YOU WANT THEM. BUT DO YOU DESERVE THEM?

ALL MY KISSES FOR YOU



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MONICA MURPHY

PENGUIN BOOKS

All My Kisses For You

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.

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To those who love lollipops, art, lipsticks and Chanel bags...this one is for you

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Playlist

"Kerosene!" - Yves Tumor
"So It Goes..." - Taylor Swift
"To Be So Lonely" - Harry Styles
"HARD KNOCK LULLABY" - Noah Guy
"My Girl 2020" - Valley Boy
"i die when u cry" - New Body Electric
"Late Checkout" - Hotel Ugly
"Hand As My Arrow [Feat. BROODS]" - Zella Day, BROODS

Find the rest of the **ALL MY KISSES FOR YOU** playlist here:
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Prologue

Crew

She approaches me slowly, her tiny feet shuffling across the bare wood floor, her long, dark hair, so much like her mother's, tumbling past her shoulders in a haphazard mess. I know for a fact Wren brushes our daughter's hair after a bath every night. If she's not doing it, I am.

Somehow, our sweet Willow makes a mess of it in those twilight minutes between bath and bed. Every single time.

"Daddy." Her big blue eyes that match mine shine up at me, her little rosebud lips pursed into a perfect pout. She is truly the most beautiful little girl in the entire world, but I'm her father so I'm biased. "Can you put me to bed?"

I glance over at my wife, who's standing in the doorway of the living room, a soft smile on her face, cradling our baby boy in her arms. Another Lancaster to carry on the family name.

"Just performing our expected duties," I said to Wren when she told me she was pregnant. She rolled her eyes and gave me a gentle

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shove, which caused me to pull her down onto our bed and perform more of those duties on her...

But I digress.

"I thought you asked Mama to put you to bed." I'm already rising to my feet, holding my hand out to our daughter and she takes it, curling her small fingers around mine.

"I want you instead," Willow says firmly.

Wren watches us, her expression a little weary. Our son is keeping her up at night because he's always hungry and she's breastfeeding. "She specifically requested her daddy."

"I don't mind." I stop beside my wife, leaning in to brush a kiss to her cheek before I murmur close to her ear, "Are you feeling all right?"

She nods. "A little tired. Row is finally asleep."

Our son. Rowan. He doesn't like to take naps and isn't the best sleeper in general. Wren says it's because he never wants to miss a thing and I tend to agree with her.

"Go to bed." I deliver another kiss, this time to her lips. "I'll join you in a few minutes."

"After you tell me a story," Willow demands.

We go to her bedroom, the light on her nightstand already on, as well as the light we installed to highlight Wren's favorite art piece, which is in our daughter's room. I tuck Willow into her fluffy princess dream of a bed, brushing her dark hair from her eyes, and she scoots away from me, patting the empty spot beside her.

"Sit."

I do as she says because this little girl owns my heart like her mother does and settle in beside her, slipping my arm around her slender shoulders and scooping her closer to me. She tilts her head back so our eyes meet, her lips parting and I have a feeling I know what her request is going to be.

"Tell me the story about you and Mama."

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My gaze goes to the piece hanging on the wall, smiling as the

memories wash over me, one after another. Willow has already heard this story countless times and she's barely three. But she can't get enough of it.

"Where shall I start?" I ask.

"When Mama didn't like you." Willow wrinkles her nose then bursts out laughing. "It's funny."

"That would make you laugh." I tickle her and she giggles uncontrollably, so loud that Wren calls from our bedroom.

"What's going on in there?"

We both go silent, sharing a secret look, and I press my finger to Willow's lips.

"Nothing. I was just telling her a story," I respond.

"Uh huh." The doubt in my wife's voice is obvious and I smile.

So does Willow.

"We need to be quiet," I whisper.

"Don't tickle me," Willow says, sounding completely logical.

My girl is smart. Much like her mama.

Clearing my throat, I lean against the headboard and stare at the art piece, telling the story about watching for Wren every day before school started. How I didn't know her, but I wanted to, even though she never wanted to give me the time of day. How we were forced to work together on a school project and we slowly got to know each other.

And swiftly fell in love.

"What about the kisses?" Willow stares at the piece with me.

"What about them?"

"You owe her two million." She remembers that. She remembers pretty much every detail of our story. "How many do you give her?"

"A lot."

"How many?"

"We're probably only a quarter of the way in," I say, and my poor little daughter frowns, confusion etched in her delicate features. "Let's just say Daddy still owes Mama a lot of kisses."

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The frown disappears, just like that. "I want kisses."

I give her one on her forehead. Her nose. Each cheek. "All the kisses you could ever want, you deserve."

"I wanna husband who gives me kisses too." Her gaze turns dreamy as she stares at the art piece once more.

Over my dead body, is what I want to say, thinking of my own self not too long ago and how completely over the top I was. How badly I wanted Wren and went after her with a dogged determination that still surprises me. I've never chased after someone like I chased after Wren.

And look at me now. I got her. I love her. I love our little girl and I love our son. Life is pretty great.

"Someday," I tell Willow, dropping another kiss on top of her head. "But for now, save your kisses for your mama and daddy. And your brother."

"Okay, Daddy. I'll save all my kisses for you." She tilts her head back to look at me, and for a moment I think she looks older. Wiser than she should. "But someday I'm going to kiss someone else. Like Mama kisses you."

"Uh, sure." I swallow hard, hating the thought of her being so grown up. She's still my baby. My first child. My daughter. "Just... don't give your kisses away too easily."

