

Playing The Part

NESSA

My mom had a smooth, deep voice. It was the kind of voice that either demanded attention or put a man to sleep, depending on how she chose to wield it.

Her voice was her weapon. And her money-maker. Literally.

Momma Elez was an audiobook narrator.

Which meant I had to be careful when diving into my Audible account for a spicy read. Like hell was I going to listen to my mom describe how some character named Hannah cried out when he *hit her just right*.

But right now, my mom's voice was driving me up the goddamn wall. There was nothing more irritating than listening to someone else have a voice of reason when you were fucking pissed.

"You can just take the bus on Thursday morning," she said calmly. "I saw there's one leaving around ten. What's wrong with that?"

"Because Thursday morning is Thanksgiving, mom. And Piper and I always watch the Macy's Day Parade." I sighed. Spotting a nearby windowsill, I set my drink on it before turning around to stare at the empty street. I leaned against the siding of Julian Brigg's house. "Not to mention there are creeps on the bus."

"When I was your age—"

"Do *not* finish that sentence."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, maybe because it's not 1985 anymore."

My mom chuckled, and I rolled my eyes. She was so unbothered, and I was so...bothered.

"Wednesday," she began, and I rolled my eyes again at the use of my full name. "We overbooked ourselves, and I'm sorry. But we can't come and get you tomorrow."

"Why can't dad go to his thing with the Harroldsons without you?"

"Because they're expecting me, and that would be rude."

"I'm expecting you."

Mostly I was annoyed because I'd had my eye on this 2015 Nissan this summer, planning to buy it before coming to Oakland. I *knew* this would happen, and I wanted to get ahead of it. Unfortunately, scheduling and organization had never been the forte of the Elez family.

But my parents talked me out of getting the car. They said they'd pick me up for breaks and that I should save the money because college tuition was expensive enough without car payments.

"It won't happen again."

That was a bold-ass lie.

"Wednesday!"

Oops, said that aloud.

That was what I got for calling my mom after downing a whiskey-coke. But she started texting about not coming to get me tomorrow, and I didn't even think twice before coming out here and picking up my phone.

"Fine. I'll take the bus home on Thursday," I mumbled, unhappy with the results of this conversation. I'd stormed outside all convinced that I'd get her to change her mind, but I should have known better.

We hung up, and I immediately let out a scream as something brushed against the top of my shoulder.

A low chuckle reached my ears, and I looked behind me to see the curly-haired hipster who I'd met at a party last weekend. *Jack? John?*

"Hey, didn't mean to startle you," he said, keeping his hand on my shoulder awkwardly.

I looked him up and down quick, taking in the Grateful Dead t-shirt and ripped, black jeans. I was surprised I didn't notice him here before; he didn't exactly fit in.

"Never a good idea to sneak up on a girl alone at night," I replied dryly.

"Yeah, my bad." He said the words without an ounce of remorse for the heart attack he'd nearly caused. "I'm surprised to see you here. I didn't peg you as a football party kind of girl."

I raised a brow. "And I didn't peg you as a football party kind of guy."

Jack—*John?*—and I sat in his room last weekend for at least an hour, ditching out on the party that his roommates had thrown so we could watch *Game of Thrones*. This guy was

completely my type: nerdy, attractive dudes who have barely an ounce of self-awareness but a whole lot to talk about.

And so I'd enjoyed myself.

Until he tried to get handsy, and it felt *off*. So I bolted out there faster than Daenerys on her fucking dragon.

I should have known better. Never trust a guy whose name starts with J.

He shrugged. "I got roped into coming with a few friends."

"Where are they?" I asked, shifting on my feet and shrugging my shoulder up to try to get him to drop his hand.

He didn't get the message.

And it was making me really uncomfortable.

Looking into this guys' face—hazel eyes, round nose, protruding lip piercing—I wasn't sure why I'd ever felt comfortable with him to begin with. I supposed it probably had something to do with how I really thought he only wanted to chill when I first met him last Saturday. Like *just* chill.

And now I knew that wasn't the case.

He jerked his head toward the house. "They're inside."

"Oh," I said, my voice sounding breathy to my own ears. "I was just heading back inside myself."

And then, because I couldn't think of anything else to say, I began to turn around, intending to bolt. Again. *Let's ride, Drogon.*

His grip on my shoulder tightened. "Wait—"

I cut him off, my voice shaking slightly. "Look, I'm going back inside."

He took a step closer to me, and I instinctively retreated. "Nessa, I just—"

"*There* you are, baby."

Whipping my head in the direction of the new voice, I spotted those bright white shoes first. Walking toward me with purpose. Wait, toward me? Was he talking to *me*?

