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TOO LATE

**COLLEEN
HOOVER**



SPHERE

Dear readers,

This book started out in 2012 as a project I would work on while experiencing writer's block. I never intended to release it because it's nothing like the other stories I write. It's morbid and vulgar, but it was a fun escape when I'd find myself stuck on the sweeter material I was writing.

I mentioned this unfinished project years ago, and a few readers requested to read what I had written. I put the chapters on a free website, and I would occasionally add material to it over the course of the next few years. What started out as something I never intended for anyone to read, grew into something I couldn't wait to finish, thanks to those of you who were reading it as I was writing it. I would write and update the chapters frequently, so the story was written in real time, unlike the rest of my novels. The immediate release and feedback of each chapter became an addiction for me and the readers who were fans of the story. When it finally came to an end, I released this book in its entirety for free through Amazon Kindle, but never officially published it.

Now that the book is being put on actual bookstore shelves with the help of Grand Central Publishing, I wanted to revisit it and rework some of the content. Because of the way the book was written and released, there are things I would have changed had it ever gone through a professional edit. I've done my best to keep the original characters and story intact, but I have taken liberty to adjust some scenes, delete some scenes, and have even added a few things.

LBPRIS

COLLEEN HOOVER

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If you're new to this book, I hope you enjoy it despite it being completely different from my other novels. For some of you, it'll be an entertaining read. For others, it may be hard to stomach. Whichever group you belong to, I thank you for being a part of each of my books, whether they are novels I spend months and years on, or stories such as this one, written in the spur of the moment for hopefully only adults to read. This book is in no way appropriate for children or young teens. Proceed with caution.

Sincerely,

Colleen Hoover

Trigger warnings include foul language, graphic sexual scenes, murder, sexual assault, and drug use.

**TOO
LATE**

SLOAN

Warm fingers entwine with mine, pressing my hands deeper into the mattress. My eyelids are too heavy to open from the lack of sleep I've had this week. The lack of sleep I've had all month, really.

Hell, this whole damn *year*.

I moan and attempt to squeeze my legs together, but I can't. There's pressure everywhere. On my chest, against my cheek, between my legs. It takes me a few seconds to pull my mind out of its sleepy haze, but I'm awake enough to know what he's doing.

"Asa," I mumble, irritated. "Get off me."

He thrusts his weight against me repetitively, groaning against my ear, his morning stubble cutting into my cheek. "I'm almost done, babe," he breathes against my neck.

I attempt to pull my hands out from beneath his, but he squeezes them tighter, reminding me that I'm nothing more than a prisoner in my own bed, and he's the warden of the bedroom. Asa has always had a way of making me feel like my body was at his disposal. He's never mean or forceful about it; he's just needy—and I find it really inconvenient.

Like right now.

At six o'clock in the damn morning.

I can guess the time by the sunlight peeking through the crack under

the door, and the fact that Asa is just now coming to bed after last night's party. I, however, have to be in class in less than two hours. This isn't how I would have chosen to be torn from sleep after only three hours of it.

I wrap my legs around his waist and hope he thinks I'm into this. When I act half interested, he gets it over with more quickly.

He palms my right breast and I let out the expected moan, just as he begins to shudder. "Fuck," he groans, burying his face in my hair, slowly rocking against me. After several seconds, he collapses on top of me and sighs heavily, then kisses my cheek and rolls onto his side of the bed. He stands up and removes the condom and tosses it into the trash can, then grabs a bottle of water off the bedside table. He brings the bottle to his lips, raking his eyes over my exposed flesh. His lips pull into a lazy grin. He stands confidently naked by the bed, gulping the last of the water.

Despite his good looks, he has his faults. In fact, his looks may be the only thing about him I *don't* find fault in. He's cocky, quick-tempered, hard to handle sometimes. But he loves me. He loves the hell out of me. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't love him in return. There are so many things I would change about him if I could, but right now he's all I have, so I deal with it. He brought me in when I had nowhere else to go. No one else to turn to. For that reason alone, I put up with him.

I have no other choice.

He brings his hand up and wipes his mouth, then tosses the empty bottle into the trash can. He runs his hand through his thick brown hair and winks at me, then drops back onto the bed and leans in, kissing me softly on the lips. "Goodnight, babe," he says as he rolls onto his back.

