

Longshot

NESSA

My house was a typical two-story. Tan, stucco exterior, tiled roof. Cute and moderately sized with a carefully watered front lawn, it was where I'd lived my whole life. With a few updates, of course.

By the time Grayson and I pulled into the driveway out front, my fingernails had made little indents in my coffee cup from where I'd been clutching it a bit too tight.

From where I'd been trying desperately to keep a grip on reality.

Because Grayson Everett was *not* reality. There was literally no way this guy was real. No fucking way.

Sure, he played football. And that definitely wasn't my thing. Nor was his cockiness or overconfidence.

But I spent the rest of the car ride to Patterson quizzing Grayson on *Sherlock*, and I wasn't disappointed. Or maybe I was. It was hard to say how I felt about it, but he knew every answer to every question. From *The Hounds of Baskerville* book to the movie to the BBC episode—I couldn't get him to trip up. And while he still didn't disclose what his specific musical talents were, he talked about the show's soundtrack like he'd *played* it.

I sighed as I glanced up at my house and the swirling clouds above it.

God, I'm begging you to send me more flaws.

Ready to bolt out of the car and away from the way this guy made me feel, I yanked on the door handle.

"Wait," Grayson said, surprising me. Feeling slightly nervous about what he wanted, I turned around. Slow and measured-like. But by the time I swiveled to face him, Grayson had already slammed his door and was walking outside. I watched him, following his movements with my eyes as he circled the trunk to plant himself on the passenger side.

Making a dramatic show of opening the car door for me, Grayson held out his hand in a sweeping motion. Then he stared at me with a sweet smile, and my lips parted with a bit of awe.

This was not what I meant by a flaw, God.

I swallowed, trying not to let him affect me. "I can get out of the car on my own, Grayson."

He laughed, undeterred. "I am well aware that you are highly capable of fleeing my car, as you've already tried to do so once. However, you might recall that this is a date, Adler."

His hand inched forward, begging to be taken, and I gave in.

I slid my palm into his, and he wrapped his fingers around my hand. His grip was firm. Hot but not sweaty. Steady but not unyielding.

With the unnecessary help of Grayson, I popped out of the car only to be knocked back against it, a small body flying into me.

Well, not so small anymore, I realized.

"I can't breathe, Rory," I gasped, pinned between my surprisingly tall, strong brother and the side of the Volkswagen.

Grayson's blue eyes caught mine over the top of Rory's head, and I could tell he was repressing a laugh. His eyes smiled at us.

"You've been gone *forever*," Rory said. Or at least I thought that was what he said. The words were a bit muffled; Rory's face pressed into my sweatshirt.

I grinned, warmth spreading through me. "I've missed you, too, Rory." And I had—a lot. I'd missed home. "But it's only been a few months."

He pulled back, shrugging off the hug like the cool, unbothered eleven-year-old he was. "Piper didn't shut up the entire time you were gone, so it seemed a lot longer."

Grayson did laugh at that, and Rory's attention shifted to him. He immediately wrinkled his nose.

"Who are you?"

Grayson took a step toward him, and Rory's eyes drifted further up, widening as he went. "Shit, you're tall."

I hit my brother's shoulder. "Language!"

But he ignored me, and I sighed, figuring I should introduce them.

"Rory, this is Grayson. We live on the same floor at OSU."

Rory's eyes widened even further. They bugged out of his head, almost comically. "They let the guys and the girls live next to each other? College is going to be *sick*."

"It's pretty great," Grayson agreed, chuckling in a way that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. And then he gave Rory a little wink, and an equally slight smirk appeared on Rory's face.

Grayson's eyes swept from me to my brother, and it was then that I realized Rory was wearing his favorite 49ers' football jersey, and I prayed that Grayson wouldn't—

"49ers, huh?"

Too late.

"I'm not going to lie, I grew up as a Chargers fan," he added.

My brother made a face at that, but it quickly changed as Grayson popped open the trunk of his car, producing a well-loved football.

"Go long," Grayson said, giving a little nod to Rory, who nearly stumbled over his feet on his way to run across the yard. And then Grayson raised his arm, and the gray quarter-zip pullover he had on shifted and stretched over his muscles. I watched as he launched the football across the yard, lifting my coffee to take an absentminded drink. My throat was...dry.

But then I remembered my coffee was gone.

Rory caught the ball, and both boys cheered like it was the winning touchdown of a championship game. A huge smile spread over Rory's face as he punted the football into the ground. It smacked against the grass with the same amount of force that a nail was hammered into a coffin. *My coffin.*

Because Grayson Everett was going to be the death of me.

The two of them tossed the ball back and forth a few more times, and helplessness seeped into my bones, which was only made worse when Grayson turned and stared me in the eyes. He strode back to the car with determination. His hair, perfectly tousled. His breath, a little uneven. And if that wasn't enough, he leaned in and casually kissed me on the cheek. Like we were Europeans who just *did* that. Like it was normal for his mouth to be on my skin. Like I wasn't going to react to feeling his lips again.

Or to when he breathed in my ear.

"See ya on our next date, Adler."

After unloading my bag for me, he walked around to the driver's side of the car with an unashamed grin, and I was stuck watching. Unable to move.

"Sunday?" he called over the hood.

Somehow I managed to nod.

I always prided myself on my ability to have something to say for every situation, no matter what it was.

But this?

I was fresh out of words. Hopefully, I'd find some again before we headed back to campus Sunday.

"That guy reminds me of Jasper. Are you guys together?"

My attention snapped back to my brother, a shiver running through me.

He reminds me of Jasper.

There was the reality check that I'd been looking for. Little brothers were good for something, at least.

