enter a building, a room, the quad, the football field (well, that's a given), and everyone notices them. Not only because of who they are, but they deliberately make a scene, like they want the attention. They talk, they yell, they cause a commotion everywhere they go and everyone looks upon them with awe.

And the football players revel in it.

Finally, most of them are extremely good looking. Even if they're not attractive in the traditional sense with a handsome, symmetrical face, the majority of them have a raw magnetism that draws people in—specifically women. There's always a crowd around them, mostly female, though the guys on campus idolize them as well. No matter where

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they go, they're surrounded. Even mobbed sometimes. It's wild.

I don't get it.

I attend Colorado University and our college football team is made up of the most popular guys on campus. The Golden Eagles are loved. They are revered. When the fall semester starts, they're all anyone talks about: every single conversation, everywhere you turn. The day after their games, where they almost always win?

It's a nonstop analysis of their every move through all four quarters, right down to the final seconds.

All I can ever think is how exhausting it must be, to have so much sitting on their shoulders. They are responsible for the overhyped school spirit on this campus, and when they —heaven forbid—lose, it's like the end of the world is coming.

No joke.

"Did you watch this weekend's game?"

I barely look up as the customer asks the question that's on everyone's tongue this Monday. I work at the campus bookstore, and while I love my job, I don't love these types of questions.

Being truthful gets me attention I don't want. Because I don't watch the game. I never watch the game.

I don't care about sports.

And I really don't like football.

Can't let that get out, though. I'll get my college admission revoked, despite the fact that I've been here two years already and am starting my junior year. I don't understand the adulation, the way these guys are treated like gods on campus when all they do is throw a football on the field.

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I honestly don't get it.

"I did watch," I finally answer, lying through my teeth.

"It was a good one, huh." He says it as a statement, not a question. He flat out assumes that I watched it and loved every minute of it. Because...who wouldn't? How could a member of the student body *not* spend their Saturday watching the game?

Glancing up at the guy, I immediately note that he's decent looking, which is...interesting. I haven't really noticed a guy's looks in a while.

He has friendly brown eyes, which are currently zeroed in on my face. His lips are curled into a pleasant smile and he's wearing a Nirvana T-shirt, which is trendy yet also somehow ironic? Maybe? "Can't believe that catch Maguire made in the third quarter," he says.

It takes everything inside me not to roll my eyes.

"I know, right? He's so good," I say, grabbing the Intro to Psychology book the customer is finally getting and scanning it before I add it to the bag of other supplies he's purchasing. We've been in class for a week. Most everyone moved in at least three to four days prior to that. Which begs the question—why is he only picking up this book now? I saw on his order slip that it's been here at the store since before school even started.

The guy scoffs. "*Good?* Major understatement. Maguire is the best tight end out there. Period. He'll go pro next year for sure."

Right. I'm sure he will if this dude says so.

I just don't really give a damn.

"He needs to watch that knee though," he continues. "It might trip him up."

I don't know much about Knox Maguire's knee, but I did overhear a customer at the store say that after he injured it his freshman year, it still gives him trouble.

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Like it gave him trouble at Saturday's game. The coaches

eventually benched him, but only during the fourth quarter because they knew they were going to win. Which they did.

Naturally.

That I even know these little facts about their first game of the season tells me I retain more facts than I thought I did. And the fact that they occupy even a little bit of space in my brain is seriously so frustrating.

"Yeah, he does need to watch it. You're *so* right." I meet his gaze once again to find him studying me with interest in his eyes. I think I impressed him with the knee talk. I only know this info because of all the chatter I overhear at the store. At the student center. At the lounge in my apartment building that's on campus.

I cannot escape the football players, especially Knox Maguire.

"You like football?" the guy asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Sort of." I shrug. Smile. Then hit a button on the register. "That'll be one-hundred-fifty-two dollars and thirty-six cents."

He whistles, pulling his credit card from his battered wallet. "Probably will barely crack the book open all semester."

"Don't forget we buy back textbooks," I remind him, on autopilot.

Working at the student bookstore, I say that a lot.

"I shouldn't even buy it. What's the point? I'll just beg some hot girl to share her notes with me." He taps his card, the reader making a noise, indicating it's going through. "What's your name?"