She frowns. "Doesn't everyone need a kiss?"

I say nothing, unsure of how to explain myself. She's unreasonable a lot of the time, but she's still a toddler so it's expected. She's also naturally fiery and hotheaded—Wren calls that the Lancaster in her.

She's right. I can't deny it.

"Kisses are the best. They're so pretty." She turns toward the art, a little sigh escaping her. "I want it."

"Want what?"

"Kisses." She turns a toothy grin on me. "Lots of them."

Shit.

I'm in trouble.

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Chapter One

WILLOW, AGE 18

Labor Day weekend

"Why are we starting back at school so late again?" I'm sitting at the baroque-style vanity table that's in my cousin Iris's room, dotting my face with a highlighter stick almost aggressively.

"I already told you." Iris rises from her prone position on her bed, her dark blonde hair in the perfect messy bun I can never, ever duplicate, no matter how hard I try. "You leave for a year and everything changes."

She loves to remind me of this.

"Oh, I know." I turn away from the mirror, glaring at her like I'm mad, even though I don't mean it. She's not only my cousin, but she also happens to be my very best friend. "But we used to start in August."

"And now we start in September." Iris shrugs her slender shoulders, the strap of her tank top slipping. She shoves it back into place and plops backward onto the unmade and downright

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chaotic bed. Total symbolism for the complete disarray that is her mind and life. "Only fifteen minutes was added to our school day, but that's enough to allow us to start school later *and* end it sooner. Doesn't Westscott have the best ideas?"

My face turns into a grimace. I can feel it, and from the look on Iris's face, she can see it. Even though she's lying down and staring at the ceiling. "I haven't even met this mythical new headmaster and he's all you can talk about."

"That's not true. I don't talk about him all the time." She rises up into a sitting position as if she's rising from the dead. Even points an accusatory finger at me. "You're just mad because you've been gone and so much at Lancaster Prep is different now. Face it. You don't like change."

I return my focus to the mirror and start patting the highlighter into my skin with my fingertips. "You're right. I hate change."

"Well, then you're going to hate your senior year because *everything* is different." Iris sounds almost gleeful. I think she's enjoying this—torturing me over how things are all switched up at school. She'd never admit it, but she was a little jealous, a lot sad and plenty angry with me for abandoning her during our junior year of high school. That's the word she always uses–abandoned. Like I'm her deadbeat mom and I dropped her off on an orphanage doorstep. "You might freak out and feel like you're at a different school, but you'll be fine." She pauses. "Hopefully."

My cousin/bestie has always had a flare for the dramatic.

"Iris." I jump to my feet and whirl around to face her, resting my hands on my hips. "You have to stop holding my leaving you against me. I went to Italy. I was gone for almost a year and I missed you terribly, but now I'm back and we're together again. Please stop being angry with me over it."

The best thing about my relationship with Iris is how loyal we are to each other, yet we also can fight like sisters and make each other cry. I think we act like this because we're the same age and

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there are hardly any girl cousins in the family. The few that exist are a solid five years younger than us and we have nothing in common. As in, we can barely tolerate hanging out with them because they're so young and annoying.

Once we started at Lancaster Prep our freshman year and were in the same grade, Iris and I clung to each other and eventually became inseparable. No one talked about us in a singular way—it was always Iris and Willow. Or Willow and Iris. Until I applied for a foreign exchange program our sophomore year and surprisingly enough, got accepted. Oh, she was so mad at me.

I think she might still be.

"You know I love to hold a grudge." She's staring at the ceiling again, stretching her long, enviable body across the mattress. She's tall and lithe while I'm short with too big boobs. "Mom reminds me all the time that I'm just like my father and we all know how he is."

Grumpy. Quick to judge—but always willing to admit when he's wrong. Fiercely loyal and protective but once you wrong him, you're dead to him. Whit Lancaster is a man most don't want to cross. His children are basically the same way—all three of them.

"But my father always says Mom knows how to hold a grudge like no other so I'm doomed." Iris sighs. "I come from a grudge-holding, revenge-seeking set of parents. Whoever wants to tangle with me, they better watch out."

"Revenge seeking. Give me a break." I march over to my bed—we've shared a room at Iris's house since I was little—and grab a pillow, tossing it at her. It bounces off her forehead, making her laugh. She can never stay in a bad mood for long. "Come on already. Get dressed so we can go downstairs."

"Get dressed? I am dressed." She slides off the bed, effortlessly chic in a cropped white tank that shows off her tan and dark brown leggings that showcase how long her legs are. She slides her feet into a pair of furry Louis Vuitton slides and throws her arms out. "Dressed and ready to go!"

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I sort of hate her.

No, that's a lie. I absolutely *adore* her. These are my own insecurities rising up and threatening to choke me.

We leave Iris's bedroom, her slides slapping against the sleek white marble floors extra loud as we head for the staircase. The sound echoes throughout the cavernous corridor and I'm surprised her mother isn't screaming at her to walk properly. I know I'm tempted to tell her just that.

"I'm starving," I murmur, thinking of all the yummy breakfast food Marta will have prepared. She's their housekeeper and we all adore her. She's been with the family so long that we consider her an honorary member and she acts like one too.

Always bossing us around and telling us what to do. We all roll our eyes and most of the boys talk back to her, but we all end up doing exactly what she wants.

"I ate an orange earlier." My side-eye is strong and aimed right in her direction, making her shrug almost helplessly. "What? I woke up at seven and couldn't go back to sleep. The light was so bright since you forgot to close the drapes last night."

