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The RULE BOOK

A NOVEL



SARAH ADAMS

New York Times bestselling author of
THE CHEAT SHEET and PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT



The
**RULE
BOOK**

A NOVEL

SARAH ADAMS



DELL BOOKS
NEW YORK

The Rule Book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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AUTHOR NOTE AND CONTENT WARNING

Dear reader, thank you for wanting to spend time with Derek and Nora. Although this book is written in such a way that it feels light and comedic, please be advised that there are heavier topics and themes portrayed such as late diagnosis of dyslexia and parental neglect. The story also contains adult language and sexual scenes. If you prefer to keep the bedroom door fully closed, please skip chapter 34.

1

Nora

Sometimes life is like a box of chocolates, and sometimes life is like a box of chocolates left out in the sun all day.

Today, it turns out, is a melty, disappointing chocolate sort of day. Not only did I step in gum while wearing my favorite shoes on my way into work, but I also fired up my email to find some wonderfully disturbing information.

“Knock knock,” I say to my boss, Nicole Hart, as I step hesitantly into her office to address said email.

Truthfully, I’m always a little hesitant to step into her office because, whew, this woman is a force to be reckoned with. There’s a reason she’s CEO of the agency. She’s kind to me (in her own way), but she’s like a tornado of confidence. You need a helmet and a safe place to take shelter when she focuses her attention on you.

Like now, she’s sitting at her desk in her immaculate gray pin-striped skirt and silk blouse—red lipstick painted perfectly on her full lips, blond hair pulled back into a sleek, perky ponytail that has a magical flip on the end. But all those surface-level attributes are nothing but a misdirection. It’s in her eyes you see the truth. The alert, bone-chilling, feline ferocity. Her keen mind is why she’s the top agent in our industry and lands enormous deals for clients like Nathan Donelson, famous quarterback for our city’s NFL team, the L.A. Sharks. The woman is all sharp edges and absolute dedication. She’s an inspiration.

“Please tell me you’re asking to come in and it’s not the beginning of a joke.”

“I could tell you that, but then I’d be lying.”

She cuts her eyes to me, and I smile. She’s worked with me long enough to know I’m not going anywhere until this is over.

“Who’s there?” she asks like she’s in the middle of a root canal.

“Needle.”

“Needle who?”

“Needle little smile to brighten your day?” I give her one as I shuffle into her office.

She looks up from her keyboard—posture ramrod straight—and her eyes bounce from my reddish-brown hair, down to my yellow sneakers, and back up to my face. Nicole misses nothing. She’s an assassin who’s just identified her target’s weak spot. *God, I want to be her.*

She discards my fabulous joke. “How many pairs of those shoes do you own?” She’s referring to my bright yellow sneakers.

“Four. I was wearing my red pair this morning, but I stepped in gum and had to change into these.” I raise my foot and wiggle it proudly. “Smelled delicious but left a nasty squelching trail.”

“I’m guessing Marty had something to say when he saw those. Do I need to humble him?” Her attention is on her keyboard, somehow still able to talk as her fingers fly across the keys. The thing about Nicole is she’s all bark and...an even worse bite. But she only bites those who threaten her people. And even though she likes to pretend I mean nothing to her—she’s made it clear I’m one of her people.

I wrinkle my nose at the mention of the worst man in this office. They’re all pretty unspectacular and seem to dislike me joining their boys’ club no matter how many fun-size packs of Skittles I leave in the break room, but Marty is by far the most awful. *Male chauvinist number one.*

I shrug a shoulder. “Only that the yellow is somehow more offensive to look at than the red and I should spend my paycheck on a professional wardrobe one of these days.”

“He’s not wrong about the color,” she says, giving me brief side-eye. “But only I’m allowed to criticize your style choices. Not a man who wouldn’t know a good-looking suit if it smacked him in the face.”

“And on that note, you’re absolutely correct,” I say cheerfully. “But that’s not why I’m here actually.”

When I first started working here as Nicole’s intern two years ago, she was very vocal about how much she disliked my playful wardrobe. But I’ve since been promoted to her associate agent over the last year, and I’ve more than proved my capability in this industry, miraculously earning her respect. Now she never tells me what to wear. Instead, she tells everyone else to piss off on my behalf since I have a tough time saying mean things to people.

