



A MILLION KISSES IN YOUR LIFETIME

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MONICA MURPHY

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Monica Murphy is a *New York Times*, *USA Today* and international bestselling author. Her books have been translated in almost a dozen languages and have sold millions of copies worldwide. Both a traditionally published and independently published author, she writes young adult and new adult romance, as well as contemporary romance and women's fiction. She's also known as *USA Today* bestselling author Karen Erickson.

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PLAYLIST

“Pretty” - Coco & Clair Clair, Okthxbb
“I Hate U <3” - Slush Puppy
“Did We Change” - From Indian Lakes
“pink bubblegum” - lavi kou
“yeahyeahyeah” - Scotch Mist
“dream boi” - tara-bridget
“Deep in Yr Mind” - James Wyatt Crosby
“I’m Not in Love” - Kelsey Lu
“Are You In The Mood?” - Bay Fraction
“Forever” - Night Tapes

Find the rest of the **A MILLION KISSES IN YOUR
LIFETIME** playlist here: <https://spoti.fi/3McPHVu>

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ONE

CREW

IT'S BEEN THREE YEARS, four months, two days and a handful of hours since the first moment I set eyes on *her*.

The most beautiful girl I've ever seen.

The absolute bane of my existence.

She arrived at Lancaster Prep boarding school the first day of our freshman year, and no one knew who she was. Fresh and untested, open and accepting with that damn smile that seems permanently etched across her face. Every girl in our class immediately fell under her spell. Followed her everywhere she went. Desperately wanted to be her friend, even fought for the coveted spot of *best* friend. They copied her effortless style, and she set the school abuzz every time she wore her hair a different way or put on a new pair of earrings, for Christ's sake.

Even the older girls, the upperclassmen, were drawn to her. Completely captivated by a seemingly innocent green-eyed girl who has barely spoken ten words to me in the entirety of her time here.

I've heard from more than one person that I scare her. Intimidate her. I am everything she fears, as well she should.

I'd eat her up. Swallow her whole—enjoy every second of it, too.

And she knows it.

We are opposites in every single way you can think of, yet we're also unspoken equals. It's the weirdest fucking thing.

She is a leader they all follow, and she quietly rules the school, just like me. Her crown is light though. Made of spun glass and airy effervescence and with zero expectations. While mine is heavy and cumbersome, reminding me of my duty to the family. To the name.

To the Lancasters.

We're one of the richest families in the country, if not the world. Our legacy goes back generations. I own this school—literally—and everyone in it. With the exception of one person.

She won't even look at me.

"Why you staring?"

I don't bother looking in my best friend, Ezra Cahill's direction when he asks me that stupid question. We're at the front entrance of the school Monday after Thanksgiving break, the crisp early morning air cold enough to penetrate through my thick wool jacket. I should've worn a heavier coat. And I sure as hell am not going inside. Not yet.

I do this almost every single morning: wait for the queen's arrival, for the day she actually acknowledges me.

Currently, I'm running at a zero percent rate of acknowledgement.

"I'm not staring," I finally tell Ez, my voice flat. Uncaring.

Outwardly, I act like I don't give a shit about anything or anyone. It's easier that way. Trust me, I'm perfectly aware I'm a complete cliché,

but it works for me. To care is to admit vulnerability, and I'm the least vulnerable motherfucker at this entire school. Shit slides off my back. Expectations are never placed upon me. My older brothers think I'm the luckiest out of all of us, but I don't think so.

At least they're acknowledged on a consistent basis. Sometimes I think my father flat out forgets I exist.

"You're looking for her again."

My head snaps in Ezra's direction, my glare hard and cold, though he ignores me, his only admission he's aware being that smirk curving his lips. "When do I not?" The question is sharp. Like a slap to the face, not that he cares.

The fucker actually laughs at me. "Fuck all this waiting around. How long has it been? You should talk to her."

I shift my position against the cold pillar I'm leaning against, my entire body lax. Casual. Though deep inside, I'm coiled tight, my gaze going to her once more. Yet again.

Always.

Wren Beaumont.

She ambles up the walkway toward the school's entrance. Toward me. With a serene smile on her face, she radiates light, casting her unique beam on everyone she walks past, lulling them into a trance. She greets everyone—but me—in that high-pitched voice, offering them a pleasant good morning like she's Snow fucking White. Friendly and sweet, and so goddamned beautiful, it almost hurts to look at her for too long.

My gaze drops to her left hand, where the thin gold band fits snug around her ring finger, a single, tiny diamond resting atop it. A promise ring she received at one of those fucked-up ceremonies where a slew of prepubescent future debutantes are put on parade in

a sea of pastel gowns cut in demure lines. Not an inch of scandalous skin visible.

Their dates are their daddies, important men among society, who like to own things, including women. Such as their daughters. Sometime during the evening, they are put through a painful ceremony where they turn to face their fathers and repeat a vow of chastity to them while the ring is slipped onto their fingers. Like it's a wedding.

Strange as hell, if you ask me. Glad my father didn't put my older sister Charlotte through that bullshit. Sounds like something he'd enjoy.

Our little Wren is a virgin and proud of it. Everyone on campus knows about the speeches she gives the other girls, about saving themselves for their future husbands.

It's fucking pitiful.

When we were younger, the girls in our class listened to Wren and agreed. They should save themselves. Value their bodies and not give them away to us disgusting, useless creatures. But then we all got a little older and fell into relationships or hookups. One by one, her friends lost their virginity.

Until she was the last virgin standing in the senior class.

"You waste your time with that one, Lancaster," says my other closest friend, Malcolm. The fucker is richer than God and from London, so all the girls on campus throw their panties at him, thanks to his British accent. He doesn't even have to ask. "She's a right prude and you know it."

"That's half the reason he wants her," Ezra cracks, knowing my truth. "He's dying to corrupt her. Steal all her firsts from that mythical future husband she'll have one day. The one who won't give a shit if she's a virgin or not."

My friend isn't wrong. That's exactly what I want to do. Just to say I can. Why save yourself for some fake man who will do nothing but disappoint you on your wedding night?

So damn foolish.

Malcolm contemplates Wren as she stops and talks to a cluster of girls, all of them younger than her. Each of them fluttering around her as if she's their mama bird and they're all her dependent babies, eager for a scrap of attention from her.

"Wouldn't mind having a go at her either," Malcolm murmurs, his gaze narrowing as he continues staring at her.

I send him a murderous look. "Touch her and you're fucking dead."

He throws back his head and laughs. "Please. I'm not interested in virgins. I prefer my women to have a little experience."

"Definitely don't like it when they're scared of a penis," Ezra adds, clutching his junk for emphasis.

Ignoring their laughter, I refocus on Wren, my gaze wandering the length of her. Navy jacket with the Lancaster crest on it, white button-up shirt beneath, her full tits straining against the fabric. Pleated plaid skirt that hits her just above the knee. Always modest, our Wren. The white socks with the little ruffle, the Doc Marten Mary Janes on her feet.