I don't want to tell him. I don't like this guy. Not really. But I don't want to be a complete bitch either. "Joanna."

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"I'm Mark." He smiles.

"Hey Mark." I point at the credit card reader screen. "Mind signing that for me?"

He scribbles his finger across the screen and I stash the receipt in his bag before handing it over. "Maybe I'll see you around," he says, voice purposely casual.

"Maybe," I echo, knowing I probably won't. He doesn't seem like the type to hang out here or in the library, which is my other favorite haunt. "Thank you. Have a nice day."

"You too." He grins just before he takes his bag and leaves the counter. I watch him go, letting out a small sigh of disappointment as I slowly shake my head.

Men. They're pitiful.

"He was flirting with you."

A startled yelp escapes me and I whirl around to find my coworker, my friend, one of my favorite people in the entire world, Leon, watching me with narrowed eyes.

"You scared me!" I rest my hand against my chest, trying to ease my overly active heart. "And he was not."

"He was," Leon says firmly. "And you were clueless, as usual."

I wasn't that clueless. "What am I supposed to do, offer up my number? Ask him to meet me for coffee sometime?"

"Yes and yes." Leon stands next to me at the counter, nudging his shoulder into mine. I grip the counter, so I don't go toppling. Leon is stronger than he looks. "You need to get back out there. You're moping, and I'm over it."

"I am not moping." I sound defensive.

Guess what? I am defensive.

My boyfriend and I broke up at the beginning of the summer and I was absolutely...devastated. Bryan and I had been together since midway through our senior year in high school, and when we got into different universities, I worried we would end things before they even really started.

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We were a total high school cliché. After lots of crushing on each other and wasting time, we were finally a couple, only to go our separate ways after graduation.

But Bryan said that it didn't matter where we were. He was in love with me and wanted to keep seeing me, even if we were at different colleges. In different states—he's in Arizona and I'm in Colorado because I wanted to stay closer to home. I, of course, agreed to a long- distance relationship because I felt the same way. I was in love with that boy and fully prepared to go the distance. As time went on, as we made it through one year, and then the next, I felt secure. We were going to make it. Hell, we even talked about getting married and having children, for the love of all that is holy, and then what does he go and do?

Breaks up with me in May—during finals week, the bastard—for a girl named Clara.

She goes to his college. They share the same major. They share a lot of the same classes. Fairly certain he cheated on me with his new girlfriend, though he will deny it until the day he dies.

Whatever. I'm over it.

Mostly.

"You are moping. And it's bringing me down," Leon says, reaching over to pat my hand. I snatch it off the counter, turning my back to him and grabbing a pile of books that need to be put back on the shelves. "Avoiding me isn't going to change things. You're still miserable!"

He calls out the last sentence to me as I walk away, and as discreetly as possible, I give him the finger.

All Leon does is laugh in response. The jerk.

But he's not really a jerk. He's just concerned about me, and I love him for it. Mostly because, deep down, I know he's speaking the truth. I've been especially cranky lately

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and I need to do something about it. I need to get out of this funk.

How though? I'm not ready to date. Not yet. I'm probably too independent. That's what happens when you're in a long-distance relationship for over two years. You don't spend a lot of time with your significant other, and you learn how to be on your own.

I'm so on my own now, I can't imagine tying myself to someone else. Just…

No, thank you.

I take my sweet time putting away the books, forcing Leon to take over ringing-up duties. With school starting, we've been so busy the last couple of weeks, but it's finally begun to slow down, thank goodness. Despite my occasional grumbling, I really do love my job. I've been here for the last year, and I like being amongst the books and the school merchandise—we are the number-one seller of campus-themed merch, of course. Everyone comes here to purchase their Golden Eagle team gear to wear to football games.

I don't even think I own a single T-shirt with the eagle blazed across it, though I do have a sweatshirt my parents bought me after I got my acceptance email. I still wear it on occasion, but I've definitely never worn it to a football game.

Because I don't go to football games.

Ever.

Like I can't seem to help myself, my thoughts drift to Bryan, and I wonder how he's doing right now. He started college a week before I did and last I saw—after some sneaky social media sleuthing—he's moved into an apartment off-campus with his precious new girlfriend Clara.