"No," I replied, hoisting my bag onto my shoulder. "We aren't."

And we never would be.

I couldn't be sure if Rory even heard me. He was already on his way into the house by the time I managed to answer his question, his back to me.

The familiar aroma of seasoning and garlic greeted me as I walked in the front door after Rory. Dad must be cooking Klepe tonight, and I sent a silent thanks to Grayson for getting me home in time for the melt-in-your-mouth goodness that was Bosnian dumplings.

But the immediate comfort I felt was interrupted by my little sister. Rory was right; Piper was *loud*, yelling about...shit, I couldn't even tell. It was too hard to decipher through the screeching. Mom's voice was calm, though, unphased by Piper's outburst. Probably because she was used to it.

Middle school was an era I didn't miss.

Although annoying as it was to hear screaming the second I walked into the house, I couldn't really blame Pipes. I remembered being her age. When it felt like everyone—and I mean *everyone*—was on a different brainwave than you. I constantly craved and sought the attention of other people but constantly contended with loneliness at the same time. Trying to figure out how to make my mind and my body and my mouth all act in cooperation with each other—it all felt so impossible.

So I walked into the living room, chucked my bag on the floor, and I pulled Piper into a hug from behind. And it *did* get her to stop yelling, but then she promptly pushed me away with a look of irritation I didn't honestly believe.

"Give the pipes a rest, Pipes," I said, smirking at my dumb joke and giving her a little nudge.

Piper didn't bother replying with more than a roll of her eyes. But then she softened a bit, flashing me a small smile. "Welcome home, Ness," she murmured.

I smiled back at her. "Thanks, good to be back."

"How'd you get here?"

The question came from my mom, and I grimaced at the sharpness in her tone. It was completely different from how she'd been talking to Piper a minute ago. Spinning around, I faced Momma Elez with an assurance I didn't feel. Because it was that moment that I realized I got so wrapped up in Grayson that I forgot to tell my mom I was coming today.

"Oh, I—uh, got a ride."

"From a *guy*," Rory interjected, popping his head up on the other side of the kitchen island. He plucked a grape from the bowl in the middle of the countertop and plopped it in his mouth.

"A guy?" mom repeated, raising a brow.

"They live on the same floor," Rory added while chopping on the grape. His mop of brown, curly hair bounced as he rocked on the balls of his feet like he always did. "He looks like Jasper but taller. Plays football, too."

My mom's eyebrows transcended all the way up into her hairline, which was just as curly and dark as Rory's.

"He said he could give me a ride on Sunday," I said after clearing my throat. "I figured I'd tell him to pick me up after we go get our tree."

Grayson and I hadn't decided on a time to head back to campus. But he'd told me to put my number in his phone when it'd been lying unlocked in my lap, so I assumed he'd text me at some point about it.

"Tree?" Piper cut in, proving that she was listening more closely to our conversation than she'd ever care to admit.

"Yeah," I said. "Our Christmas tree."

My mom sighed, dramatic and drawn-out. "Oh, hun. About that—"

"Don't say it, mom," I warned. Because I knew that face, and I knew that tone. I'd seen it, and I'd heard it so many times before.

"Your dad and I have a thing with the Walkers on Saturday. It's a fundraiser we bought tickets to ages ago."

My parents had an extensive friend group, and it seriously got old knowing that they were infinitely more popular than I'd ever been. Or ever would be. But when my dad moved to the US to marry my mom, he didn't know a single soul in California. And she'd pulled out all the stops to bring him into the community. And now, twenty years later, he was the most popular guy in town. Fundraisers, parties, barbecues, luncheons—you name it, they were invited.

"But we always go get a tree the weekend after Thanksgiving," I said, not even caring how whiney it sounded.

My mom sighed before switching her attention to the pot on the stove. "I'm sorry, Wednesday. Really, I am. I honestly didn't think that you'd still want to do all that."

Didn't still want to do all that? Was there some rule that traditions die off when you go to college?

If so, I didn't like it.

"Can we go on Friday?" I asked, and she frowned.

"I thought we'd go Black Friday shopping—"

"You know how much I hate that," I interjected.

It wasn't so much that I hated shopping. Large swarms of people, on the other hand...

But even though I thought the whole thing was abysmal, I knew my mom and Piper wouldn't miss the chance to score deals on candles or some shit.

"Maybe Piper, Rory, and I could just go get the tree on Saturday," I tried, looking between my sister with her hair piled on top of her head in the messiest bun ever and Rory, who had at least six grapes in his mouth by now.

Silence greeted my words, though. Piper at least had the decency to look ashamed when she glanced up at me.

"I actually have plans with Natalie on Saturday," she said.

"Don't you see Natalie like every day?" I replied, once again unashamedly whining. But honestly, Natalie and Piper were attached at the hip, best friends who did everything together; they could skip one day of hot middle school gossip, right?

But Piper didn't seem too keen on that idea, giving a little shrug and walking away to the basement stairs. Rory followed suit, not even bothering to provide an answer to my question.

Sighing, I gave up. Trudging up the stairs to my room, I poked my head into open doorways on my way, searching for my dad. It was unlikely, but maybe, just *maybe*, he could make everyone see reason. But he didn't seem to be around. So I collapsed on my bed, with its watercolor design and the band posters sixteen-year-old me thought were edgy above the frame. My whole room was like a montage of all the stages I'd gone through in high school, and I didn't really want to relive any of them.

Picking up my phone, I texted Beau.

Me: Thanksgiving break is already a dud, and I got home like ten minutes ago. Save me. I'm begging you.

Beau: I got you, girl.

Releasing a stream of breath, I flopped back into my pile of pillows. I didn't know what Beau meant by that, but at this point, I didn't really care.