"You mean good morning," I say as I reluctantly pull myself out of bed. My T-shirt is bunched around my waist, so I pull it down and grab some pants and a different shirt. I walk across the hallway to the shower, relieved that one of our countless roommates isn't occupying the only upstairs bathroom.

I check the time on my phone and cringe when I realize I won't even have enough time to stop for coffee. It's the first class of the semester and I already plan to use it to catch up on sleep. This isn't looking good.

There's no way I can keep this up. Asa never goes to class on a regular basis, yet he always passes with near-perfect grades. I'm struggling to keep my head above water, and I didn't miss a single day last semester. Well, in physical form. Unfortunately, we live with so many other people, there's never a quiet moment in the house. I catch myself falling asleep in class more often than not; it's the only time I get peace and quiet. The parties seem to go on all hours of the day and night, regardless of who has class the next day. Weekends have no separation from weekdays in our house, and rent has no bearing over who lives here.

I don't even know who lives here half the time. Asa owns the house, but he loves being around people, so he likes the revolving-door free-for-all. If I had the means, I'd have my own place in a heartbeat. But I don't. That just means one more year of pure hell before I graduate.

One more year before I'm free.

I pull my shirt over my head and drop it to the floor, then pull the shower curtain back. As soon as I reach down for the nozzle, I scream at the top of my lungs. Passed out in the tub, fully clothed, is our newest full-time roommate, Dalton.

He jerks awake and smashes his forehead into the faucet above it, letting out a yell. I reach down and grab my shirt just as the door bursts open and Asa rushes in.

"Sloan, are you okay?" he says frantically, spinning me around to check me for injuries. I nod feverishly and point to Dalton in the tub.

Dalton groans. "I'm not okay." He palms his freshly injured forehead and attempts to crawl out of the tub.

Asa looks at me, down at my naked body being covered by the shirt in my hands, then looks back at Dalton. I'm afraid he's about to get the

wrong idea, so I start to explain, but he cuts me off with a loud, unexpected burst of laughter.

“Did you do that to him?” He’s pointing at Dalton’s head.

I shake my head. “He hit his head on the faucet when I screamed.”

Asa laughs even harder and reaches a hand down to Dalton, then pulls him the rest of the way out of the tub. “Come on, man, you need a beer. Cure for hangovers.” He pushes Dalton out of the bathroom and follows behind him, closing the door when he leaves.

I stand frozen, still clutching my shirt to my chest. The sad part is, this is the third time this has happened. A different idiot every time, passed out in the tub. I make a mental note to check the tub from now on before undressing.

CARTER

I pull the schedule out of my pocket and unfold it to look for the room number. “This is such crap,” I say into the phone. “I graduated college three years ago. I didn’t sign up for this shit so I could do homework.”

Dalton laughs loudly, forcing me to pull the phone several inches away from my ear. “Boo fucking hoo,” he says. “I had to sleep in a damn bathtub last night. Suck it up, man. Acting the role is part of the job.”

“Easy for you to say. You were signed up for one class a week. I have three. Why’d Young only give you one?”

“Maybe I give better head,” Dalton says.

I look down at my schedule and up at the number on the door in front of me, finding a match.

“I gotta go. *La clase de Español.*”

“Carter, wait.” His tone is more serious. Dalton clears his throat and prepares for his “partner pep talk.” I’ve been suffering through them on a daily basis since we started working together. He doesn’t have to remind me why we’re here. I realize I have a duty. My duty is to complete the job I’m being paid to do... which is to bust the largest campus drug ring in collegiate history. The drug problem at the local university has multiplied tenfold in the past three years alone. Rumor has it that Asa Jackson is the sole reason for that. Asa and all the people in his circle, which is why

Dalton and I are here—to identify the key players. Dalton and I are only a small part of this sting, but it's the small parts that make up a huge whole, and every one of our roles is vital. Even the role of pretending to be a college student. *Again*. I just wish I would have started the semester last week like everyone else in this class but the department took forever to get me set up in the system.

"Try to make it fun, man," Dalton says. "We're so close to getting everything we need... You'll be here two months, tops. Find a hot piece of ass to sit by; it'll make the days go by faster."