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Of course he did.

I shove a book onto the shelf, a little more aggressively

than necessary, and then turn and run straight into someone.

A very solid, extremely tall someone. It felt like I ran into a brick wall, I hit him so hard.

"Oh hey." A deep, rumbling voice says as he reaches out, grabbing hold of my elbows, steadying me after the blow. "You okay? Sorry about that."

My elbows tingle where the stranger is touching me, and I shake my head, trying to gather my bearings. "I'm fine." I blink up at him, shock coursing through my blood when I realize who it is.

Knox Maguire himself stands directly in front of me, so close I can smell his cologne, his hands still lightly gripping my arms.

His brows are lowered in concern, his green eyes roaming over me, as if he's checking to make sure I'm all right. "You sure? You ran right into me. You didn't hear me say something?"

He said something to me? "Yeah, no. I didn't know you were standing right there." I try to take a step back, realizing he's still got a hold on me, but then he releases my elbows, allowing me to gain some much-needed space. Standing so close to him is a little overwhelming, but I'm not exactly sure why. "I'm okay, though."

"You promise?" He smiles.

Oh. Shit. He has a nice smile. Straight, white teeth. The faintest dimple denting his right cheek.

"You work here, right?" The smile evaporates, replaced by a no-nonsense expression and tone that tells me he needs some assistance. That's the only reason he said anything to me. Not because he thinks I'm cute or wants to flirt with me, but because I work here.

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Not that I want him to think I'm cute. Or want him to flirt with me. Nope. Not interested. Not. At All.

Nodding, I attempt a smile, trying not to act rattled, though that's exactly how I feel.

Shaken. To my very core.

Remember how athletes kind of scare me?

This one is the scariest of them all. He's large and intimidating and handsome and good lord, who allowed a man to smell this good?

"How can I help you?" I ask, shifting into serious customer-service mode.

He scratches his temple, like he's confused, which is still a good look for him. "I need one of those fancy-ass calculators, and I heard you guys still have a few in stock."

"You're right. We do." I tilt my head, contemplating him. "You can just order it on Amazon, you know? For a lot cheaper price."

"You turning away business?" He lifts his brows.

"Just being truthful." I shrug. "And if you have Prime, you should get it fairly fast."

"Yeah, I've got Amazon Prime or whatever, but I uh, need the calculator today." He rubs the back of his neck, seemingly embarrassed. "Class is in two hours. I'm not even close to ready, and the teacher is kind of a hard-ass."

I have a sneaking suspicion who his professor might be and he's right: she's a total hard ass.

"Let me show you where they are." I wave a hand at him to follow, and he falls into step, trailing behind me as I lead him to the other side of the store, where a display of various calculators is located. Taking a deep breath, I remind myself that he's not scary. Not in the least.

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I don't know why they intimidate me. The football players. Maybe because they're larger than life? And that sort of

thing has always made me want to retreat. I don't like loud or obnoxious people. They put off an energy I find really... draining. And here's where I need to get real.

They remind me of my father. Not my stepdad, who's been the steady male presence in my life the last fifteen years, but my real father. The one who bailed on us and never really bothered trying to see me, especially when I was younger and missing him.

Despite how great Jerry is and how present he's been in my life, I still feel like there's a hole in my heart my father used to occupy. I know I shouldn't miss him but...

I still do.

He was an athlete. A show-off. A bragger. A car salesman even, though there's nothing wrong with guys who sell cars. My father's problem? He wanted everyone to pay attention to him, including women.

Especially women.

Guys like him. Guys like Knox Maguire, they revel in that. Female adoration.

And I refuse to fall into that trap. My mother did, and she always told me it was one of the biggest regrets of her life.

"Not that I regret having you, sweetie," she always reassures me. "I just wish it hadn't been with your sperm donor."

She can barely call him my father, which I get.

I do.

My gaze returns to Knox as he wanders around the bookstore, sucking up all the oxygen in the building despite its spacious size. Just having him close is making it hard for me to breathe, and I swear I'm not the type to be starstruck.

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Yet, here he is, dazzling me with his mere presence.

