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MATCHED UP

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Also by Jenny Ireland

The First Move

The Boy Next Door

MATCHED UP



JENNY IRELAND



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2025

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Set in 10.75/15.5pt Adobe Caslon Pro

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-72095-0

All correspondence to:

Penguin Books

Penguin Random House Children's

One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW



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For Lyla and Rory. Thank you for the football. x



1

I tapped newly painted nails on my laptop impatiently.

‘Can we turn over now? Barcelona–Sevilla is on.’ I rolled my eyes and turned to my best friend with prayer hands.

‘It’s almost over. This is the best bit!’ Megan watched the screen, hugging her tanned legs as her eyes welled up.

‘You said that half an hour ago.’ I gave an exaggerated sigh. ‘Oh, and by the way, if you look at them when they’re old, the height difference is completely off, so unless he’s shrunk, I reckon he’s actually talking to a complete stranger and it’s not Allie at all,’ I said. I loved finding inconsistencies in movies.

A pillow was pushed over my face. I threw it away and laughed. ‘Hey!’

‘Stop trying to ruin *The Notebook*. It won’t work.’ There were tears streaming down Megan’s face now. I don’t know why she did it to herself; every Sunday when she chose the movie, she picked something that made her cry, full-on heartbroken tears, like the trauma had just happened to her. It made no sense to me. But that was the deal.

I got up and paced around my room for about the tenth

time during the movie. I'd never been any good at sitting in the same place for extended periods of time, but since I'd agreed to movie night with Megan every Sunday in exchange for extra training, I'd actually been getting better at sitting.

'Don't you get enough football?' Megan asked. We trained twice a week with Westing FC and played matches once, and sometimes even twice, weekly. Sometimes I got a game, if they were a player short, but lately the whole squad had been showing up and the closest I got to a match was freezing my arse off on the bench. But it was all going to change this season. I knew it.

'Blasphemy!' I said, horrified. I gazed at the framed poster of Aitana Bonmatí on my wall. 'Bet Aitana doesn't lie around watching movies all the time.'

'Bet she doesn't eat these either.' Megan shoved a handful of Doritos in her mouth and a million crumbs dropped on to my bed.

'I'll kill you,' I said. I didn't add that of course Aitana wouldn't eat them. Sometimes I wondered if I talked about her too much, my idol, the Barcelona midfielder who I'd been obsessed with ever since I'd started playing. When me and my twin brother Niall had started watching Liga F, the Spanish women's football league, alongside the Premier League, Serie A and La Liga. Niall was as into football as I was. Maybe it was a twin thing, always liking the same stuff – I'd never really thought about it too much – but it was nice, always having him around. I mean, Megan was my best friend, but Niall was more than that, like he was almost part of me.

She laughed and brushed them off. 'OK, it's over. You happy?'

‘Yes. You owe me a practice,’ I said.

‘Oh, come on, it’s too late. And it’s way too cold,’ Megan whined, her huge brown eyes begging me to back down.

‘Sorry. You promised. And who cares if it’s cold? Bet Aitana plays in the cold.’

‘Yeah, and I bet she’s zero craic,’ Megan said, pulling herself off the bed. ‘OK, fine, I’m ready.’ She looked in the mirror and tightened her ponytail. She was wearing her new lululemon shorts. The pink ones that barely covered her arse.

‘Do you want to borrow some trackies? You’ll be freezing,’ I said, pulling on one of Niall’s massive hoodies.

‘No, I’m fine,’ she said and spun round on one foot. ‘Let’s go before I change my mind.’

‘Where are you two going?’ Niall didn’t even look up from the screen as we passed. But Hunter did. He was my brother’s best mate, and because Mum and Dad were so chilled out about having people round to the house, and Hunter’s parents were always fighting about something, he was always there. They were sitting in the adjoining living room to our bedrooms, the one Niall had turned into a games room.

‘Practice,’ I said.

‘You serious? It’s Baltic.’ Both of them were looking up now.

‘That’s what I said,’ Megan complained behind me.

‘Why don’t you stay in? We could even play *Mario Kart*?’ Hunter said, smiling. He knew how much I loved *Mario Kart*; it was the only game I had any chance of winning against Niall. He also knew how much I liked to beat Niall, at anything.

‘Sorry, can’t. We’ve got work to do, haven’t we, Meg?’ I grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the stairs.

‘Kill me,’ she said, and I heard Niall and Hunter laugh.

We walked into the kitchen where Mum was drinking a glass of wine and watching some Scandinavian crime drama. I’m pretty sure that’s all she ever watched.

‘Isn’t it a bit late to go outside, love?’ she called when she saw where we were headed.

‘Just going out to practise.’

‘OK, but not too long. Sport isn’t life, remember.’

I rolled my eyes. She loved to trot out that phrase at least once a week. She didn’t know what she was talking about. She wasn’t even into sport.

‘And, Megan, love, I’ll ask Niall to run you home after.’

‘Thanks, Mrs Ryan.’

‘*Inga problem*,’ Mum replied.

I shook my head. ‘She thinks she can speak Swedish now.’

Megan laughed and walked outside. ‘Love your mum. Jesus. I still can’t believe your mum and dad paid for this.’ She did a backward whistle. ‘You’re so lucky.’

She was talking about the football pitch that Dad had installed just before Christmas. It wasn’t a complete surprise because there were workers in our garden for weeks, but he told me on Christmas Day that he’d decided to build it after a conversation we’d had about how much I wanted to make the team and that he wanted to support me as much as he could.