And then I raised my gaze, and I saw his eyes trained on me with unwavering precision.

I opened my mouth, but Grayson cut me off.

"I've been looking for you," he said, murmuring the words with the softest, most endearing tone I've ever heard. And if *that* didn't shock me into silence, the way he strode up to me, brushed Jack's hand aside, and pulled my body into his arms definitely did the trick.

Two strong hands flattened onto the small of my back, and they tugged me face-first into a hard, muscled wall of a chest. I gasped, and before I knew it, my own hands betrayed me, acting of their own accord and flying up to encircle Grayson's neck.

I blinked up at him, and he was waiting. He was waiting for me to look at him.

Because then he *winked*.

His cheeky grin quickly vanished as he turned to stare Jack down. "You're not having a problem with this guy, are you, babe?"

Even though he'd glanced away, Grayson directed the question at me, and I ignored the confusing swirl of emotions in the pit of my stomach.

I needed to push Grayson away. I needed to tell Jack off myself. I needed to just go back inside and find Beau and—

"Nessa?" Grayson asked, swiveling back to look down at me again. And holy shit, he had the concerned boyfriend look *down*. His eyes swirled with warmth, and his attention was wholly focused. On me. He lifted a hand, and a finger grazed beneath my chin. And then along my jaw. "Is there a problem I can help with?" he murmured.

I *knew* it was fake. But no one had ever touched me like this, and I couldn't help but lean in.

"No," I said, my voice soft. Lost in...something.

"That's good," he replied, just as quiet.

"I was just coming to find you," I said, forgetting my plans to push Grayson away. To stand up for myself on my own. Something possessed me to play along, instead. Grayson might be a pompous jock, but he was a hell of a lot better than dealing with Jack.

He didn't make me feel unsafe. For some reason, it was the opposite.

"You were?" Grayson replied, raising a brow. There was a hint of hopefulness in his voice—almost like he'd forgotten this was all an act. But then it caught up with him, and he chuckled to himself. He ducked his head lower, and his nose brushed against mine.

"Yeah," I said absentmindedly. My brain was too busy trying to calculate all of the places he was touching me right now and why every single one of them felt *good*.

Alcohol. The answer was always alcohol.

"Oh, *that's* why you're at a football party," Jack called out. Gravel crunched beneath his feet as he walked backward, retreating to the house again. "You're screwing one of the players. I should have known."

Oh, fuck this guy. Like hell was I going to let his scruffy, hipster ass just walk off after that.

I tried to launch myself out of Grayson's arms, intending to storm over to Jack, but Grayson held tight.

"He's just being a jerk because you rejected him," he breathed in my ear. "Let him go."

But Jack sneered at me from across the driveway, and goddamnit, I wanted nothing more than to kick him in the balls. He was barely taller than me, and he definitely spent more time on Reddit than in the gym. I could take him.

"Nessa," Grayson said, a little more firm this time. He gave my chin a little nudge to get my attention.

I jerked my gaze up to his and did the first thing I thought of.

The first thing I thought of that would piss Jack off.

The first thing I thought of when I saw Grayson's concerned expression.

The first thing I thought of when I felt his hand cup my face.

I kissed him.

Grayson's lips were frozen beneath mine for only a split second before he kissed me back, and I knew immediately this was a terrible mistake. A terrible, beautiful mistake. The hand that had been cupping my face tilted it further, and the arm around my waist pulled me in closer. And suddenly, every part of me was fused to him, to this irritating, handsome football boy.

Skillfully, Grayson coaxed my lips apart, and his tongue slipped in to brush against mine. Shivers erupted across my skin. No, deeper than that. A wave of feeling tore through my chest. And lower, too. I moaned, and it was loud enough that I'd certainly be embarrassed about it later. But right now, I didn't care. Right now, all I cared about was making Grayson moan, too.

I pulled back, pressing my lips to his briefly. Once. Twice. And on the third kiss, I ran my tongue along the seam of his lips, and he immediately parted them so I could kiss him more thoroughly. He smelled like woody, smokey cologne and tasted like a combination of grainy beer and a hint of whiskey. *My* whiskey. And it only heightened my drunkenness.

I didn't even think I was that drunk. Apparently, I was wrong.

Grayson rewarded me with a low groan, just like I'd wanted.

"Fuck, Nessa," he muttered before grabbing both sides of my face and dragging me even closer. As if we hadn't already had each other's tongues down our throats.

But this kiss was my lifeline, and nothing else mattered.

"What a bitch," Jack scoffed.

"Ignore him," Grayson breathed against my mouth. He took a step forward, forcing me back against the side of Julian's house.