Currently I’m sporting a fitted, three-quarter-length yellow-and-white herringbone blazer with a baby blue pleated skirt and a Rolling Stones T-shirt underneath to really pull it all together, and even though I know she must hate it, she keeps quiet. I sort of miss the days when she’d say something like *You look like a librarian attempting to be cool.* Sassy Nicole is a pleasure to study.

“Let me know if Marty says anything else about your wardrobe. I’ll be happy to jam those yellow shoes right up his ass.”

“And this is why I fear you as much as I adore you, my glorious workplace warrior goddess. However, I think I’d rather keep my shoes away from Marty’s nether regions. Actually, I’m here because I want to talk about the email I just got.”

Nicole finally stops typing and swivels her chair to me with a sigh of long suffering. She crosses one sleek (waxed...I know because I used to make those appointments for her when I was an intern) leg over the other and then leans her elbow on the desk. She delicately rests her chin on her fingers.

“I think it might be a mistake,” I continue, shifting on my little feet hugs (that’s what I call these dream shoes) as her gaze narrows on me.

“Stop second-guessing yourself, Mac. You’re ready for this step. You’ve worked hard to get here and deserve the promotion,” she tells me in her no-nonsense kind of way.

She’s right. I have worked hard, and not to blow my own trumpet too loudly, but I do feel that I’ve earned this promotion. In fact, I’ve been reaching for this dream ever since I was a kid and would go visit my dad for the weekend and sit with him on the couch and watch whatever sport was on TV at the time. During those few hours, he would let me into his life, and I felt close to him. My relationship with my dad didn’t last, but my dream of becoming a professional sports agent has endured through high school, college, grad school, postgrad intern positions, and lately, working as Nicole’s associate agent.

No, the promotion to full-time agent without training wheels is not the issue.

The mistake is that she’s assigning me to Derek Pender, tight end for the L.A. Sharks.

“I’m not second-guessing,” I tell Nicole. “It’s more like third- and fourth-guessing. I could be a professional guesser at this point. Are you sure Mr. Pender and I would be a good fit?”

I’m not asking what I really want to ask. But I’m not sure if I should come out with the whole truth or keep it to myself. If Nicole has taught me anything, it’s that this industry is all about playing your cards right—and the key to doing that is to not show them too early.

Nicole senses my half-truth, though, and taps her red-tipped nails on the desk. “You’re practically vibrating with nervous energy—what is the real question you’re not asking me?”

“I’m just concerned that Derek was told he was meeting with *Mac* and not *Nora Mackenzie* and might be expecting someone else entirely.” It’s the truth. Just not all of it. I tuck my cards a little closer to my chest.

“You’re wanting to make sure he’s not expecting a man?”

Not exactly. Although, that too. Everyone around the office calls me Mac because of my last name. I don’t particularly love it, but I’ve learned to tolerate it because the sad truth is, in our industry, people on the other end of email correspondences tend to say yes more often when they have the incorrect assumption I’m a dude. The most misogynistic men live in the world of sports (ahem Marty), and women work twice as hard as men to gain the same amount of respect. It’s messed up.

“I guess I was just wondering if you could tell me exactly what you told Derek—er, Mr. Pender about me. It...it just seems too good to be true that he’d be willing to sign with a brand-new agent, and I want to make sure he knows the whole story.”

She waves a dismissive hand. “Don’t worry. I used your pronouns and told him that you’re new, but that I was the one who trained you, so he can be assured you have been taught by the best”—*the confidence on this one*—“and that if he were smart, he’d snatch you up before you have a chance to go skyrocket someone else’s career.”

My heart quivers with delight. Did she really say all of that? Does she mean it? Nicole is not flippant with compliments, so I had no idea she thought any of that about me.

“Wow...thank you,” I say, trying not to get emotional but not entirely successful. I press my lips together and she knows why.

Her nose crinkles in distaste. “Are you about to cry?”

I keep my lips sealed and shake my head even though pools are settling over my eyeballs. Oh no, they’re clinging to my lashes. We’re going to have a runner!

She groans and turns her face back to her laptop. “No emotions in my office, you know that. I believe in you, and I’m happy to propel you toward success, Mac.” She’s typing and talking again. How does she do that? “Derek Pender has a lot of obstacles to face in the next several months. His career is completely up in the air, and you could be looking at a trade or a contract renegotiation as well as controlling any weak narratives that the media will undoubtedly try to throw at him as the season approaches. Are you up for it?”

