A LANCASTER PREP NOVEL

THINGS I WANTED TO SAY



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MONICA MURPHY

PENGUIN BOOKS

THINGS I WANTED TO SAY (BUT NEVER DID)

Monica Murphy is a *New York Times*, *USA Today* and international bestselling author. Her books have been translated into almost a dozen languages and have sold over two million 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

"Champagne Coast" - Blood Orange
"Rebel (If I lie)" - Eli Rose
"Monster" - Shawn Mendes & Justin Bieber
"that way" - Tate McRae
"Bitter" - FLETCHER, Kito
"Streets" - Doja Cat
"Daddy Issues" - The Neighbourhood
"Miss Summer" - ODIE
"sex money feelings die" - Lykke Li

Find the rest of the **Things I Wanted To Say** playlist here:
https://spoti.fi/3xopqf9

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PROLOGUE

The past

I REMEMBER the first time I saw him.

He didn't notice me, which was what I preferred. That way, I could stare at him unabashedly, fascinated with the bone structure of his face, the way he moved, how he never smiled.

Why didn't he smile?

We were much younger then. Innocent? I don't think you could ever use that word to describe either of us. We'd seen and done too much, that by the time we met again, we were too far gone to stop it. Stop us.

And the darkness.

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I accompanied my parents to a party in Manhattan. My mother didn't want to bring me. Jonas, my stepfather, insisted.

Let her see how the one percent really lives, he said with a chuckle.

Mother scowled. She likes to think she is part of the one percent, when Jonas says he merely works for them.

The building we walked into was on the Upper East Side, with friendly doormen and stern security everywhere. The lobby was constructed of glass and marble. Sleek and gleaming. I must've looked like a country bumpkin, my head tilted back and staring at the soaring ceiling, dazzled by the twinkling lights above us.

"Come on," Mother said irritably, her fingers clamped so tight around my upper arm, she pinched my skin.

The elevator ride was smooth. Quick. We arrived on the penthouse level, and the moment the doors slid open, it was as if we were stepping into another world. No one greeted us when we entered the penthouse. No one was actually *inside* the apartment either.

Everything was white. The furniture. The walls. Massive paintings hanging everywhere the only pops of color. Most of them were abstract. I stopped in front of one of them, tilting my head to the side, trying to figure out what it could be. Mother practically dragged me away from it, muttering under her breath that they shouldn't have such vulgar art on display in front of children, and Jonas only laughed, asking what kid could figure out what that was?

That was when it hit me—the painting was a close-up view of a vagina.

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I could hear noises coming from somewhere though. As we drew deeper into the apartment, they grew louder, until a wall

of windows appeared, beautiful people milling about, clustered in small groups. Talking, talking, talking. Drinking, drinking, drinking.

I was starstruck. Dazzled. This was the sort of thing I lived for. Mother marrying Jonas Weatherstone was life-changing. He made big money. Real money. Mother worked at Jonas' real estate company, and they fell in love. He left his wife for Mother. Their divorce was difficult but eventually Jonas and Mother were married. I liked living with Jonas. He was kind to me. Our apartment was big, though nothing like this one.

This one was unlike anything I'd ever seen.

As we stepped out onto the terrace, the skyscrapers loomed. They looked close enough to touch. The city lights glittered and twinkled, but I didn't notice. I was too busy stealing sips from discarded champagne glasses, the bubbly liquid tickling my throat and making me feel funny. I savored the funny feeling. It made my brain fuzzy, helped me forget all of my problems. Like my parents. My stepbrother.

All of it.

He spotted me sneaking drinks and quietly approached. I set the glass down, pretending to look at something else. We were the only two kids at this party. I was fourteen. I guessed he was about the same.

Summer before high school and I felt very grown-up. I had boobs and they were bigger than my friends'. I'd discovered that touching myself in a particular place while in bed at night sent me spiraling, and I chased that feeling as much as I could. Yates kept trying to get me alone when our parents were at work. One time, he slipped his hand down my pants, trying to touch me there, but I slapped him away.

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He's disgusting. He's my brother.

Stepbrother, but still.

Despite my being disgusted, Yates's dogged pursuit of me also left me feeling wanted. And there's power in knowing that someone wants you. Sitting at this party in a strapless black dress, sipping champagne, also made me feel older. Having the attention of this boy, this very beautiful, intense boy, also had me curious.

Who is he? What does he want from me?

"You want your own glass?" the boy asks, pointing at the discarded glasses on the table beside me. I'd sipped every one of them dry.

I glance up to find him watching me. He's wearing black pants and a white button down, the sleeves rolled up and showing off his forearms. His hair is golden brown, almost but not quite dirty blond, and his face is stunning. Arrogant.

Perfect.

I rise to my feet and stand in front of him, reveling in the appreciation flaring in his ice blue eyes. "Yes, please."

I follow him to the bar. He speaks to the bartender and slips him a fifty-dollar bill while I stand there, duly impressed. He hands me the glass, and takes a can of beer, slipping it in his front pocket.

"You don't like champagne?" I ask him as I glance around, clutching the stem of the glass between pinched fingers. No one's paying any attention to us, so I take a sip.

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Delicious.

"No," he says. "Besides, the cheap stuff gives me a headache."

I don't know the difference, so I take his word as gospel.

I also take what I can get, so I'm not about to turn down this free and very full glass of bubbly.

I follow him inside, the hushed quiet sending a shiver through me. Or maybe that's the air conditioning that's on full blast, I don't know. We walk deeper into the house, until we're in a dark hallway, where all the bedroom doors are closed.

"My father's in one of those rooms, fucking your mother," he says casually, right as I'm sipping from my glass.

I practically spit it all over his face. I gape at him, blinking. "What did you just say?"

His expression doesn't change a bit. "You heard me."

"My mother is *married*."

"So is my dad. Like that matters." He shrugs, then pulls the can of beer out of his pocket. He cracks it open, then slurps up the foam before taking a huge drink.

"She wouldn't do that." When he says nothing, I feel the need to clarify. "Fuck your father."

It feels very grown-up, saying that word to this boy while drinking champagne. I take another sip, letting the bubbles linger on my tongue.

"Well, she is. Your mom's a slut." He drains the beer can, then crushes it between his fingers, tossing it onto the ground so it lands in a loud clatter.

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I'm suddenly furious. Mother and I don't always get along, but he doesn't even *know* her. "You can't say that."

"Oh yeah? Well, I just did." He cocks his head, his gaze narrowed. So much anger there. And he's so young. I get angry sometimes, but nothing like this. "Are you a slut too? Like your mom?"

"Fuck you," I spit at him, flinging the champagne in his face.

He winces, slowly wiping his face off with his hand. I stand there, breathing hard, knowing I should go, but I'm too fascinated, watching this unfold.

Watching him.

It's like it's not even happening to me. And I've never done anything like that before in my life. Who am I? When did I get so brave? Or stupid?

"You're a bitch," he hisses. "Just like your mom."

"You're an asshole," I return, about to turn on my heel and walk away from him, but he grabs me.

Stops me.

His fingers sink into my flesh, his grip extra tight on my upper arm and I struggle against his hold, trying to get rid of him. "Let me go."

"No." He smirks, and I idly realize he's the devil hiding behind an angel baby's face. He shoves me against the wall and I fall against it like a rag doll, nearly sliding to the floor. He grabs hold of me before I land, yanking me up, and presses his body against mine. He towers over me, at least six feet tall, but he's lean. Skinny. Yates is broader. Meatier. But he's sixteen. Older.

This boy is just that.

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Still a boy.

"What are you doing?" I ask as I struggle against him. Doing so makes me feel him and I'm intrigued. He's hard everywhere. Solid. Stronger than he looks.

"I think you like it." The smirk is still there and when he presses his lower body against me, I can feel something else.

He's got a hard-on.

I go completely still, unable to move.

"Your mom sucks my dad off at least twice a week," he whispers. "She meets him in his office. They call it lunch."

I gape at him. I have no idea what he's talking about. I mean, I know what he's referring to, but there's no way she does that.

No. Way.

"You have dick sucking lips," he tells me, and I almost bloom under the compliment, before I tell myself I'm sick and messed up, and he meant it as an insult.

"Shut up," I whisper, and he smiles.

"Want to suck mine?"

"Absolutely not." I tilt my chin, sounding like a haughty princess.