"You have hands too, you know."

"I guess I was too excited to sleep any longer." Iris shrugs, shooting in front of me as she calls, "Race ya to the bottom of the stairs."

We run down the endless steps, but Iris shot ahead of me at the top, which means she's going to win. If my mother could see us now, she'd be furious. These are the very stairs where Sylvia Lancaster tumbled to her death—she was Iris's grandmother and her funeral was held on the day Iris was born so we didn't even know her. I've heard the family stories though. She was awful and abusive toward her daughter Sylvie, but no one really talks about her.

Typical. Iris and I are always griping about the family secrets and how no one will share them with us.

"You seem off this morning. Are you about to start your peri-

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od?" Iris jumps from the second to the last step, her slides slapping the floor and echoing throughout the entire foyer. "We used to be synced up. One more thing we lost."

Her winsome tone is as good as any actor I've heard.

"Dramatic much?" I tease back, making her laugh. The sound of it warms my heart and I reach for her, locking her in a hug. She struggles to get out of it, but I won't let her go. I'm a touchy-feely Lancaster and she is most decidedly not. "Come on, let me hug you."

"Ew no. Hugs are for wimps." She starts to run ahead of me, those vaguely annoying—but very cute—shoes smacking on the cold marble floor. "Better hurry or you might miss breakfast. Marta starts clearing plates at nine-thirty!"

Ugh, she's such a liar. Marta's not the one clearing plates from the buffet table in the dining room. There are servants for that task and Marta is the one who manages them.

My steps slow at the thought and I sort of hate myself for having it. Being away from my family for the school year showed me how the other half lives—the term my mother used when I was first accepted to the exchange program and my father was dead set against letting me leave. I had to beg and plead and cry for him to finally give in and let me go.

I'm a self-admitted daddy's girl, which means I know how to get my way with him almost always, but convincing him to let me leave the country and live with another family for a school year? That was difficult. He didn't want me away from them for that long. He also thought I was too young, too sheltered, too...I don't know. Too naïve? He never said those words out loud, but I'm fairly certain that's what he was implying.

I am my mother's daughter in many, many ways, but I would never consider myself as naïve as she was. He would've been proud to see me hold my own while I was away, which I did. I learned a lot, and I pushed myself out of my comfort zone just by going there, and I'm proud that I lasted the entire school year. It

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would've been so easy to give up. To go home, but I refused. I wanted to have an experience on my own, without all of those Lancaster expectations attached to it.

It's really good to be back home though.

Eventually I end up in the dining room—all the breakfast food is still out, shocker—and I'm behind Iris as we fill our plates with fluffy scrambled eggs and colorful pieces of fruit. I also add one slice of bacon and a chocolate croissant while Iris ignores both items and we settle in at the table with a few of our cousins. Not a single parent is in sight. They all get up far earlier than we do and I'm sure the majority of them are outside already. The men are probably golfing at the nearby country club and Iris's mom is tending to the garden because that's her new favorite thing.

"Where's Row?" Iris asks me as she pops a square of honeydew melon into her mouth.

"He's heading back to campus today, remember?" My younger brother brought a friend along with him to the house, and from what I can tell they've had a great time swimming and hanging out together, but they're both on the football team and have to go back to school early for practice.

It's still unbelievable to me that Row plays football. That he actually wants to do it. Our family has never really been into competitive sports before, but I guess there's a first for everything.

"Oh right. Because of football." She digs into her food, practically shoveling endless pieces of melon into her mouth while I nibble on my single piece of bacon, mulling over my younger brother's choice to leave early. "He's really good at it, Willow. They've made him the quarterback and everything."

"I know—I've heard all about it," I murmur, still a little stupefied over the fact that Lancaster Prep now has a winning football team.

Look, our school is known for a lot of things. Only the elite of the elite have attended the private high school for hundreds of years, but the new headmaster has made a lot of changes since he

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took over, and he implemented those changes in a rapidly short amount of time. Like our sports department. We always had one, but it wasn't necessarily award-winning. Our lacrosse team did well years ago. Oh, and the girls' volleyball team always wins division championships.

But never football.

"The team is going to kill it this season." At my amused look, Iris huffs out a sigh and rolls her eyes. "You're such a snob. There's nothing wrong with going to a football game on a Friday night and screaming your guts out because you're so excited that we're winning."

"*We're* winning?" I repeat. "We had nothing to do with it."

"It's called school spirit." She smiles. "And the entire campus has it. Trust me, you're going to love the vibe when you come back. I know you will."

She's just trying to reassure me because as she already pointed out, I don't like change. I should've known some things would be different when I came back from Italy, but it turns out *nothing* is the same. My little brothers both grew like three feet—okay a total exaggeration, but they are both so tall now—and from what I've heard so far, my school has changed a lot. Even Iris seems to be different. More mysterious. Which makes me wonder if she might be holding on to something that she doesn't want to tell me...

Or maybe that's just me being paranoid. I've definitely not brought up a certain someone because I'm worried over what she might say. Mom told me a long time ago when I was having trouble with a friend back in middle school that the truth hurts but sometimes, we need to hear it.

She's right. The problem? Sometimes I don't want to hear the truth, especially if it doesn't align with my secret wishes.