See, now this whole situation makes me want to nervous-cackle, because, *no*, I’m not up for it. But not because I don’t feel I can handle any of those things. In fact, the idea of jumping major hurdles at the start of my career fills my stomach with twinkling stars of delight. *Anticipation*. I love a good challenge. And since Derek Pender—the most legendary tight end in professional football of our time—is returning this season from an epic ankle injury that should have killed his career, it’s the mother of all challenges.

No, the problem is, I’m not ready to face the man himself. The man I still dream about when I absolutely shouldn’t.

I blink back my tears. “Thank you, Nicole. I’m excited for the opportunity. I owe you my undying love and friendship.” I’m embarrassed to admit just how much I wish she’d reciprocate the friendship part.

Except she says, “Save the love and friendship, please. I’m not doing you a favor; you’ve earned this all on your own. Do you know in the history of this company we’ve never had an associate close as many deals as you have? And you’re definitely my first one to ever scout and land a player on my behalf.” That one was technically an accident. I ran into a popular college basketball player at the grocery store, and I complimented him on his super cool sneakers and phenomenal game the previous week. One thing led to another and he was in Nicole’s office Monday morning signing a contract. Super nice guy. Bumped his head on the doorframe on his way out.

“But now,” Nicole continues, “we’ll really see what you’re made of because you’re on your own in the cutthroat world of athlete representation and there’s no room for screwing up.”

Ominous. Don’t love that.

“Okay, so not a favor, but you do want to be best friends. Got it,” I add with a salute, and then feel thankful that she was staring at her computer and missed that gesture because it would just annoy her even further. And the truth is, I really do want Nicole to like me. Because although I love having my mom as my BFF (she’s truly awesome), I’m starting to feel it’s time to make some friends.

Admittedly, the making friends part is easy. It’s the keeping them that’s proved tricky.

I slip out of Nicole’s office and miraculously make it down the hall and back to my office— if you can even call it that since it more resembles a broom closet with a window the size of a porthole—without being confronted by Marty or his minions. In my office, I press my back to the wall and scoot around the desk to get to my chair just like I always do.

With a determination to take this melty chocolate day and turn it into delicious hot chocolate instead, I begin reorganizing my desk, because nothing lifts my spirits more than putting things in order and sorting them by color. Once my world feels a little steadier, I crack open my inbox and reread The Email once again. I am still convinced this is a mistake. A hallucination. A nightmare.

Any moment, I, Nora Mackenzie, will wake up and my favorite red sneakers won't be marred with Juicy Fruit and my big career break will not hinge on *him*.

Mac,

Exciting news. Nicole and I have been very impressed with your work as of late (especially regarding the athleisure deal you facilitated on Nicole's behalf while she was out sick) and we feel that you are more than ready to move up into the position of full-time agent.

Derek Pender, tight end for the Sharks, who I'm sure you're already aware is a client of ours, needs a new agent. Bill Hodge has repped Derek during his seven years in the NFL. Unfortunately, Bill is facing medical issues, the details of which we will not go into at this time, and has resigned effective immediately. We need to place Mr. Pender with a new agent ASAP. Nicole cannot currently take on any other clients but has communicated to him her faith in you as an agent, and he is willing to meet with you to see if you two would be a good fit. He'll be here at one o'clock today. Although we are all aware of the obstacles he will be facing at the start of the season, he is still an excellent first athlete for your roster. Congrats!

—Joseph Newman, Owner and Director, Sports Representation Inc.

The email itself is lovely, affirming and everything I've ever dreamed of happening in my career. The problem is, I'm convinced Derek doesn't know who he's actually supposed to meet with later. If he did, there's no way he would have agreed to it.

Because the last time I saw Derek, my college boyfriend, was when I was breaking up with him.

2

Derek

I step into the house, set the container of to-go soup on the counter, catch one look at the whiteboard in the corner of the room, and turn right back around.

“Nope,” I say, heading for the door.

Sick my ass. My friend and teammate, Nathan, sent me a text this morning saying he and his wife, Bree, were really sick and wondered if I could drop off some soup—knowing I’m hardwired to show up when someone needs me. But he looks healthy as a clam standing by the whiteboard with my three other friends wearing a shit-eating grin on his face.

Lawrence steps in my path as I try to retreat, giving me a taste of what it’s like to face him—our left tackle—on the field. “Hear us out, Derek.”