‘Not as lucky as you,’ I said, opening the gate and switching on the little floodlights. ‘Megan Evans, daughter of the NI team doctor!’ I kicked a high ball to her, and she trapped it with her chest effortlessly.

‘Apart from free match tickets it’s not that exciting, you

know,' she said. 'I'd much rather have this pitch . . .' She kicked the ball back to me, hard. 'Actually, I'd rather have the money the pitch cost and go on a really expensive holiday.' She grinned.

'OK, let's do this,' I said. 'Dribbling drills?'

Megan pulled a face. 'OK, *Sadie*.' Sadie was our coach. The coach that everyone, apart from me, hated because she was so serious.

Then we were interrupted. 'You ready, Megan?' Niall's voice from the side of the pitch. I looked over to see Hunter standing there too, drinking a can of Coke, and watching us play.

'What? Go away – we've only just started!' I shouted back.

'Yeah, we've only *just* started,' Megan said, dropping to her knees and pretending to cry.

'Mum says I need to leave Megan home.'

'She's not ready,' I said, getting annoyed now. 'We'll be finished in an hour.'

'An hour?!' Megan screamed.

Niall and Hunter laughed. But it wasn't funny.

'I watched your stupid movie; you promised you'd practise with me,' I said, aware of the fact I sounded like a child. 'You can go now,' I said to the boys, who were still hovering at the side of the pitch.

They didn't go. 'Two versus two?' Niall called.

'I'm in!' Megan said before I could say no.

We were supposed to be doing drills. But I guess it was better than nothing.

'Fine,' I conceded.

Niall joined us on the pitch. 'Maybe we should split the teams? Make it fairer?'

‘Yeah, right! Scared to lose to a couple of girls?’ I always fell for Niall’s wind-ups.

‘Niall is,’ said Hunter.

He crushed his Coke can and threw it over the little fence and I didn’t even say anything. I was in football mode, where nothing else mattered.

‘OK, fine, Ryans versus rejects,’ I said, and walked over beside Niall. Niall and I had played together so much we made the perfect team.

Hunter scoffed. ‘Hear what they called us, Megan?’

‘Let’s destroy them. Twins are going down.’ Megan gave us her best evil stare, and Niall laughed.

‘Let’s go!’ I passed the ball to Niall and we played for an hour. No breaks. By the end of the match, they were winning, and Niall had taken to holding back Megan, ignoring her half-hearted protests.

We sat on the pitch, exhausted, although when I glanced at Megan she barely looked out of breath. Unlike me she hadn’t missed a pass, hadn’t hit the ball wide and still managed to smile, when all I could do was try to get my breath back.

‘You’re such a cheater,’ Megan said to Niall. But it was light-hearted.

Hunter walked over to me and offered his hand to help me up.

I took it. ‘Good game,’ he said, ‘except for the fact Niall cheated.’

‘I don’t see a ref.’ I grinned. ‘Go get that Coke can.’

‘Oh yeah, sorry,’ he said, like he’d dropped it accidentally. And by the time he got back, Coke can in hand, Megan and Niall were standing up too, passing the ball between them.

‘You ready to go *now*?’ Niall asked Megan.

‘I’ve been ready to go for an hour.’ She stuck out her tongue at him.

‘I can take her,’ I said, between gulps of air. ‘Meg, you don’t have to go with them, don’t worry.’ I was looking forward to driving her home. When we were in the car alone, we’d turn up the music and sing-scream until our throats ached, then piss ourselves laughing at how bad we sounded.

‘It’s OK, Lex, I don’t mind,’ she said.

‘You look like you need a shower anyway,’ Niall said, jingling his car keys in my direction. ‘Bet you’ve sweated all over my hoodie.’

‘Good!’

‘Bye, Lex,’ said Hunter with a little wave, which wasn’t like him. Usually, he and Niall were throwing jokey insults in my direction.

‘Bye, Hunter,’ I said with exaggerated enthusiasm.

‘See ya tomorrow!’ Megan called, and the three of them disappeared.

But I hadn’t finished yet.

This was it. Final thirty seconds of extra time and Lexie Ryan, star defender of Westing FC, is taking it up the wing. What’s this? She’s beaten three of Crusaders’ defenders. She shoots, she sc—

‘Fuck sake!’ The ball hit the crossbar and rebounded back at me. I kicked it as hard as I could against the fence. I bent over, hands on thighs, hot breath disappearing into the night like cigarette smoke. The shadow from the floodlights stretched me out, taller, thinner, like Megan. Megan who didn’t have to train like this. Extra hours on top of practice, working on

my touch, working on my fitness. She had it all. Naturally. I wasn't jealous. OK, I was. Even though I hated thinking bad thoughts about her, but come *on*. I booted the ball towards the net again, hoping I'd sink it into the top corner and it would be a sign from the gods that the talent was there, just hidden really, really well. But no. Wide.

I went back upstairs, had a shower, did my skincare routine, and put on the new Victoria's Secret pyjamas that Mum had bought me. Then I put on the football and picked up the Doritos that we'd left on the bed.

I stretched out my aching muscles, then opened the new leather notebook that Megan had bought me for Christmas. My heart swelled for her. How well she knew me. How she knew how much I loved to make lists. New Year, new list.

1. Practise for at least two hours every day.
2. Study for at least one hour every day.
3. Eat, sleep and breathe football.
4. Start on the first team.

Tick, tick, tick, no tick. But I was working on it. And I would work as hard as I had to until Sadie started me. I fell asleep watching Barcelona vs Sevilla, the sound of the chanting crowd infiltrating my dreams.