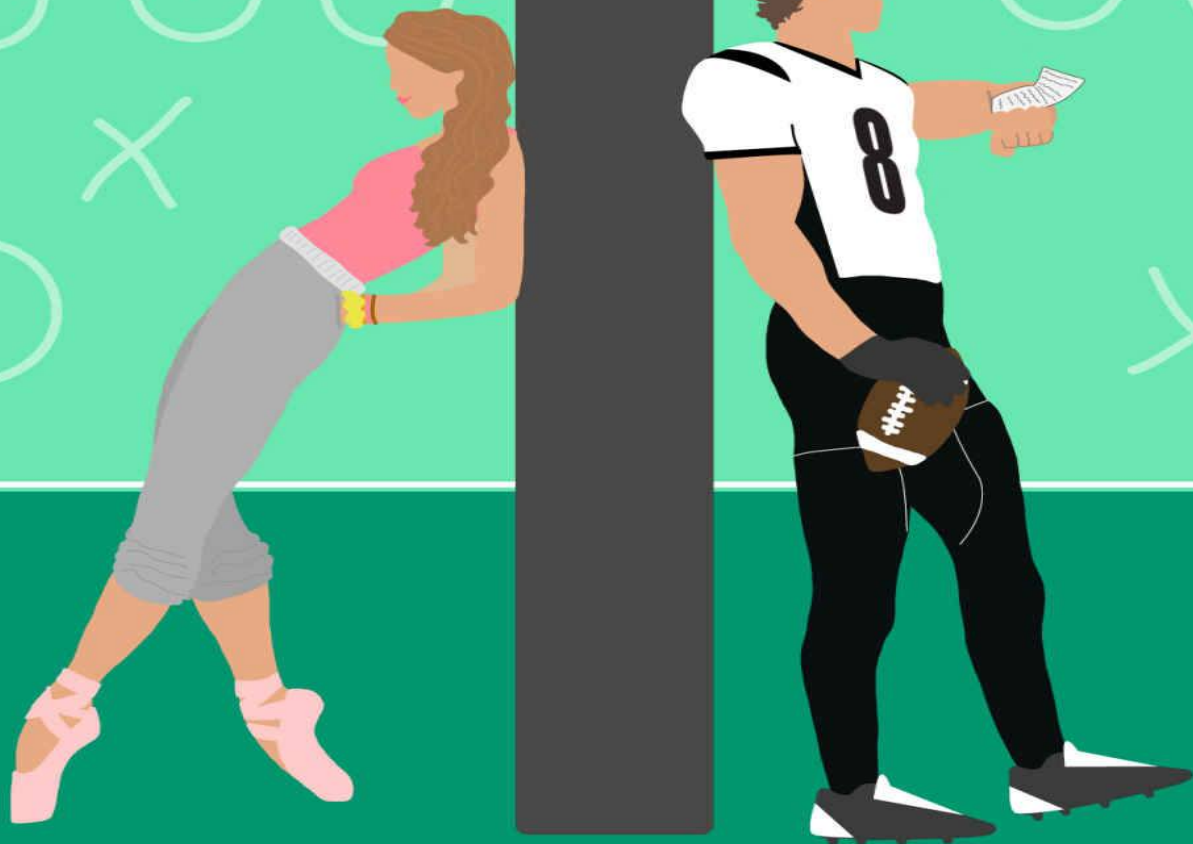


THE CHEAT SHEET



SARAH ADAMS

**THE
CHEAT
SHEET**

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

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CONTENTS

[Sensitivity Note](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Also by Sarah Adams](#)

[About the Author](#)

SENSITIVITY NOTE

DO NOT READ IF YOU WISH TO AVOID SPOILERS

Readers please be advised that on-page panic attacks are portrayed. As someone who experiences anxiety and panic attacks, I hope that I have given this subject matter the care and sensitivity it deserves.