I remain quiet as we finish our breakfast, listening to the nonstop chatter from our younger cousins and siblings. Our family likes to get together for almost every holiday, Labor Day being no exception. Both Iris and I have brothers that are the same

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age, and Vaughn and Beau are talking about video games and a Marvel movie they went and saw yesterday afternoon. Then there's Prudence and Paris, Aunt Carolina's twin girls, who also went to the movie yesterday and keep trying to interject their opinions. The four of them won't stop talking and when Iris finally sends me a look, I know she's telling me she wants out of here.

August strides into the room just as we're pushing back our chairs, a look of complete disdain on his face when he sees the younger cousins sitting at the table. "You're leaving?" he asks his sister.

Iris nods. "You can hang out with them. I'm sure you'll have so much fun."

She knows her brother can barely tolerate anyone, even relatives.

"Fucking Christ," he mutters as he heads for the side table to grab some breakfast, his irritation coming off of him in palpable waves.

"He's so grumpy," Iris says to me. "I thought college would put him in a better mood but apparently he hasn't changed a single bit."

"Apparently," I agree, shaking my head.

We promptly exit the house, the younger cousins' laughter still ringing as we make our way outside, and the moment that I pull the door shut, there's nothing but blessed silence, save for the occasional seagull squawking as one of them flies overhead.

"God, our little brothers are annoyingly loud," Iris mutters as she heads toward the closest table. The bright white and navy striped umbrella is open above it, leaving plenty of shade, and there's a warm breeze blowing, making the ends of my hair dance. "Never any peace and quiet when they're around."

"I don't mind it," I admit. "I missed having so much family around."

Our parents seemed to make some sort of pact when they all started having children that they wanted to stay connected. When

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Iris's parents took over the Rhode Island house, the one that's been in the Lancaster family since basically the dawn of time, it was decided that it would become the family compound. The one central place where everyone got together for every family celebration and holiday. Throughout the summer. Spring break. All of it.

Iris and her family reside here full time and my family bought a house not too far after my youngest brother Beau was born. But our house isn't nearly as big as the original Lancaster estate.

"You missed all of us?" Iris ducks her head, her blue gaze meeting mine. She's got those Lancaster eyes, just like mine. Physically it's the only part of my father that I have. Otherwise...

I am the spitting image of Wren Lancaster.

"Of course, I missed everyone. Especially you." I lean into her, pressing my shoulder to hers.

"You didn't even come home until a week ago," she points out. "You were gone for what felt like forever."

"My parents wanted to travel all around Europe as a family for the summer." I shrug, remembering how upset my mother was when my brother Rowan insisted on going home early so he wouldn't miss football practice. He's only a sophomore, but the second he becomes interested in something, he takes it seriously. To the point of obsession sometimes.

It's the Lancaster in him, Daddy said. I suppose he's right.

"Did you have fun? Meet any boys on your trip with the fam?"

I slowly shake my head, wondering if I should tell her the boy I'm actually wanting already goes to our school and she knows him very well. "How could I? I was with my parents the entire time."

"No fun." She mock pouts. "Did you at least get to drink?"

"I turned eighteen when we were there, so yes. But I didn't get drunk or anything." My birthday is in July and we celebrated it in Paris, which was wonderful, but I missed my friends and the rest of my family.

I was eager to get home. I'd been gone long enough.

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"I suppose it's not as much fun getting wasted with your parents." Iris sighs and I can't help but laugh.

"No, it's not much fun at all," I agree, laughing. "But none of that matters now. I'm home, we're together once again and we're ready to have the best senior year of our lives." I smile.

Iris smiles too. "It's going to be epic."

"You really think so?" I hear the worry in my voice and I hate it. I shouldn't have a care in the world. I am a Lancaster, after all. I'm back on this campus where I belong.

"I know so." Iris's nod is firm, her eyes sparkling. "It's going to be amazing. Just wait until you're back on campus. You're going to love it!"

If she says so.

We hear clattering footsteps on the stairwell that leads down to the gardens and the beach just beyond it and two heads suddenly appear. One is my brother. The other is his friend that he brought with him.

Callahan Bennett.

"Iris!" Rowan shouts when he spots us. "Go to the front and entertain Rhett for a minute while we grab our shit."

Iris's brows shoot up. "What in the world is Rhett doing here?"

"Who's Rhett?" I ask, looking between her and my brother.

"Only the best quarterback I've ever witnessed in my life," Row proclaims.

Callahan smiles broadly at me. "Rhett's my brother. He came here to pick us up and take us to school."

"Please, Iris." Row makes a prayer gesture with his hands folded in front of him. "I'll owe you."

"Come on, Willow." Iris rises from the chair, sighing loudly. "Let's go meet the hottest guy on campus."

"Ew," Cal says as he walks past us, trailing after Row who's already halfway in the house.

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We enter the house after them, headed for the front, while the

boys race up the stairs to grab their things, their heavy footsteps sounding like a herd of elephants barreling through the house.

"Who's the hottest guy on campus?" I ask Iris as we briskly walk through the massive living room, drawing closer to the front door. I can hear the blare of loud music coming from outside and I wince.

"You'll see," Iris says cryptically, stopping in front of the massive door and turning the locks before she swings it open and strides outside. "Rhett! Darling!"

Darling? What?

I follow her out onto the front terrace, shading my eyes from the sun. There's a car in the drive. A sleek white Porsche 911 with tinted black windows and a loud, rumbling engine. The driver's side door is cracked open and this Rhett person has one leg out with his foot braced on the ground, as if he's poised and ready to leap from the car at a moment's notice.