What would it be like, sucking a boy's dick? Girls do it. All the time. I found a magazine in Yates's room once, and snuck it back into mine. Photos of naked girls. Couples caught in mid-position. His penis inside her vagina. His mouth on her nipples. His penis inside her mouth as she stares up at him, doe-eyed and with her fingers between her legs.

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I think of that now and heady warmth unfurls deep within me, making me weak.

Or maybe that's the champagne.

"You might like it," he says with the faintest smile. His teeth are perfectly straight. I bet when he really smiles, he's beautiful.

Pretty sure he doesn't smile much though.

"I won't," I tell him firmly.

"Ever done it before?"

I furiously shake my head.

"Let me be your first."

"No." I shove at his shoulders, but he doesn't budge.

"Come on. Your mom is my dad's whore. You could be mine too." He inclines his head toward the closed doors in the darkened hallway. "Like I said, they're in one of those rooms right now. I bet your mom is on her knees for him." He sneers. "I bet she swallows every drop of my dad's cum. You could do the same for me."

"Fuck you." His words are infuriating but also the faintest bit tantalizing. I've never thought of cum and swallowing and dicks in my mouth while talking to a boy. No one has ever spoken to me like this before.

No one.

He laughs. "No, fuck *you*. Your family is fucked up."

"Uh, I think it's your family that's fucked up," I tell him, thrusting my hips against his to get him off me.

It doesn't help at all. Just reminds me that he's hard. And I can't help but think that he's hard for me.

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I have friends who've had sex already. Lana did it with David in the gym during our eighth-grade graduation dance. She told us later she walked funny for a week, his dick was so big. I had a hard time believing her, but said nothing.

Now I'm curious. This boy's dick seems large, not that I have much to compare it to. I want to see it.

Touch it.

"Let me go," I say through clenched teeth, struggling a little. I think he likes it. I sort of like it too. His strength. How I'm too weak to break free. What does this say about me? I'm sick. Twisted. Weird.

I've always had what I call 'the darkness.' I've never met someone who acts like he has it too.

He leans in close, his mouth mere inches from mine, and I can feel his breath. It's warm, and smells faintly of beer. "Make me."

Going on pure instinct, I part my lips, readying to scream, and he knows it.

So he kisses me instead.

It's harsh, a shock to the system, and I go completely still. His lips mash against mine, lacking skill, though I'm not particularly skilled either. But I know it can be better than this. Softer than this.

I purse my lips around his lower one, tugging on it. He slows. Relaxes. The kiss turns languid. His tongue darts out, surprising me. I part my lips, and his tongue touches mine.

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My first grown-up kiss is with a boy who calls my mother a whore. Who said I could be his whore. I should shove him away. Bite his tongue in half. Knee him in the balls.

I don't do any of that. Instead, I let him kiss me, and God help me, I enjoy it. Warmth spreads through my veins, warming me from the inside out, and I cling to him. His hands are on my waist. I clutch the front of his shirt. His erection jerks against me, and that secret spot I've recently discovered tingles.

This is what Yates wants from me. The disgusting pervert. I will never give this to him, because we're family, and that's gross.

But the more this mystery boy kisses me, the more I'm willing to consider giving him whatever he wants.

We kiss for so long I don't know how we're able to breathe. Finally, *finally*, he ends it first and I open my eyes, staring at his parted, swollen lips. Slowly I lift my gaze to find him watching me.

He reaches for the hem of my skirt, his fingers shooting beneath it to touch the inside of my thigh and I bite my lower lip. "Are you wet?"

"What are you talking about?" I know, but he's so freaking young. Like me. We know sex is happening. We have access to all the porn on the internet, but still.

He talks to me like an adult. The boys I know won't even touch my boobs, and this guy is going straight to the spot between my legs.

"Like you don't know." He sounds disgusted, and I'm about to say something, a protest. An insult.

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But he kisses me again, making me forget. This one is better. I guess I taught him well. It's slow and soft, the drag of his tongue against mine making me ache. He explores my mouth thoroughly, testing me, and I let him. I explore too. Our mouths are open, our tongues teasing, licking at each other, and my entire body tingles with anticipation. Somehow I touch him, my hand on the front of his pants, and he thrusts against my palm, letting me feel how hard he is.

I throb between my thighs and I want to touch myself.

No.

I want *him* to touch *me*.

"I don't even know you," I whisper against his lips.

He pulls away with an evil smile. "Liar."

"I don't." I'm confused. Why would he think I'm lying about that?

"You're at my house. My father is one of the richest men in the entire fucking world. 'Oh, I don't even know you.'" He's mocking me, his voice high-pitched. He sounds ridiculous.

Anger fills me. After what just happened, he makes fun of me? I don't care how good of a kisser he turned into, he's an asshole.

"Get away from me." I shove him off of me and this time, he staggers backward, letting me go. I stalk off, nearly tripping over the discarded champagne glass. I must've dropped it when we struggled earlier.

I don't even remember that happening.

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He calls after me, but I ignore him, running as fast as I can on shaky legs. I push my way out of the house, back onto the

terrace, searching for my mother. My stepfather, who's basically like a father to me. But they're both nowhere in sight.

I hear the boy. He says my name, though I never told him what it was. Panicked, I glance around, scared he's going to grab me, bracing myself when I feel a hand clamp around my shoulder but...

I turn around to find it's my mother.

"Summer! What are you doing? You look petrified."

Relief floods me. She's not locked away in a room fucking another man; she's out here. With me. At the party.

"Mother." I throw myself at her, hugging her waist tight and she laughs, sounding surprised. We've been fighting nonstop since eighth grade ended. All of my friends are going to high school at Lancaster Prep, and that's where I want to go too. I'm desperate to go there.

Jonas says no. He wants me going to St. Anthony's like he did. In the city. It's a good school and all, but I'll be lonely. My friends will be having fun in boarding school and I'll be stuck here.

Alone. With Yates, who'll be a junior. Our parents travel together all the time, leaving us alone, and Yates will be relentless. He'll wear me down, until finally I'll give in to him.

"Honey, what's wrong? You're shaking." She runs her hand up and down my back, soothing me, and I'm struck with the fear that this is the last time she'll do this. Believe me sweet and innocent. It's like a piece of me was stolen tonight, and that boy claimed it with his lips and tongue and wandering hands.

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I try to laugh and pull away from her, desperate to play it off. "I'm fine. Really. I just thought—I'd lost you."

"Your cheeks are extra pink." She frowns, cupping my face. "You haven't been drinking, have you?"

I try my best to look innocent. "*No,* Mom. God. Of course not."

"Good." That was way too easy. I can't believe she took my word for it. "Stay away from the champagne. I know how much you like to sneak sips."

My cheeks heat even more.

Now it's her turn to glance around, and I study her. Really study her.

Her cheeks are flushed too. Her hair is a mess in the back, like she needs to run a brush through it. One of her earrings is missing. And the dress she's wearing, it's all crooked and rumpled. Like she needs to readjust it.

Oh no.

She looks like how I feel. Though I didn't have sex with that boy, I did let him kiss me, and I sort of lost myself for a moment.

Mother looks like she lost herself for at least a half hour. Maybe longer.

"Where were you?" I ask, my tone accusing.

"I've been out here the entire time." Her gaze meets mine once more, her freshly glossed lips curled into a frown. "Where were you?"

"Right here. The whole time." I glance over my shoulder to find the boy standing there, watching us. A man stands behind him, the older version of the boy. He's extremely handsome, with an

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air about him that says he owns everything. The boy is watching me.

The man is watching my mother.

The boy raises his brows, tilting his head in my direction. I turn away from him, not wanting to see the smug satisfaction on his stupidly handsome face. He knows I figured it out. He already had figured it out.

And damn him, he was right.

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ONE

SUMMER

SENIOR YEAR

I WALK the hallowed halls of Lancaster Prep, my head ducked down, studying my feet as I place one in front of the other. Again and again and again. My shiny new penny loafers pinch my feet and the wool of my green and navy plaid skirt is itchy against my thighs. I remember wanting to come here so badly the summer before my freshman year, and how angry I was that my parents wouldn't pay the tremendous amount of money it cost to go to Lancaster.

Now I'm here, for one year only. My final year in high school. It's late August, and while the air is cool, thanks to the ocean breeze outside, it's stifling in this old building with the beautiful wood paneling and the horribly outdated cooling system. Do they even have central heat and air in this place?