*To my best friend, Chris. Thanks for always taking jokes way too far with me, and giving me so much material for my books.
Also, you're super hot. So that's awesome too.*

Cheat Sheet:

A piece of paper the quarterback has on his wristband to easily reference plays to be called.

1

BREE

Balancing two cups of burning hot coffee and a box of donuts while trying to unlock a front door is not easy. But because I'm the best friend a person could ever ask for—which I will remind Nathan of as soon as I make it inside his apartment—I manage it.

I hiss when I turn the lock and a splash of coffee darts out onto my wrist through the little hole in the lid. I have fair skin, so there's a one million percent chance it's going to leave an angry red mark.

The moment I step inside Nathan's apartment (which really should not be called an apartment because it's the size of five large apartments smooshed together), the familiar clean and crisp scent of

him knocks into me like a bus. I know this smell so well I think I could follow it like a bloodhound if he ever goes missing.

Using the heel of my tennis shoe, I slam the front door shut with enough gusto to warn Nathan that I'm on the premises. *ATTENTION ALL SEXY QUARTERBACKS! COVER YOUR GOODS! A GREEDY-EYED WOMAN IS IN THE HOUSE!*

A high-pitched yelp sounds from the kitchen, and I immediately frown. Peeking around the corner, I find a woman wearing a light pink shorts-and-camisole sleep set pressed into the far corner of the wraparound white marble kitchen counter. She's clutching a butcher knife to her chest. We're separated by a massive island, but from the way her eyes are bugging out, you'd think I was holding matching cutlery against the jugular vein in her neck.

"DON'T COME ANY CLOSER!" she screeches, and I immediately roll my eyes, because *why* does she have to be so screechy? She sounds like a clothespin is pinching the bridge of her nose and she has recently inhaled a whole balloon full of helium.

I would raise my hands in the air so I don't get knifed to death, but I'm sort of loaded down with breakfast goods—goods for me and Nathan, *not* Miss Screechy. This isn't my first rodeo with one of Nathan's girlfriends, though, so I do what I always do and smile at Kelsey. And yeah, I know her name, because even though she pretends not to remember me every time we meet, she's been dating Nathan for a few months now and we have met several times. I have no idea how he spends time with this woman. She seems so opposite of the type of person I would pick for him—they all do.

"Kelsey! It's me, Bree. Remember?" *Nathan's best friend since high school. The woman who was here before you and will be here well after you. REMEMBER ME?!*

She releases a big puff of air and lets her shoulders sag in relief. “Oh my gosh, Bree! You scared me to death. I thought you were some stalker girl who broke in somehow.” She sets the knife down, raises one of her perfectly manicured eyebrows, and mumbles not so quietly, “But then again...you sort of are.”

I narrow my eyes at her with a tight smile. “Nathan up yet?”

It’s 6:30 AM on a Tuesday morning, so I know for a fact he’s already awake. Any girlfriend of Nathan’s knows if she wants to see him at all that day, she has to wake up just as early as he does. Which is why Satin-PJ-Kelsey is standing in the kitchen looking pissed off. No one appreciates the morning quite like Nathan. Well, except for me—I love it too. But we’re sort of weirdos.

She turns her head slowly to me, hate burning in her delicate baby blues. “Yes. He’s in the shower.”

Before our run?

Kelsey looks at me like it grieves her deeply to have to expound. “I accidentally bumped into him when I came into the kitchen a few minutes ago. He had his protein shake in his hand and...” She makes an annoyed gesture, letting it finish the story for her: *I dumped Nathan’s shake down the front of him.* I think it’s killing her to admit she did something human, so I take pity on her and turn away to set the donut box down on the ridiculously large center island.

Nathan’s kitchen is fantastic. It’s designed in monochrome tones of cream, black, and brass, and an expansive window wall overlooks the ocean. It’s my favorite place in the world to cook, and exactly the opposite of my dumpy little garbage bin five blocks down the road. But that dumpy little garbage bin is affordable and close to my ballet studio, so all in all, I can’t complain.