"Iris." His deep, commanding voice seems to tug at something low in my belly and I drop my hand, watching breathlessly as he emerges from the car, his hand braced on top of the door. Wow, he's tall. "Where's my brother and Row at? We gotta get going."

"Calm down, they're coming," Iris says with an unfamiliar laugh. I send her a strange look, but she's not paying any attention to me. "Where's your friend?"

Rhett appears genuinely confused. "Who are you talking about?"

"Brooksie."

"Wait a second—are you referring to Brooks Crosby?" I ask Iris.

She shushes me and I take a step away from her, annoyed.

"He's already at school. And he hates riding in my car. You know this. Says he's too big for it." Rhett laughs, the sound rich and deep and I shade my eyes again because I can't make out a single feature, thanks to the blazing sun above our heads.

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My heart stops as I drink in his handsome face. No wonder Iris

is laughing and flirting with him. I would be doing the same thing if I knew who this boy was. He's tall, with golden brown hair that gleams in the sun, and while he's wearing sunglasses that cover up half of his face, that doesn't diminish his good looks. He's got great facial structure. Prominent cheekbones and a sharp jawline that is just begging to be kissed.

I shake my head a little at the thought. What in the world?

"Sorry, Rhett!" Callahan emerges from the front door in a full sprint, Row right behind him. They're both carrying unzipped gym bags that are bulging with clothing and a sock falls out of Row's bag, landing at my feet.

"Get your skinny asses in the car, pronto," Rhett demands, turning toward his seat and flipping it forward. "You can take the back, Cal."

"Aw, man." Callahan groans as he folds his lanky body into the back seat.

"Row, you forgot this!" I wave the sock above my head, grateful it's clean and doesn't smell like sweaty feet.

"I don't need it," Rowan yells as he rounds the front of the beautiful—and dangerous looking—Porsche.

I ignore what he says. I also ignore Iris who asks me what I'm doing as I run down the steps without thought. Gravitational pull, I think as I approach Rhett. He's larger than life, bigger than I realized and my gaze lands on his arms—his biceps in particular. He's got muscles for days and his chest is wide, that navy Lancaster Prep T-shirt he's wearing stretched to the absolute limit.

My breaths come faster and I skid to a stop, holding out the sock lamely. "This is my brother's."

Rhett slowly lowers his glasses down the bridge of his nose, blatantly checking me out with what looks like hazel-colored eyes. "Who are you?"

"I'm Row's sister." I wave the sock at Rhett again, feeling like a fool. "Can you give this to him for me, please?"

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"Anything you want, pretty girl, I'll do for you," he drawls as he slides the glasses back up, covering his eyes.

"Jesus, don't flirt with my sister, Rhett!" Row screams from the passenger seat.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever." Rhett completely ignores him, sliding his hands into his shorts pockets. "You go to Lancaster?"

I nod.

"Huh. With that gorgeous face of yours, I'd definitely remember you." A pained expression suddenly appears on his face. "Please tell me you're not a freshman."

"I'm not," I say with a breathless laugh, my heart fluttering at him calling my face gorgeous.

"Thank God," he mutters.

"I'm a senior," I tell him. "I was in Italy last year. On a foreign exchange program. But now I'm back."

Oh God, am I rambling? He probably doesn't care about any of that.

"Wait a minute." He snaps his fingers, pointing at me. "You're the infamous Willow Lancaster."

I blink at him, shocked he'd know me. "You've heard of me?"

"Everyone knows who you are—except for me. Looks like we need to change that." He grins, the sight of it blinding me worse than the late summer sun. He snags the sock from my grip, our fingers brushing, and I feel his touch all the way down to my soul.

Now I feel as dramatic as Iris.

Rhett climbs back into the car, tossing the sock at Row's face before he shuts the door. I take a step back, wincing at the roar of the engine. The tires squeal when he pulls out of the driveway and takes off like a shot, hitting the horn twice as a goodbye.

In a complete daze, I turn to find Iris watching me with a giant smile on her face. "Um. Wow."

She giggles. "Tell me all about it."

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Chapter Two

WILLOW

The morning air is downright crisp as I head for the auditorium where the first day assembly is being held. A breeze sweeps through the trees, making the leaves rattle, and I shiver inside my jacket, thinking of the other first days I've experienced at Lancaster Prep. They were always warmer, with the August sun blaring down, making all of us sweat.

Starting school a few weeks later than we used to is already bringing plenty of change, and I try my best to accept it.

Iris is walking beside me, keeping up a constant stream of chatter as she waves and speaks to almost everyone around us, but all I can do is nod and smile. I'm the quieter Lancaster, the more observant one. Iris is the social butterfly while I need to test someone out before I give in and share bits of myself.

Some may think of me as secretive or worse, aloof, but I can't help it. I'm not about to blab my business to just anyone. Having the Lancaster name makes it hard for me to trust people. I always wonder what their motives are when they try to get to know me.

"Where's Alana?" Iris asks, her question breaking through my thoughts.

"I haven't seen her yet." Alana Kirkpatrick is our other best

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friend. The three of us have hung out together all through high school and I can admit to myself that I was jealous when Iris would send photos and Snapchats and share stories of her and Alana laughing and screaming over something trivial and silly throughout the school year while I was gone. They looked like they were having fun—without me.

I missed them so much sometimes my heart would physically ache.

"How weird. She texted me last night asking me what I was wearing." Iris laughed. "I told her, 'um, the uniform?' Like we have a choice. But she was talking about accessories I suppose."