Her one sign of rebellion—albeit a minor one. Those shoes sent the girls of Lancaster Prep into an absolute tailspin when she showed up to school wearing them, the day we came back from winter break our freshman year. It threw the girls off. Everyone at Lancaster wore loafers. It was an unspoken rule.

Until Wren.

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By the beginning of our sophomore year, almost every fucking girl in attendance at Lancaster had Mary Janes on their feet, Doc Marten

and other brands too. Funny how not a one of them wearing those shoes affect me the way Wren does.

The seemingly innocent shoes and little girl socks. The plaid skirt and flushed cheeks and the way she's always walking around campus at lunch or after school with a fucking lollipop in her mouth, her lips juicy red from the candy. I see her with a Blow Pop between her lips and all I can imagine is Wren on her knees in front of me. Her hand wrapped around my cock as she guides it into her welcoming mouth, that bullshit ring, her precious daddy gave her, twinkling in the light.

That's what I want. Wren on her knees, begging for my dick. Crying for it when I reject her. Because I *will* reject her eventually. I don't do relationships. They're a vulnerability I don't need. I see the way my father has treated my older brothers when they've brought women home to meet the family. Grant and his girlfriend, who actually works for him—Father made a pass at her, of course. My other brother Finn doesn't even bother bringing a woman around the family.

Not that I can blame him.

And then there's my sister, Charlotte. Our father sold her to the highest bidder and now she's married to a man she doesn't even know. He's a decent guy, but shit.

No way am I going to let my father meddle in my relationships. Best way to avoid that?

Don't have one.

I think of my cousin, Whit. How he was embroiled in a minor scandal during his senior year at Lancaster Prep with a girl who he's now about to marry. They even have a child—out of wedlock, the ultimate scandal for a Lancaster. My own mother calls Whit's future wife absolute trash, but that's what happens to a family like us. Our reputation precedes us, and sometimes it ends up getting tarnished.

A lot of the time it does.

And Whit's fiancé isn't trash. She's in love with him, and no one tolerates his shit like Summer.

Wren draws closer and I stand up straighter, trying to meet her gaze, but as usual, she refuses to look at me. I almost laugh when she says good morning to Malcolm. To Ezra.

She doesn't say a damn word to me as she walks past, entering the building without a backward glance, followed by the younger girls who all shoot me a look, big doe eyes, every single one of them.

The moment the door slams shut, Ezra starts laughing once more, slapping his knee for emphasis.

"You've been trying to catch that girl's attention for how long, and she still ignores your ass? Give it up."

The challenge is what drives me on, don't they see? Don't they get it?

"She's having a party, you know," Malcolm says once Ezra's laughter has died.

"For what?" I ask irritably.

"Her birthday. Jesus." Malcolm shakes his head. "For someone who's supposedly obsessed with Wren Beaumont, you don't know much about her at all, do you?"

"I'm not obsessed." I push away from the pillar and go and stand closer to my friends, needing every detail. "When is this party?"

We're three weeks from winter break, in the throes of working on projects and preparing for finals for our last fall semester as seniors, and we're already exhausted. I'm over busting my ass for grades that don't matter since I have zero plans on going to college once I graduate. I've come into the first of three trust funds when I turned eighteen in September. Plus, my brothers want me to work for them at

their real estate firm. Why go to college when I can just work toward my real estate license and then conquer the world selling luxury homes or giant corporations? My brothers have both residential and commercial divisions.

What I'd really prefer is to travel the world for a year or two after I graduate. Never work at all. Soak up the culture and the food. The scenery and the history. Eventually I can return to New York City, start working toward my real estate license, and eventually join my brothers' business.

I have options, despite what the old man might think.

"Her birthday is actually on Christmas, but she mentioned she's having the party the day after. Boxing Day," Malcolm says. "Most underrated holiday, I might add."

"Made-up holiday for the Brits to get more time off if you ask me," I mutter.

"The British equivalent to Black Friday," Ez adds with a grin.

Malcolm flips us both the bird. "Well, if she has it, I'm definitely going."

"So am I," Ez chimes in.

I frown. "You assholes were invited?"

Malcolm scoffs. "Of course. I assume you weren't?"

I slowly shake my head, rubbing my chin. "She doesn't speak to me. She definitely won't invite me to her birthday party."

"Eighteen and never been kissed." Ezra pitches his voice higher, trying to sound like a girl yet failing miserably. "You should sneak into the party and lay one on her, Lancaster."

"If only she could be so lucky," I drawl, enjoying his idea.

Far too much.

“The Beaumonts are rich as fuck,” Malcolm reminds us. “The security for that party will be top notch, with all that priceless art hanging on their walls. Besides, her daddy watches over her like a fucking hawk. Hence the promise ring on her finger.”

Ezra mock shudders. “Creepy if you ask me. Promising yourself to Daddy? Makes me wonder what’s going on with that family.”

I hate where my thoughts lead me after Ezra’s comments. I hope like hell there’s nothing strange, or dare I think it—*incestuous* going on within the Beaumont household. I highly doubt it, but I don’t know her or her family. I only know what I witness, and I don’t see nearly as much as I’d like.

“There were a lot of girls at this school wearing promise rings that were given to them by their fathers,” Malcolm says. “They all copied Wren. Remember? It was a bunch of girls in our class and the freshmen when we were sophomores.”

Annoyance fills me. “That trend died a slow, painful death.”

Pretty sure Wren is literally the only one still wearing the ring.

“Right,” Malcolm drawls with a dirty grin. “Now they’re all a bunch of sluts, begging for our cocks.”

I chuckle, though I don’t find what he said very amusing. Malcolm has this way of insulting women that I find extra annoying. Yes, we’re all a bunch of misogynistic assholes when we hang out together, but none of us go around calling girls sluts like Malcolm does.

“Such a derogatory term,” Ezra says, causing us both to glance over at him. “I like whore better. Slut is just so...mean.”

“And whore isn’t?” Malcolm laughs.

We're veering off track. I need to bring the conversation back to Wren.

The sweet little birdy who's scared of the mean and nasty cat with fangs.

That would be me.

"If she's actually having a birthday party, I want an invitation to it," I tell them, my voice firm.

"We can't work miracles," Ezra says with a nonchalant shrug. But what does he care? He's already been invited. "Maybe you should try a gentler approach with Wren. Be nice for once, instead of your glaring asshole self all the time."

Seeing her makes me automatically scowl. How can I be nice when all I want to do is fuck her up?

Fuck her up as in, fuck her senseless. I see her, and I'm immediately filled with lust. Watching her suck a lollipop between her lips makes me hard. She's sweet, gentle Wren for everyone else.

I see her differently. I want her...differently.

I don't know how else to explain it.

"He's glaring just thinking about her right now," Malcolm points out. "He's a lost cause. Give it up, mate. She's not for you."

What the hell does he know? I'm a Lancaster for God's sake.

I can make anything happen.

Like fucking a virgin.

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TWO

WREN

THE MOMENT the double doors clang shut behind me, I'm glancing over my shoulder, trying to spot Crew Lancaster through the opaque glass. But all I can make out is his dark blond head, plus the heads of his other friends. Malcolm and Ezra.