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Probably not.

"Come on," Mother says through her teeth, snapping her fingers at her waist to get me to walk beside her.

I hurry my steps, keeping pace with her, lifting my head to see other students pass by us with curious expressions on their faces, their gazes taking in the familiar Lancaster uniform that I'm wearing.

A new girl. A transfer. I'm sure they'll be curious. I'm sure they'll Google my name, and find out my family scandal.

I came out mostly unscathed. Mother made sure of that. She wasn't about to let my future crumble. She knows people, and she used that power to ensure that I would be protected.

That's why I'm here, at Lancaster Prep. The most elite boarding school on the east coast. Founded by one of the richest, oldest families in the country. The Lancasters go way back, to the time of the Vanderbilts, the Astors and the Rockefellers. Their money is so old, most don't know exactly where it originally came from.

Like me. I've heard maybe shipping? Oil? Bought up all available land on the east coast and then sold it over the years. I don't know. I don't really care. I just know they're filthy rich.

And for years, my mother, my prim and proper mother, was having a raging affair with Augustus Lancaster the fifth.

"Here we are," Mother singsongs, and I can hear the slight tremble in her voice. She's nervous for me, and I stand taller, wanting to prove to her that I'm not scared. "The admissions office."

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She opens the door and I enter first, smiling at the older woman sitting behind the high wooden counter. She rises slowly to her

feet, clad in a navy skirt suit, the jacket barely able to come around her ample bustline.

"Good morning!" The woman smiles at my mother before her gaze lands on me. "You must be Summer Savage," she says with an overly friendly smile.

"I'm her mother, Janine Weatherstone." She always holds out her hand in a way that makes it seem like she's a queen greeting her loyal subjects. I can tell this doesn't impress the woman whatsoever, but she takes her hand anyway, weakly shaking the tips of her fingers.

"Lovely to meet you. We're so glad to have Summer here for her senior year." The woman's expression grows solemn. "Such a tragedy, what happened. I'm sorry for your loss."

Mother glares. That is the last thing she wants to talk about, especially with a stranger. "Thank you," she says crisply. "Is Mr. Matthews available?"

The woman stands up straight. "Of course! I thought you'd want Summer's schedule so she can get going. First period has already started, I'm afraid." She casts me a look of judgment. Like it's my fault I'm late.

I can't help it that it took Mother forever to pack her things and leave the hotel room, complaining the entire time that she didn't get enough sleep. I, on the other hand, have been up since six, too anxious to sleep.

"Yes, please give us her schedule," Mother demands. "And we need to talk to Mr. Matthews first before she goes to class. I'm sure he'll write her an excuse."

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"Of course." The woman—she must be the headmaster's secretary—hands over a pale pink slip to me. Mother snatches it out

of her grip, glancing over my list of classes, and I stand there, anxiously awaiting a glimpse.

"She wasn't put in honors English," Mother says, shoving the schedule in my direction, her irritation clear.

Disappointment fills me as I scan the list. Senior English. World Religions. Math. Advanced French. There's a free period listed right after lunch, and American Government is my last class. "I'm okay with this schedule," I tell Mother, but her lips thin and she shakes her head.

"You're an excellent writer, Summer. Always scribbling in those journals of yours," Mother says. Her voice is low, but I see the way the secretary perks up.

My cheeks color and I shrug. "It's nothing. Please don't change the schedule. I'll be fine."

"Let's have you go into Headmaster Matthews' office and you can wait for him in there," the woman says, waving toward a partially open door behind her. "He's on campus right now but I'll let him know you're waiting. He'll be right in."

I follow Mother into the cramped office, the both of us settling into the chairs facing the giant, ornate desk as the secretary shuts the door with a quiet click. The moment Mother knows we're alone, she turns on me, her scowl obvious.

"What do you mean, you don't want honors English?" she hisses.

"I don't want to cause any trouble." I've become a mere shadow of myself since the accident happened, not wanting to draw attention. "It's enough already, don't you think? That you were able to pull some strings to get me in here."

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"It's the least I could do, considering how long I've known Augie," Mother mutters, referring to her former lover.

The one who ended up divorcing his wife, thanks to my mother's years-long affair with her husband. It was a huge scandal. One splashed all over the internet and tabloids. It broke my stepfather's heart. And then it enraged him.

It was not a pleasant experience.

The door suddenly creaks open and in walks a handsome older man. Headmaster Matthews, I assume. He smiles at us, his dark eyes crinkling in the corners, his grin wide, showing off dazzling white teeth. He shuts the door and moves so he's standing behind his desk as some sort of barrier, and holds his hand out to Mother first.

"Mrs. Weatherstone, an absolute pleasure to meet you," he says, his voice smooth, his expression pleasant.

She rises to her feet and gives his hand a quick shake. "Thank you for meeting with us, Mr. Matthews."

They both settle in their chairs, smiling at each other and I blink at the two of them. It's almost as if they've forgotten all about me.

"This is Summer," Mother says, indicating me with a tilt of her head.

"Summer, we are so glad to have you here, attending our prestigious school," Mr. Matthews says, his voice warm and sincere. "I've personally looked over your transcripts, and I'm most impressed with your classes. And your grades."

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"Thank you." I'm a good student. A little out of control in my earlier years and a little boy crazy, but I've always got good grades.

"You had some trouble early on though," he continues, his gaze meeting mine. "I assume you've straightened up since then?"

I stiffen my spine, nodding. "Yes, sir."

"She's not enrolled in honors English," Mother says, and I glare at her. She ignores me. "Summer is an excellent writer. She was on the newspaper staff at her previous school. She's won awards for her writing. It's exceptional."

"Ah, I'm afraid getting into the senior honors English class here at Lancaster is a privilege, not a right. The students in Mr. Figueroa's class have worked hard the last three years. He handpicks them at the end of their junior year, and there's only twenty in the class." Mr. Matthews rests his forearms on top of his desk, his hands clasped. "I'm afraid I can't just enroll Summer without his consent."

"Maybe you could talk to him." Mother's voice is lilting. Pleasant.

His smile never falters. "I'm afraid not."

"Maybe you could extend a favor my way." Her voice becomes a little sterner.

"It's Figueroa's class, not mine."

Her smile is gone. "Maybe I can reach out to Mr. Lancaster and see what he could do for me."

I want to die. This is so embarrassing. I don't care about the honors English class. I don't want to stand out. I definitely don't want to make a scene. Me walking into a classroom of twenty

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students who've risen up the ranks for the last three years would be a nightmare. They'd automatically hate me.

Matthews' lips quiver the slightest bit and his gaze dims. "I'll make it happen."

"See that you do." Her smile returns and Mother takes a deep breath, glancing over at me. "Will this alter her schedule dramatically?"

"No. No, it shouldn't." He finally frowns as he turns toward the computer on his desk. He starts tapping away at the keyboard, the screen angled just enough toward us that I see my information brought up on the screen.

My transcripts. Notes from previous teachers and my counselor throughout the years. Administration notes take up the most of it.

Summer is disruptive in class. Lashes out for no reason.

Was caught vaping in the bathroom. Two-day suspension.

Caught having sex in the gymnasium. Five-day suspension.

Detained and searched. Found with her mother's Xanax prescription in her backpack. Two-day suspension.

And that was all by the end of sophomore year.

My stepfather—God rest his soul—put the hammer down after the Xanax incident. He threatened to put me in military school for the remainder of my high school years. I cried and begged, pleaded with him on my knees not to make me go. They enrolled me. It was going to happen.

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And then my mother's affair with Lancaster became public, and he forgot all about me. He focused on my mother instead.

We moved out. Found a smaller apartment. The media was so focused on my family, I retreated into myself. Stopped causing trouble at school and focused solely on my schoolwork. Lost all of my friends. Mother worked Jonas over. And over. And over.

Until we moved back into his house in the spring. Yates soon returned, home from college, and he was so glad to see me. He lit candles in his room and forced me to meet him that night. Put his hand over my mouth and his hand in my pants before he—

"Ah, we'll have to switch a couple of your classes," Mr. Matthews says, disrupting my thoughts, "but that shouldn't be a problem."

He taps a few more keys, angling the screen more toward himself, as if he just realized that we could read everything about me. Mother keeps up the pretense, but I see the tightening of her lips, the clouds in her eyes.

