

Crescendo

NESSA

"A caramel macchiato, as requested."

Grayson's grin was annoyingly perfect as I slid into his Volkswagen, a car as shiny and white as his smile.

The interior was spotless. I expected to see duffle bags exploding with football gear or to smell the stank of a men's locker room for the entire ride home, but I didn't notice any of that when I chucked my bag into the backseat.

"Thanks," I said, taking the travel cup from him. I still wasn't sure about this, but at least I had caffeine and warmth on a chilly day. And I'd be home in time to watch the Macy's Day Parade with Piper tomorrow morning.

"No problem," Grayson said, and I frowned when I only saw one cup.

"Where's yours?"

"Oh." He shrugged. "I don't like coffee."

"You don't like *coffee*?" Shaking my head in disbelief, I shoved the car door open again, twisted away from him, and put one foot out onto the pavement in front of our dorm building. "Sorry, I have to go. This was not a good idea."

Grayson's low chuckle reached my ears. And other parts of my body. A prickle of awareness spread through me, and I repressed a pleasant, tingling shudder.

"Remember last night?" he asked.

I froze. Because I remembered last night with alarming clarity. Everything about it: Grayson's lips, the feeling of his breath across my skin, his *hands*.

"When you said you weren't dramatic?" he added, and I snapped out of my memories.

Goddamn thirsty thoughts.

"I'm not," I insisted, turning back to look at him.

He raised a brow, eyes flicking to my foot on the pavement, my hand on the door handle.

"Alright, *fine*." Rolling my eyes, I settled into his car again and shut the door. When I glanced back at Grayson, he was biting his bottom lip, eyes dancing. I cleared my throat and forced myself to look away.

"You don't like coffee, *and* you're a football player? Honestly, I can't believe we're associating right now."

Unphased, Grayson laughed as he shifted the car into drive. "What's your deal with football players?" he asked without taking his eyes off the road. "Is it just because of your ex?"

Taking a sip of my caramel macchiato, I swallowed a satisfying moan. So foamy, so good. And then I registered what he'd asked.

"My ex?" I repeated. I didn't tell him about—

"You said that your ex was on the team."

Right, that.

I opened my mouth to reply, but Grayson kept talking.

"Who is it, anyway?" His brows furrowed. "Max? I've always had the strange urge to flatten his face onto the pavement, so I kind of hope it's him." Grayson pursed his lips. "Well, it really isn't a *strange* urge. He says the stupidest shit."

My expression mimicked his, brows furrowing together. "Flatten his face? Seriously?"

"So, it's Max?" Grayson peeked over at me, an odd mix of satisfaction and irritation on his face.

"What? No, I don't even know who Max is."

"Damn." He made a little clucking noise with his tongue, thinking hard as he concentrated on the highway we'd merged onto. "Ethan?" he finally asked. "He's a cocky jerk. I wouldn't mind kicking his ass, either."

"Really?"

Grayson seemed confused by my confusion. "You said you were at our UCLA game to cheer against your ex. Which I'm guessing means they did something fucked up to hurt you. So yeah, I'll gladly kick his ass. Just like I would have kicked Jack's ass last night if we weren't, ya know, preoccupied."

I stared at him, trying to comprehend what he was saying. And trying not to think about last night. "They're your teammates, though."

He snorted. "Do you know how many players are on our team?"

I shook my head.

"There's 105 of us. I'm only loyal to the ones who deserve it. I'm not going to go to bat for the dumb fucks."

"Oh."

I didn't know what to say to that. But I felt a tiny bit of resentment melt away as I stared down at my coffee. Maybe I should give this guy a chance. Well, not like a *chance* chance. Just like a chance to drive me home without biting his head off in the process.

Something dropped into my lap, startling me, and I looked down to see Grayson's phone. "Put your address in, Miss Elez," he said. "I have a general idea of how to get to Patterson, but I don't want to miss the exit."

Cocking my head to the side, I frowned at the phone. No boy had ever just plopped his unlocked phone in front of me. I was used to guys who guarded their phones like it was their entire life—a life that was always kept a mystery to me.

"Okay, Mr.—" I paused when I realized I couldn't remember his last name. Or had I ever known it to begin with?

Wow. I was in a car, flying seventy-five miles per hour down the freeway, stuck with a guy whose last name I didn't even know.

But you know how he tastes.

"Oh my god, shut up," I groaned.

"What?"

Slapping a hand over my mouth, I glanced up to see Grayson's confused frown in the rearview mirror.

Stupid, dirty thoughts.

"Nothing," I spat out.

Grayson nodded. "It's Everett," he said after a short pause.

"Huh?"

My brain was still stuck on previous thoughts.

"My name. Grayson Everett."

"Oh, right."

Now you know his name *and* the way he tastes.

"My name isn't really Nessa," I spat out. It was the first thing that came to my mind that had nothing to do with Grayson Everett and the way—

It was just the first thing that came to my mind.

But it was stupid. Because, *of course*, Grayson had a follow-up question. And I had no interest in answering it.

"Oh? What's your name, then?"

I jumped on the opportunity to take a long, scorching sip of my caramel macchiato instead of answering. With my free hand, I typed my address into his phone. But after I started the directions and pulled the cup away from my lips, I still didn't know how to reply.