They don't intimidate me like Crew does. Malcolm is a giant flirt with a distinctly wicked edge. Ezra is always looking for a laugh.

While Crew stands there and broods. It's his thing.

I don't like his thing.

I frown at my thoughts—that last one in particular seemed vaguely inappropriate, and I do not have thoughts like that—

“Wren, will you sit with us today at lunch?” one of the girls asks me.

Oh. I get to thinking about Crew and I forget what's going on around me. Like the fact that I have four freshmen currently following me everywhere I go.

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Smiling faintly at the girl who asked me about lunch, I say, "I'm so sorry, but I have a meeting to attend today during lunch. Maybe another time?"

The disappointment they feel at my rejection is palpable, yet I smile through it. They all reluctantly nod their heads at the same time, before they send each other a look and slink away, never saying a word to me.

It's odd, having a fan club when I do nothing but simply...exist.

A shuddery exhale leaves me, and I head down the corridor. The pressure these girls unknowingly put on my shoulders to be perfect sometimes feels insurmountable. They have me up on such a high pedestal, it would take nothing to send me tumbling. I'd end up a disappointment to all, and that's the last thing I want. The last thing they'd want.

I have an image to uphold, and sometimes it feels...

Impossible.

It's a lot of responsibility, being a role model for so many females like me. Lost girls who come from rich families. Girls who just want to fit in and belong. To feel normal and have a typical high school experience.

Granted, we're at an exclusive private school that only the upper echelon of society attends so there's nothing normal about our life, but still. We try and make it as normal as we possibly can, because some of us suffer, just like everyone else. With self-esteem issues, our studies, the expectations put upon us by family and friends and teachers. We feel unseen, unknown.

I know I did.

Sometimes I still do.

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That's my goal in life currently—to help others feel comfortable and maybe even find like themselves. When I was younger, I used to think I might want to be a nurse, but my father talked me out of that profession by ranting on and on how nurses do a lot of hard work for nominal pay.

Nominal according to him. Harvey Beaumont is rich—he took over his father's real estate business when he was barely thirty and made it thrive, and now he's a billionaire. His only daughter becoming a nurse would be so beneath him and the Beaumont name.

It's something I can't even consider. It doesn't matter what I want.

Whatever move I want to make, I need his permission first. I'm his only child, his only daughter, and I can't be trusted to always make the right decision.

I make my way toward my first period class, Honors English. Only twenty people are allowed in the class our senior year and, of course, Crew is in there. I've had a few classes with him since I started at Lancaster Prep, but I've never had to sit by him or talk directly to him, which I prefer.

As in, I've never had a conversation with him. I don't think he likes me much, considering the faint sneer that's always on his face when he watches me.

And he watches me a lot.

I don't understand why. I avoid eye contact with him as much as possible, but every once in a while, I stare into his icy blue eyes and I see nothing but disgust.

Nothing but hate.

Why? What did I ever do to him?

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Crew Lancaster is too much. Too moody and too dark and too quiet. Too handsome and magnetic and smart. I don't like how I feel when

his eyes are on me. All shivery and strange. The feeling is completely unfamiliar and only happens when I'm in his vicinity, and it doesn't make any sense.

I turn down the corridor that houses the English department, eager to get to class early, so I can secure my seat in the front row, direct center. When my friends come into class, I always make sure they sit by me, so no one unsavory can. Like Crew.

Knowing him, if he had the chance to sit close to me, he would. Just to rattle me.

I think he would enjoy that.

Our teacher, Mr. Figueroa, doesn't assign seats, and he has a very relaxed attitude in this class. Considering we're seniors and he hand-picked each student to be in his advanced class before the school year started, he trusts us not to act out or cause trouble. He just wants to "mold young minds," as he says, without restrictions or boundaries. He's my favorite teacher, and he's asked me to be a teacher's aide for the spring semester.

Of course, I immediately said yes.

I enter the classroom, coming to a sudden stop when I spot Figueroa in an embrace with someone. A student, because she's wearing a plaid uniform skirt and blue blazer. Her hair is a deep auburn, a shade I recognize, and when he gives her a nudge, she springs out of his arms, turning to face me.

Maggie Gipson. My friend. Her face is streaked with drying tears, and she sniffs, blinking at me. "Oh hey, Wren."

"Maggie." I go to her, lowering my voice so Fig won't hear us. That's what he tells us to call him, though all the guys make fun of the nickname behind his back. I figure they're all just jealous of the relationships he has with us girls. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She sniffs again, shaking her head. Which tells me she's not fine at all, but I can't press the situation. Not when we're in class. "Just...I got into another argument with Franklin last night."

"Oh no. I'm sorry." Franklin Moss is her on-again, off-again boyfriend, and he seems very demanding. Always pressuring her to do things with him sexually. She just needs more conviction within herself, so she can tell him no, and mean it.

But she never tells him no. She's already had sex with him multiple times, and it doesn't matter. He doesn't love her like she wants him to.

I think it's because she gave it up to him too soon, but she won't listen to me. Once we entered our junior year and sex became more and more rampant, one by one my friends sacrificed themselves to the boys who begged them for it. At least that's the word my father used for it—a sacrifice.

The majority of them got nothing but heartache to show for it, and the words *I told you so* are always on the tip of my tongue when they complain to me, which isn't too often. Not anymore.

They know how I feel. They know what I might say. They'd rather avoid me versus hear the truth.

"You'll be fine, Maggie. Keep your head up," Fig says, his voice soft, his eyes glowing as he takes her in.

I watch him, the hairs on the back of my neck rising as I glance between the two of them. The way he said that, how he's looking at her—it's very familiar.

Too familiar.

Other students come shuffling in, their voices loud as they chatter animatedly among one another. I settle into my desk, zipping open my backpack and pulling out my notebook and pencil, getting ready for class to start. Maggie does the same, her gaze on Fig the entire

time as he rounds his desk and settles into his chair, a few girls from class coming to talk to him. They all giggle when he says something, the sound grating.

I watch Maggie watch him, wondering at the jealousy I see in her gaze. Hmm.

I don't like that either.

Just as the bell rings, Malcolm and Crew enter the classroom, as per their usual habits. Sometimes they're even late, though Fig never marks them tardy for it.

I look away at the last second, not wanting to make eye contact with Crew, but it's no use. He catches my gaze, his cold blue eyes seeming to penetrate mine, and I stare at him for a second too long, my mouth growing dry.

It's like being caught in a trap, staring at Crew. It's almost scary, how much power he seems to wield with just a glance.

His name is on the building. His family has owned Lancaster Prep for hundreds of years. He's the most privileged student at this school. Whatever he wants, he gets. The girls all want a piece of him. Every boy here wants to be his friend, yet he shuns most everyone. Even a lot of the girls.

I hate to admit this, but we're a tiny bit similar, Crew and me. We just move about our day in a different way. He's cruel and unyielding, whereas I'm kind to a fault. I try to be nice to everyone I encounter, and they want a piece of me. He's mean and snarly, and they always come back for more.

It's odd.