“I’m sure it wasn’t a big deal. Nathan never gets upset about things like that,” I say to Kelsey, waving my white flag one last time.

She takes out her samurai sword and slices it to shreds. “I already know that.”

Alrighty then.

I take my first sip of coffee and let it warm me under Kelsey’s frigid stare. Nothing to do but wait for Nathan to surface so we can get going with our Tuesday tradition. It dates all the way back to our junior year of high school. I was a sort of self-designated loner in those days, not because I didn’t love people or socializing, but because I lived and breathed ballet. My mom used to encourage me to skip dance occasionally to go to a party and be with my friends. *“These days of getting to just be a kid and have fun won’t last forever. Ballet isn’t everything. It’s important to build a life outside of it too,”* she said to me on more than one occasion. And of course, like most dutiful teenagers...I didn’t listen.

Between dancing and my afterschool job working in a restaurant, I didn’t really have friends. But then *he* happened. I wanted to increase my endurance, so I started running our school’s track before school, and the only day I could make this happen schedule-wise was on Tuesdays. I showed up one morning and was shocked to see another student already running. Not just any student, but the captain of the football team. Mr. Hottie McHotterson. (Nathan didn’t have an awkward phase. He looked like a twenty-five-year-old at sixteen. So unfair.)

Jocks were supposed to be rude. Chauvinistic. Full of themselves. *Not Nathan.* He saw me in my scuffed-up sneakers, curly hair piled on my head in the grossest bun anyone has ever seen, and he stopped running. He came over and introduced himself with his huge trademark smile and asked if I wanted to run with him. We talked the entire time, instant best friends with so much in common, despite our different upbringings.

Yeah, you guessed it—he comes from a wealthy family. His dad is the CEO of a tech company and has never shown much interest in Nathan unless he's showing him off on the golf course in front of his work friends, and his mom pretty much just hung around and badgered him to make it to the top and bring her into the limelight with him. They always had money, but what they didn't have until Nathan made it big was social standing. In case you can't tell, I'm not a huge fan of his parents.

So anyway, thus began our Tuesday tradition. And the exact moment I fell for Nathan? I can pinpoint it down to the second.

We were on our final lap of that very first run together when his hand caught mine. He tugged me to a stop then bent down in front of me and tied my shoe. He could have just told me it was untied, but no—Nathan's not like that. It doesn't matter who you are or how famous he is; if your shoe is untied, he's going to tie it for you. I've never met anyone else like that. I was so gone for him from day one.

We were both so determined to achieve success, despite how young we were. He always knew he'd end up in the NFL, and I knew I was headed to Juilliard and then to dance in a company after. One of those dreams became a reality, and one did not. Unfortunately, we lost touch during college (*fine*, I made us lose touch), but I serendipitously moved to LA after graduating when a friend told me about another friend who was looking to hire an assistant instructor at her dance studio just as Nathan signed with the LA Sharks and moved to town as well.

We bumped into each other at a coffee shop, he asked if I wanted to go for a jog on Tuesday for old time's sake, and the rest was history. Our friendship picked right back up as if no time had passed at all, and unfortunately, my heart still pined for him the same as it had back then too.

The funny thing is, Nathan was never projected to reach the heights in his career that he has. Nope, Nathan Donelson was drafted in the seventh round, and he effectively warmed the bench as a backup quarterback for two whole years. He never got discouraged, though. He worked harder, trained harder, and made sure he was ready if his time came to take the field, because that's how Nathan approaches everything in life: with nothing but 100% effort.

And then one day, it all paid off for him.

The previous starting quarterback, Daren, broke his femur on the field during a game and they had to put Nathan in. I can still close my eyes and see that moment. A stretcher carrying Daren off the field. The offensive coach running down the sidelines to Nathan. Nathan shooting up off the bench and listening to the coach's instructions. And then...just before he put his helmet on and entered the game for what would go down in history as his career-making start, Nathan looked up in the stands for me. (He didn't have a private box at that point.) I stood up, we made eye contact, and Nathan looked like he was going to hurl. I did the one thing I knew would help him relax: contorted my face like a ding-dong and stuck my tongue out the side of my mouth.