"She didn't text me." I'm frowning. That's what Alana and I have in common—a love for fashion. I was always her go-to when she needed an opinion on what to wear.

I'm almost a little offended she didn't reach out.

"Did I tell you that you look amazing this morning?" Iris is smiling at me and I can tell she's trying to change the subject.

"No, you didn't. And thank you." I do a quick twirl, my uniform skirt flaring out. I have the waistband rolled up because that's what we all do and Iris's skirt is even shorter than mine, so I don't feel bad.

"What was your inspiration?"

"I found this scrapbook my mom made a long time ago and the pages were filled with photos of my mom and dad. Polaroids mostly." I remember some of the photos that shocked me. Of my dad shirtless with lipstick kisses all over his back. His chest. His face, his neck. Mom's face turned red when I brought the scrapbook to her and asked about it and she even took it from me, stashing it in her closet.

I won't mention those particular photos to Iris.

"Oh yeah? Your mom is such a fashion icon."

She still is and she was as a teen too. "The uniforms were pretty much the same back then, but she'd always wear a bow in her hair and Doc Marten Mary Jane shoes." I kick out my feet. "You can't

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find them in that style anymore, but I thought these Mary Jane's were cute."

They're Chanel and they're adorable because of course they are—Chanel is my mother's favorite fashion label.

"Cute. Love the knee-high socks too."

"My mom didn't do the knee-highs. I had to put my own spin on it." Instead of wearing my hair down, I have it in a high ponytail with a white satin ribbon tied in a bow at the base. "I wanted to rock the same vibe, but make it my own."

"I'm liking the red lip too." Her smile is knowing as she points at my mouth. "You never wore such a bold color before. Are you trying to get Silas's attention?"

I press my red lipstick-covered lips together, hopeful I'm not blushing. Finally, she says his name out loud. Silas. Silas Fortner. My sixteen-year-old self was madly in love with him. Well, maybe not *love* because that's a strong word and emotion, but I definitely had a huge crush on him for almost the entirety of our sophomore year, and I thought he felt the same way about me.

Oh, at first he was completely oblivious. I don't know how he didn't see it because I pretty much followed him everywhere, laughed extra loud at his jokes and always tried to sit next to him during lunch, during class, in the library, any chance I could get.

Eventually, he started to notice. We would talk. Conversations in the hall, or in class. Sometimes after school. We started hanging out together during lunch sometimes, which Iris barely tolerated because I don't think she likes him that much. We'd even message each other at night, especially toward the end of our sophomore year. We'd send each other funny memes or videos, but it never went beyond that. We weren't confessing any sort of feelings toward each other, and he never asked me to do anything with him, like a date. I'd hoped he was into me, but nothing ever happened.

Like...nothing at all.

He's nice. Polite. Handsome. Comes from a good family and

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that's important to me. For whatever reason, I always found myself clamming up every time I was around him though. Like I would stutter and everything, which Iris thought was just hilarious.

I can't wait for her to fall head over heels for some poor soul. She claims no one interests her, but I don't know. I think she likes to throw up walls and pretend nothing affects her because she wants to protect her heart. I might do that too, but in a different way—she's bold where I'm hesitant. Loud where I'm quiet. I let some people—a particular person—get too close, and then he disappeared. Iris wouldn't have let him get close in the first place.

"You think it's too dark?" It's a classic red shade from Chanel that my mother has always worn, and since we have the same coloring, she told me it would look good on me and I believed her.

Now Iris is making me self-conscious. I'm not one to wear such a bold color so this feels like I'm making a statement, which I guess I am. I haven't been here for a year and now I've returned. Iris and I plan on fully ruling this school, but I don't know. Maybe I've lost some of my power because I've been gone. People might've forgot all about me.

"I love it. It looks good on you." We both pause as she reaches for me, rubbing at the corner of my mouth with her thumb. "You had a tiny smudge."

"Thank you," I murmur just as we approach the double doors that lead into the auditorium. Plenty of other students are ahead of us and we're all in a line, shuffling inside. "I hope this assembly doesn't last too long."

"They're not dry and boring like Matthews' speeches were, so don't worry. It's going to be fun." Iris hooks her arm through mine and we eventually enter the cavernous auditorium. She drags me to the senior section and we settle into the front row, dead center, practically having to crane our necks to see the stage directly in front of us.

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"Couldn't we sit a couple of rows back?" I glance over my

shoulder, doing a double take when I spot Silas ambling down the walkway, heading straight toward us.

I quickly face forward, my cheeks going hot, my heart starting to race.

"What's wrong?" Iris glances in the direction where I just saw Silas, but she keeps looking, not really saying anything at all.

"Stop staring at him," I practically hiss at her, embarrassed. "Please."

Her gaze shifts to mine and I see the uncertainty there. Alarm bells start going off in my brain. "What is it?"

"Um...you'll never believe this, but." She bites down on her lower lip for a brief second. "Alana just appeared at Silas's side and now they're...holding hands."

I whip my head around to catch Silas and Alana walking side by side down the aisle, my gaze dropping to their connected hands. Their interlocked fingers clutching tight. I lift my gaze to their faces, noting the way Silas is staring at her, a dazed expression on his face. As if she's the most beautiful thing he's ever witnessed in his life.

My heart crumbles into a million tiny pieces. Seriously?

Seriously?

"Did you know about this?" My voice squeaks. My heart pounds. God, if Iris knew all this time and never told me...