“Like hell. I’m here under false pretenses—not for whatever that intervention is,” I say, pointing to the whiteboard behind me.

“Dude, come on. It’s time.” Jamal loves the sound of his own voice. “Besides, after what we found in your bedside table, you can’t deny you want this.”

“It is not time, and I don’t want it.” I stalk over to rip the dry-erase marker from Jamal’s hand. Next, I aggressively wipe away the words *Find Derek A Wife* from the top of the whiteboard. The whiteboard that has become a staple for every important life planning session in our friend group over the last two years ever since we used it to help Nathan get out of the friend zone with his best friend (now wife), Bree. And listen, I’m happy to sit around with these guys and meticulously plot out each of their sappy love-life plans all day, but try to use it on me, and I’ll burn it to the ground.

“I don’t want a wife. And this is the last time I’ll warn you not to bring up my bedside table before there’s real consequences in the form of your face looking a little less pretty at the start of the season.”

I should have never given these guys a key to my place while I was out of town, even if my plants needed watering. Of course they would snoop. It’s in their DNA to overstep.

But this shit with the whiteboard is too much. I know why they’re doing it—can see right through their nervous pity-smiles. I’ve been hermitting myself away too much, declining more and more dinners, never going out to clubs with them, and definitely not dating. I’m basically a one-eighty of who I used to be, and they think a relationship is going to pull me back out. And

maybe their fears are valid. They don't know who I am anymore or how to handle me. I don't know who I am either.

I haven't felt this uncertain of myself since I was an awkward, gangly, eighth-grader who was once again sucking at school, struggling to make friends who didn't tease me mercilessly after they heard me read aloud, and only lived in the shadow of my older sister. Ginny who was everyone's favorite. Achieving straight A's was effortless for her, and probably why she's now a practicing doctor. Where she thrived, I struggled twice as hard. I fought relentlessly with my parents over grades and heard *Why can't you just apply yourself, Derek, and stop goofing off* more times than I could count.

It wasn't until a few months ago that I was finally diagnosed with what my supposed *goofing off* was...dyslexia. One night while lying in bed and scrolling through social media, I came across a video where a guy was describing what living with dyslexia was like for him. I was shocked—because everything he described, those were my experiences too. I got in with a learning specialist quickly, and after testing, it was confirmed.

I'm dyslexic.

It's why reading and writing were so damn hard for me and took me twice as long as other students. Why I struggled to process certain words. Why I fell behind. I wasn't tested in my adolescence because I come from a very firm "he just needs to try harder" family. But in reality, I was working the hardest. I could never understand why it wasn't enough. Why I couldn't comprehend what I was reading in my textbooks like everyone else. And that wedge just grew between me and my parents until I hated learning altogether.

But then...I found football my ninth-grade year. I stepped onto the field and it was like every puzzle piece fell into place for me. I was *good*. A natural. And I only got better and better as the years went on and I grew into my six-four body and filled out in a way the other guys around me did not. Girls suddenly really liked me. Teachers gave me more slack. My parents were proud, because like Ginny, I was making a name for myself. A new reason they could brag to their friends. No one really cared too much that my grades sucked or that I was struggling with academics—because I was clearly going to play college football and then go on to the NFL, so what did it matter anyway?

And that's what happened.

I just barely graduated high school but shattered varsity records as a tight end. I got more handouts in college courses from my professors than I'd care to admit, but I graduated, and then went first round in the draft. I've played in two Super Bowls and have been named MVP. I've dated movie stars, bought my parents their new house, and paid off my sister's med school loans as her graduation present.

It wasn't until I snapped my ankle on the field at the end of last season and needed surgery that my identity altered. I've leaned on this career for security and acceptance for so long that I don't know who the hell I'd be without it. What will all these people think of me when I can no longer do the *one* thing I was good at. *Worthless*.

It would be the worst time to try to find a relationship. Especially when Collin Abbot—the rookie backup who stepped in for me while I was out during the last two games of the season—

blew everyone away. The rumors circle me like piranhas now. *He's going to take my place this season.* I have everything to lose—and nothing permanent to offer.

“Derek, quit being a dipshit and let us help you find love and happiness,” says Nathan.