I finally manage to look away from Crew when Fig stands in front of the white board, his booming voice drawing my attention as he

launches into a lecture about our upcoming read, *The Great Gatsby*. I've never read Fitzgerald before, and I'm looking forward to it.

"Wren, can you stay after class for a moment? I'll make sure to give you a pass," Mr. Figueroa says to me as he hands me a battered copy of our assigned book.

"Sure." I nod and smile.

He returns the smile. "Good. I have a few things I want to run by you."

I watch him walk away, curious. What does he want to talk to me about? We're still three weeks away from winter break, meaning we're over a month away from me becoming his teacher's aide for the spring semester.

Not too sure what else there is to talk about.

"What does he want anyway?"

I glance over at Maggie, who's watching me with narrowed eyes. "You mean Fig?"

"Yes, I mean Fig. Who else?" Her tone is nasty. Like she's mad.

I lean back a little in my chair, needing the distance. "He just asked me to stay after class. That he had a few things to run by me."

"Probably has to do with me and what you saw." Maggie's expression turns knowing. "He'll probably ask you to keep it quiet. He doesn't want anyone to know."

"Know what?" I mean, I sort of get what she's implying, but there's no way Maggie would get—*involved* with our teacher, would she? She's been with Franklin for over a year. They're pretty serious, though they've argued a lot lately. Maggie says their relationship is extremely passionate in all ways, and makes it seem like that's her preference.

But why would you want to be with a guy who you hate and love equally? That makes no sense to me.

“About our friendship, silly.” She watches Fig head back to his desk, a faintly dreamy look on her face. One she usually only reserves for her boyfriend, not our teacher. “People wouldn’t understand.”

“I know I don’t understand,” I retort.

Maggie actually laughs. “Figures. You know Wren, you can be kind of judgey.”

I’m offended. And is that even a word? “You think I’m judgmental?”

“Sometimes.” Maggie shrugs. “You’re so damn perfect in everything you do, and you hold everyone else to the same standards, which is impossible. You get good grades, and you *never* cause any trouble. The teachers and staff all adore you. You volunteer every chance you get and all the younger girls think you can do no wrong.”

She lists every one of those things like it’s a fault versus a good quality.

“What do you think of me?” I brace myself, sensing I’m not going to like what I hear.

A sigh leaves her as she contemplates me. “I think you’re a very naïve girl who’s been sheltered your entire life. And when the real world finally bites you in the ass, you’re going to be in for a big shock.”

The bell chooses that exact moment to ring, and Maggie doesn’t hesitate. She leaps to her feet, grabs her backpack, and shoves the book into it before she makes her escape without another word. Not even a goodbye to me or Fig.

The rest of the students exit quickly, even Crew, who doesn’t look in my direction. He’s too busy smiling at Malcolm about something.

Something I don’t care to know about, that’s for sure.

I remain in my seat, suddenly nervous over why Mr. Figueroa might want to talk to me. I set my backpack on my desk, shoving the old copy of *The Great Gatsby* in the front pocket, briefly checking my phone to see I have a text from my father.

Call me when you get a chance.

My stomach bottoms out. When he texts me to call him, it usually isn't about anything good.

"I have a free period right now." Fig strides over to the open classroom door and pulls it shut, cutting off the noise coming from the hallway. It's eerily quiet. "So it's the perfect time for us to—chat."

I rest my hands on top of my backpack and offer him a faint smile, fighting the nerves bubbling up inside me. "Okay."

He walks over to the desk Maggie just vacated and settles in, his warm gaze landing on mine. I take a deep breath, reminding myself that Fig doesn't want anything from me beyond help. Despite the whispers and the rumors I've heard over the years about him and other female students, he'd never try something like that with me.

Fig knows better.

"What did you want to chat about?" I ask, when he still hasn't said anything, hating how breathless I sound. Like I'm trying to flirt with him, when that's the last thing I want to do.

He tilts his head, contemplating me. "You're turning eighteen next month, aren't you?"

I blink at him, surprised he'd know that fact. I'm sure he could look it up in my personal file, but why would he care? Do teachers even have access?

"I am. On December 25th." The words fall from my lips slowly, my gaze questioning.

Where is he going with this?

A pleasant smile curls his lips. "A Christmas baby. How sweet."

"It's actually the worst. People give you presents wrapped in bright red paper with Santas all over it." God, I sound ungrateful, but I'm only speaking the truth.

"Is that a cardinal sin?" His brows shoot up, his eyes sparkling. I'm sure he's teasing me, but he doesn't understand what it's really like.

No one does, unless they have a birthday on a major holiday like me.

"I wouldn't say it's that bad. It's just no fun having your birthday and Christmas at the same time. Your birthday is never as special as someone's who's in June or whatever," I explain.

"I'm sure." He nods, his tone grave. "Well, Wren, I'm excited to have you come on as my TA next semester."

I'm thankful for the change in subject. I don't want to talk about anything personal pertaining to me.

"I'm excited too." I'm just grateful for the free period next semester. I've heard it's pretty easy, being his TA. He doesn't ask you to do much.

"You'll be replacing Maggie. That's why she was crying earlier. I told her I didn't need her to be a TA for me any longer."

Alarm races through me, leaving me cold. "What do you mean? I thought you always had a couple of TAs each semester."

"I do. I still do. Maggie just wasn't—working out." He leans over the desk, his face drawing closer to mine. Close enough that I can't help but rear back. "She's a little clingy sometimes."

His voice is low, as if he's letting me in on a secret.

Unease slips down my spine. "Clingy how?"

When he hesitates, I regret asking. Maybe I don't want to know.

"I gave her my phone number. In case of an emergency, or if she needed to contact me. I didn't think it would be any big deal."

If he says so. I think it sounds like a terrible idea. A teacher giving a student his number? That's a line he probably shouldn't have crossed.

"And she won't stop texting me. It's become...an issue," he continues.

An issue he brought on himself, is what I want to tell him. But I keep my mouth shut.

"I hope if we happen to exchange numbers when you become my TA next semester that you won't react that way. I'm looking for someone a little less...excitable. If you know what I mean." His smile, his entire demeanor is giving off easygoing, no big deal vibes.

But there's a tension in him, lying just beneath the surface. He just doesn't want to reveal it.

I'm having a hard time agreeing with what he's trying to say. I don't plan on giving him my number ever. That's inappropriate. And I'm not interested in having a relationship with him beyond student/teacher.

It makes me wonder what exactly happened between Maggie and Franklin—and if Fig has anything to do with it.

"I should go." I rise to my feet, grabbing my backpack and slinging it over my shoulder. "I don't want to be too late to second period."

I'm almost to the door when Fig calls out my name. I freeze, my hand on the doorknob as I slowly glance over my shoulder to see Fig standing directly in front of me.

Terribly close.

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"You forgot your pass." He hands out the familiar blue slip of paper.

"Don't want you to be marked tardy."

I face him fully and take the note from his fingers, hating how he tightens his hold on it for a second too long, making me tug. Pulling me even closer to him. He eventually lets me take it, his lips curved, his gaze dark.

“Thank you,” I say weakly, turning toward the door.

