

# Midnight Rhapsody

**NESSA**

***A/N: if you haven't read *It Burns Within Us*, this chapter will contain spoilers. Just FYI!***

Beau really didn't do things half-assed. Like when I asked for him to save me, I didn't expect *this*.

I didn't expect him to show up at my house with his Range Rover, apologize to my mom for interrupting while she unloaded her Black Friday steals, and then convincingly insist that we needed to check on Bren and Madie. Because he was worried.

Beau wasn't worried.

The only thing he was worried about was whether he would lose fifty bucks because I'd bet him on the way to LA that our roommates would be all over each other by the time we got there.

A few hours on the road, and Beau and I were bursting into his parents' Malibu beach house, with its sleek interior design and floor-to-ceiling windows.

And its *busy* occupants.

We probably should have given them a heads up that we were coming; they'd undoubtedly been in the middle of something. But I couldn't find it in me to feel sorry, couldn't get the smile to wipe from my face. I'd been waiting for this—for Bren and Madie to finally get their shit together.

Madie Lenertz was sweet in a way I'd never understand, considering what she'd gone through. She should have this tough, hardened exterior that was a challenge to get beneath. But Madie had always been warm and welcoming from the minute we moved in together this fall.

Honestly, I should have done more to prod her soft-hearted soul, to get her to come to her senses. To build up a wall that was sometimes necessary. But I'd been too hesitant to get involved and uncertain of what I should do. We hadn't known each other *that* well yet.

But still, I'd known she was in trouble.

And soon, it was too late. Before long, I found myself sitting in a hospital room, watching Madie recover from a brain bleed. And it was all thanks to Quinton Reed. Madie's boyfriend. Middle linebacker of the Oakland State football team. Abusive, controlling piece of shit.

I sat next to a half-conscious Madie for days, watching as she looked for the one boy who made her feel safe.

Not Quinton.

Hell no, not Quinton.

Bren.

The guy who I swore dreamed of giving Madie everything she didn't even know she wanted.

Honestly, even though Bren was Beau's roommate, and Madie was mine, sometimes it felt like I knew Bren better. Or at least I understood him better.

Bren was rough around the edges, unassuming and quiet unless it was about how much he hated school or douchey football players. He had an attitude and secrets and walls. Really tall walls with heavy doors and padlocks, all guarding...god, I didn't even want to know what was behind Bren's walls. I probably wouldn't ever know, either. Madie was the only one with a key.

But I understood why he had walls even if I didn't understand what was behind them. Walls made sense to me.

I was pretty sure that Bren had been the one who'd given Madie the final push to leave Quinton. Which had racked him with guilt because Quinton's response to the break-up was to smash her head into a wall. I'd seen the guilt, all-consuming in Bren's dark brown eyes when I'd arrived at the emergency room, and he muttered that Madie needed surgery. He'd had so much guilt that he tried to run away from Madie and Oakland altogether.

But Beau convinced him to come back. Because Quinton had still been on campus, meaning Madie wasn't safe to return to Oakland State when she was released from her hospital stay.

So now they were here. Together, in Malibu.

In a sense, they were hiding. But with one look at their smiles as we all settled on the back patio, the ocean whirring around us, I knew it was more than that.

They were living.

And judging by the way Bren's arm kept curling around Madie's waist, they were very clearly together. Which meant Beau totally lost his fifty bucks.

Bren's possessiveness only increased as the night wore on. Bottles of beer were continually emptied, and laughter constantly sounded. Beau made a fire on the beach, and by the time we settled in the sand with the stars twinkling above us, Bren was completely drunk. And completely unable to keep his hands off Madie.

We'd been staring up at the sky when she drifted off, and now Bren stroked her strawberry-blond hair as she slept in his lap. Watching them, a sudden pang of *pain* hit me square in the chest.

Not because I felt anything towards Bren. I mean, Bren was attractive in that sort of way that I typically went crazy for, and I *had* gone crazy for it one of the first weekends in Oakland. But then I realized that he was head over heels for my roommate, which fizzled out any remaining feelings I had.