His face exploded in a smile, and then he led the team to play the best game of their season. Nathan stepped in as the starting quarterback for the rest of the year and carried the Sharks to the Super Bowl, where they took home a win. Those months were a whirlwind for him. Actually, they were for both of us, because that was the year I went from just being an instructor at a dance studio to *owning* the studio.

Today, I'm here for a run with Nathan, and since he didn't play his best last night, I know we'll be running extra hard today. His team still won the game (and they are officially in the playoffs, YAY),

but he threw two interceptions, and since Nathan is a perfectionist when it comes to...well, anything, I know he'll be stomping around here like a bear with an empty honey pot.

Kelsey's shrill voice yanks me out of my nostalgia. "Yeah, so don't take this the wrong way...but what are you doing here?" By *Don't take this the wrong way*, she means, *Don't take this as anything nice because I fully intend for it to come out extra witchy*. I wish she'd act like this when Nathan is around. When he's watching, she's sweet as pie.

I give her my most sunny smile, refusing to let her steal my joy so early in the morning. "What does it look like I'm doing here?"

"Being a creepy stalker who's secretly in love with my boyfriend and breaks into his apartment to bring him breakfast."

See, here's the problem. She says the words *my boyfriend* like they should be trump cards. Like she just tossed them on the table and I'm supposed to gasp and close my hands over my mouth in shock. *My heavens! She won!*

Little does she know, her card is the equivalent of a lonesome five of clubs. Girlfriends come and go in Nathan's life like fad diets. Me, on the other hand—I was here *long* before two-faced Kelsey, and I'll be here long after, because I am Nathan's best friend. I'm the one who's been through it all with him, and he's been through it all with me: high school gangly phase (me, not him), college football signing day, the car accident that changed my entire future, every stomach bug of the past six years, the day I took ownership of the dance studio, and when the confetti was falling on him after his team won the Super Bowl.

But MOST importantly, I'm the only person in the entire world who knows how he got the two-inch scar right below his navel. I'll

give you a hint: it's embarrassing and has to do with an at-home waxing kit. I'll give you another hint: I dared him to do it.

"Yep!" I say with an overly bright smile. "Sounds about right. Stalker who's secretly in love with Nathan. That's totally me."

Her eyes widen because she thought she'd really zing me with that one. *Can't burn me with the truth, Kels!* Well, except for the stalker part.

I turn away from Kelsey and wait for Nathan. There was a time in my life when I tried to befriend Nathan's girlfriends. Not anymore. None of them like me. No matter what I do to earn their affection, they are predisposed to hate me. And I get it, I really do. They think I'm a major threat. But that's where the story gets sad.

I'm not.

They all get to have Nathan in a way I never will.

"You know," she says, trying to grab my attention again, "you could just go ahead and save yourself the embarrassment and leave. Because when Nathan comes out here, I fully intend to ask him to make you leave. I've been patient so far, but the way you act toward him is super weird. You hang around him like a clingy piece of toilet paper."

I try not to look too patronizing when I give her an over-the-top *Okay honey* turned-down smile and nod. Because here's what I forgot to mention before: I'm not a threat to these women...until they make him choose. Then, I'm more threatening than a glitter bomb. I might not get to sleep in Nathan's bed, but I do have his loyalty—and to Nathan, there's nothing more important than that.

Kelsey scoffs and folds her arms. We're deeply engaged in a battle of frightening expressions when Nathan's voice rumbles from the room behind me.

“Mmmm, do I smell coffee and donuts? That must mean Bree Cheese is here.”

I flash Kelsey a not-so-subtle grin. A *winner's* grin.