“It’s not the right time,” I tell him instead of snapping at him that love and happiness are not synonymous in my head and that he can shove his opinions up his ass. I’ve only contemplated the idea of marriage with one woman. The only woman that I’ve ever felt really loved me for who I was outside of football. It was before I ever met these four buffoons that I call teammates—less affectionately known as friends—and let’s just say I got enough of a taste of being loved and left to never want seconds. They don’t know about her. They don’t know she’s the reason I chafe at the idea of a long-term relationship now.

“Why not?” Nathan Donelson is the quarterback of our team, the Los Angeles Sharks, and we’ve affectionately nicknamed him *Dad* because of his leadership and wisdom. Which is why after he married his best friend, Bree, two years ago, the rest of the guys followed suit shortly after. Jamal married Tamara and Lawrence married Cora—both couples even going so far as to elope in Vegas just like Nathan and Bree because they made it look like a damn fairy tale. But marriage is where the sheeplike following ends for me.

I’m the last of our five-man crew without a wedding ring, and I’m going to keep it that way.

“Pender’s just scared,” says Jamal Mericks, our team’s running back and self-designated pain-in-my-ass, taking the dry-erase marker from my hand again and using it to draw a big baby with a pacifier on the board. In case there was any question as to who the baby was supposed to represent, he writes my name with a big arrow pointing down to it.

I give him the bird.

“Real mature. You’re only proving my point.” He taps the marker against the cartoon baby.

“That’s enough bickering for the day,” says Lawrence, who is undoubtedly the biggest softie of the group but also the most aggressive on the field—you’d never guess it by the way he bristles when we fight. He’s also the only one in here who makes me look short. I’m six-four and Lawrence towers over me.

He pushes past me and Jamal to erase the board again. “Jamal, it’s a miracle you managed to land a wife with your big ego. And Derek, I’m starting to doubt that you could get one even if you tried.”

“Rude,” Jamal and I say in unison, and then turn mirroring glares at each other. We’re a love-hate situation. As in, I mostly love to hate him.

“How about you guys do something constructive and come help me instead of trying to force romance down Derek’s throat?” Price shouts from the living room, where he’s sprawled out with a million tiny little plastic rainbow-colored parts on the floor. I think they are eventually supposed to resemble some sort of baby-jumping-play-saucer-thing.

Jayon Price is our curmudgeonly wide receiver. He shocked the hell out of us all by becoming the first in the group to announce a pregnancy. My money was on Nathan, but no. Hope, Price’s wife, is in her last trimester, and I’ve never seen the guy so happy.

Well, he doesn’t currently look happy as he tries to shove a plastic springy thing into another plastic part, but it won’t click together. His bicep is about to burst from how much force he’s

using. “Why the hell don’t they sell these things already assembled?”

He chucks the offending piece across the room, and I duck—just narrowly missing a plastic bumblebee to the face.

“Better question,” says Jamal, stepping up to look at the box the parts came in. “Why are you putting this together now?”

Price looks dumbstruck. “Why not? Hope’s due date is like two months away.”

I grunt a laugh. “Man, your baby won’t be old enough for that thing for a while.” I point at the box. “It says on the back that it’s to strengthen a baby’s legs and back to start walking.”

Price drops the instructions and levels an ominous look at each of us. “Tell Hope about this and you’re all dead. She’s already freaking out that we don’t know what we’re doing, and I don’t want her to worry more when she finds out she asked me to piece together a toy for an eight-month-old.”

I really do love getting to walk through all these seasons of life with my friends. Which is why I have to make a full comeback. Because part of me is worried that if I get cut...*never mind*. I don’t want to think about it right now.

Nathan nods. “We’ll help you put it together, but mainly because your pregnant wife truly terrified me last week when she threatened to stab her fork’s prongs into my hand if I took the last brownie. If that woman wants her baby’s exersaucer built several months early, we’ll build it.” He faces me again. “But first...we’re not done talking about your relationship status yet.”

“Oh yes we are,” I say, backing into the kitchen and aiming for my keys on the counter. “Leave me and my bachelorhood alone and go eat your soup, you lying asshole. I’m outta here.”

“No one is going anywhere!” comes a feminine voice from the kitchen threshold. I look up to find that Nathan’s wife, Bree, has appeared out of nowhere and is using her body as a human barrier—arms stretched out and gripping the trim around the door so I can’t exit. She must have just come from her ballet studio because she’s wearing a black leotard with gray sweatpants. Her usual look. “Did you guys talk to him about the plan yet?”