It's not like he's an actual celebrity, though he's treated

like one on campus. Plus, it's his senior year. This is his last hurrah before he's out of here for good. He surely wants to go out on top.

He'll probably do whatever it takes to make that happen.

"Here you go." I stop in front of the more elaborate calculators. The very expensive ones I'm sure he needs. "What class is this for?"

"Statistics." He takes a step forward, grabbing one of the packaged calculators with his large hand and peering at it. His brows shoot up. "Two hundred bucks?"

"I recommended Amazon, remember?" I shrug.

His gaze meets mine, then drifts downward. Like he's checking me out.

What? Why?

"You did," he finally says, his gaze returning to the calculator. "But I don't have a choice. I'll take it."

"You need anything else?" He glances over at me and I try to smile, but I can tell it comes out mangled. "You have all the textbooks you need for your classes?"

"Well, yeah. Class started last week." He says it like, *duh.*

"I had a guy who just bought his Intro to Psychology textbook a few minutes ago." I shrug and start heading for the counter, so I can ring him up.

"That guy sounds like a bonehead," he says, amusement lacing his tone.

I can't help but smile, noticing how Knox keeps up, walking beside me, towering over me. He's well over six feet. Even broader than I thought, standing this close. Yet he moves with almost an easy elegance, which is...weird.

Weirdly attractive.

I go behind the counter, Leon nowhere in sight, leaving me alone with Knox. He doesn't say anything. Just hands over the calculator and I ring it up for him, rattling off the

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total while he checks his phone. He taps out a quick message and sends it before paying for his purchase.

No words are spoken. No eye contact is made until I offer him a sugary sweet thank you as I hand over the bag.

He takes it from me, his gaze finding mine once more, a barely-there smile on his lips when he says, "You're welcome."

Then he's gone.

An irritated huff leaves me and Leon mysteriously reappears, a curious expression on his face.

"What did superstar Maguire want?"

"He bought a calculator for too much money and then said 'you're welcome' when, like an idiot, I said 'thank you.'" I shake my head, annoyed. "Why would he do that? Does he actually think he's God's gift to women?"

"Yes, he does," Leon deadpans, making me laugh. "He probably thought you said thank you, like you're grateful to be in his presence."

"Most likely." I glance at the double doors, remembering the flare of interest in Knox's gaze before it disappeared. Like it was never there in the first place.

I read him wrong. Not that I'm interested.

Athletes—football players in particular—aren't my thing.

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2

KNOX

Practice is long over and I'm throwing on fresh clothes after taking a quick shower when our head coach makes his way over to my locker.

"Maguire, a word?"

I'm about to answer when he turns and walks away, fully expecting me to follow after him.

The locker room goes quiet, everyone sharing curious looks as I shove the rest of my stuff in my backpack before slamming my locker door shut. I make my way to his office, where he left the door open for me, then requests I close it when I'm about to walk inside.

I do as he asks, settling into the chair across from him, trying to ignore the way my stomach churns with nerves. Doesn't help that Coach Mattson just stares at me, his gaze steady. Intense. Like he wants to freak me out.

Well, he's doing a damn good job of it.

"Looking good out there today."

That's all he says.

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"Thank you."

"How's the knee?"

Hurts like a bitch, but I don't want to admit it. "Fine."

His brows lower. "When y'all say fine, it means it hurts."

"I can live with it." I shrug.

"You should get some PT for it."

Again. I've done this before. Blowing out my knee halfway through my freshman season was devastating. My stats went to shit. I was afraid someone else would come in and show me up, pushing me back to second string. Threatened with my college football career ending before it had barely begun, I threw myself into action, doing whatever I could to ensure I'd play football again as soon as possible.

I had surgery and once I was ready, started physical therapy four times a week, and I never missed a session. I worked hard to get my strength back. Trained harder. Made sure the knee was healed. That I was stronger, both physically and mentally. I've been going nonstop ever since, and now that it's my senior year, my last chance to prove myself before I attempt a go at the NFL, of course my knee decides to give me trouble.

"You really think I need it?" I definitely need it, but man, my class schedule is heavy this semester. Along with practice and games and everything else that comes with my life, that won't leave much time for socializing.

Specifically with women. Not that I've been "socializing" much lately anyway.