“Bye, Wren,” he calls once I’ve pushed the door open.

I don’t answer him as I flee.

THREE

WREN

THE REST of my day goes by normally. I worried about spending lunch with Maggie at our Honors Society meeting, but she ended up spending it with Franklin, so I didn't have to deal with her asking me about my conversation with Fig.

A conversation that's left me unsettled. It's like he was trying to communicate with me with unspoken words. Implying one thing while saying something else. I didn't like his tone. His familiarity. He knows what I'm about.

He knows I'm not interested in boys or drinking or sex. That's not my scene. It never has been. I'm a good girl.

Those kinds of things...scare me.

When I walk into my seventh period class, the last one of the day, I'm excited. Psychology is my favorite class. I love learning how people act and think, and the motives behind our actions. It's so interesting. Today is when Ms. Skov announces our last project for the semester, and she usually has us work in groups. There are a couple of girls in

this class that I've worked on group projects with before, and I know it'll be easy to work with them again. They'll at least carry the workload equally with me.

Crew is already there, the only other class I have with him, as well as Ezra and Malcolm. They're all three sitting together in the back of the classroom, surrounded by girls. Girls who roll their skirts up so high they practically flash their underwear, and they have so much makeup on their faces I'm surprised they can open their eyes all the way. There's too much mascara on their lashes weighing them down.

I really shouldn't be so mean in my thoughts. It's not kind. I blame it on it being a Monday. The tension between Maggie and me—and Maggie and Mr. Figueroa. The conversation with Fig.

It's all so unsettling.

"Okay, everyone, listen up!" Skov slams the door behind her once she's entered the room, striding toward her desk. She's fluid movement and rhythmic noise, the bangles on her wrists clanging as she moves her hands. And she likes to move her hands *a lot*.

We all settle down, sitting face forward and paying attention. Everyone respects Skov. She's fun and interesting and makes us excited to learn, which can be a rarity, even at a private school that pays a generous salary to have the best educators on staff.

"As you're all well aware of, it's time to begin our final project for the semester. I took the time over Thanksgiving break to really think it over and I came to the conclusion that after doing pretty much the same damn thing for the last eleven years...I'm bored." Ms. Skov glares when Crew and his clan hoot and holler from the back. "Settle down, boys."

They go quiet and I can't help but glance at them over my shoulder, a smirk already on my face. It disappears when I catch Crew glaring at me, those blue eyes freezing me in place.

I hurriedly turn back around, clutching my hands together on top of my desk.

“I decided to change it up. You’re going to work on your project on a one-on-one basis. As in, you’ll be paired up with someone.” She pauses. “And I’m the one who assigns you your project partner.”

A collective groan rings through the room, though I still remain quiet. And a little nervous. Hopefully Skov won’t pair me with someone too horrible.

Nerves eat at me when she starts rattling off names. I realize quickly she’s pairing us up with someone who is our polar opposite. There are more groans. A couple of curse words dropped.

My heart is in my throat when she finally says my name.

“Wren Beaumont, you’re going to work with...”

The pause lasts all of two seconds, but it feels like a lifetime.

“...Crew Lancaster.”

What?

The word actually flies from my lips. I said it out loud, when I didn’t mean to.

Oh God.

“Lucky fucker,” I hear Ezra say, and I close my eyes in shame at the word he just used. I hate it when the boys curse.

And they know it.

Ms. Skov finishes with her list of partners and clears her throat loudly, causing the voices to go quiet. She scans the room as she starts pacing in front of our rows of desks.

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“I know this isn’t what you envisioned, but let me tell you what your assignment is. It’ll make more sense when you hear.” She stops in

front of my desk, because, of course, I sit in the front row. “I paired you with someone I knew would be the opposite of you. I want you all to interview each other. Study each other carefully, because you’re going to take all of that information you learn and give a speech on why and what makes your project partner tick.”

There are more groans. I sink in my seat, gnawing on my lower lip. There is no way I’m going to tell Crew a single thing about myself. He hates me. Whatever information I give him, he’ll find some way to use it against me eventually.

He’s never done anything like that to me before, so maybe my thoughts are just...extreme.

“Now, of course, you shouldn’t share any intimate, long held secrets you don’t want anyone else to know. I know everyone in this class is mature enough to respect each other’s privacy, but you know how it is. Things will eventually get out,” Skov explains.

Exactly. And there’s no way I want Crew to find out anything about me.

Nothing.

“For some of you, this is going to be hard. But I did some research on this type of project, and many of those involved said they found it almost easier to confess their darkest fears or most secret dreams to someone they consider a complete stranger. Those who know us, tend to judge us.”

I think of what Maggie said to me, and how she thinks I’m too “judgy” sometimes. That kind of hurt. I never mean to be judgmental...

“For the next three weeks, there will be no lectures, no tests and no side projects. From now until winter break, I want you to spend this period with your partner. Get to know them, interview them about

their past, ask them questions about their future and what they hope for. What they aspire to be. Try your best to dig below the surface. Be real with each other, gang! Don't present your picture-perfect Instagram life to someone. We all know that's a figment of your imagination," Skov teases.

"No one's on Instagram much anymore, Ms. Skov," one of the guys shouts, causing a few chuckles to ripple through the classroom.

She smiles, dipping her head in acknowledgement. "I'm an old person, what can I say? I can't keep up with what social media you kids are on."

There's more joking and laughter, but I can't focus. I just want to disappear. Drop out of the class.

Maybe even drop out of Lancaster Prep.

God, see? I can't get away from him. Thinking about my school makes me think of him because of the name.

"All right everyone! Break up into your pairs. Do it quickly. I don't want a lot of chatter going on, unless you're talking to your partner." She smiles, looking quite pleased with herself as she goes and settles in behind her desk.

I rise to my feet, ignoring everyone else as I make my way to her desk. I stop just in front of it, staring at her until she finally looks up, her expression calm. "Can I help you, Wren?"

I can see it in her eyes, that flicker of disappointment before I even open my mouth. She knows what I'm going to say. "I was wondering if you'd be open to me switching partners."

Skov sighs, resting her arms on top of her desk. "I knew I'd have at least one of you come to me and ask this. Didn't expect it to be you."

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"I don't like him." Best to be open and honest, right?

She arches a brow at my bold statement. "You don't even know him."

"How do you know?" Oh, that sounded snotty, and that's the last thing I want to be toward a teacher.

"I've been at this school a long time. I know the students don't think we pay attention, but we do. I see a lot. And I know for a fact you and Crew don't speak. Ever. Which is funny because the two of you are actually quite similar."

What in the world is she talking about? We aren't similar. Not even close.

"No, we're really not," I tell her. "We have nothing in common, and he's always so...mean to me."

"How is he mean toward you?"

My mind draws a complete blank. I hate it when people ask for examples because most of the time, I can't provide them. "He gives me dirty looks."

"Are you so sure about that?"

Now she's making me doubt every horrible look Crew has ever given me. "I don't know."

Her smile is small. "That's what I thought. First, you have to get to know someone in order to understand how they feel about you. Don't you think?"

