

# Fumbled

**NESSA**

I've spent at least a quarter of my life daydreaming. And a whole quarter of my brain was used for storing those dreams.

Some of them were dreams of books I'd read, re-imaginings of characters, and what I'd wished they'd done. Or sometimes, the dream was what they *had* done, and I just wanted to relive it.

Some of the dreams were of me. I liked to imagine that I'd done something...cool.

Put like that, it sounded ironically dumb. But I didn't know how else to describe it. I wanted to *accomplish* something. And not just anything, but something that other people cared about. I'd dream about starring in a movie or writing my own bestseller. I'd dream about winning an Olympic gold medal or swimming the English Channel.

More irony for you.

Because I had no desire to act. I was a horrendous writer, too. A sixth grader could string together sentences more coherently than I could. And exercising—god, it was a form of pure *evil*.

I supposed I just liked imagining situations where I was better than I really was; it didn't really matter what that happened to be. Then maybe people would care. About me.

The other parts of my brain were occupied in ways that had been entirely unhelpful to me in college so far. Granted, I was only a few months into freshman year. But still, I doubted that would change.

My brain, the useless vessel, housed a smattering of lyrics I'd memorized. Mostly Bon Iver songs mixed in with jams I listened to on the bus in elementary school. And then there was the catalog of actors and actresses from all my favorite movies—badass action heroes (or heroines) and soft Nicholas Sparks romance leads alike.

The worst, though, was probably the list of hypothetical arguments that I'd never actually have. But I stored it all up there anyway. Just in case I ever met someone who wanted to debate whether the potato was *the* most versatile food that money could buy.

It was, by the way.

But in other words, my head was a mess.

The one thing that wasn't up in my noggin, though?

The name of the guy who currently stared at me—that football player who'd walked cockily up to Beau and me the other night after the game.

"Beau," I hissed, hitting his arm to get his attention. All of his concentration had been on his bubble tea as he swirled it around with his straw. He sucked the boba up slowly, trying to watch it while cross-eyed. Leave it to Beau to play with his food like a five-year-old.

"What?" He jerked upright, looking offended that I'd hit him that hard.

"He's staring at me."

Beau's eyebrows drew together. "Who's staring at you?"

"I don't know," I hissed again, wishing he'd keep his voice down.

"Nessie." The way he said that stupid little nickname made me feel chastised. I wrinkled my nose before Beau continued. "If you don't know, then how do you know he's staring at you."

I sighed heavily, exasperated. "What I mean is that I don't remember his name."

"Where is he?" Beau began whipping his head around dramatically, searching the student union cafeteria. The chatter of people around us should have masked Beau's eager voice, but it still seemed to carry across the recently renovated space. I cringed.

Without daring to look at football boy, I jerked my head in his direction. He'd been standing by the exit with a group of muscly bros in matching sweatsuits—his team, I was sure.

I couldn't remember this guy's name, but I remembered his striking eyes. Not that I chanced a look at them now. I could *feel* them, though, breaking through my defenses. I felt hot. Why did I feel hot? *He* was the one being a creep. I certainly had nothing to be embarrassed about.

"The football player?" Beau asked. "With the light brown hair and a bit of a swagger?"

"Yes, that one."

Beau leaned back into his chair with a pinched sigh. "Yeah," he said, drawing the word out beneath his breath. "Dude saw me looking, and he's definitely on his way over here."

"Oh my fucking god," I groaned. "I could kill you." Ducking my head, I stared at the ground in hopes that I might suddenly disappear into the pressed carpet. The last thing I wanted was to talk to football boy again. Being harassed by football players was something I was

sensitive to. And I'd been relieved when he hadn't lingered the other night, quickly introducing himself before heading to the elevators and disappearing from sight.

Not that I'd watched him walk off, of course. Not that I distinctly remembered his confident *swagger*.

Beau's word, not mine.

Ugh, Beau. I saw him smile out of the corner of my eye. He always had a sly smile, and I always wanted to smack it off his face.

"I mean it," I muttered. "I hope you choke on your boba."

Beau snorted. "No, you don't. Girl, I'm like your only friend."

I opened my mouth to reply before snapping it shut. He had me there. Well, I had other friends. But they weren't here right now.

"Hey."

I saw his feet plant themselves next to the table before I actually registered his voice. He was wearing a pair of Nikes that were either brand new, or he took excellent care of them. Probably the latter. Football boy was likely the kind of guy who stayed up late to clean the scuffs off his sneakers. They were sparkling white.