Those old memories aren't pleasant. I wasn't happy—far from it. No one was listening to me. I only found absolute peace when I got away from Yates and it was just Mom and me. Living with him, having to deal with him all the time, his persistence eventually wore me down. More times than I could count.

And it was...horrible.

Knowing that I was about to spend my entire summer with him, the summer before my senior year, pushed me to my limits. I did something that's almost...scary.

But it got me away from him.

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Forever.

"I just sent your new schedule to the printer. Vivian will have it ready for you. Good luck today, Summer," Headmaster Matthews says, his shrewd gaze landing on me.

You're going to need it.

I can hear the unspoken words there, hovering in the room. Oblivious to it all and pleased with getting her way, Mother stands and I rise too, fighting the nerves swimming in my stomach.

"Thank you for understanding our needs," Mother says. "We're so grateful."

"Of course. Anything for a—*friend* of Mr. Lancaster's," he says.

I catch the emphasis the headmaster made. So does Mother. She marches out of his tiny office with her head held high, snatching the newly printed schedule from Vivian's fingers without so much as a thank you as we pass by her. Vivian mutters something under her breath, and I pretend like I didn't hear it, though I did.

"Whore," is what she whispered.

The word follows my mother everywhere she goes, and she's an expert at ignoring people. I don't know how she does it. I remember the boy I met. The son of the man she had the affair with, and how he called me a whore too. Those memories linger in the forefront of my mind, especially when I'm in bed late at night. I remember how he made me feel. His cruel words, his brutal kiss.

I've been chasing after that feeling ever since.

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TWO

SUMMER

I ENTER the honors English class early, since I already missed most of first period, and go to the desk where a giant, dark-haired man is sitting, chatting with a couple of students. The girls are pretty, their uniforms immaculate, their hair a matching golden blonde, long and parted in the middle. They're carefree in the way they toss their heads back and laugh at something the teacher said, and I envy just how comfortable they are. They're so confident, so sure of themselves, and I understand why. They've been here for three years; they've put in the time, and now they're on top. The seniors. Ready to rule the school.

And here I am, barging into their class thanks to my overbearing mother, as if I belong here. I don't.

And I know it.

When they all turn to look at me, their expressions full of disdain, I shrink back from them, handing over my schedule to Mr. Figueroa with shaky fingers.

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"Hi. I'm in this class," I say.

He glances over the schedule, his dark brows drawing together. "I'm afraid there must be some mistake."

I say nothing. Just glance around the classroom, pretending I don't know what just happened in the headmaster's office.

Figueroa picks up the phone on his desk and dials a three-number extension. "Hey. Yes, I have a—" he looks over my schedule, "—Summer Savage here, claiming she's in Senior Honors?"

He goes quiet, listening to whatever Headmaster Matthews is telling him and I want to disappear into myself. The girls are obviously listening, their gazes cutting to me, and one of them leans over to whisper to the other, her hand cupped around the other girl's ear so I can't hear them.

They don't bother trying to hide they're talking about me. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised.

"I see." His voice is low. A little cold. "All right then. Thank you." He hangs up the phone and looks at me, his expression impassive as he hands me back my schedule. "You can go ahead and sit down, Miss Savage. Class will begin in a few minutes."

I do as he says, sitting in the very front, on the farthest side of the classroom. I pull out a fresh notebook and a pen, taking the cap off with my teeth before I open the notebook, smoothing my hand down the blank page. I'm filled with the urge to write in my journal, but it's buried deep in my backpack and I don't want to pull it out, only to have to put it away.

My journal carries all of my thoughts. My feelings. Notes and doodles. Scraps of paper I wanted to save. A receipt from the time my friends and I went to that new coffee shop, right before

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I moved. A concert ticket stub when I went to see Harry Styles. A note from Yates, threatening me. A rumpled, stained with champagne cocktail napkin taken from that party, the night I kissed that terrible boy. It was a dark navy blue, with a giant white L in the dead center.

For Lancaster.

Sometimes I like to flip through my journal, running my fingers over the bits of paper, rereading my entries. Some are hard to read, like the night of the fire. My interactions with my stepbrother. The argument with my stepfather. My falling out with my friends.

Others make me smile. Still others make me yearn for the old times, when I was still young and innocent and believed there were good people in the world.

Now I'm not so sure if any even exist.

Students slowly trickle into the classroom, every single one of them looking at me with confusion in their eyes. They expect to know every single person in this class, so I understand why I trip them up.

"Okay, are we all here? I think so." Figueroa stands and goes to the white board, writing Romeo and Juliet in blue ink. "Welcome to senior honors English. It is truly an honor to be here." He smiles. The class chuckles. He points at the board with his capped marker. "This was your summer reading assignment. I hope you're all fully prepared for the assignments I'm about to make."

He sends me a doubtful look and I smile in return, writing Romeo and Juliet on the first line of my page. This is too easy. I

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read this book my sophomore year. I'll need a refresher, but I'm not worried.

"I'm sure you've all noticed we have a new student in here with us. Please say hello to Summer." His gaze never leaves mine as he speaks, and I look away first, uncomfortable with his scrutiny.

A few people offer murmured hellos, but not too many. I'm sure they hate that I'm in here with them. In their eyes, I'm sure they believe I don't belong here.

The door suddenly bursts open and a boy strides in, his head turned as he yells to someone in the hall. The door slams shut behind him, and everything within me comes alive. I sit up straight. My skin prickles. My heart races. My breath stalls in my throat, and sweat beads along my hairline.

I know who it is. I told myself he wouldn't be here, but I was wrong.

He is.

Whit Lancaster. The boy who kissed me. Who wanted to fuck me and called me a whore when we were barely teenagers. He's taller than I remember. Well over six feet, and his shoulders look so broad, clad in the requisite navy uniform jacket. His arrogance is palpable. He saunters into the classroom as if he owns the place, and technically, he does.

After all, it's his family name on the sign.

I stare, caught up in his magnificent face. It's better than I remember. He's heartbreakingly beautiful. Piercing blue eyes, sharp cheekbones, aquiline nose, angled jawline. His mouth is lush, his lips a deep pink and he bares his teeth in a smile for our teacher that is hopelessly fake.

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"Whit. So happy you could make it," Figueroa says dryly.

Girls giggle. Whit scowls.

"Sorry." He doesn't sound sorry at all. His voice is deeper compared to the last time I heard him speak. "Something came up."

He doesn't even look at me and I sit there, folding into myself so my shoulders are hunched, and I drop my head. I don't want him to see me. Recognize me.

That would be a disaster. He hates me.

With everything he's got.

Why did I think he was a year ahead of me in school? How could I screw that up so badly? I don't know how I came to that conclusion, but once the idea formed in my mind, it stuck.

My mistake—a big one, too.

After our encounter that night, when I asked my mother who the man was and she told me his name, I Googled him. One of the top images that appeared was of the Lancasters, all five of them. The father, tall, proud and handsome. The mother, thin, arrogant and cold. The two beautiful girls, with matching smiles, stood in the front wearing matching dresses. Whittaker Augustus Lancaster stood next to his father, taller than him. His expression one of barely contained anger, so strong I could practically feel it. The more I studied the photo, the more curious I became.

What kind of family were they? They look picture perfect, but I know now pictures lie. At fourteen, I didn't believe Whit when he told me my mother was having an affair with his father. I couldn't even wrap my head around the idea. I loved

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my stepdad as if he were my own father, and I believed my mother felt the same way.

I found out later that I was wrong.

The scandal was revealed quickly. Midway through my sophomore year in high school, the Lancaster divorce was announced to the world, thanks to a scandalous photo of Augustus Lancaster in a compromising situation.

With my mother.

My elegant, never ruffled, always put together mother. Caught exiting a seedy hotel downtown with giant sunglasses covering her beautiful face, wearing only a loosely belted Celine trench coat and hand in hand with Augustus, the wind catching the coat's hem just so and revealing her long, bare legs.

All the way up to her hip bone. No panties in sight.

The press went wild. She was naked under that coat, they implied, and I assumed they were correct.

So did everyone else.

Nothing else was going on in the world at the time, so it turned into a national scandal. One the Lancaster family never fully recovered from. Our family didn't necessarily recover from it either.

As the oldest of three and the only boy, Whit is heir to the family fortune. Well, one of the heirs of the many Lancaster families' fortune. But his father is the oldest son of the oldest son of the oldest son...