Nathan yells from the living room. “Yeah, he doesn’t want to get married.”

Bree’s mouth falls open. “Ever?” She sounds personally offended by this choice. It’s not like I have anything against marriage for other people, though—it’s just not for me. Not anymore at least.

I shrug and toss my keys around my finger, staring at the woman who now feels like my little sister. “Sorry, Bree Cheese—it’s just not for me.”

“Okay, okay...” She waves a hand. “So you don’t want to get married—that’s fine. At least let us set you up with someone.”

“Thanks, but no. I’m all set on that front.” I walk toward her, but she doesn’t move out of the threshold.

“No, you’re not! Don’t think we haven’t noticed how you—Derek Pender—have not even been on a single date since your injury. All those overgrown toddlers peeking from behind the corner might be too chicken to come right out and say it...but it’s worrisome that you’re not going out anymore. Not dating. Not even hooking up with anyone!” She says all of this like my name should be synonymous with those things. And...well, I guess it used to be.

I look over my shoulder and sure enough, everyone is watching. They duck back a little, though, when I make eye contact. “Nothing to worry about, guys. I’m just focusing on rehab full-time right now.”

“At what cost?” Bree asks, shoulders sagging a little.

I look her in the eyes. “Quit worrying. I’m fine—I swear.”

She drops her arms and rolls her eyes. “You’re annoying is what you are. But I guess I’ll still let you have this anyway.” She reaches in her purse hanging off her shoulder and I know what’s coming next: a Breenkit. Bree shows her affection by occasionally giving out little presents that made her think of her friends. We each have at least a few. I have a skull coffee mug that she said looks like the tattoo on my forearm and a magnetic 82 she stole from her little nieces’ fridge number-learning stash in honor of my jersey number.

Today, she pulls out something that stops me in my tracks even though there’s no way she could know why this particular item has so much impact on me.

Bree sets a little key chain onto my palm and all I can do for a solid three breaths is stare down at the miniature bowl of ice cream topped with cereal bits. The skin of my face heats like I’ve been caught red-handed.

“Why did you give me this?” My tone is accusatory. Like she’s been snooping around inside my brain without permission. Like she knows all my secrets, and this is part of the intervention.

“Because...” Her smile turns questioning. “Remember? At Lawrence’s wedding reception when you got drunk? You gave that funny speech about how all you ever want to eat for the rest of your life is ice cream and cereal and you were so sad thinking you couldn’t? I saw a shop online that makes custom ice cream resin key chains, so I had them make you this one with cereal on top.”

Right. Because of the speech. My shoulders relax a little in relief that she doesn’t know about *her*. About Nora.

To this day the group still laughs about that “funny little speech” I gave at the reception. They thought I was so incredibly drunk that I was just spouting pitiful nonsense. And it’s true—I was drunk. But only because I couldn’t get Nora—the woman I wanted to marry from the day I met her—off my mind through the entire ceremony. I couldn’t stop thinking about where she is now or wondering for the thousandth time why I wasn’t enough for her. Yes, we were opposites. Her being incredibly smart and driven and academically focused whereas I was a jock with an undiagnosed learning disorder who was great at partying.

But we were also compatible in a lot of ways. We loved to compete—turning everything into a pointless, fun game and thriving off it. We had chemistry that I’ve never felt with anyone else. The kind that slips into your bloodstream and alters you. And if that wasn’t enough—we both loved sports. In fact, she was aiming to become an agent. *Did that ever happen?*

And Nora’s favorite snack: ice cream topped with cereal.

Apparently, I never gave any hints that the speech was actually directed toward my broken heart or the woman who brought the hammer down on it. They just assumed I had a serious sweet tooth that night. I’ve let them believe it because I prefer my history with Nora to remain buried.

I close my hand around the key chain and force a smile. “Right, I completely forgot. Thank you—this is funny.”

She frowns and probably would say more about my unamused demeanor if Nathan didn’t turn the corner behind her and wrap his arms around Bree’s waist. These two will make you puke. They’re too damn sweet for their own good.

“We’re all going to lunch. Want to join?” Nathan asks me while still holding on to Bree.

“Can’t. I have a meeting at one o’clock. Bill had to retire—something health-related he didn’t want to talk about—so I’m meeting with a brand-new agent that Nicole recommends.”