"No, of course not! You know I would never keep something like that from you. I had no clue. She pretty much ghosted me the last month of the summer, but I figured she was out of town. I only just heard from her last night." I glance over at Iris to find her staring them down with narrowed eyes. Her Iris-is-pissed expression is in full force. "Did she conveniently forget you had a massive crush on him and that you two were talking?"

"I've been gone for a year."

"Doesn't matter. She stole your man." We both turn in our seats and face forward. "If she even dares to sit close to us, I'll—"

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"You'll what?" I rest a gentle hand on Iris's arm, noting how tense she is. "Are you going to beat her up for me? Come on, Iris."

"It's such a bitch move on her part." Iris shakes her head. "What kind of friend does that?"

I barely look over my shoulder just in time to watch them sit to the right of me, three rows back but still in the senior section. She won't even look in our direction, though I'm sure she saw us. Silas is oblivious, too enamored with Alana to care. He's currently reaching out to touch her cheek, but she bats his hand away.

My heart hurts for him, which is dumb. But I would never push away his touch. I would welcome it. Revel in it because that's all I want. To find a great love like my parents did when they were in high school. To find someone who falls so madly in love with me, he can't see anything else. And I'd feel the same exact way. Just completely gone over him. That's what I want more than anything else, and I believed I could find it with Silas. I guess I was wrong.

Silas being with Alana doesn't necessarily feel like a betrayal. No, it's more like a revelation. It's obvious he wasn't the right guy for me. My heart still aches at the loss though.

"It's okay. I'm not going to blame her," I say as a sense of calm settles over me. "Like I said, I was gone. I didn't expect him to wait for me. He was fair game. He didn't even know I had a crush on him."

"She knew how gone you were for him, though. You wasted all of your sophomore year wishing he'd notice you," Iris complains, crossing her arms and slumping in her seat.

Some of this past year too, even while I was in another country, but I can't dwell on that now.

"What's done is done. I wish them well." I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin, hoping I appear as if I don't have a care in the world. Doing my best to hide the turmoil currently swirling inside me.

If I'm not going to spend my senior year with Silas as I'd hoped —oh what a silly little girl I was, and that's a difficult realization to

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have—then I guess I'll spend it with friends, which isn't a bad thing. And it's not that I need a boyfriend to make me happy. I've never had one in the first place, but it would be nice...

Disappointment floods me and I mentally push it aside. I don't need to get depressed over Silas's new relationship with my friend. I should've known nothing was going to happen between us. He never contacted me when I was in Italy beyond the occasional like on a social media post. Once I was out of sight, I was out of his mind.

It does hurt though, what Alana has done. I thought we were friends. She was my closest friend after Iris. Now I'm not even sure I can trust her, let alone remain friends with her.

Iris starts talking to the girl sitting next to us and while I smile and nod and pretend to keep up with the conversation, my mind, and my gaze, are wandering. Scanning all of the male faces that fill the auditorium, trying my best to stick to the ones closest to me since they're in my grade.

While I see a few familiar ones, there aren't a lot of boys sitting with us, which is...odd. Where are they?

"Where is everyone?" I whisper close to Iris's ear just as the curtains start to pull back, revealing the new headmaster standing behind a podium, a giant smile on his enthusiastic face as he throws his arms up at the same time loud music begins to blare through the giant speakers flanking him on the stage.

"If you're meaning the boys, just wait," Iris tells me out of the side of her mouth when she starts to clap. She even yells along with everyone else. The entire auditorium erupts into cheers, which I don't think I've ever seen happen at Lancaster before.

I guess she wasn't lying.

The school definitely has a new vibe going on.

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Chapter Three

RHETT

We're waiting on the side of the stage, me in front of the rest of the football team since I'm their QB. My younger brother Callahan is behind me and I can hear his big mouth rambling on like he does, but I don't tell him to shut up, which is my usual response when I get sick of his nonstop talking.

I'm not about to start a fight with him in front of everyone. There's no point. Besides, he's chatting up his new best friend Rowan Lancaster and considering that kid's family owns the damn school, I'm not looking to start any trouble. Talk about rich...

My mind shifts to that massive house I picked them up at. Most everyone who goes to this school is from real money that's generations old. My family is wealthy, but we've got nothing on the Lancasters. And then there's Row's sister.

Gorgeous. Long, silky dark hair. Big tits. Wide eyes that gobbled me up while she held out that stupid sock. I wanted to yank on her hand, drag her into my car and take her with me, but I repressed the urge. I had more important things to take care of that morning.

Like football.

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Tugging at the front of my jersey, I look down, glaring at the khaki uniform pants I still have on. At my old school we could wear whatever we wanted along with our jerseys during game days or when there were rallies. I come to this fancy prep school and it requires uniforms on a daily basis. Still can't get over the fact that I go to this damn school and this is my second—and final—year here. Thank God.

Someone bumps into me and I send him a dirty look, which has the kid panicked and apologizing. I don't remember his name—he's new to the organization and a sophomore. We've got a junior varsity team this year so I don't deal with them as much as I used to. Every single one of these guys standing with me though, they'll do pretty much whatever I say. It wasn't easy, taking command of this newly rejuvenated team, but I eventually won them over.

"Stop scaring the JV team," Brooks says out of the side of his mouth. He's my closest friend at this school and we make a great team on the field. He's the best wide receiver we've got and the one I like to throw the ball to more than anyone else.

"They need to calm the fuck down," I mutter, shaking my head, glancing over my shoulder yet again, my gaze narrowing. They go quiet, even Cal, and once I'm satisfied with their behavior, I face forward once more, eager to get this rally over with and get on with my day.