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It goes on and on for generations. They are old money—as old as it can get in this country. Lancaster Prep has been here for over one hundred and twenty years, and every single Lancaster

has attended this school before they went on to college and bigger, greater things.

My mother's affair with Augustus changed their lives forever. Whit's mother, Sylvia, of the Rhode Island Whittakers—another very wealthy family, though not as established as the Lancasters—received a healthy sum in the divorce settlement. Neither of the Lancasters are allowed to discuss the terms of their divorce, or why exactly they divorced in the first place. There's a gag order in place. But everyone knows why their marriage ended.

Because of my mother.

While we have money, we're considered downright poor compared to the Lancasters, and money makes a person, or family, untouchable in certain circles. Meaning my mother was left for the wolves—the paparazzi, the society pages—and they tore her apart. Her carcass was ripped to shreds, scattered all over New York City. People whispered. Celebrity rags and blogs screamed her name in glee, running that photo of her exposed hip bone again and again and again. 20/20 on ABC ran a two-hour special on the affair and the devastating aftermath of it all once the fire happened.

I always tend to push the fire out of my mind. Our family scandal ended in tragedy, while the Lancasters were left relatively unscathed. Money protects you. Insulates you. Those who win in the game of life, always win when they have the most money.

Unfair, but whoever said life was fair? I've also learned that the hard way.

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Look at the Lancasters. Despite the affair and the scandal it brought with it, they emerged as golden as ever. Photos of the

entire family together still pop up occasionally. The ever-modern family who can still get along while divorced. They do it for the kids, all the articles have said.

While Mother and I are left tarnished and scarred. Broken and barred from the society that used to accept us—specifically her and Jonas—with open arms.

A thought suddenly hits me: are the Lancaster sisters here as well?

They'd have to be.

Sylvie and Carolina are gorgeous. One of them is a dancer, I can't remember which one. But carrying on the Lancaster name rests squarely on Whit's shoulders.

My head still ducked, I watch as Whit walks in front of the rows of desks, settling into one in a row the farthest from mine, on the other side of the room. His expression is like stone, his lips formed into what looks like a pout as he glares at the teacher standing before us.

I swore Whit was older than me. At the time during our first and only encounter, he most definitely acted like he was older. He was so jaded, as if he'd seen and done everything already, and he wasn't impressed.

He's wearing that same look now. He hasn't changed much in three years. He seems completely bored with life.

I'm just grateful he didn't notice me.

I stay frozen in my chair as Figueroa continues his lecture, droning on about the relationship of two lovesick teenagers who sacrifice everything—including their lives—for what they believe is love.

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"Was it love, though?" Figueroa asks at one point. "They're younger than you all are now. Historians figure Juliet was barely fourteen. We can assume Romeo was older, so sixteen, seventeen at most. By eighteen, he should've been married and even a father."

"Fuck that," one of the boys mutters, making everyone laugh.

"Indeed," Figueroa says, scowling at the boy, who only smiles at him in return. "But that's how it was then. How it's been for hundreds of years. Only during recent modern times have we as a society accepted that people get married for the first time at an older age. More and more people are becoming parents at a later age as well. You should thank your parents for that."

"I'm not thanking my parents for shit."

This is from Whit.

"Mr. Lancaster, I always appreciate your colorful commentary throughout my lectures. Witty and entertaining, as usual." The snideness in Mr. Figueroa's tone is telling. Someone doesn't appreciate the namesake in his classroom.

But I suppose there's not a damn thing he can do about it.

There's more talk of Romeo and Juliet, and I take copious notes, keeping my gaze on my notebook for pretty much the entirety of class. I don't want to draw anyone's attention. Not the teacher's—who resents me for being pushed upon him when he has no clue what I'm like or how my grades are—or the students, who've worked hard and earned their spot while I just walked into this class like it's mine to take.

I wonder if that's the case for Whit as well. Does he just get whatever he wants, thanks to his last name? Or is he actually smart? Does he do well in school? Or does he act like an asshole

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and put in zero effort? He doesn't have to abide by the school's strict rules, not like the rest of us.

The bell rings and I hurriedly gather my things, sling my backpack over my shoulder and exit the room without a backward glance. I have my schedule clutched in my hand and I scan it, noting I have math next.

My least favorite subject.

The wide hall is flooded with students, all of us making our way to our classrooms, everyone looking the same in their uniforms. I went to a private school in Manhattan, though we didn't have to wear uniforms. I'm unused to the itchy wool skirt, the stifling button-up shirt. And the jacket?

I hate it. I'm actually sweating right now.

My gaze drops to the other girls' skirts as I walk past them. Some of them are extra short, and I assume they're rolling them at the waist. I can't help but notice they all have beautiful hair. Vivid color on their mouths, dramatic makeup on their eyes. Brightly painted nails. A way of standing out from the crowd.

My long brown hair is pulled back into a simple ponytail. No paint on my nails or my face. A little bit of mascara on my lashes is the only effort I put into my look this morning, and I feel downright plain compared to these girls.

Maybe that's a good thing. I don't want to stand out. I don't want anyone to notice me. If I'd known Whit was in attendance, I would've never wanted to come here. For all my internet sleuthing regarding the Lancasters, that I never figured out he was still enrolled at Lancaster Prep is a rookie mistake. I should've known better.

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I should've known period.

While the internet was full of talk about my mother's affair with Augustus, and there are plenty of books and numerous online articles about previous Lancaster generations, there's not a ton of information about the current generation. Maybe it's out of respect for their privacy, because of their age. And Whit doesn't put himself out there. He has a cousin—Brooks Lancaster—who's an influencer on Instagram. He has his own YouTube channel and is huge on TikTok. He's the one with all the fame.

Maybe Whit prefers staying out of the limelight.

I enter my math class and settle at the back of the classroom, deciding that will be my seat of choice for the rest of the day. I don't know why I sat in the front in English. Out of defiance? Figueroa frustrated me. Considering we're seniors in an honors English class, Romeo and Juliet is a trite reading assignment.

But I'm not going to complain. I'm actually grateful, considering I've already read the book. At least I don't have to catch up on anything.

An older woman enters the classroom and she shuts the door with a loud boom, turning the lock. She makes her way to the front with brisk efficiency, turning to face us with a brittle smile.

"Welcome to Math III. If you don't know who I am, my name is Miss Falk. As in, don't Falk with me." She smiles.

No one laughs. Guess they're taking her words to heart.

Passing out a syllabus, she talks about what she expects from us. She doles out our textbooks and a single sheet of homework, claiming she wants to assess our abilities, and I glance it over, frowning at the questions.

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"Is there a problem?" Miss Falk asks, pausing right next to my desk.

I glance up to find her contemplating me, curiosity in her gaze. "No ma'am." I shake my head.

"Good. Welcome to Lancaster, Miss Savage."

She moves on.

A few people turn in their seats to openly study me and I smile wanly at them before ducking my head. I hate the attention. I don't want them to figure out who I am. I've always hated that I'm stuck with my father's last name. A man I barely know. A man who doesn't give a shit about me, and never really has. I wanted to be a Weatherstone like my mother, like my stepfather Jonas. Even my stepbrother Yates.

Yates Weatherstone is a mouthful. Literally and figuratively.

My stomach roils at the thought.

I go to French class, and it's a small, enthusiastic group. The teacher is young, asking all of us to call her Amelie and she talks in animated French. She's actually from France, and there are mostly girls in the class, which helps me relax. I introduce myself in French to everyone and they smile and nod in response, their faces friendly.

The first friendly faces I've seen all day.

Once it's lunch, I go to the dining hall, impressed with the food selection. I put together a salad at the salad bar, then make my way through the many crowded tables, hating that I know no one. A couple of girls from my French class spot me and wave me over, and I sit with them, silently eating my salad as they chat around me.

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"Oh God, there's Whit," one of them says, resting her hand over her chest. "He's *so* gorgeous. Swear to God he got better looking over the summer. He's *so* tan."

No way can I turn and look at him. If he saw my face, I'm sure he'd recognize me. Of course he would. The media kept my face out of the news, but he knows exactly who I am. Just like I know who he is.

"He's sadistic," says the other girl. Her name is Jane, and she is far from plain. She looks like a model with her perfect features and long, lanky body. "I hear he likes to hurt girls when he ah, fucks them."

"What in the world are you talking about?" asks the other one. I stare at her, trying to remember her name, but I can't.