And that’s another thing. You know that my agency isn’t putting too much stock in my career when they try to stick me with the new kid on the block. Imagine being the number one tight end in professional football, only to get tackled in a way that snapped my ankle like a twig and required surgery to repair it, and now I’m stuck with the agency rookie who’s never had a client in her life. The only reasons I didn’t turn down the idea immediately are (1) I’m not so sure I’m worth it anymore either, and (2) Nicole—who has been Nathan’s agent from the start of his career and is known as the best in the business—recommended her.

“Nicole wouldn’t steer you wrong. If she says to sign with him, do it,” says Nathan, still holding Bree like she’s his lifeline and he’ll keel over if their physical contact is severed.

I envy them.

“Her,” I correct, looking away from the happy couple to spin my keys around my finger again. “The agent is a woman.”

“Ooh, maybe she’ll be gorgeous and single, and you’ll fall madly in love,” says Bree with hearts in her eyes.

I shake my head. “I seriously need you guys to give it up. I don’t want a relationship.”

“Sure...you think that now. But what about after you go meet the most incredible woman in the world?”

I look at Nathan. “Can you please ask Cupid to stand down so I can leave?”

3

Nora

I touch the door handle to the conference room, and my stomach leaps off a cliff. And as it free-falls, it drops directly into a space-time continuum portal where I continue to fall with absolutely no relief from my misery. But not because I'm unprepared to do my job. It's because I'm unprepared to be face-to-face with Derek Pender again.

Simply put: Derek was my everything that was never supposed to be. I had my life all organized in a nicely laid-out plan. A plan I'm still hyperfocused on. Meeting a wild, fun, sexy football player and falling madly in love with him my senior year of college was never supposed to be part of that plan. We had both attended University of Southern California for three years without bumping into each other.

But then, like a ripple in the universe, there he was...at the same party as me with eyes as blue as a hot flame. Inexplicably, he was just as drawn to me as I was to him. He noticed me hanging on the outskirts of the party, not because I'm introverted or shy, but because I didn't want to be there. It was keeping me from finishing a presentation I was excited to work on, but my roommate forced me to go. Apparently I hadn't blinked in several days. And that was when Derek came over to talk.

After a while, he coaxed me out onto the dance floor, and my cheeks ached at the end of the night from how much I laughed. I also got rip-roaring drunk, and since my roommate left with a guy and we were off campus, I didn't have a ride. Derek (who was way more sober than me) called us an Uber and made sure I got back to my dorm safely. And then he slept on my floor all night to make sure I didn't aspirate in my sleep.

The next morning, I felt terrible that he had gone through all that trouble for me, so I wrote him a little IOU that could be redeemed at any time. He never did, though, and it didn't take long for us to fall head over heels for each other. Didn't take long for me to lose sight of my goals and dreams either. To replace them with my addiction to his smile, his touch, the way he looked at me as if I were the greatest thing in the world. We understood each other in a way no one else did. Even our need for constant competition. It was normal for us to randomly declare a race to wherever we were going. Who could balance a cup on their head the longest. The floor is lava. Ridiculous little competitions all the time.

We had that silly, soul-wrenching young love that can only exist in a bubble full of skipping

class, staying out all night to see the sunrise while eating gas station donuts, and ignoring my textbooks in favor of watching him practice or play a game.

Until I realized Derek didn't understand one of the most important parts of who I was. So just before we graduated college and he was drafted into the NFL, I ended it. Abruptly and cold as ice. I've never stopped regretting that part.

The most likely scenario of seeing my ex again, however, is this: Derek will take one look at me, smile a slow smile, and then give me a platonic hug. He might even call me by my old cute nickname once for old times' sake. *Ginger Snap*. Because we're both adults now. Because even though it nearly killed me to break up with him, he moved on a week later. And judging by all the press and tabloids, if there's one thing Derek hasn't been doing, it's sitting around and pining over me. That thought used to bother me, but today it brings me comfort. If he moved on so quickly, there's a chance that I'm barely a memory for him.

And so, with great bravery I twist the door handle and step confidently into the conference room—exuding power and poise. *Just kidding*. Someone else opens the door from the inside while my hand is still on the handle, and it drags me in. I stumble through the doorway, past the intern who opened it, and accidentally shoot the pen resting on the top of my pile of contracts like a cannonball onto the conference room table. It lands smack-dab in the middle, and Nicole (oh goody, apparently Nicole will be in this meeting too) looks absolutely shocked.