**Maybe I should stop staring at his feet.**

I snapped my gaze up only to immediately regret it. *Blinding*. His smile was blinding—as white as his shoes. Everything about this guy was sharp, from his jawline to his eyes to the way he dressed. He didn't have on a sweatsuit like the rest of the team; he wore a pair of khaki chinos and a quarter zip pullover with the Oakland State football logo stitched into it.

"Oh, hey!" Beau said, saving us from awkward silence. "We met the other night, right? What's up... man?"

I winced as Beau fumbled on the last bit, clearly as clueless as I was about football boy's name. But then I rolled my eyes as I saw the look on Beau's face. His realization was genuine; he hadn't even made the connection that this was the same guy we met a few days ago until just now. Of course.

"It's Grayson," the guy said with a soft chuckle, saving us from having to ask again. Thank god. "And not much, just getting lunch with the team," he added before cocking his head to the side and focusing on Beau. "I'm not sure if I caught your name before?"

Alright, this was going well. Beau and football boy could just have their own little conversation, and I didn't even need to be involved—

"It's Beau. And this is Nessa."

**Nevermind.**

Grayson's gaze flicked to me. It was amused. Like he found *me* amusing. A tiny smirk played on his lips, and it lifted before he spoke. His voice was low and smooth. "Yeah, I remember."

My cheeks burned. But only because I was almost certain that this Grayson guy had just mocked me. Somehow he'd *known* that I'd forgotten his name, and he wanted to rub it in my face that he hadn't forgotten mine.

Well, he was a jerk.

And hot. In here. God, it was hot in here.

I shifted in my chair and pulled at the collar of my sweater, refusing to return his smartass smile.

"Listen," he said, his grin cocking even further to the side. "I never found out why you guys were cheering against us, and it's been bugging me. I'm curious."

"Oh?" The little syllable fell out of my mouth, sneaky and snarky. "Not used to encountering someone who isn't worshipping the ground you walk on?"

He laughed. It was annoying. I wasn't trying to be funny. "I mean, worshipping is going a little far," he said. "But yeah, typically people from Oakland cheer for Oakland."

I raised a brow. "Let's just say I have bad blood with someone on the team."

Grayson raised his brow to match mine. "Bad enough blood that you'd fork out hundreds to cheer against them? Playoff tickets aren't cheap."

**Tell me you think you're hot shit without telling me you think you're hot shit, football boy.**

"I guess," I replied, shrugging casually.

It was a lie. I usually wouldn't pay a dime to go watch football, but Beau Martin was rich as fuck. And we were bored. What better way to spend a night than booing Quinton Reid off the field for his last game?

Grayson narrowed his eyes. "Like an ex?"

"Of sorts."

Not my ex. But definitely an ex.

Grayson's eyes lifted to his teammates, scrutinizing their backs to try to figure out who I was talking about. But then he looked back down at us, clearing having drawn a blank.

"Wait, are you guys—" He flicked a finger between Beau and me, and I *jumped* on that.

"Yes." The word squeaked out as I grabbed onto Beau's arm.

But the action was a bit undermined by the fact that Beau simultaneously snorted and said, "No."

I glared at him, and his eyes grew wide.

Beau wasn't wrong; nothing was going on between us. We lived on the same floor in the dorms, and our first meeting consisted of Beau screaming down the hall about a party later that night. But then we started running into each other more and more. And it didn't take us long to realize we had a mutual interest: getting our roommates together.

And we did.

Well, I wasn't sure if they were *together* together yet, but they were definitely on their way.

But me and Beau? No way.

"Gray!"

Football boy whipped his head toward whoever had called his name. A grimace flashed across his face before he gave us a quick nod and stalked off, retreating just as fast as he had the other night. A guy with at least fifty pounds on Grayson clapped a hand on his back as he congregated with the team again. And then they all streamed out of the student union.

No one could convince me that sports teams weren't a kind of weird cult.

"Nessssssaaaaa."

I peered at Beau out of the corner of my eyes, unsure if I wanted to hear anything he had to say.

"What?"

"Dude is *into* you, and you're over here making him fumble."

"Guess he isn't as good of a player as he thought, then."

Beau shook his head. "Why you gotta be so frosty? Shit, screw *Nessa*. Your nickname should be Wendy."

"He fraternizes with the enemy, Beau."

"Wendy...Wednesday...I mean, it makes sense. Maybe we should dye your hair tonight."

**"Beau."**

He sighed. "They play on the same team. It doesn't mean they're besties."

"There's a reason we went to that game and cheered against the Oakland State football team. I'm not about to change my position now that one of them smiled at me."

Taking a sip of his bubble tea, Beau rolled his eyes while I crossed my arms over my chest. A gesture of finality. And knowing better than to hassle me further, Beau relented. The subject, dropped.

Not in my head, though.