There have been too many new things today to remember them all, including names.

Jane leans in close, her voice dropping. "Farah had a thing with him last year. Nothing serious, but they'd mess around. Hook up. He was very demanding, she said. Every time he kissed her, he'd put his hand on her throat. Like he was trying to hold her down. She said sometimes his fingers would tighten, as if he were trying to actually—*choke* her."

The other girl gasps. I say nothing, though of course what she says sparks my imagination. It doesn't scare me. Nor does it shock me.

I can imagine him enjoying that. He was brutal when he was fourteen. Where could his imagination go now?

"That's disgusting," the girl whose name I can't remember declares with a sneer.

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Jane grins and flips her wavy blonde hair over her shoulder. "I think it's kind of hot."

I watch her. How she snaps her bright pink gum—she's not eating anything at lunch—and her prissy mannerisms. This girl couldn't handle Whit Lancaster. He'd destroy her with a touch. A glance.

"He's so hot, I suppose I could ignore his idiosyncrasies." The girl—I just remembered her name, it's Caitlyn—laughs, her focus turning to me. "Have you met Whit yet?"

I slowly shake my head, but otherwise remain quiet. I'm neither confirming nor denying anything verbally.

"His family owns the school. He's untouchable," she says.

"Are you liking Lancaster so far?" Jane asks, tucking her hair behind her ear, snapping her gum.

"It's a lot to take in," I answer truthfully before I take a bite of my salad.

"Are you staying in the dorms? Or are you a day student?" This is from Caitlyn.

"Dorms," I answer, dropping my gaze. Thanks to Mother knowing Augustus Lancaster, I was able to get a single dorm at the last minute, which I'm sure is unheard of. Meaning I don't have to share my room with anyone else. I've heard those are rare.

Again, I'm getting special favors, thanks to my mother's connection to the Lancasters. Which is kind of messed up, but whatever. I have to take advantage of it where I can.

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"Where did you go to school before?" asks Jane, sipping from her water bottle. Her eyes gleam as she studies me, and I'm sure she's trying to figure me out.

I don't trust her. Something about her sets me on edge. But, of course, I don't trust anyone. Not anymore.

Once you've been burned so many times, it's hard to let down your guard.

"Billington in Manhattan," I answer with a faint smile.

They both look impressed.

It's one of the best private schools in Manhattan. Jonas was on the school board when Yates attended there. That is how Yates was able to get away with so much—they looked the other way, thanks to Jonas' generous donations and position on the board.

I did the world a favor when I took care of Yates. Not that I get any thanks for it.

Not that anyone knows exactly what I did.

We make small talk for the rest of lunch, the spot between my shoulder blades growing warmer and warmer as the hour winds down. As if someone was watching me. I don't dare look back.

Too afraid if I do, I'll be staring into Whit Lancaster's cold, assessing eyes.

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THREE

SUMMER

AFTER LUNCH I HAVE A BREAK, though it's actually a study hall period. I go to the library and find a spot in the back of the cavernous building, settling in at a small, unoccupied table. I pull out my math assignment, working through it hurriedly, distracted by the beautiful architecture. It's old, with soaring ceilings and gothic windows made of gorgeous stained-glass. Something you'd see out of a movie about witches and warlocks.

I receive a text notification and I check it to see it's from Mother.

Are you settling in?

I don't bother answering yet. Not that she cares. She's already on her way back home, to the apartment she inherited upon Jonas' death. No more fifth floor walkups for her. She'll be taken care of for the rest of her life. If I'm lucky, she'll leave a little bit for me when she dies.

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Knowing how much she enjoys spending money, I probably won't be so lucky.

There are other people in the library, and they talk in hushed tones, their heads bent close together, gossiping and smiling and laughing. Seeing them makes me long for my friends at my old school. I miss them. But when the scandal broke out about Yates and me, just before the fire happened, I couldn't show my face there ever again. Everyone knew what he was doing to me.

And not a single damn person did one thing to stop it.

Shoving my anger back down, I focus once again on my math homework, oblivious to the sound of footsteps until a soft, female voice says hello.

I nearly jump out of my skin, my head jerking up to find a girl standing by my table.

She smiles shyly, her long, dark blonde hair flowing far past her shoulders. Almost to her waist. Her face is pale, her eyes a haunted blue, and she smiles with rosebud lips, vividly red compared to the snow white of her skin. "You're new."

I can't help but smile in return. "I am."

"May I sit with you?"

I wave my hand at the three open chairs at my table. "Be my guest."

She settles into the chair closest to mine, dropping her backpack on the table with a loud thump. I watch as she digs through the contents, pulling out a history textbook and letting it land on the table with an echoing slap. Somewhere in the distance, I can hear a faint, "Shush!" that I'm sure came from the front desk.

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"She hates noise," the girl tells me with a faint smile.

"Who?"

"The librarian. Miss Taylor. She's as old as this building." The girl laughs and I can't help but join in. It's an infectious sound and I immediately feel at ease with her. Far more at ease than with the other two at lunch. "Notice how there are a bunch of spinster teachers who work here? I think this is where virgin educators go to die."

She laughs even harder. She reminds me of an angel, but she definitely has a devious mind.

I warm up to this girl even more.

"You like it here?" she asks me.

"It's nice," I say with a shrug, glancing at my math paper yet again. I have one more problem to solve, and then I'm done.

She leans in close, her voice a harsh whisper. "It's easy."

I raise a brow. "You think?"

"I *know*." She glances back, as if making sure no one's around, before she returns her attention to me. "I'm a junior. You're a senior?"

I nod, wondering how she knows. "I am."

"Went to Billington?" She whistles low when my eyebrows shoot up. "That place is fancy."

"And this place isn't?" My voice is dry, my heart racing.

How does she know where I went to school?

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She shrugs. "It's nothing."

Her words are so dismissive. Obviously, Lancaster Prep doesn't impress her.

"Have you always gone here?" I ask her. That's the only explanation as to why she doesn't see the beauty of this place. The old buildings, the gothic chapel with the spire that rises high into the sky. The lush green grounds, the forest behind the campus, and the ocean just beyond, crashing against the shore.

It's like a dream.

"My whole entire life." She rolls her eyes. Blows out an exaggerated breath. "That's what it feels like, at least."

"How do you know so much about me?" I ask, curious. But not put off. She has a way about her that's nonthreatening.

"I have my ways. And access," she says mysteriously. "I know your name is Summer Savage. Cool name by the way. Very—primal. You're from Manhattan. You were enrolled at the last minute, even though Lancaster was far past the enrollment drop dead due date."

It's the way she says drop dead. As if she relishes the words.

"A single dormitory was assigned to you. Rather impossible, considering the enrollment situation, so you must know someone higher up. Dear old Augustus, maybe? Plus, I hear you made an appearance in honors English this morning, which I'm sure infuriated many. All those girls work so hard to be in Figueroa's class, desperate to get close to him. He's messed around with a few, though you never heard that from me. So yes, you definitely know someone." She smiles, her light blue eyes sparkling. "Friends in high places take you far."

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Recognition dawns and I sit up straight, hating the dread slithering down my spine. This girl should hate me. She probably already does.

"My name is Sylvie, by the way. Sylvie Lancaster." The moment she takes a good look at my face, she throws her head back and laughs. So loudly, I hear Miss Taylor shush her again. "We've never met before, yet I feel like I know everything about you."

"Same," I admit, my voice hoarse. Talking to her is like fraternizing with the enemy.

Dangerous.

"Oh, don't look so shocked. I don't care about what your mother did with my father." She waves a hand, effectively dismissing all the lurid stories about our parents. "Our mother was hell-bent on making our father's life as miserable as she could throughout their marriage. This was his only way out."

"You really believe that?" I ask her incredulously. It's as if it doesn't matter to her, whereas her brother treated me like a common prostitute when we were just kids. Barely teenagers.

I think of what the girls said about him, and how he likes to choke girls when he kisses them. Despite the depravity, I'm intrigued. I wouldn't mind knowing what it felt like, to have Whit's large, warm hand closing around my throat, pinning me to a wall as he tormented me with his mouth?

God, I'm sick. Seriously.

"I lived with them my entire life. A witness to the disaster they called marriage. Yes, I believe that," she says solemnly. "My older brother thinks your mother is the devil incarnate, and he puts all the blame on her. Our baby sister believes our father is

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the one who wrecked everything, and used to battle with him on the daily over the frail condition of mother dearest before she found her way out."