"Gladly," I replied before tangling my hand into the short hairs at the nape of his neck and urging his lips back onto mine. Grayson eagerly followed my lead, kissing me like he didn't realize a kiss could be this good.

Or maybe that was me.

I didn't know what was up or what was down, but I did know that Grayson's hips were grinding against mine. And goddamn—

"I'll kick his ass later if you want," Grayson added through heavy breaths.

"It's not worth it."

I didn't give a shit about Jack anymore.

A screen door slammed.

"I think he's gone," I said, breathless.

"I think you're right," Grayson agreed before reapplying his efforts to kiss me. His lips caressed mine twice more before they began to trail off, kissing my jawline. And then beneath it. And then I was arching back, allowing him to lower his mouth even further.

"We should—" I was cut off, gasping as Grayson's lips hit that perfect spot on my neck, sucking lightly. "Stop."

I didn't sound very convincing. I wasn't sure I *wanted* to sound very convincing.

"Ten more seconds," he said with a pleading groan.

I couldn't help but laugh, and his lips broke away from my skin with his own deep chuckle.

"Sorry." He didn't look very sorry, though. A satisfied smirk had settled on his face as he took a step back.

Shaking my head, I pushed away from the side of the house and tried to regain a sense of—well, any *sense* at all. Logic, rather.

Grayson didn't really have anything to apologize for. I was the one who'd attacked him. He'd just played along.

It wasn't that I was surprised that I'd done it—I'd had my fair share of impulsive kisses before. It was more that I couldn't believe how much I'd *enjoyed* it.

How much I still craved it.

My heart was pounding, and it was *wild*.

I spun around, unable to look at Grayson anymore. I grabbed for my drink, which was still perched on the windowsill where I'd left it. And I was about to take a sip when it was plucked from my hand.

Turning back to the thief, I glared at Grayson. He held my cup with a frown.

"What is it with you and stealing my drink?" I scolded, mimicking his frown and perching a hand on one hip.

God, he was annoying. He just went around doing anything he wanted with that hot swagger of his. Drinking other people's drinks and pretending to be other people's boyfriends.

I couldn't believe I'd kissed him.

And even worse, I liked it.

Actually, that wasn't the worst part.

The worst part was that it was the best kiss I'd had in a long time.

And not a single part of it had been real.

It was an act. Probably one of Grayson's many plays in his playbook. And I couldn't even be upset about it. I'd jumped right in. Caught the pass he was throwing.

Football boy was just a player, after all.



ahhhh a kiss in the fourth chapter?

This is so unlike me, I can't



please tell me your thoughts!

ps a few people have asked about where we are at on the timeline right now. so this is right before Nessa and Beau went to visit Madie and Bren at the beach house. hope that helps!

xoxo

A Risky Play

GRAYSON

It was a calculated risk, walking up to Nessa like that.

But standing there and doing nothing hadn't been an option. Not when that guy had moved in, cornering her. Not when I could *feel* how uncomfortable she was.

There were other options, though, besides the whole pretending she was mine thing.

Telling that asshole off had definitely been at the top of the list. Colorful language sat on the tip of my tongue, my fists primed and ready to throw a few punches. But I had this inkling that Nessa Elez wasn't the kind of girl who wanted men to barge in and fight her fights.

I'd thought about just asking her if she needed help. Like a sensible person might. I thought about shouting over to them from my place by the door. But then what would I have done if—*when*—she'd said no? Walk away? Yeah, fuck that.

Striding up to Nessa and throwing her into my arms had been a calculated risk. But I'd always been a fan of the motto *no risk, no rewards*. And man, did it ever hold true tonight.

Fucking hell, it paid off.

Because Nessa didn't just kiss me, she *kissed* me. She moaned in my mouth, tugged on my hair, and did things with her tongue that had me hard within seconds.

And it pretty much solidified the idea that I needed this girl. Christ, I needed her in so many ways. I barely knew her, but we could fix that.

I was going to fix it right now.

"Grayson, give me my drink."

Well, I was going to fix it right after I dumped out her drink. Tipping it over, I ignored Nessa's outstretched hand. Her brows furrowed as she watched the whiskey mix run into the grass that lined the driveway.

"What the hell?"

We both lifted our gazes at the same time, and Nessa glared at me, crossing her arms over her chest. Already swollen lips pressed together, and I barely withheld a groan at how badly I wanted to feel them again. Taste them.

She tasted like whiskey and wildness.

"I'm going to tell Beau you dumped out his good shit," she said, pouting.

"And *I'm* going to tell Beau that some creepy guy followed you outside and could have put something in your drink when you weren't paying attention."