I look through the window of the classroom door. It's practically at full capacity with only three empty seats. My gaze immediately falls on a girl in the back of the room next to one of the empty chairs. Her dark hair is spilled over her face while she rests her head on her arms. She's asleep. I can sit by the sleepers; it's the incessant talkers I can't tolerate. "Look at that. Already found me a hot piece of ass to sit by. I'll check in with you after lunch." I end the call and swing open the classroom door as I turn off the volume on my phone. I hoist the strap of my backpack onto my shoulder as I make my way up the steps to the back of the room. I squeeze past her to the empty seat, tossing my backpack on the floor and my phone onto the table. The sound my phone makes when it meets the solid wood jolts the girl from her sleep. She immediately sits up, wide-eyed. She looks around the room, frantic and confused, then down at the notebook on her desk. I pull the chair out and sit down next to her. She glares at my phone lying on the table in front of us, and then looks at me.

Her hair is a wild mess and there's a shiny trail of drool running from the corner of her lip, down her chin. She's glaring at me like I've interrupted the only minute of sleep she's ever had.

"Late night?" I ask. I bend over and open my backpack, pulling out the Spanish textbook I could more than likely recite from memory.

"Is class over?" she asks, her eyes narrowed at the book I'm placing on the desk in front of me.

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On how long you've been passed out," I say. "I'm not sure which class you're here for, but this is the ten o'clock Spanish class."

She throws her elbows onto the desk in front of her and groans, running her hands over her face. "I've been asleep for five minutes? That's it?" She leans back into her seat and slouches down, resting her head on the back of her chair. "Wake me up when it's over, okay?"

She's looking at me, waiting on me to agree. I tap my finger to my chin. "You've got a little something right here."

She wipes at her mouth and pulls her hand back to inspect it. I expect her to be embarrassed by the fact that she's got drool running down her face, but instead, she rolls her eyes and tucks the sleeve of her shirt under her thumb. She wipes the puddle of drool off the table with her sleeve, and then slouches back down in her seat, closing her eyes.

I've been through college before. I know how it is with the late nights, the partying, the studying, and never having time for it all. But this girl seems stressed to the max. I'm curious if it's due to maybe having a night shift or way too much partying.

I reach down into my backpack and pull the energy drink out that I picked up on the way here this morning. I'm thinking she needs it more than I do.

"Here." I set it on the desk in front of her. "Drink this."

She slowly pries her eyes open as if her eyelids weigh a thousand pounds each. She looks down at the drink, then quickly grabs it and pops the top. She gulps the contents frantically, like it's the first thing she's had to drink in days.

"You're welcome." I laugh.

She finishes the drink and sets it back on the table, wiping her mouth with the same sleeve she wiped away the drool with earlier. I'm not gonna lie; her unkempt, sloppily sexy demeanor is a major turn-on, in a weird way.

"Thanks," she says, wiping the hair out of her eyes. She looks at me and smiles, then stretches her arms out behind her and yawns. The door to the classroom opens and everyone shifts in their seats, indicating the entrance of the instructor—but I can't take my eyes off of her long enough to even validate his presence.

She combs through the strands of her hair with her fingers. It's still slightly damp and I can smell the floral scent of her shampoo when she flips her hair back over her shoulders. It's long and dark and thick, just like the lashes that line her eyes. She glances toward the front of the room and opens her notebook, so I mirror her movements and do the same.

The professor greets us in Spanish, and we return his salutations in collective, broken responses. He begins giving instructions on an assignment when my phone lights up on the table between us. I look down at the incoming text message from Dalton.

Does this hot piece of ass you're sitting next to have a name?

I immediately flip the phone over, hoping she didn't read it. She brings her hand to her mouth to cover her laugh.

Crap. She read it.

"Hot piece of ass, huh?" she says.

"I'm sorry. My friend... He thinks he's funny. Also likes to make my life hell."

She arches an eyebrow and turns toward me. "So you *don't* think I'm a hot piece of ass?"

With her facing me head-on, it's the first chance I've actually had to get a good look at her. Let's just say I'm officially in love with this class now. I shrug my shoulders. "With all due respect, you've been sitting down since I met you. I haven't even seen your ass."

She laughs again. "Sloan," she says, extending her hand. I take her hand in mine. There's a small crescent-shaped scar on her thumb. I run my thumb across it and twist her hand back and forth, inspecting the scar.

"Sloan," I repeat, letting her name roll off the tip of my tongue.

"This is usually the point during introductions that one would reply with their *own* name," she says.