Coach nods, grabbing a notepad and scribbling something across it with a pen he snagged from his polo shirt pocket. "Definitely. I'll make it happen, and you make sure to coordinate with your schedule, so it doesn't interfere with your classes."

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"Okay." I nod, hating the idea of adding one more thing to my plate.

I handle a lot of shit, day in and day out. I'm exhausted. And school has only barely begun.

"How's class going?"

"Fine." My tone is clipped, and he lifts his head, noting it. I'm defensive when it comes to school.

I'm not that good at certain subjects, and he knows it.

"You finally in that English class?" He raises his brows.

The one subject that gives me trouble, the class I've been avoiding until I can't avoid it any longer. It's a first-year level class that my academic counselor pushed back for me, doing me a favor, until finally, I was forced to take it this semester.

I'm not great at writing papers, spelling, reading. In fact, I suck at it. I was diagnosed with a mild case of dyslexia in elementary school, and I've been struggling with it ever since. My father told me he wasn't much good at English either and needed a tutor when he was in college.

His tutor just so happened to be my mother. That's how they met.

"Yeah. I am."

"How's it going?"

"I've only had the class twice." I shrug, wanting to avoid this subject. "That math class I have is going to be a bitch."

And I actually like math, so that's saying something.

"Is it going to give you trouble?" The concern in his voice is obvious. He doesn't want any of his seniors on the team struggling with classes. And whenever risks pop up, he wants to take care of them, including our class load.

I shake my head. "I'm good at numbers." Comfortable with them even.

The English language, though? Forget it. I can't spell. I can't write. Well, I can write a bunch of nonsense. I have trouble reading sometimes, and that's just embarrassing. I

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make sure and take home the various playbooks every season, so I can pore over them. Memorize them. That way, no one on the team can figure out that I'm not good at this reading thing.

"If you need any help, don't hesitate to tell me, okay? We want to keep you sharp, on all fronts." His expression is dead serious. "This is an important time for you. We can't fuck anything up. All eyes are on you now through the rest of the season."

I break out into a literal sweat at his words, and the ominous meaning behind them. No big deal. I'm not intimidated or anything.

"Right." I nod. "I've got this."

My voice is firm, as is my resolve. I've definitely got this. I can't slip and mess anything up.

"Good to hear." Mattson leans back in his chair. "Get on out of here. I'm sure you have homework to do."

"I do." I rise to my feet, relieved to be dismissed. "See you tomorrow, Coach."

"Later, Maguire." He picks up his phone and makes a call before I'm barely even out of his office.

"What the hell was that about?" is how I'm greeted by my best friend, our QB, Camden Fields.

"Nothing. He's just checking on me." We exit the locker room together, and I'm grateful it's mostly empty. That no one else is questioning me about why Coach wanted to talk to me.

Cam is the only one I tell everything to. We've grown close over the years, to the point that we also live together at one of the apartment buildings near campus. Most of our team is in that building, all on the same floor, which means we are together constantly. And most of the time, I like it.

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Right now, I'm wanting to retreat. To hide away for a few

hours and nurse my wounds. I don't like the twinge I'm currently feeling in my knee. Or the fact that I have to take that damn English class this semester. Physical therapy on top of that is going to really eat into my study time, something I can't afford to lose.

"Something's bothering you," Cam says as we head for the parking lot. While we do live near campus, said campus is fucking huge, which means we drive over to the field every afternoon for practice. Today, we took Cam's car. "You look ready to chew through steel."

A ragged exhale leaves me. "Coach ordered PT for me."

He's quiet for a moment, absorbing what I said. "For your knee?"

I nod.

"I'm sure it'll be good for you."

"I'm sure it will," I agree as we both climb into his Dodge Challenger. "But I need every spare minute I can get to do homework."

"You're worried about that English class, huh?" Cam fires up the engine, giving it gas, making it roar.

Show off.

"I'm going to fail."

"With that kind of attitude, hell yeah, you will."

I glare at him. "Thanks for the encouragement."

"I'm just speaking the truth. You're so negative lately. Where did our happy, go-lucky Knox go? I miss him." Cam throws the gear into reverse and glances over his shoulder before backing out of the parking space, the engine rumbling. "It's our senior year, man. We should be on top of the world. Having a good time."