I know exactly what helped me take over the team and become their leader, despite only transferring to this school last year. It's my last name, and the fact that my dad is a former NFL QB and is now a coach for an NFL team. I come from a long line of football players. Like it's fucking crazy how many are in my family, in the bloodline, including my own father. He married into it, but the Callahans are a powerhouse of football and have left a legacy that reaches generations.

I hope to be one of the stars of the new generation, and my little brother does too. We didn't actually believe playing at this

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stupid, snotty-ass prep school would be the answer, but I've gained so much attention thanks to attending Lancaster Prep and being on their football team, it's kind of wild.

And awesome. Totally awesome.

"Wish Westscott would introduce us and get it over with," Brooks mumbles and I silently agree with him. Though I can't deny our headmaster knows how to hype the team up.

I rest my hands on my hips, waiting for Westscott to run through his happy first day of school spiel. He goes hard, boasting about his efforts to turn Lancaster Prep around and bring more school spirit to our campus. He even gets everyone to yell, "Go Lions!" on repeat.

The football team yells it right along with them, high fives all around and finally, it's our time to shine.

"And now, let's give a hearty welcome to our league champions, the Lancaster Lions football team!"

I give the signal and we all run out on stage, crowding around Westscott, me still in the front, Brooks just to my right. The headmaster detaches the microphone from its stand to say, "Here's our team captain and quarterback, Rhett Bennett. Give us an update on the team, Rhett."

Westscott thrusts the mic in my face and I lean forward to speak into it since I tower over the dude. "We've been practicing like crazy and we're ready to take the team all the way to the state championships this year, sir."

"That's the spirit!" Westscott screams, making the entire auditorium scream along with him.

I gaze out at the crowd, seeing so many of my classmates yelling and clapping and whistling. I scan the first row, locking in on one girl in particular who's watching us with a confused look on her face.

Her brows are drawn together, her deep red lips pursed. She's got long, dark hair pulled into a high ponytail that shows off her delicate bone structure and I don't want to look away.

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It's like I can't.

Goddamn, she's beautiful.

I know the exact moment our gazes actually connect because it feels like a bolt of lightning shot straight through me, fiery hot and settling in my balls. I stare at her, Westscott's booming voice growing distant, the screaming crowd now nothing but a dull roar.

I recognize her. Rowan Lancaster's sister. She tilts her head to the right, her ponytail swinging, and I'm gripped with the image of me grabbing hold of her hair and tugging her head back, kissing the fuck out of her.

Blinking, I pull myself out of my stupor and say something into the mic that's suddenly in my face again. Whatever it was I said, it's got the crowd yelling even louder, and I tear my gaze away from the girl, realizing she's sitting right next to Iris.

She's cool. Cousin to Rowan. Probably the most popular girl in my class and completely untouchable. Not like we talked much last year, but we had a couple of classes together. I like her as a friend, but that's it. She's too blonde for me to ever be interested.

I'm surrounded by blondes. My sister Kenzie is a blonde and so is my mom, and I'm just like...nah. I prefer dark-haired girls.

Like Rowan's sister, who's studying me blatantly, her brows still drawn together like I might confuse the shit out of her. I wonder if she felt that bolt of lightning too when we locked eyes. If she's electrified as I am. It's like I can feel every part of my body—every hair standing on end, the blood pumping through my veins, my heart throbbing in my chest.

I flex my fingers. Shake my hands out and tilt my head to the left, then the right, savoring the satisfying sound of my neck cracking. Westscott is giving me an odd look, unsure of what I'm doing, and without warning, I swipe the mic right out of his hand and stride toward the front of the stage, standing almost on the edge of it.

Directly in front of her.

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"We're going to dominate this season. By the end of the year,

everyone in this country will know who the Lancaster Lions are. I guarantee it!"

Everyone leaps from their seats. Even Iris. It's like my words pushed everyone right over the edge and they've all lost their damn minds.

Except for her. She's still sitting in her seat, clapping lightly, her head turning to the left, then the right, the confusion remaining in her expression. The applause is obligatory but does she even know why she's clapping? I'm guessing no.

Our gazes lock yet again and I smile at her. She doesn't smile back, but she keeps watching me with those big, startling blue eyes. Just before I look away, her lips curve up the slightest bit, not showing any teeth. A Mona Lisa smile if I've ever seen one.

Never understood that saying before until this very moment. This girl is mysterious. I may know her name, but I want more.

And I'm going to make it my mission to find out every little thing about her.

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Chapter Four

WILLOW

"What did you think?" Iris asks once we've finally exited the auditorium with the rest of the students pouring out. "Can't help but get swept up in the school spirit, am I right?"

My nod is reluctant, as are my feelings, which I can't even explain. "It's definitely something."

Iris's steps slow and I can feel her staring at me, but I refuse to look at her. "Seriously, Willow? You didn't like it?"

"What do you want me to say? That I'm a Lancaster Lion until the day I die?" My sarcastic tone makes me laugh, but I clamp my lips when I see the look on Iris's face. It's obvious she's displeased with my reaction.

"Well, you're exactly that. We're more Lancaster than anyone else on this campus. Shouldn't we show that we have school spirit?"

"It's just so...rah rah, go team." I shake my hand in the air like I have a pom pom in it. "That's never been my thing. That's never been our school's thing either."

"It is now," Iris says firmly. "And I think it's fun. We needed

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