"And what do *you* think?" I ask.

"They're all responsible for their actions, are they not? They're adults. Was anyone thinking of the children? No. But when do any of them think of the children?" She doesn't give me a chance to answer. "They're all selfish. Wrapped up in their own little worlds. Why do you think there's a boarding school with our family name on it? So they can shove us all out here and forget we exist."

Sylvie explains all of this in such a logical manner that it makes complete sense. I'm sure she's right. When do they ever think of the children?

Never. My parents neglected me and Yates when it mattered the most. Why else was he so brazen in how he pursued me? He knew he'd get away with it.

Well, I showed him.

"Does your brother know I'm here?" I ask her, hoping my voice sounds casual.

"No. Yes? I'm not sure. We haven't discussed you, and your name has never passed his lips to me. Though Whit and I don't talk much. He finds me a nuisance," she says. She doesn't sound the least bit offended.

"How did you find out so much information about me?"

"I hacked into the school's files." She grins while I gape at her. "It's an archaic system. My grandma could hack into it, and she's been dead for two years."

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I can't help but start to laugh. "Does anyone know you hack into the school's computer system?"

"Only a select few. You being one of them now." Her smile is small, her eyes sparkling. "You ever have a grade issue in class, let me know. I can fix it for you." She snaps her fingers.

"I get good grades," I reassure her.

"Now." She smiles, her expression never faltering, while my smile slowly fades.

I'm sure she's seen my entire file from Billington and read over every little detail greedily, soaking up all of those suspensions with barely repressed glee. Drugs and backtalk and sex on campus. I was a nightmare. The first two years of high school were difficult. I was acting out. It was a cry for help. I wanted attention, whether it was good or bad.

But no one listened. Worse, they were ready to send me far, far away, to military school, as if that would fix me.

I suppose getting away from Yates would've fixed everything, but I didn't want to do it like that. One of the last nights we were all together as a family, long after everyone went to bed, he held me close afterward and told me how much he would miss me once I was gone. I realized then he believed I didn't want to leave because we would be kept apart.

And that wasn't the case. Not even close.

At least, that wasn't the case for me.

"You seem like someone with a lot of secrets," Sylvie says, interrupting my thoughts.

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I blink her into focus, to find she's watching me with narrowed eyes. "I'm an open book," I lie.

She says nothing. She doesn't have to.

Because she doesn't believe me. She shouldn't. I have all sorts of secrets.

And every single one of them is awful.

I HURRY into American Government just before the final bell rings, sending an apologetic look toward the teacher sitting behind his desk. I lingered too long in the library, enjoying my conversation with Sylvie, feeling guilty the entire time because of my connection with her brother. I never brought it up. She never brought him up. Only that one time.

And I preferred it that way.

The classroom is full, every desk occupied, save for a couple in the very back of the room. I scurry toward them, not paying attention to where I'm going when I trip over a backpack directly in my path, sending myself sprawling to the ground.

It feels like the entire classroom witnesses my fall from grace and erupts into laughter.

I lie there for a moment, my cheek resting against the cool floor, knees throbbing from my hard landing. Cool air brushes against the back of my thighs and I realize my skirt flipped up, exposing my black booty shorts that I am so damn grateful I wore instead of just my underwear.

The teacher rushes forward. I can hear his squeaky footsteps on the floor. "Are you all right?" he asks me.

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My audience has calmed some, but I still hear laughter. Furious whispering, all of them talking about me. A boy asks straight out, "Who the fuck is she?"

I gather myself up quickly, rising to my knees, smoothing my hair out of my face. I hear someone suck in mouthfuls of air, as if in shock, and when I glance to my left, I realize I'm literally face to face with the fallen angel of my dreams.

The devil of my nightmares.

Whit Lancaster. Who's staring at me as if he's seen a ghost.

Gripping my backpack strap tightly, I stand, averting my head and sitting in the closest empty chair.

Directly behind Whit.

Fuck.

The teacher sends everyone a stern look, effectively shutting them up before he starts speaking, but I have no clue what he's saying. I can't hear anything thanks to the rapid beat of my heart. It roars in my ears, through my blood, and I try to hold my breath. Until I can't take it anymore and exhale in a stream of mint, thanks to the gum I chewed in the library.

God, I hope he doesn't notice.

I glance down at the floor in front of me, grimacing. I tripped over Whit's goddamn backpack. Of course I did. I sit there as if in a trance, my entire body shaking, my knees stinging from the fall. I stare at my desk, scared to lift my head, afraid I'll find him watching me. When I finally dare to glance up...

I'm looking at the back of his head.

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As another shaky breath leaves me, I pull out my binder and notebook, along with my favorite mechanical pencil, my hands still shaking. Fully prepared to take notes, though the teacher is leaning against the front of his desk, his arms crossed as he talks about himself and what he expects from us this year.

He passes out a syllabus and my heart threatens to fly out of my body. Whit will have to turn around to pass me the syllabus. I wait, my hands clammy, my legs knocking together, and when my row starts passing the copies of the syllabus back, I watch as the small stack reaches Whit.

But he doesn't give me my copy. He holds on to both, his shoulders straight, his attention directed at the teacher. Irritation fills me, and I have the urge to poke him in the back with my pencil and demand the syllabus.

Instead, my hand shoots up in the air.

"Yes?" the teacher acknowledges me with kind eyes.

I'm sure he feels bad for my earlier fall.

"I didn't receive a syllabus."

He frowns. "Well, that's strange. I counted them out." Grabbing an extra from his desk, he approaches me and hands over the single sheet of paper.

"Thank you," I tell him.

The teacher drones for the rest of the period, but I'm not listening. I can't concentrate on anything else but the fact that Whit is sitting directly in front of me, purposely ignoring me, thank God. I can smell him. Warm and spicy and inherently male. I study his hair. It's a dark blond, almost brown but not quite.

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Short, neatly trimmed, and a little longish on top. It looks soft. I'm sure if I ran my fingers through it, the strands would cling.

Finally the bell rings, signaling the end of the class—the end of the day. I sit there, immobilized as everyone around me gathers their things and practically runs out of the classroom. There are practices happening for all of the fall sports. They made an announcement over lunch. I'm trying to wait out Whit, so I can leave after he does, but he's slow too.

As in, he slowly turns around to face me.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" His voice is low, his eyes sharp.

"I go here," I say breathlessly.

"The fuck you do," he retorts, leaning away from me. As if he gets any closer, I might give him the plague.

I hate him. I do. But I'm drawn to him, too. The pull is there, tugging me closer to him, and I wonder if he feels it too.

"I'm enrolled," I say, grabbing my backpack and putting away my stuff. "Whether you like it or not."

He glares.

I do too.

He finally speaks first.

"Nice fall earlier. Landing on your knees like that must've hurt." He smirks. "Though I'm sure you're used to being on your knees."

His insult cuts me like a knife, slicing me open. "Fuck you," I say, rising to my feet.

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Whit stands as well, blocking my path. He's far more formidable than he was over three years ago. Taller. Wider. Stronger. But I refuse to let him scare me.

"I'm sure you'd love it if I fucked you," he says, his voice low and taunting. I don't know how the teacher doesn't hear, but the man must be oblivious. "You're a cheap whore, just like your mother."

I dodge around him at the last second and make my escape, never looking back. I can hear his laughter follow me, all the way down the hall, and it's not until I completely exit the building that I realize it's just in my head. My thoughts.

Filled with his laughter. Reminding me that yes, I am my mother's daughter.

Nothing but a cheap whore.

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FOUR

SUMMER

THE FIRST TWO weeks of school are much the same. Learning my schedule, trying to get a feel for my teachers and what they want from us, homework every night, though it isn't too hard. They always ease us into it at the beginning of the term. It's the same at every school. I've not really made any friends yet. Rumors went around that Whit tripped me on purpose on the first day of school, which left them with all sorts of questions. Plus, people witnessed our nasty little discussion after class ended that Monday, and slowly but surely, I've become a pariah at school.

No one will talk to me. They're all wearing a Lancaster muzzle. I haven't seen Sylvie since that first day in the library, so I can't even count on her friendship. It's as if I've become a ghost and no one sees me.