"I already know that he doesn't like me," I say with all the finality I can muster. "It would be a lot easier for all of us if I could do this project with someone else. Maybe Sam?"

Sam is sweet. I don't have a lot of guy friends, but he's one of them, and he's always been kind to me. We've had the same honors classes together since our freshman year, and he even took me to the prom last year, though just as friends. He knows where I stand when it

comes to relationships and sex, and he's never tried to push himself on me.

He hasn't even tried to kiss me, and with Sam, I would've considered it. I still might.

I glance over to where he usually sits, one of the girls with a too short skirt on sitting next to him, a little scowl on her face as Sam tries to talk to her.

"I'm sure he'd want to switch to be partnered with me," I tell Skov as I watch Sam smile at that girl, hoping to warm her up. Her name is Natalie.

She's not very nice. I avoid her and her friend group at all costs.

"I'm sure he would." Ms. Skov sounds amused, which I find faintly annoying.

This isn't a laughing matter. This is the next three weeks of my life. The most intense time at school—nearing the most important finals week of my senior year. The one that counts the most. Daddy reassures me our family money can get me into any college I want, but I also prefer to get in to one of my dream schools on my own merit.

My family name makes that nearly impossible, but we'll see what happens.

"So you'll let us switch then? I bet Natalie would love to do this project with Crew." I think they were together at some point over the last couple of years. At the very least, they hooked up.

Ew.

"No, I'm not going to let you switch. The whole point of this project is to learn about someone who isn't like you, who is part of a different friend group. You and Sam went to prom together last year so that means he's out as a possible partner," Ms. Skov says.

Everything inside me withers and dies. "It'll just be easier. I'm comfortable with Sam, and Crew makes me...uneasy."

"In a threatening way?" The concern in her voice is very, very real.

Maybe this is the weak spot, where I can burrow my way into getting what I want. "Yes, he always has such a horrible look on his face."

"So he's never actually threatened you in any way?"

This is where my honesty gets me. "No. Not really."

His mere existence feels like a threat, but I can't tell her that. I sound like a horrible person for thinking such a thing, let alone managing to say it out loud.

"I think you need a challenge, Wren. You're always wanting to help people."

"Girls," I stress. "What do any of the boys have to worry about at this school?" I'm not condoning it, just stating facts. "They're all golden. Untouchable. They can do whatever they want, especially the one whose name is everywhere we look."

My skin grows prickly with awareness when I sense someone approaching. I can feel his warmth, smell his deliciously intoxicating scent, and I know.

I just know who it is.

"Is there a problem?" Crew asks, his deep, rumbling voice touching something foreign inside of me.

I brace myself for Skov to tell on me.

"Miss Beaumont had a few questions on the project. Right, Miss Beaumont?" Ms. Skov smiles broadly at the both of us.

I nod, keeping my head down. I can feel his gaze burning my skin as he watches me, and I'm worried if I look into his eyes, I'll turn to

stone. Like he's freaking Medusa with a bunch of coiled snakes as hair.

"You two should go sit down and get started," Skov encourages.

"Okay," I croak, daring to look in Crew's direction.

To find him already watching me, the look on his handsome face so dark, my knees nearly buckle.

FOUR

CREW

WREN BEAUMONT IS PETRIFIED of me.

I knew the moment she shot out of her seat and went to Ms. Skov's desk that she was trying to get out of working with me. I could tell. Everyone else in the class was shifting into position, pairing up with their project partners, while I sat there by myself and fumed.

She's making me look like a damn fool, and for what? Because she thinks I'm going to treat her like shit? Doesn't she realize she's only making things worse? She's just too wrapped up in her own worry to realize what she's done.

Typical behavior.

In tandem, we turn away from Skov's desk, and Wren goes to hers, about to settle in when I speak up.

"I don't want to sit in the front."

A frown mars her pretty face. Because there is no denying it. Wren Beaumont is beautiful. If sheltered little prudes are your thing—which, apparently, they are for me. "Why not?"

“I’d rather sit in the back.” I indicate with a nod toward my desk that sits empty.

She turns her head, studying the empty desks surrounding mine and her shoulders sag in defeat. “Okay.”

Triumph ripples through me as I watch her grab her notebook and her backpack, my gaze dropping to her legs. She wears the skirt at normal length, which is too long in my opinion, and she has white knee-high socks on today, so I don’t get to see much actual flesh. Those stupid fucking Mary Janes are on her feet, but they’re not her usual Docs. They’re another brand and style, sleek and shiny.

Little Miss Virgin is changing it up. Nice.

I follow her to the back of the room, taking in the straight line of her shoulders, the glossy straight brown hair that falls down her back. She’s got the front pieces pulled back in a white bow like a child, and I wonder, yet again, if she’s ever been kissed.

Probably not. She’s as sweet and innocent as they come, with a diamond on her finger, promising her father she will keep herself pure until marriage.

I have no idea why I find that so damn attractive, but I do. I want to mess her up. Fuck her up. Fuck with her, actually fuck her until she’s completely addicted to me and forgets all about her virginal promises. Destroying this sweet, innocent girl feels like sport.

A challenge.

A game.

She daintily settles into the empty chair beside mine, dropping her notebook onto the desk with a loud slap. I sit next to her and lean back, sprawling my legs wide, my foot nudging against hers purely by accident.

Wren immediately jerks her foot away as if I scalded her.

"Are you going to get a notebook out?" she asks.

"For what?"

"To interview me. Ask questions. Take notes."

"Skov said we're getting to know each other. It's the first day of the project. We still have a long time to go." This chick needs to chill the fuck out.

"I want to do well on this," she stresses, her gaze fixated on the empty page in front of her. "I want to get a good grade."

"I do too. We will. Don't sweat it."

"Is that how you approach everything?" She lifts her head, mossy green eyes meeting mine. Don't think I've ever sat this close to Wren in the over three years we've gone to school together, and I'm taken aback at how gorgeous those eyes are. "No sweat. Don't worry about it?"

"Yes," I say without hesitation. "Have a problem with that?"

"That's not how I operate. I work hard to get good grades and maintain my 5.0 grade average."

She dropped that little tidbit on purpose. A total flex for the virgin, big deal.

"We have something in common," I tell her, making her frown.

"What?"

"I have a 5.0 grade average too." We've both been in advanced classes since freshman year.

The look of disbelief crossing her face is undeniable. "Really?"

"Don't sound so skeptical. It's true." I shrug.

"I never see you study."

“We don’t exactly hang in the same areas. I never see you study either.”

Wren says nothing to that because it’s true. We definitely don’t hang with the same crowd in the same places.

“I’m sure the only reason you get good grades is because of your last name,” she retorts.

Whoa. Little Miss Virgin has some bite.

“You think I have a 5.0 grade average because I’m a Lancaster? And I go to Lancaster Prep?” I raise a brow when she dares to look at me.

She drops her gaze, her head bent. “Maybe.”

“I’m offended.” Her head lifts, her expression now full of remorse. “I’m not an idiot, little birdy.”

“Little birdy?”