"The pressure is getting to me," I mutter as I slump in the seat.

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"You need to use that pressure to your advantage."

"Right, like you do?" I send him a look. The guy is always cool. Like nothing ever gets to him. It's infuriating.

He completely ignores my comment.

"You need to go out." Cam keeps his eye on the road, his lips curving into a barely-there smile. "You need to get laid."

"Tell me about it." It's been a while. I've been so damn busy with football. From the moment I returned to campus six weeks ago, I've hit the ground running.

Shit. That means I haven't had sex in at least…six weeks.

No, make that eight weeks. Shit, that's two months. Pretty sure that's some sort of record.

"Saw your sister today."

Now it's my turn to glare.

"Where the hell did you see Blair?"

It fucking kills me that my sister is going to the same college as me. She's a transfer student and is starting her junior year here, and while it's nice to have family close by, it's also a little frustrating. She's so damn nice and smart, and I don't want a single motherfucker from the team to even look in her direction.

Even my best friend. Who would never do anything like try and make a move on my little sister, but still.

"Chill, man. I saw her in the library. She's the one who approached me first." He shrugs. "See how uptight you are? Like I said, you need to get laid."

"Sorry. I get defensive about Blair. None of you deserve to breathe the same air as she does," I mutter.

"Tell me how you really feel," Cam says sarcastically.

"It's nothing personal. I know you'd feel the same way if you had sisters." I have two, and I'm so overprotective of them sometimes, I even annoy myself.

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And I know I definitely annoy my sisters. They're always

rolling their eyes and telling me to butt out of their lives. Don't they see I'm only watching out for them?

"Thank God I don't." Cam glances over at me when we come to a stop at a red light. "Let's go out tonight."

"No—"

"Yeah, it's happening," he interrupts, gunning the engine yet again before he glances over at the car sitting next to us. It's full of girls, who are all watching us with blatant interest in their gazes. Cam grins and hits a button, his window sliding open. "Hey ladies."

"Camden Fields!" they all shout, their voices getting louder when they notice me. "Knox Maguire! Oh my God! Can we have your autographs?"

Cam laughs. "How about you tell us where you're going later tonight and you can get our autographs then?"

They squeal in delight, the driver rattling off the name of a local bar we frequent that's downtown.

"See you then," Cam calls, punching the gas the second the light turns green, his tires screeching.

"You're unbelievable," I say with a shake of my head as we speed down the street.

"They fucking love it. So should you. I can guarantee at least one of those girls will be flirting with you in the next couple of hours. Maybe you could sweet talk her back to our place and even convince her that you last longer than five minutes in the sack."

"Fuck you," I say good-naturedly, making Cam laugh.

I have an English assignment that's due by midnight Wednesday, but hell, I'd rather go out tonight.

There's always tomorrow.

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3

JOANNA

"I don't want to go out," I whine, snuggling deeper beneath the throw blanket I just draped over my upper half. I have a glass of wine, a cheese and cracker plate I just put together for myself and Netflix is cued up on my laptop. "I'm all cozy."

My roommate Natalie rolls her eyes at me, resting her hands on her slender hips. We were dormmates our freshman year, and we've been living together ever since. We might not have a ton in common, but we get along great as roomies, which is rare. I know way too many people with roommate horror stories.

My biggest problem with Natalie is she's always trying to push me out of my comfort zone, and that's not really a flaw. That's more on me than her.

"You're turning into an old woman." Natalie's tone is accusatory, but I know she's saying it out of concern. I take her in, noting that she's dressed in a cropped white tank top that shows off her perfectly tanned skin and her flat stomach. The straight leg mom jeans she's wearing make her butt look great. Her thick auburn hair hangs straight down her

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back and her full lips are covered in shiny gloss. Sometimes I sort of hate her because she's so beautiful, but she's too damn nice to hate.

"I am not an old woman." My tone is haughty, giving me serious old woman vibes.

Natalie rolls her eyes. "You're going out with me. We've been in school for almost two weeks and you haven't come out to the bars once."