She scoffed. "You think Jack was gonna try to drug me?"

"I think I'd rather not find out. I feel like you'd be a disaster to try to get back to your room if you were drugged."

"You're so sweet," she said mockingly, pinching her face together. But then her expression softened, and she kicked at a loose rock, sending it flying across the empty street.

It was a cool evening. Perfect sweatshirt weather. Julian lived a few blocks off-campus, so it was a relatively busy area for college kids to roam about. But his house was also nestled against a dead end, and traffic was virtually nonexistent. Except for his neighbors, of course—a few elderly couples who I doubted could even hear the loud house music without their hearing aids in.

"Thank you," Nessa murmured, and I jerked out of my musings. Her head was down as she stared at the rocks in the driveway, nudging them with her foot. "He was making me nervous."

I cleared my throat, resisting the urge to pull her back into my embrace. "I could tell."

She looked up at that, eyes wide. Vulnerability leaked through them.

"I saw him follow you outside," I confessed, keeping my voice soft. At the moment, it looked like she could be easily spooked. "Decided to check on things. Only creeps follow a girl outside alone at night."

A humorless laugh bubbled up from her throat. "That's what I said."

I nodded and leaned against the side of the house, throwing one hand in my pocket. "Yeah, my moms taught me better than to do shit like that."

Her head tilted to the side. "Moms?"

"Moms," I affirmed and laughed when she still looked confused. "They're called lesbians, Nessa."

Nessa's hands flew up to cover her face, and I noticed her short, shiny black nails. They dug into her forehead a bit. "Oh my god," she groaned. "I'm sorry. That was dumb."

"Who was he?" I asked. She was embarrassed, and she didn't need to be. I wanted to distract her.

And I also wanted to know who the fuck he was.

Nessa shook her head with a roll of her eyes. "Some guy I met at a party last weekend. I ditched him after—" Her voice cut off as she glanced away. The hand in my pocket clenched back into a fist because I just *knew*.

"After what?"

"Doesn't matter."

I pushed off the side of the house, intending to—well, I wasn't quite sure. But before I could reach out to Nessa, she threw her hands up. "He just got a little handsy, and I wasn't feeling it, okay?"

I rocked to a halt, shoving my other hand in my pocket, too.

"Okay." *No, not okay.* "Are you alright?"

She nodded, and I knew that was all I was going to get from her.

Swallowing, I wished I had something to wash down the dryness in my throat. At least if I had a drink, I would have something to do except stare at Nessa and think about things I shouldn't be thinking about.

"I overheard the end of your conversation on the phone," I said after clearing my throat.

Nessa rolled her eyes, which I realized might be her favorite thing to do. That was fine with me; it was oddly hot. Well, it might just be that *she* was hot, but whatever.

"Yeah, that was my mom," she muttered. "My parents were supposed to come get me tomorrow. But something came up."

"Where are you from?"

"Patterson."

Hell yes.

Trying not to look too eager, I forced myself to take two steps back again. "I'm going home tomorrow. To Modesto. Patterson isn't that far out of the way. Want a ride?"

"Oh, I—" Nessa clamped her mouth shut just as quickly as she'd opened it to protest. She frowned, and indecision flickered through her eyes.

"No," she finally said, but the tiny word was drawn out as if she couldn't quite decide if it was the correct answer. "No, that's okay."

I raised a brow. "You don't really want to ride the bus."

"I barely know you."

It was my turn to roll my eyes. After they'd made it one full rotation, I fixed them on Nessa, flashing her with a look.

On the one hand, she wasn't wrong. And that was exactly why I wanted to drive her home. Over an hour of uninterrupted time with the punchy, hot Nessa Elez? Fuck yes.

But also, her tongue was just wrapped around mine. So we did know each other a *little* bit.

Her cheeks flamed. "Stop staring at me like that. I *don't* know you."

I shrugged, dropping my gaze at her request. Even though I liked the way it made her face all rosy. "You don't know the bus driver, either," I said, looking out at the empty street. "And you'd trust his ass to deliver you safely to Patterson?"

"He gets *paid* to do that."

A low chuckle made its way out of me as I glanced back at her. "So you're saying that you'd trust me more if you were paying me? I could get on board with that."

She rolled her eyes.

Shit. Yeah, that *really* did something for me.

"Well, yeah," Nessa said. "I would obviously pay you for gas."

"I was thinking of something other than money."

Nessa crossed the distance between us with one step and hit my chest. But I captured her hand before she could snatch it away. Her eyes widened as I pressed her palm to my chest and held it there. This girl must have forgotten that I was pretty good at catching things, and that went for punches, too.