“Your name is a bird.” My nickname isn’t that original, but that’s what she reminds me of sometimes. A sweet little bird, flitting from branch to branch. Chirping at everyone, the sound light and melodic.

“And your name is a sport. Shall I call you that? What’s up, old sport?” She rolls her eyes.

Huh. She also has a bit of a sense of humor. I didn’t think that was possible. She’s always marching around campus, advocating for her causes. The plight of young rich women, which is totally uninteresting, if you ask me. I don’t care about a bunch of virginal freshmen girls. Not like she does.

“You can call me whatever you want,” I drawl. “Asshole. Fuckhead. Whatever. It doesn’t matter to me.”

There’s no hesitation in her reaction. She’s glaring at me, those narrowed green eyes shooting sparks in my direction. “You’re revolting.”

“Oh, my bad. I forgot you don’t say such foul language.”

“Things can be said without having to sprinkle dirty words throughout. They’re completely unnecessary.”

Her prim voice saying the word *dirty* is a complete turn-on. Meaning something is really fucking wrong with me.

“Sometimes the word *fuck* is really satisfying to say.” I pause, already knowing the answer to the question I’m about to ask. “Have you ever said it before?”

She quickly shakes her head. “No. It’s the worst word of them all, if you ask me.”

“I don’t know about that. I can think of some even more vulgar words to say.” They’re all on the tip of my tongue too, but I restrain myself.

Barely.

She scowls, and it’s adorable. “I’m not surprised. You and your friends are extremely vulgar.”

“Such a judgmental little priss, aren’t you?”

Wren blinks at me, a hurt expression on her face. “You’re the second person to call me judgmental today.”

“Hmm, you should probably take that as a sign.” When she doesn’t say anything, I continue, “Perhaps you are a little judgmental.”

“You don’t even know me,” she retorts, clearly offended.

I don’t say anything—just look at her. It’s a pleasure, watching her squirm, and she’s obviously squirming, though it’s more internal than anything else.

The perfect little princess everyone supposedly adores is getting called out for her faults—multiple times. I’m sure she doesn’t like that.

Who would?

“This isn’t going to work.” She rises to her feet, her entire body shaking. She clenches her hands into fists. “I can’t be your partner.”

I gaze up at her, surprised. “You’re giving up already?”

“I don’t like you. And you don’t like me. What’s the point of working together? I’ll talk to Ms. Skov some more after school. She’ll listen to me.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Damn, it’s fun rattling her. She makes it so easy.

“Wouldn’t you rather work with Natalie?”

“Not at all.” I grimace. “She’s shallow. Rude. Doesn’t give a shit about anyone but herself.”

The pained look on Wren’s face at me saying the word shit is almost comical. This girl clearly has issues.

“Sounds familiar.” Her tone is haughty and cool, though I can detect the faintest tremble. “You two should get along perfectly. Didn’t you go out with her?”

“Fucked her a couple of times.” I say that on purpose, and it has the effect I want. The offended look on Wren’s face is so extreme, I’m concerned she might burst into tears. “Nothing serious.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“No, little birdy, it’s perfectly normal. We’re hormonal teenagers. We’re supposed to fuck anything we can get our hands on. Something you don’t have a clue about.” I decide to ask the question that’s been lingering in my mind since we started this absurd conversation. “Have you ever been kissed?”

She lifts her chin. Appears ready to bolt. I wait for her to run, but surprisingly, she stands her ground. “That’s none of your business.”

The obvious answer is no.

My gaze finds Sam Schmidt, who's currently being tortured by Natalie as she drones on about her meaningless life. Though he doesn't appear miserable over it. He's too busy staring at her glossy lips as they keep moving. He's the guy that took Wren to prom last year. Two boring people who most likely had a boring time together.

Jealousy flickers deep inside and I shove it away. How can I be jealous of Sam? Because he got to dance with her? Put his hands on her? Have her smile at him and want to actually talk to him for an entire evening?

"What about Sam?"

Wren flinches, as if I said something that hurt her. "What about him?"

"He didn't try to kiss you on prom night?" I'm sure that would've met her dreamy, romantic expectations, though I get the sense Sam isn't particularly romantic. The guy is too in his head for that.

That fucker is scary smart.

"How did you know Sam was my prom date?"

If she really wanted to leave me and this conversation, she would've done so already. She almost did.

"It's a small school, and we're a small class. Everyone knows everybody." I hesitate, my gaze drifting down the length of her. The blazer and button-up shirt completely contain her tits, and what I remember from seeing her in the fairly demure dress she wore to the dance, the girl is stacked. "Do you remember who I went with?"

"Ariana Rhodes," she immediately says, biting her lower lip the moment the words are out.

“See?” I incline my head toward her. “We know what everyone else is doing at all times.”

“I only knew because I was friends with Ariana,” she says.

Poor Ariana. She left the country after our junior year, banished to England to a finishing school in the remote countryside out in the middle of bum fuck nowhere. She was a broken girl with a talented mouth, who had a minor drug problem that blew up into a big one last summer. Her parents got her the hell out of here before it became worse.

“Well, maybe now we could become friends,” I suggest, sounding like a goddamn villain, even to my own ears.

“I don’t think so. Like I said, I’m talking to Ms. Skov after class.” She slings her backpack over her shoulder. “Be prepared. You’ll most likely be partnered with Natalie tomorrow.”

“I’ll miss you, Birdy,” I call after her as she walks away.

She doesn’t bother saying anything. Doesn’t even look back at me.

Whatever she thinks she’s going to say to convince Skov we shouldn’t be partners, isn’t going to work. I know Skov—and deep down, so does Wren. Our teacher’s mind has been made up. This is how it’s going to be.

Whether Wren likes it or not.

FIVE

WREN

I WANDER through the empty halls of school, trying to hold back the tears that threaten, but it's no use.

They're streaking down my face, and I wipe them away as best as I can, irritated with myself. With my teacher. With the entire day.

Thank God no one is really around to see them, since school let out almost thirty minutes ago.

I stayed after class, just as I told Crew I would, and spoke again to Ms. Skov, trying to plead my case. She wouldn't budge. She wasn't mean about it, but she refused to listen to my reasoning as to why I couldn't work with Crew. It didn't matter to her that he was vulgar and said crude things to me to get a reaction. That he didn't care about the project and just assumed he'd get a good grade because he's a Lancaster.

He didn't necessarily say that, but when I asked him about it and he didn't deny it, I can only assume.

Something I hate doing, but I did anyway—and mentioned it to Skov too. Her skeptical look told me she wasn't falling for it, but whatever. I was trying to think up every reason imaginable why I didn't want to work with Crew.

And I'm still stuck with him.

Stuck with his hateful attitude and his mocking gaze. His disgusting vocabulary and the way he looks at me. Like he can see right through me.

I hate that most of all.

I dash away another streak of tears, sniffing loudly.

"Wren!"

Turning, I spot Mr. Figueroa standing in the open doorway of the faculty room.

"Oh." I come to a stop, hoping that I don't look too terribly upset. "Hi, Mr. Figueroa."

Slowly he approaches me, his brows lowered in concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." I smile, hating how my chin wobbles. Like I'm going to burst into sobs at any second. "I just—had a rough afternoon."