"We're juniors now. We don't need to hang out at bars all the time," I remind her, sounding like a prim, stuck-up nerd, when I'm really trying to sound like a responsible grown up who's over the bar hopping antics.

"You've *never* hung out at bars. And why wouldn't we hang out at bars? We're finally twenty-one and of legal drinking age!" Natalie holds up the glass of wine she poured herself a few minutes ago, just before she downs half of it. "We should pre-party."

"I am pre-partying." I wave a hand at my plate before I grab a cracker and slice of cheese and take a bite. "And then I'm going to binge something on Netflix."

"No more true crime." She makes her way over to me and yanks the laptop out of my lap before I can stop her. "I'm tired of hearing about murderers all the time."

"But I love—" *murderers.*

Yeah. Finishing that sentence makes me sound like a crazy person.

"Get dressed." Natalie tucks my laptop beneath her arm, holding it close.

"I have homework." I pout.

"Liar. You were going to watch Netflix all night."

"I need to write a paper though." For next week.

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"That's due next week," she says, like she's in my brain.

Natalie knows me far too well.

"No more excuses," she continues. "We'll only go out for a couple of hours. If it's boring and there are no prospects, then forget it. We'll leave."

"A couple of hours?" I groan. "That sounds awful. I have a nine o'clock class tomorrow."

"And who's fault is that? You know better than to schedule a class so early."

"I didn't have a choice." I lean my head against the back of the chair, staring at the ceiling. "And what do you mean by prospects?"

"Don't be dense, Jo. You know what I'm talking about." She sends me a knowing look.

Boys. Men. Whatever you want to call them. Nat is a big flirt. It comes naturally to her, and the guys flock to her wherever we go. Back in the day, I didn't care. I was smug with the knowledge that I had a boyfriend, and being surrounded by boys who had no interest in me wasn't a problem.

But now I'm just as single as Natalie, and maybe I don't want to deal with a bunch of guys trying to get in her pants. Maybe it'll make me feel inferior that none of them want to get in *my* pants.

Stupid but true.

"Fine. I will go anywhere but Logan's," I finally say.

Logan's is the bar where all the football players hang out. Which means they dominate the space. There is football memorabilia all over the walls and they are treated like gods the moment they walk through the doors.

Yeah. No thank you.

"Logan's has the Monday night drink specials," Natalie reminds me. "That's the *only* place we're going."

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I try to protest, but she's not hearing it. Within minutes, Natalie has me in my bedroom, making me strip out of my

sweatpants and T-shirt, while she picks out an outfit for me to wear. Once I'm dressed in jeans and a black cropped tank top that's basically the same one she's wearing, she corrals me into the bathroom we share, curling my hair while I nearly poke my eye out putting on mascara.

"You act like you don't know how to apply makeup," she mutters as she curls my dark hair way better than I ever could.

"I don't. I rarely wear it," I remind her.

Natalie shakes her head. "Your ex really did a number on you."

I pause, the mascara wand still clutched between my fingers. "What does Bryan have to do with this?"

"He's the one who convinced you he likes you all-natural. That you don't need to dress up for him or try and impress him. He always told you he loved you for who you are and look what he did to you."

I go still, staring at her in the mirror's reflection until she finally meets my gaze.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" I ask carefully. "And what's wrong with loving me for who I am?"

A sigh leaves her. "I always thought he wanted you to be this plain Jane, so no one else would notice you. He wanted to keep you to himself and then he goes and cheats on you anyway. Such an asshole. I hope he's miserable with his new ho."

Her words are like a punch to the heart. Made worse because I know she might be speaking the truth. "You really think he tried to...hold me down?"

Natalie nods, releasing the last bit of hair from the curling iron before she sets it on the counter and turns it off. "He totally did. He convinced you to stay home all the time too, and you know he wasn't doing the same. He was out all

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the time. He'd post videos of himself at parties every single weekend!"

She's right. He would do that. And I would get mad and then we'd start arguing. It sucked. I hated it.

I finish applying mascara, adding a few extra coats so my lashes are really long. Then I grab the cream blush Natalie gave me for Christmas last year and pull off the lid, applying bright color to my cheeks. I blend it in with my fingertips, Natalie watching me.