I glance back up at her and she pulls her hand away, looking at me inquisitively.

"Carter," I reply, keeping in character with who I'm supposed to be. It's been hard enough referring to Ryan as Dalton for the past six weeks, but I've gotten used to it. Calling myself Carter is another story. I've more than once slipped up and almost used my real name.

"*Mucho gusto*," she says in an almost perfect accent, turning her attention toward the front of the room.

No, the pleasure is mine. Believe me.

The professor instructs the class to turn to the closest partner and state three facts about the other person in Spanish. This is my fourth year of Spanish, so I decide to let Sloan go first so I don't intimidate her. We turn toward each other and I nod my head at her. "*Las señoras primera*," I say.

"No, we'll take turns," she says. "You first. Go ahead, tell me a fact about myself."

"Okay," I say, laughing at how she just took control. "*Usted es mandona*."

"That's an opinion, not a fact," she states. "But I'll give it to you."

I tilt my head in her direction. "You understood what I just said?"

She nods her head. "If you intended to call me bossy, then yes." She narrows her eyes, but a tiny smile forces its way through. "My turn," she says. "*Su compañera de clase es bella*."

I laugh. She just complimented herself by telling me that my class partner is beautiful? I nod in unabashed agreement. "*Mi compañera de clase esta correcta*."

I can see the blush rise to her cheeks, despite her tanned skin. "How old are you?" she asks.

"That's a question, not a fact. And in English, no less."

"I need to ask a question to get to the fact. You look a little older than most sophomore Spanish students."

"How old do you think I am?"

"Twenty-three? Twenty-four?" she says.

She's not too far off. I'm twenty-five, but she doesn't need to know that. "Twenty-two," I say.

"*Tiene veintidos años,*" she says, stating her second fact about me.

"You cheat," I reply.

"You have to say that in Spanish if that's one of your facts about me."

"*Usted engaña.*"

I can tell by the arch in her eyebrow that she wasn't expecting me to know that one in Spanish.

"That's three for you," she says.

"You still have one more."

"*Usted es un perro.*"

I laugh. "You just accidentally called me a dog."

She shakes her head. "It wasn't an accident."

Her phone vibrates, so she pulls it out of her pocket and gives it her full attention. I lean back in my chair and grab my own phone, pretending to do the same. We sit silently while the rest of the class finishes the assignment. I watch out of the corner of my eye as she texts, her thumbs flying quickly over the screen of her phone. She's cute. I like that I'm looking forward to this class now. Three days a week doesn't seem like enough all of a sudden.

There's roughly fifteen minutes left of class and I'm doing my damndest to keep myself from staring at her. She hasn't said anything else since she referred to me as a dog. I watch as she doodles in her notebook, not

paying attention to a single word the instructor has said. She's either bored out of her mind, or she's somewhere else entirely. I lean forward, attempting to get a better look at what she's writing. I feel nosy, but then again, she did read my text earlier, so I feel justified.

Her pen is frantically moving over the paper, possibly a result of the energy drink she downed. I read the sentences as she jots them down. They don't make a lick of sense, no matter how many times I read them.

Trains and buses stole my shoes and now I have to eat raw squid.

I laugh at the randomness of all the sentences sprawled across her page, and she glances up at me. I meet her gaze and she grins mischievously.

She looks down at her notebook and taps her pen against it. "I get bored," she whispers. "I don't have a very good attention span."

I normally have a great attention span, but apparently not while I'm sitting next to her.

"Sometimes I don't either," I say. I reach across the desk and point at her words. "What is that? A secret code?"

She shrugs her shoulders and drops her pen, then slides the notebook closer to me. "It's just something stupid I do when I'm bored. I like to see how many random things I can think up without actually *thinking*. The more they don't make sense, the more I win."

"The more you win?" I ask, hoping for clarification. This girl is an enigma. "How could you lose if you're the only one playing your game?"

Her smile disappears and she glances away, staring down at the notebook in front of her. She delicately traces her finger over the letters in one of the words. I wonder what the hell I just said to change her demeanor so drastically and so fast. She picks her pen up and hands it to me, shaking away whatever thoughts just darkened her mind.

"Try it," she says. "It's highly addictive."

I take the pen from her hand and find an open spot on her page. "So I just write anything? Whatever comes to mind?"