2

BREE

Nathan turns the corner wearing a pair of black athletic shorts and no shirt. His chiseled, tan chest that could only belong to a professional athlete is on full display, and that Adonis V of his is winking and making everyone blush. His hair is damp and glistening, and the tops of his shoulders are slightly pink from the hot water. This is his *fresh from the shower* look, and no matter how many times I've seen it, it never ceases to make me swallow my tongue.

He has a small towel in his hand, and it's getting rubbed all over his incredible chocolate brown hair. That lucky towel is giggling with glee. Nathan's hair is so wavy and delectable that he has a five-million-dollar endorsement deal with a men's luxury haircare brand because of it. After that first commercial went live—Nathan stepping out of the locker room shower with a towel wrapped around his waist, beads of moisture clinging to his taut muscles, and holding that bottle of shampoo—women everywhere flocked to the store to grab the same brand in hopes of it magically turning their man into Nathan. At the very least, they wanted their man to *smell* like Nathan. But here's another secret that only I know—Nathan's hair

doesn't smell like that shampoo because he prefers a cheap generic brand in a green bottle that he's been using since he was eighteen.

"Thought you might need this," I say, handing Nathan a steaming cup of coffee from our favorite little shop a few blocks away. I open the donut box like a treasure chest. The donuts shine in the light. *Bing!*

Nathan groans and cocks his head to the side, a soft smile in the corner of his mouth as he tosses the towel onto the countertop. "I thought it was my day to get the coffee and donuts." He plucks a maple glazed out of the box and leans down to give me a quick peck on the cheek like he always does. Completely platonic. *Brotherly.*

"Yeah, but I woke up super early this morning with a charley horse in my calf and couldn't get back to sleep, so I went ahead and got it." I hope he buys my fib.

Truth is, I couldn't sleep because I broke up with my boyfriend last night and I'm dreading telling Nathan. Why? Because I know he'll prod me with questions until he finds out the truth behind the breakup. And he can't know that I broke up with Martin because Martin isn't Nathan.

Maybe if I'd squinted, plugged my ears, and wobbled my head side to side, I might have been able to trick myself into thinking it was him. But who wants to live like that? It's not fair to me or Martin. So now, the goal is to find a man who attracts me more than Nathan does. A real bug-zapper of a man is what I'm looking for. This time I won't settle for anything less than complete and total *smittenness.*

Nathan lifts one of his thick brows. "Probably should've eaten a banana before bed last night."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, yeah, but my answer is still the same: I hate bananas. They're so squishy, and they taste like...bananas."

“Doesn’t matter. Clearly your potassium is—”

Kelsey clears her throat, and that’s when we notice her massive scowl. “Excuse me. Is it not odd to you that she is here at 6:30 in the morning with coffee and donuts when you have your *girlfriend* over?”

Again with that G word. And okay, yeah, maybe I should have realized Kelsey would be over this morning, and I should have waited for Nathan to meet me with the coffee and donuts. That’s my bad. Sometimes I forget Nathan and I don’t have a particularly normal friendship.

Nathan clears his throat lightly. “Sorry, Kelsey, I just thought you remembered Tuesdays are always my running days with Bree.”

“Yup.” She rolls her eyes and pops the p sound. “How could I forget when it happens EVERY SINGLE TUESDAY. Literally your only morning off during the season.”

This feels like a private conversation I shouldn’t be here for. Actually, I kinda agree with her. It’s weird that Nathan and I are such good friends. I’ve tried to take myself out of the equation many times before so he could spend more time with his girlfriend, but he never allows it. If I were his girlfriend, though, I would be very territorial with free time.

Tuesdays in the NFL are off days for nearly every team. But here’s the secret sauce that not all players realize: The best ones still go into the training facility on their off days. They use the extra time to focus on their weaknesses, meet with physical therapists, review old game tapes—anything that will help them excel above the rest. Nathan never sits Tuesdays out, *but* he does go in a little later so we can have our run together in the morning.

“Can’t you take, like, this *one* morning off?” She is overexaggerating every single word, and I don’t know how he