"He forced you to have a boring time at school while he got to have all the fun," she reminds me. "He's a complete dick."

"No, Bryan is an asshole," I announce, standing up straighter.

The proud smile on her face tells me I said the right thing. "Girl, you are preaching to the choir. I totally agree. Screw that guy."

"Fuck that guy." Our gazes lock in the mirror and she grabs hold of my shoulders, giving me a gentle shake.

"Yes, *fuck* that guy. He's the worst. You need to find yourself a new guy and make out with him tonight." Natalie grins.

My confidence deflates, just like that. "I don't want to make out with anyone, Nat. Not yet. It's too soon."

"Right, right. Okay, no making out. Just...talking with a hot guy. Maybe even exchanging numbers? Socials?

"Maybe," I hedge.

"Baby steps, okay?"

"Yes, baby steps." I pick up a highlighter stick that belongs to Natalie and uncap it, then dab my fingers in the shimmery cream and dab it on my cheekbones. "How does that look?"

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"Oh, I love that color on you." Natalie smiles, and I smile too.

Maybe tonight at Logan's won't be too awful after all.



We arrive at Logan's an hour later, pushing our way inside through the clusters of people as we make our way to the bar. Natalie flirts with the bartender the second their gazes catch and he gets started on our drinks, causing the others who've been waiting to groan in protest.

"How did you make that happen?" I yell at her, in order to be heard over the music and loud conversations surrounding us.

She shrugs. "I come here way too much. He recognizes me."

"And who exactly are you coming here with?" I know she has a far more active social life than I do, but how often is she going out to the bars?

"Friends. People from class." She gently shoves my shoulder. "You should come with us more often."

"I might." I'm lying, and she probably knows it. The bar scene has never really been my thing. But maybe I never gave it a chance...

Glancing over my shoulder, I check out all of the people surrounding us, shocked by how packed it is. There seems to be an equal mix of females to males, the majority of them clutching glasses or beer bottles, locked in flirtatious conversations.

Logan's is the premier hookup bar downtown. As in, you can easily find someone to get together with at Logan's. Plus, you can't beat their drink prices. They have some of the best in town, and the Monday night specials bring everyone out.

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Clearly, judging from the crowd.

We're still waiting for our drinks when the double doors at the entrance swing open, an entourage striding in that immediately earns approving shouts from the crowd. My gaze snags on them, on one in particular, and I realize it's the football team.

Knox Maguire has made his appearance.

Women squeal his name like fan girls and they swarm the guys like bees to honey.

"Here you go." I turn to find the bartender sliding my glass toward me across the counter, and I take it from him with a faint smile.

"Thank you."

"We owe you one," Natalie adds with a wink as she grabs my arm and steers me away.

"Nat, wait!" the bartender calls after us, but Natalie ignores him with a soft laugh.

"Wait a minute, you didn't pay for our drinks?"

She shakes her head, leading me toward the back, where there might be some open tables. Doubtful though. "I always get a couple of drinks out of him every time I show up, and he knows it. He just likes to act put out."

"Well, thanks." Coming to a stop, I raise my glass toward her before I take a tiny sip, grimacing. "Oh shit, that's strong."

"He delivers a heavy pour, even with the free ones. I'm sure his boss hates him." Natalie laughs, chugging from her glass before she grabs hold of my wrist. "A table just freed up! Let's go!"

We dart toward it, not minding that it's littered with empty cups, a plate full of congealed leftover nachos, and a pile of crumpled napkins lying on top of it. Natalie shoots

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ahead of me, falling into one of the empty chairs with her arm raised, clutching her glass, most likely so it won't spill.

A few guys show up at the same time, intent on getting our tiny table before us and I swing around, ready to plop my butt in one of the empty chairs when I hear a, "whoa there."

Just before my ass lands on the lap of a very firm, very warm male.

Humiliation washes over me and my face is on absolute fire as I try to get up but big hands clamp around my waist, keeping me in place.

"No need to run off. You can stay awhile." The familiar voice is so close to my ear, I swear I feel his lips brush it.

A shiver steals through me and I lean to the left to find...

I'm sitting on Knox Maguire's lap, his eyes going wide when he registers who I am.

"Wait a sec. Do I know you?" he asks.

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