"Not *that*," I laughed, ignoring the dirty thoughts that sprung into my head.

She tugged her hand away with more force than was really necessary. "Oh," she said, dripping with sarcasm, "I suppose now you're going to tell me that you don't need to do favors to get sex, right?"

"No." I shook my head with a laugh, and she cocked hers to the side. "I would never say anything as douchey as that," I added.

The corner of Nessa's mouth tilted up. "So it isn't true, then?"

"Didn't say that, either," I replied with a wink.

Nessa glanced away with a wry, exasperated twist of her lips. "You're the worst," she muttered.

But she definitely didn't mean it. I could tell. If I really thought she meant it, I'd walk away right now and never try to shoot my shot with her again.

"I was thinking more along the lines of coffee," I said, bringing the conversation back around.

"Coffee?"

"For payment."

"You want me to buy you coffee?"

"No, I want you to let me buy *you* coffee. For the ride home."

There was a long pause while she tried to make sense of that. I couldn't help but smile. I wasn't really sure why the idea of coffee popped into my head, but I'd heard girls like guys who bring them coffee. And I was a guy who liked a girl. So here we were.

"I don't get it," she finally said.

"Because then it's a date," I filled in for her. "A car date, but a date nonetheless."

Nessa's mouth popped open. Her brown eyes narrowed, and incredulity leaked into her voice. "I'm not going to start *dating* you just so I can get a ride home."

I chuckled. "Has anyone ever told you that you have a flair for the dramatics?"

The incredulity shifted—a jump from offense to defense. "I'm not dramatic," she snapped.

"It's alright. I dig it," I said, shrugging and trying not to laugh as her eyes narrowed even further. "Nessa, I'm not asking you to start dating me. It's just *one* date. Although I'd gladly drive you home and back to campus for the rest of the year. I plan to head back to my moms' for most of the breaks and a few weekends."

I paused for a moment and took a step closer to her. She didn't take a step back. She smelled flowery and sweet. Nothing like how she'd tasted.

And that combination was sinfully appealing.

"All I ask," I continued softly, "is that you let me buy you a coffee for the ride."

Nessa didn't move besides flicking her eyes up to mine. "You're serious."

I dared to inch forward once more. Another calculated risk.

Again, Nessa stayed.

Raising my hand, I brushed her hair back, tucking it behind her ear—touching her like I'd done a few minutes ago when I had the chance to pretend she was mine. Nessa sucked in a breath. It was quiet, but so was the night. So I heard it.

Leaning down, I breathed in her uncovered ear. "I don't know about you, but that kiss...."

I trailed off, unable to find the words to describe it. That kiss destroyed me, but I couldn't say that. So I moved closer to her instead. Close enough that my lips grazed the curve of her ear. Close enough that I could feel her breath hit the side of my neck. Close enough to drive me crazy.

"Yeah," I said eventually, my voice hoarse. "I'm serious."

"If you're just doing this because you think it'll get me into bed with you at some point, you can forget that right now," she murmured, tilting her head so that our eyes connected.

I pulled back without breaking our gaze. "I would never dream—" A smirk slipped onto my lips. "Well, that's actually a lie. But I can't help my thoughts at night."

Nessa's hand flew up again, undoubtedly intent on giving me another playful slap. But I caught her wrist. Raised a brow. Swept my gaze down. "Can you, Nessa?"

"Yes," she bit out despite the flush on her cheeks.

"Oh, yeah?" Laughing, I dropped her hand and shoved my own in the pockets of my pants. I began to back away, heading to the back door. "So you're not going to think about that kiss at all before you fall asleep tonight, right?"

"Of course not."

As Nessa would say, that was a *bold-ass lie*.

I smiled at her, which seemed to drive her crazy. "If you say so. How does noon sound tomorrow?"

"Hey, now." She began to trail after me, pointing an accusatory finger in my direction. "I never said yes."

Formalities. We both knew she was going to take the offer. It was me or a bus packed with creeps.

God, I *hoped* she picked me.

"Do you want the rides or not?" I asked, indulging her.

She didn't say anything. She nibbled on her lip and stared at a spot over my head, but she didn't say anything. So I rephrased the question. "Would eleven work better?"

Nessa gave a little sniff, refusing to meet my eyes when she replied. "Noon works just fine."

I flashed her a grin. "See you then."

"I like caramel macchiatos!" she called after me, and *goddamn*, I'd never been so excited about coffee.

There was definitely a possibility that I would go broke this year, buying fancy-ass coffees for this snappy brunette.

But luckily, that was a risk I was more than willing to take.