I should've known this would happen. The moment I realized Whit was on campus, I knew my chance at having a semi-normal senior year was through. He realized the second day of school that I was in the honors English class with him, but I

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refused to look back at him. He'd glared in my direction the moment he strode into class, always late, with that nonchalant *I don't give a fuck* attitude for Figueroa.

I'm sure the entire staff at this school hates his guts.

His poisonous words about me ate at my reputation, slowly but surely. Bit by bit. To the point that people literally sneered when they walked past me in the halls. The very girls I hung out with at lunch on my first day now pretend they don't see me. Or they shoulder check me in the dormitory, like Caitlyn did a few days ago.

It's as if he's trying to drive me out of here, but I refuse to leave. At lunch, he sits in the dining hall or outside, always surrounded by girls. Always accompanied by the same three boys. Chad, Elliot and Spencer, who are seniors like us, from prominent families, but ones not as prominent as Whit's. I'm surprised the devil has friends, but I suppose you get to be the devil by having a persuasive personality, and oodles of charm.

Sounds like something my mother would say.

I don't tell her what's going on. I definitely don't tell her about Whit and what he's doing. She thinks school is going well and I'm managing. If I told her there was a struggle with Whit, she'd contact his father. And then there would be hell to pay.

For me.

So I remain quiet. I moved to the next row over in American Government, so I no longer sit directly behind him. I've taken to spending my lunches in the library. I get all of my homework done in there, since I have study hall directly after. At night, I grab some food from the dining hall and take it to my room, keeping to myself. I take a shower. Read or watch

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something on Netflix or whatever. My days are the same. Boring.

Lonely.

If I pretend I don't exist, then I don't. By the end of the second week of school, it seems as if Whit has also forgotten about me, which fills me with a quiet sense of relief.

But not too much relief. I don't completely trust him. He might have a plan secretly in place.

Having him so close though, leaves me curious. I watch him sometimes at lunch, when I'm there for those few moments in the dining hall. How he talks to the girls, and how they fawn all over him as if he's a celebrity. My ears strain in the classes I share with him and when a teacher calls upon him, he always gives the correct answer. He's smart.

He's also dangerous.

Everyone sucks up to him. When your family name and crest is the one on the school, I suppose that comes with the territory. Teachers and staff. Every single student. The only ones who don't seem impressed with his status are his three friends, though they treat him with a quiet reverence that lets him know he's in charge. Girls flirt with him—him and his three closest friends especially—in such a desperate manner, it's pitiful. They're pathetic.

I treat him much the same way he treats me—I refuse to talk to him. He called me a whore. Nothing's changed. He hates me.

I hate him.

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I'm watching him now. It's the last period of the day. Friday. He's one seat ahead and to my left, right in my line of vision.

He taps his pencil against the edge of his desk in a steady rhythm that's annoying. I glare.

He doesn't even look in my direction.

His hair tumbles over his forehead, his lips curled into the faintest smile. There's no happiness in that face, though. It's all harsh lines and dark shadows. But oh, it is such a beautiful face, too. Cold and hard, like the statues in the gardens on campus.

The teacher puts on a video and turns off the lights, the only illumination coming from the large screen TV on the wall. It's a current events clip, talking about the state of the world and our woeful future, and I immediately tune it out.

I'm depressed enough.

The moment Mr. Stein leaves our classroom, the mood shifts. Phones are whipped out. People start talking. I doodle on an empty page of my notebook, tilting my head so my hair falls forward, covering my face. I don't want anyone to see me. I write my name in big bubble letters. Draw flowers around it. Then I write Whit's name.

And surround it with little devil faces, their horns long and extra sharp.

"Is that how you really think of me?"

A gasp escapes me when I hear his familiar deep voice and I slam my notebook shut, lifting my head to find Whit sitting right next to me. He'd somehow slipped into the empty desk behind him and slid it over silently to mine. How did I not notice?

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"You think I'm the devil?" he prods when I still haven't said anything.

I turn away from him, wishing he'd leave me alone.

Wishing he'd keep talking to me.

"I suppose I have made your life a living hell," he says casually, as if we're making light conversation.

Still nothing but silence from me.

"I thought you'd be a crying mess by now, since I turned everyone against you," he continues. "You're stronger than I thought."

Slowly I face him once more, our gazes meeting, his sucking me in. Even in the dim light, I can see that glitter of light blue, his hungry eyes seeming to eat me up. I part my lips, but no sound comes out.

Besides, what would I say?

"But I guess you don't really care who likes you or not, huh?" His lips curve into the barest smile. "As long as you get what you want, you win in the end."

I have no idea what he's talking about.

"This isn't a game," I say, my voice low.

He lifts a brow. "She speaks."

I glare.

"You're wrong, Savage. Life is a game, and pretty much everyone that's in this room is a loser." He pauses for the barest moment. "With the exception of me."

His arrogance is astounding.

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"Only because you have money," I remind him.

"And power. I have so much fucking power, it practically drips off of me." He leans in close, and I shift back, wanting to get away from him. "They're all scared of me. They'll do what I say, no questions asked."

"Like when you tell them to ignore me?"

He grins. "Yes. Sheep, all of them."

"And you're the sheepherder?"

"I'm the asshole who owns the land the sheep graze upon. One wrong move and I can slaughter them all." He studies me for a moment and I remain silent, willing myself not to speak. I can't give anything away. Not words, not emotions. "How did your mother convince my father to let you attend here at such a late notice?"

I have no idea, is what I want to tell him.

I remain quiet instead.

"Does she have something on him? Or did she drop to her knees like usual and suck his cock for your tuition?"

I don't even flinch at his words, not when I know he's looking for a reaction. I can tell from the way his gaze roams over me, from the top of my head downward. Lingering on my eyes. My lips. Waiting for a tell.

I refuse to give him one.

"I can strike a bargain with you. Make your life here much easier," he says, his voice pitched even lower and oh so persuasive.

"What are the terms?" I keep my voice cool. Calm.

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His mouth curves upward. "Suck my dick and let me come on your tits for a week straight and I'll take the lock off everyone."

God, he's a pig. He wants to come on my tits?

An image comes to me, completely unbidden. Me on my knees before Whit. My lips wrapped around his impressive cock. I know it's big. It *has* to be. I doubt a Lancaster would have a small penis, and I remember its shape beneath my hand that one time I touched him. I'm topless, no bra, my tits out, just the way he likes it. I stroke him, let him fuck my mouth so deep I feel the head bump the back of my throat and right when he's close to tipping over that edge, a feral groan falls from his lips and he pulls out, spraying semen all over my chest so that it drips off my nipples.

He'd wipe his cum off my skin with gentle, lightly shaking fingers, the aftereffects of his orgasm still lingering. He'd drag them across my lips and make me suck them and I'd swallow his cum down without protest. I can see it all unfold, as plain as day, and I realize my fantasies are a little twisted, especially when you consider my previous sexual experience.

"Let me come on your face and I'll take care of everything in five sessions," he offers.

For the briefest second I'm tempted, but I immediately push the delicious image out of my thoughts. What the hell is wrong with me? "No."

"Three days. And I get to come on your tits," he counteroffers.

I stare at him, unable to find my voice.

"I'll make it two and you'll let me finger you right now in class." His grin is so wide, I swear his white teeth are blinding me even in the darkness.

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"Absolutely not." I try not to squirm in my seat at the idea of Whit's long fingers under my skirt. Beneath my panties. In between my legs, stroking my wet, tingling flesh—

"You're thinking about it." His knowing voice interrupts my thoughts.

"No, I'm really not."

We stare at each other, my gaze dropping to his throat. I see his pulse point, how it rapidly beats, and I'm oddly reassured that I affect him just as much as he affects me.

"Your funeral," he finally says, his tone dismissive. "I'll get them all to turn on you."

"Haven't you already?" I don't know how I'm able to keep my voice so even, when inside, I'm quaking at having him so close. Threatening me with sexual blackmail. I should be offended. Why am I not offended?

Because you're attracted to him. Despite everything he's done and said, you like the idea of being with him. You crave what he can give you.

"You're right," he says. "I have. I thought you'd cave. A couple of blow jobs and everyone would love you? That's a deal, if you ask me. I know it's not easy being the new girl here, especially when a Lancaster hates you."

"Not all Lancasters hate me," I drawl, referring to Sylvie.

Whit's cheeks immediately turn red, his mouth tightening with barely suppressed rage. "If you're referring to my father, then you're a bigger whore than I thought."

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