I right myself and tug down the end of my blazer with all the dignity of a queen. Possibly a toddler playing a queen in a dress-up outfit, but the dignity is there all the same.

“Hi. I'm here!” I will my voice to come out steady.

“Yes, you are.” Thankfully Nicole was the only one who witnessed my clumsy entrance, because Derek (oh my gosh, there's Derek) still has his broad back to me, facing the table. “Let's get the introductions started, shall we?”

Oh no. This is where it all falls into ruin, and Nicole will be here to witness it. I should have just told her the truth in her office. The truth is always the right choice. Always. I know this, because I'm the captain of the Rule Followers Club. And yet...

Derek reaches forward and plucks the pen from the middle of the table. With it clutched in his hand, he pushes his chair back and stands. I gulp down a thousand butterflies at just the sight of his back. It's...expansive. I don't remember there being this much terrain before. The muscles are so obscene they're rippling through his shirt. That poor cotton tee is straining with all its might, but it barely stands a chance. And then he turns and the floor falls out from under me.

Sharp, cornflower-blue eyes connect with mine—so beautiful they're nearly cruel, and I feel an old glimmer of something tug between us. And then a thought grips me before I can banish it. *I'm not over him, and I'm scared I never will be.*

His sun-kissed brown hair plays around his temples and nape, highlighting his bring-you-to-your-knees bone structure. Honestly, he and the quarterback of his team, Nathan Donelson, look like brothers with their size and jawlines. But Derek is Nathan's worldlier counterpart. Derek's face is broodingly, fascinatingly handsome.

My gaze bounces, nervous to fully land on any one part of him. He was broad and strong in college, but...goodness, this man is overwhelming now. He belongs to a time when people

needed warriors for their safety. And all of his tattoos...individual ones dotting but not quite connecting on both of his arms; those are new to me too. I've seen them on TV when I've watched him play, but something about witnessing them on his flesh in person heightens the experience.

When I look to his face again, he does not seem happy to see me.

Nicole clears her throat. "Derek, this is—"

"Nora Mackenzie," I say at the same moment he does in order to hide his voice. I stick out my hand with a bright, pleading smile and resist fainting from my sudden peak of adrenaline. "It's nice to meet you, Derek."

Nicole can't see me. Derek's massive frame is blocking her view. His cool gaze sweeps down to my hand extended toward him and his frown etches deeper. I silently beg him to accept it. To go along with my charade just until Nicole leaves. But I don't think he's going to.

Just as Derek opens his mouth to say something, the conference room door opens behind me, and our receptionist peeks her head in. "Nicole, sorry to interrupt you but you have an urgent call. I have him on hold in your office."

Nicole rounds the conference table and looks from Derek's stormy face to my bright and peppy expression that's clearly trying to compensate for his. "If you will both excuse me," she says, hesitation marking her tone. "I'll be back in a moment."

Yep. Take your time, ma'am! All day if you need!

Nicole leaves the room and graciously shuts the door behind her. I'm left alone staring into Derek's chilling eyes. He wastes no time before shaking his head and turning away from me to retrieve his keys from the table. "Nope. Not happening."

Wait, what?

I'm shocked. Stunned and blinking like someone just shined a bright spotlight in my eyes. It's been years since we've seen each other, and that's all he's going to say?

"Derek, wait!" I round him to stand in his path before he makes it to the door.

He eyes me, jaws flexing. "I was told your name is Mac." He scoffs—disgust clouding his vision. "Congrats. If your aim was to epically play me, you hit your mark. You won."

Even his voice is different now. Deeper.

I'm struggling to find my footing because I severely underestimated what it would feel like to stand face-to-face with Derek again. Every cell in my body is humming like they're coming back to life. I would be lying if I said I hadn't imagined running into him before. I've always known that Derek was Bill's client—but I didn't think we would actually have a chance to see each other because Bill always met with Derek offsite, and I had no reason to reach out to Derek and announce my presence within the agency.

But still, I imagined it. Imagined bumping into him in the hallway one random afternoon and sharing a second glance. However, in my fantasies, it always started with a slow mischievous smile spreading over his mouth and ended with us making out in a supply closet.

His reaction now is justified, though. I hurt him—and I need to apologize for it. But this is definitely not the time.