No, watching them didn't hurt because it was Bren. Or because it was Madie. And it wasn't just the intimacy or the clear, utter devotion in his gaze.

It was the natural ease of it. The obvious trust between the two of them. They had something more than flirtation, more than desire, more than anything I'd ever known.

It was something real.

"Dude," Beau said, laughing as he took a sip of his beer. "You're so gone."

Bren grinned, and it was so broad that it almost looked goofy on his usually solemn face. "Drunk?"

"No, like *gone*. She's got you wrapped around her finger."

"Oh, completely," Bren agreed with ease, glancing down at Madie with a softened smile. When he looked back up at us, he raised his beer bottle to the sky, and his words slurred off the tip of his tongue. "If by some grace of God I make it out of college alive, I'm gonna marry this girl," he announced.

Beau blinked a few times, obviously taken aback.

I wasn't, though.

"Holy shit, man," Beau muttered.

Bren shrugged before taking a sip of his drink. "It's true."

"The Bren sitting before me is not the same Bren who was sitting, smoking cigarettes in his garage in Fresno. The Bren whose ass I almost had to kick to come here."

"Yeah, I know," Bren said with a rueful grin. "A lot has happened since you last saw me. Madie and I..." He shook his head. "A lot has happened, okay?"

"Does she know?" I asked, unable to stop myself. The third whiskey-coke that Beau mixed for me had loosened my tongue, and I wanted all the details.

Bren cocked his head to the side. "Know what?"

I rolled my eyes. "That you freaking love her, Bren."

Bren made a face at that. "No."

"But you do," I insisted. It was supposed to be a question, but it didn't come out that way. Because it was apparent to anyone who looked at him right now, cradling Madie's head in his lap.

Bren chuckled and ran a hand through his shaggy hair. He sighed. It was wistful, which didn't really make sense to me because he *had* Madie. She'd been right there, clinging to him, grinning at him all night.

"Like Beau said, I'm a goner," he muttered.

There was a moment as we took that in, his casual declaration. The waves crashed on the shore, and the air whipped around the fire, making it crackle. A firefly buzzed by my ear, and then there was a short release of breath, either from Bren or Beau.

The sounds all mixed together like a sweet midnight rhapsody.

"You should tell her," I said finally. Softly. "I think she probably loves you too. I think a part of her has loved you since that day you asked her to get coffee with you."

Bren dismissed my suggestion with a shake of his head. "I don't want to scare her off so soon."

I snorted as Madie snuggled deeper into the sand and Bren. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I wondered if she was awake enough to hear us. "I doubt that would happen."

"Just let me love her quietly for a bit," Bren replied, his husky voice barely audible as he looked down at Madie again.

And with that, I dropped it. How could I not?

Like, holy shit. My parents were the only other couple who I'd seen look at each other like Bren was looking at Madie right now. Maybe it was the alcohol or the ocean air, or perhaps it was just Madie herself, but Bren's walls were falling down.

***And holy shit.***

Madie deserved love like that, though.

I wasn't sure if I did.

With a slow groan, I threw myself onto the ground, cringing as I thought of all the sand in the hair. I had on my beanie, though, so at least my scalp would be protected. And the stars were pretty, even if they were a bit faint.

A muffled chime alerted me to my phone, which sat in the sand beside me. I peeked over, seeing it light up with a text message from an unknown number.

But I instantly knew who it was because it read:

**Something you said to your brother stuck out to me.**

Seriously? He wanted to bring that up *now*? I swiveled my head to gaze back up at the sky with its shifting clouds. Like hell was I ruining this perfect moment with my sandy hair and my faint stars to text Grayson Everett back.

*Grayson: You said we live on the same floor.*

Wow, he didn't even wait like one minute before sending a follow-up text. That didn't necessarily surprise me, though.

Sighing, I decided to reply, but *only* to point out his ridiculousness.

*Me: Grayson, it's almost one in the morning.*

*Grayson: I know. I can tell time, Nessa.*

"Oh my god, this guy," I muttered beneath my breath.