Because I spent the rest of the afternoon daydreaming about football boy. *Grayson*.

Well, more specifically, I daydreamed about all the ways I could wipe that annoying smile off his face.



***thank you so much to everyone who has already checked out this book! i hope you enjoy!***

***xoxo amelie***

# Taking Shots

**GRAYSON**

I would be the first to admit that I was blessed with some natural talent in life.

But that didn't mean I became a leading wide receiver and multi-instrumental musician without a bit of drive. Alright, a lot of drive. When I wanted something, I went after it.

And I *wanted* Nessa Elez.

It was hard to pinpoint precisely why. Maybe it was because she somehow made that ugly hat look cute. Or maybe it was because she was so easy to read despite trying adorably hard to be a closed book. It might have had something to do with how she dared to sit in our stands and cheer against us during the championship game. Who knew? I didn't, but I also didn't really need to.

I just needed to know what the hell to do about it.

Because even though I wanted to chase—like *sprint*—after this girl, I wasn't a dumbass. Nessa had no interest in giving me the time of day, and *clearly*, taking the bold approach wasn't working. If I walked up to her a third time, she'd probably just pack up and transfer schools. That was how much she didn't want to talk to me.

But shit. Nessa was *everywhere*.

In the student union. The dorm commons. Outside her dorm room, because as it turned out, we lived only five doors down from each other. The athletic center. The jam-packed corridors outside lecture halls.

And every time that I saw her, all I wanted was to walk up to her. Say hi. Like we were *friends*.

We weren't friends.

In fact, we might have been the *opposite* of friends. Because when I'd approached her in the student union last week, she looked at me like I was a Montague bursting into her Capulet tower.

So when I saw Nessa at a party the Tuesday night before Thanksgiving break, I didn't dare approach her. Didn't dare smile, wave, or acknowledge her presence. And it was too bad I didn't also have the self-control to not even dare to look at her. Because *goddamn*.

She liked layers. I'd noticed that. Skirts with tights and sweaters thrown haphazardly over collared shirts. On lazier days, it was graphic tees under oversized cardigans and jeans with holes.

But tonight Nessa wore a tight skirt with heeled boots and a shirt hanging off one shoulder, leaving it bare besides the exposed strap of a lacy bra. And the whole combination was just...*goddamn*.

She stood beside Beau, the chill-ass Asian dude who seemed perpetually unbothered and unapologetically happy in an almost weird sort of way. Happiness wasn't really the name of the game on college campuses, even with naive freshman who were all pressing snooze through their reality check wake-up call. But Beau's mood was infectious.

He was the life of the party—literally. This place would be dead without him. He'd brought the speakers, the booze, the playlist. Everything. I wanted to know how the hell he even knew Julian.

This was Jules' crappy house, and he only associated with other football players and his dealer. The guy wasn't pretentious, though; Julian Briggs was just a lazy shithead who never went anywhere.

But now Julian and Beau were standing in the cramped living room with their arms around each other's shoulders, slinging back beers like the world was ending and it was their last chance to drink alcohol. They laughed together like they'd been friends since the third grade. And Nessa watched them, a sly smile on her face, barely hidden by a red Solo cup.

I turned around, shoving down the annoying jealousy that Julian had Nessa's attention.

Well, and Beau. But that didn't bother me. When it came to Nessa, he threw out big bro vibes, narrowing his eyes at any guy that leered a little too creepily at his friend.

Ah, fuck. I might be one of the creeps. Although, Beau hadn't glared at me. Yet.

I slammed my own beer bottle down on the kitchen counter, sighing overdramatically. It would be my one and only drink for the night, and it was already lukewarm, making me want to ditch it.

I took one more sip for good measure before promptly spewing it all out into the sink when a hand thumped on my back.

"Shots, Gray!" Julian's voice slurred in my ear.

Spinning to face him, I found his bloodshot eyes only inches from mine. They nearly matched his ginger hair, blazing through the dim kitchen lighting and glowing in comparison to his pale, lightly freckled skin.

"Dude," I said, "your breath reeks."



And that was an understatement. I tried to take a step back, but Jules had trapped me in the corner.

"Shots, Everett. *Now*."

"You might be my captain, but we're officially on break, and you can't order me to drink. Just do laps."

The only place Julian Briggs wasn't a lazy ass was the football field. He didn't fit the mold of a D1 football captain, but he was a damn good player, a damn good friend, and a damn good motivator. And right now, he was using his skills of persuasion to get me to take shots, pressing salted-rimmed glasses of tequila into my hand.

"Just one, man," he whined.

"How about just *none*," I said, ditching the shot glass on the countertop before ducking past Jules.