"Want to tell me about it?"

I shouldn't. He doesn't need to know about my problem with Crew, or with Ms. Skov. But the moment he asks, showing that he cares, I start talking.

And don't finish until I've told him everything that happened during seventh period, leaving out some of the more embarrassing parts. Like Crew asking if I've ever been kissed.

As if it's any of his business. Besides, the answer is no, and if I told him that, he'd laugh at me and then would go and tell all of his friends. It would spread like wildfire that it's been confirmed—Wren Beaumont has never kissed a boy. Has never kissed *anyone*.

Though everyone probably already thinks that. They know how I feel about sex and relationships. I wear my virgin badge proudly, because why not? Societal pressure is too strong on girls. It's downright crushing. And we need to take ownership of our bodies in any way that we can.

I don't like being made to feel stupid for doing what I believe is right for me. Crew Lancaster has no business looking down upon me for not having sex. Just because he so easily gives himself away to whoever wants him doesn't make him a better person than I am.

Of course, the idea of Crew "giving himself away" to another girl has my curious mind whirring. I've seen him with his shirt off—last spring, near the end of school, when all the boys were out on the field, running around and goofing off as boys do. I sat in the bleachers with my friends, my gaze snagging on him when he ripped off his shirt, revealing tanned, smoothed skin stretched taut over lean, rippling muscle.

My mouth had gone dry. My heart started to race. And he glanced over at me, our gazes locking, as if he knew what sort of effect he had on me.

I banish the thought, refocusing on my teacher, the concern etched on Fig's face as I spill my story, his gaze warm and comforting. About halfway through my story, he put his arm around my shoulders, his touch loose as he steered me into the faculty room, which was blessedly empty. He sat me down at one of the tables, sitting right next to me. And when I finished, he patted my arm in reassurance, exhaling loudly.

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"You want me to talk to Anne?"

I blink at him, realizing he's referring to Ms. Skov. I never think of her first name. She's just Skov to me. "I'm not sure if you should."

"I could put in a good word for you. Anne and I are pretty close. She'll listen to me." He settles his hand on my forearm, where it rests on the table, giving me a reassuring squeeze. "You shouldn't have to be tormented by Lancaster these next few weeks. You're under enough pressure as it is."

The relief that floods me at his understanding words is so strong I almost want to start crying all over again. "I'm under *so* much pressure. There's a lot going on right now."

"Did you turn in your college applications already?"

I nod, appreciating that's the first thing he thought to ask me. The college thing causes a lot of stress, for so many of us. Most of the teachers seem to forget, piling on the work like we can handle it when most of us are on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"That's good. I'm sure you have a few final projects and tests, including mine." His smile is soft. "Which you'll do fine with. You always do."

"I'm excited to read the book."

"I'm sure you are." He removes his hand from my arm and leans back, glancing about the room. "I'll talk to Anne. And maybe I'll even talk to Crew as well."

"What? No." I hurriedly shake my head, ignoring the surprised expression on his face. "I'm serious, please don't bring this up to him. I don't want you drawn into this mess."

"I'm already drawn in. I want to help you." His jaw hardens. It's the most ferocious I think I've ever seen Fig look. "Guys like him get away with everything. Like they're untouchable, never thinking of how they affect other people."

"It's fine—"

"No, Wren. It's not fine. I won't stand by and let him hurt you repeatedly."

I press my lips together, worry making my insides twist. I don't want him talking to Crew about me. I can only imagine what Crew would say to him. What he would eventually say to me. Something about me sending my watchdog teacher on him or something like that. He'd call Fig all kinds of names and make fun of me, that mocking gaze never looking away from mine.

That's the last thing I want.

"Please, Fig." It's my turn to reach out and touch him, and he drops his head, taking in my hand resting on his arm before he lifts his gaze to mine. "Please don't talk to him. I can handle Crew on my own. But if you could put in a good word to Ms. Skov about my switching partners, that would be wonderful."

His brown eyes are steady as he watches me, and I can tell from the stern look on his face that he's displeased with my request. "All right. I won't talk to Crew. But I will speak with Anne. I'm sure she'll listen to reason."

"Thank you." I smile at Fig, shock coursing through me when he reaches for me, pulling me into his arms and giving me a hug.

It's awkward and weird, since we're both sitting down, and he's my teacher, so I do my best to quickly disengage. A shaky breath leaves me and I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, all the air leaving me when I hear a familiar female voice screech.

"What the *fuck*, Fig?"

We both glance toward the door to find Maggie standing there, her mouth hanging open, her pale face suffused with red. Her narrowed gaze finds mine, and she glares, her expression full of hatred.

“Maggie.” His voice is steady as he rises to his feet. “Calm down. It’s not what you think.”

Maggie snorts, entering the faculty room as if she’s been in here a million times before. “Oh sure. More like it’s *exactly* what I think. This is how it starts, right, Fig? All sweet and kind and caring to that one student. Making her feel special. You ask her to be your TA, bring her in like the innocent lamb to slaughter, right before you go in for the kill.”

I leap out of my seat, eager to make my escape. “I need to go—”

“No, stay. Though I’m sure what I have to say will blister your virgin ears, you deserve to hear it. To know what this man does.” Her smile is brittle, her eyes shiny, as if she might cry at any second. “Because for once in his damn life, he’s going down. How many years have you worked at Lancaster? And how many girls have you fucked? I’m sure the list is endless.”

I flinch at her using that word, my gaze sliding to Mr. Figueroa’s, but he’s not even paying attention to me.

He’s too focused on Maggie, his hands clenched into fists at his sides, though he’s trying to keep a calm exterior. “Watch your mouth, Maggie.”

“Oh yeah, I need to protect the untried ears of the biggest virgin on campus, right, Figgy? I’m sure you’re just dying to get in her pants. There’s probably a lock on that vagina, but with your persuasive ways, she’ll end up handing you the key. No problem.” Maggie marches farther into the room, until she’s standing directly in front of Fig, and I can tell he wants to touch her. Grab her.

Hurt her even?

I’m not sure.

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And I don’t know why I have to be a witness to this any longer.

“I-I’ll leave you two alone so you can talk privately.” I head for the door, Maggie no longer paying attention to me.

Fig isn’t watching me either as I exit the room. They’re too wrapped up in each other.

Like lovers.

SIX

WREN

I MAKE my way back to my private room, grateful for the reprieve. Though I don't have long to bask in the silence because my phone starts ringing, startling me.

Dad flashes across the screen and I realize with a sinking feeling that I never did call him after he sent that text.

"I'm so sorry, Daddy. The day got away from me," is how I answer.

His chuckle is rich and warm, making me smile despite how agitated I still am over that confrontation between Fig and Maggie. And me, I guess. I've never been involved in something like that before in my life, and it was disconcerting. "I've heard from the head of the Art History Department at Columbia."

My heart flies up and sinks, all at the same time. "Oh."

"Don't you want to know what he had to say?"

I already know. He's dying to have me attend. Thanks to my father calling in a favor. "What did he say?" I keep my voice light and