*Me: I didn't realize when I gave you my number that you would randomly text me in the middle of the night.*

*Grayson: And I didn't realize you knew we lived on the same floor.*

Oh, shit. My inebriated brain hadn't caught what he'd been trying to say the first time around. But it's not like I had purposefully stalked Grayson only to find out that we lived five doors down. I just happened to see him coming out of his room last week...and then had shrunk back inside mine until he'd disappeared.

*Me: Well, did you know?*

Putting it back on him seemed like a good idea.

*Grayson: Yeah, I've seen you walking to your room a few times.*

*Me: But you didn't say hi? I'm hurt.*

Okay, I wasn't hurt. But I was a little surprised, knowing how outgoing Grayson typically was.

*Grayson: Um, when I walked up to you the two times before that, you looked at me like you'd rather watch paint dry than talk to me.*

I rolled my eyes before another text popped up.

*Grayson: A guy can take a hint and know when to back down.*

That made me snort, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Beau glance over, curious. But I ignored him.

*Me: That last part has to be a joke.*

*Grayson: Not a joke.*

*Me: You seduced me into your car with coffee the other morning, if you recall.*

*Grayson: Well yeah, but that was after you kissed me.*

Good lord. Was he ever going to let this kiss go?

*Me: You know I only kissed you because I wanted to piss Jack off and make him go away, right?*

*Grayson: That might be why you kissed me, but it wasn't why you moaned in my mouth.*

I threw my phone back in the sand with a groan, which caught Beau's attention.

"Nessa, who the hell are you talking to?"

"My sister."

The lie came out of my mouth so effortless, so seamlessly. And I wasn't even sure why I felt the need to say it. Reluctantly, I picked up my phone again, once again ignoring Beau. And his look of disbelief.

*Me: I hate you.*

*Grayson: No, you hate the truth.*

*Me: Which is?*

I bit down on my lip as soon as I sent the text and immediately followed up with another one.

***Me: Never mind. Don't answer that.***

***Grayson: Why not?***

***Me: Because I just know you're going to say something dirty.***

***Grayson: I think you just exposed yourself, Adler.***

"I'm going to—*ugh*," I hissed, causing Beau and Bren both to chuckle. Thankfully it was dark enough that the heat that burst onto my cheeks would go unnoticed. Or I could blame it on the fire.

Even though it had nothing to do with the fire.

"Tell your sister to go to bed," Beau called over to me. "Isn't it like way past her bedtime? How old is she, like twelve?"

"Fourteen," I muttered before giving my attention back to my phone, typing furiously not.

***Me: If you're going to keep calling me by my middle name, you need to tell me yours.***

***Grayson: No chance in hell.***

Did I just uncover a flaw?

***Me: Okay, now I really need to know.***

***Grayson: Look at that, it's getting late.***

***Me: Tell me, Everett.***

***Grayson: I'm not telling you my middle name, and you can't call me Everett, either.***

***Me: Why?***

***Grayson: You're not my coach. Or my teammate. Really ruins the mood.***

***Me: I didn't know there was a mood to ruin.***

***Grayson: That's just your denial talking again.***

I needed to go back to my original plan of not talking to this guy.

***Me: Maybe you were right. It is getting late.***

***Grayson: Goodnight, Nessa.***

I shook my head while staring at my phone, and then Grayson texted me again. And I wished I could have withheld the slight grin that drunkenly appeared on my face at seeing it.

*Grayson: I hope you sleep well.*

Sighing, I dropped my phone and stared back up at the sky. The wind blew over me, tickling my skin deliciously. I was a bit tipsy and content, but even the alcohol couldn't mask the twinge of disappointment that lingered.

I loved it here. Loved being with Bren, Madie, and Beau. But I'd wanted to be home this weekend.

Home *without* the people, though? Then it was just a house. And as much as I enjoyed staring at the stuffed animals my grandparents had gotten me when I was nine, I didn't really care to make a weekend out of it.

Hopefully, Christmas break would be better. It was only a few weeks away, and then I'd make Piper decorate the tree with me even if she complained about it the entire time.

Until then, I would enjoy the ocean and my friends.

And the occasional text from an annoyingly handsome football player.