Julian shouted something after me, but I didn't catch what it was. As soon as I'd slipped away from the sweaty, drunk junior, all my senses were preoccupied with a dark-haired beauty—a girl I'd slammed against the kitchen island in my attempt to escape taking shots.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Nessa snapped, staring down at the spilled contents of her drink, which had splashed over the old laminate countertop. "I just came in here and refilled that."

"Shit, I'm sorry," I mumbled before attempting to make an impossible retreat. The kitchen was jam-packed with partiers, and I found myself stuck with Nessa's body pressed right up against mine. So maybe I was *not* actually sorry about it.

Nessa leaned back, resting one palm on the island behind her. She was doing it to try to distance herself from me, that much was clear, but the result was her hips lifting to brush against my crotch.

Fuck, this wasn't going to end well for me.

"Is that all you football players know how to do?"

"Huh?"

Nessa scoffed and took a sip of whatever was left in her drink. "Tackle people," she said, rolling her eyes.

I laughed. "I'm a wide receiver."

Her face scrunched up. "Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"It means I don't really tackle—"

"I SAID SHOTS, EVERETT."

"And I said *no*, Julian! Shut the fuck up, man," I yelled, briefly taking my gaze off Nessa to catch Jules pounding tequila out of the corner of my eye.

"Well, isn't that a lovely way to talk to your friends? And the host," Nessa drawled, pulling my attention back to her.

Her lashes flicked upward as I looked over at her, and big, brown eyes landed on my face as she sipped from her cup again. I wondered how drunk she was or if she was even drunk at all. She must be. I mean, she was talking to me without running away.

Well, she was mocking me. Talking to me, but mocking me.

Eh, I'd take it.

"Nessa, you have a very low opinion of me, don't you?" I couldn't help but ask.

That seemed to surprise her. She straightened a bit, and I relaxed from the bit of distance awarded between my dick and Nessa Elez's body.

She sniffed. "I don't even know you, Grayson. How could I have formed an opinion of you?"

God, it shouldn't have made me this happy that she'd remembered who I was this time. But I played it off, shrugging. "I've been asking myself the same question."

Nessa narrowed her eyes in response, assessing me for...hell, I didn't know what. But her gaze was critical as fuck.

I had to break eye contact, though. I had to because it was already sweltering in Julian's house, and the intensity of how she looked me over was causing me to sweat even more. So I glanced over her shoulder instead, pausing when I noticed a dude in a Grateful Dead shirt leaning against the refrigerator.

His eyes were glued to us.

When he noticed me looking, he quickly took an interest in his bottle of beer.

"Shit."

The low swear came from Nessa, and I lowered my gaze to her again. She held her phone in both hands, her plastic cup clenched between her front teeth.

I reached out, grabbing it from her so it didn't spill. More.

Nessa allowed me to take the drink without looking up from her phone, too busy texting furiously. When she was done, she sighed before pushing the phone back into her pocket. She glanced up at me.

"Thanks," she muttered, and for some reason, a light blush tinged her cheeks. She reached for her drink.

Something possessed me to pull the cup back at the last moment, keeping it out of her reach. Nessa frowned, but it was kind of adorable. Like a pout.

"What are you drinking?" I asked, tilting my head as I looked down at her. Hell, I just wanted to keep the conversation going.

She blinked quickly three times in a row, her mouth opening without sound.

Who knew why the cat had suddenly gotten Nessa's sharp tongue, but I raised a brow at her silence. Slowly, I took a sip from her drink, refusing to release those brown eyes while I did. They widened and then narrowed in response as I let the woody, smokey taste hit my tongue and burn my throat.

"A whiskey girl?" I asked softly, lowering the drink as leisurely as I'd raised it.

She swallowed before snatching the cup back from me. "Are you surprised?"

I snorted. "No."

Nessa paused, watching me from behind the security of her drink. Her tongue flicked out, catching a droplet of whiskey coke before it fell off the plastic rim.

And I stared. Probably too intensely, but I couldn't help it.

It felt like I'd taken a million tequila shots with Julian. That was how Nessa made my head spin.

Clearing her throat, Nessa snapped out of it and reached into her pocket to grab her phone again. She unlocked it and rolled her eyes. "I have to go make a call," she mumbled before glancing around, searching the room with a frown. "If you see Beau, tell him I stepped outside."

I nodded. "Alright."

Nessa squeezed past me, and I fell back into the corner where I'd started. A hand clapped onto my shoulder. I knew it was Jules without even looking. I was too busy watching Nessa walk away, slipping through the jam of people until she reached the back door.

I was about to turn around and face the music that was Julian Briggs when the dude with the Grateful Dead shirt caught my eye.

He was following Nessa out the door.