"I don't like it," I muttered. But it was too quiet for him to actually hear above the roar of the wind and road.

"What?" Grayson said, peeking over at me with scrunched eyebrows.

I sighed. "I don't really like it. My first name."

"Is Nessa your middle name?"

Shaking my head, I took another sip of my coffee. At this rate, it would be gone before we made it halfway home.

"No, my middle name is Adler. It's my mom's maiden name."

The corner of Grayson's mouth quirked up.

"Adler, huh? Makes sense."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you're a bit like her."

"Who?"

"Sharp, witty, a flair for dramatics."

"I am *not* dramatic."

"You're pretty like her, too," Grayson added with a shrug. "And your kisses come with a motive—"

"Who are you talking about?" I asked again, ignoring the heat that worked its way up my cheeks. Ignoring the fluttering in my chest. And my stomach.

"Irene," he replied simply.

My mouth dropped open as I realized what he was implying. "Did you just make a *Sherlock* reference?"

Grayson flashed a breathtaking smile at me, and it took me a second to recover. "You sure you wanna head to Patterson?" he asked, not missing a beat. Unlike me. "It's not too late to reroute to 221B Baker Street."

I bit off a ridiculous, little laugh before it could grow out of control. "Grayson Everett, I did not take you for a nerd like that."

When he glanced over at me, amusement lingered in his eyes. In his smile. "There's a lot you don't know about me, Adler."

"Tell me," I demanded, more interested than I cared to admit.

Grayson blew a breath out between his teeth. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything."

He laughed lightly. The smirk that played on his lips didn't go away. "Nah, it doesn't work like that."

God, he could be annoying. I threw one exasperated hand up in the air. "How does it not work like that?"

"Because," he said, drawing the word out. His eyes scanned the highway, not leaving the road while he spoke. But I still felt them probing me. Hot and curious. "When someone asks you questions about yourself, that tells you something."

I raised a brow, and Grayson glanced over. "It tells you what's important to them," he said. The words were light and casual. But his eyes were something else. "So pick a question, Adler," he added, grinning to himself as he gave his attention back to driving.

"Okay, what kind of music do you like?" I asked without even pausing to contemplate it. Music selection was an excellent judge of character I'd learned. My ex's favorite artist was Robin Thicke; *Blurred Lines* played on repeat every time I jumped into his car.

I should have known right then and there.

To my surprise, Grayson flashed that grin of his again. "Music to play or to listen to?"

I shoved the coffee cup into my face, hiding my reaction and swallowing down caramel macchiato instead of releasing the ungodly sound that had been rising in the back of my throat. Definitely hadn't expected that—hadn't expected him. Grayson. Playing things other than football.

"What do you play?" I asked when I'd composed myself.

"It would be easier to tell you what I didn't play," Grayson replied, and I could *hear* the gratification in his voice.

But as much as his cockiness should be a turn-off, I had to bite my tongue to keep from asking him to tell me more. If he could play the guitar or sing, I'd be a goner. I loved boys who could sing more than I loved boys who watched nerdy movies.

But I did not want to love—or even like—Grayson Everett.

Shit, this was a disaster. I needed to stop asking him questions. I needed to stop talking to him altogether. Because the very last thing I needed was to fall for another guy who said all the right things but did all the wrong ones.

I'd had that before.

Summoning all of my restraint, I eyed Grayson up and down once before rolling my eyes. "I'm definitely not going to give you the satisfaction of asking what you *don't* play. Just tell me. Mostly strings? Winds?"

To my irritation, Grayson's grin only grew. "Both. Good with my hands *and* my mouth. But you already knew that."

My body betrayed me, responding to his words. A flush crept up my chest; I could feel it. And there was a crescendo of noise in my ears that had nothing to do with the November wind gusts outside. No, it was a rapid heartbeat—*my* loud, rapid heartbeat.

"I would smack you if you weren't driving."

Grayson laughed. "I know. My turn to ask a question now," he said.

I held my breath. Which was warranted. Because Grayson decided to drop his voice when he breathed his next words—as if afraid someone might overhear him. As if we weren't alone together in his Volkswagen. As if he wanted the pulse between us to be louder than his words.

"Did you or did you not think of our kiss when you went to bed last night?" he asked without taking his eyes off the road.

Breath still suspended, my mouth opened and closed behind my coffee cup, the quick denial struggling to spill from my lips. I glanced over at him, taking in his casual composure. How could he ask a question like that and remain so unphased?

But even as I considered it, his lips twitched.

"That's what I thought," he murmured.

Even if I *might* have replayed the kiss when I'd gotten back to my room last night, there was no way I would admit that. Not in a million years.

"I—"

"It's okay, Adler," Grayson cut in, his voice gravelly and quiet. A combination of rough and soft that got under my skin. "I did, too."

Oh, hell no. I wasn't falling into this trap again. Not even for a guy like Grayson, a guy who made all the right plays.

He was on the stage right now. Or on the field—whichever one. Showing off. Performing his little stunt. That was always how it was with guys when you first got to know them.

But luckily, Grayson's curtain call would come soon enough.