SHE BELONGS ONLY TO HIM



YOU WERE NEVER NOT MINE

FROM THE AUTHOR OF...
A MILLION KISSES IN YOUR LIFETIME

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MONICA MURPHY

PENGUIN BOOKS

YOU WERE NEVER NOT MINE

Monica Murphy is a *New York Times, USA Today* and international bestselling author. Her books have been translated into over 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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PLAYLIST

"Home To Another One" - Madison Beer
"Conceited" - Lola Young
"every day is a game" - Night Tapes
"Unrequited Love" - Ella Walton
"Super Sonic" - Alex Amor
"Please Please Please" - Sabrina Carpenter
"Designer" - Tokyo Tea Room
"Let Go" - Emily Rowed
"Disillusioned (with serpentwithfeet)" - Daniel Caesar, serpentwithfeet

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PROLOGUE

SINCLAIR

The past

I CAN FEEL their eyes on us before I can even make out their faces. The row of boys leaning against the brick half-wall that surrounds the campus. Their body language gives off complete boredom, but I can feel the anticipation ripple in the air, and they're a part of it. Giving off vibes that can't be denied—what a privilege it is, to be on this campus. It's the first day of school at Lancaster Prep on a crisp, faux fall day, despite it being early September on the East Coast. The heat wave that's come over the region makes the mornings pleasant, with a faint chill in the air, but the afternoons can be brutal.

No one out here cares about the weather though, least of all me. Despite the apprehension currently flowing through my veins, I'm eager to see the boys. We've been warned of this ritual before we even came to the campus in the group text that

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was formed soon after our admission into the most prestigious boarding school in the country.

Every year on the first day of school, the senior boys of Lancaster Prep lie in wait, judging the incoming freshman girls on their beauty and personality, ultimately deeming which ones are worthy of popularity and which ones...

Aren't.

The moment I heard about this, I was disgusted—and intrigued. It's an archaic, despicable tradition that has only recently been brought back to life. Demeaning and classless. Sexist and misogynistic, yet here we all are. The entirety of the freshman class—well, the girls—giddy and nervous, our blood pumping and our heads buzzing. Our hair perfect and our makeup probably layered on too thick because we're all trying to appear older than we are, desperate to impress the senior boys. Despite our awkward bodies and itchy uniforms with the too long skirts, we still think we look grown-up. This is a big deal. We're in high school now and finally, *finally* on our way to adulthood.

Glancing at the other girls clustered around me, my gaze zeroes in on their waists. I can see where the material is bunched up around their middles, the hem of the normally modest skirts hitting about mid-thigh. Some are even shorter and I realize my misstep.

Panicked, I hitch up my skirt too, wincing when I feel my long-sleeved button-up shirt gather around my waist along with the excess fabric of the skirt. I already have long legs, which causes anything short to look even shorter on me, but I don't care. Maybe the boys will like my legs. Anyway, I want to be accepted.

I want to belong.

"Oh my God, there *he* is." They say he as if we should all know who it is, and we do. This particular boy doesn't need a name because we understand exactly who she's referring to.

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August Lancaster.

The Lancasters rule the school, which is fitting because their family has owned it for generations. When there's a Lancaster on campus, they are undeniably the most popular student in attendance. And August Lancaster rules above all. He comes from the most powerful family within the Lancaster enclave. He's the eldest son of Whit and Summer Lancaster, the oldest of three and by far the most well-known member of his generation of the family. No one messes with August. Everyone wants to be in his favor, and to defy him, to earn his disgust or worse—his disdain—is social suicide.

"Get in good with the Lancasters," my mother told me on move-in day when my parents dropped me off—it's been a mantra on repeat throughout the summer from my mom—that gleam in her eyes a reminder that she is always scheming. Trying to up her social status. The Lancasters equal money in her eyes and she is always down for that. Money has lately become her favorite thing, especially considering my parents came into a bunch of it.

"Ugh, he's gorgeous. I hate him," says another girl, her tone telling me she doesn't hate him at all. Her face is familiar—they all are—but I don't remember her name. It's been nothing but a flurry of welcome meetings since I arrived on campus, and while I remember the girl who just uttered that sentence went on vacation this summer in Turks and Caicos and has a nice tan to prove it that makes her blue eyes pop, I can't for the life of me recall her name.

"What I'm experiencing whenever I see him doesn't feel like hate. Not even close," another girl says and I can't help it. I'm too curious to let that one go.

"What are you feeling then?" I ask her.

The group of girls I'm with goes silent. Every single one of them. I slow my steps and scan their faces, hating what I see

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because I recognize it. I've seen this sort of expression before. Barely contained amusement, all at my expense.

A sigh leaves me and I brace myself for what's about to come.

"How old are you again?" one of them asks, her gaze narrowing as she stares at me.

"I'm a freshman like the rest of you." I lift my chin, hoping I don't sound as embarrassed as I feel.

"Right, but what are you, like...twelve?"

The other girls titter nervously and I take a step back from the one who's currently watching me with a faint sneer curling her upper lip.

"I'm fourteen." The two words leave my throat on a rasp and I swallow hard, averting my head, my gaze landing on the line of boys slouching against the bridge ledge, their expressions turning impatient.

Oh. The realization hits me the longer I watch them. These are not boys. They look more like men. They're all tall and broad and devastatingly handsome. Like every single one of them. They fill out their uniform suits as if they were custom tailored to drape their frames perfectly. Their faces are chiseled from stone and their hair is longish on top and artfully messy, the strands blowing around in the gentle breeze.

There's one who stands the tallest out of all of them though. He's in the dead center of the group, his dark blond hair fluttering across his forehead and getting in his eyes. He angrily swipes it away with long, elegant fingers, his icy cold glare landing directly on me.

I recoil automatically, taking such a big step back that I run into one of the girls who not so gently pushes me out of her way the moment our bodies collide. Laughter rings in the air and I send her a questioning look, trying to ignore the way they're all ridiculing me.

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The disappointment fills me as I turn my back on them. I

don't fit in here. At all. And I have no idea why. Can they see it on me that I'm not actually like them? My family has never been what anyone would call wealthy until the last few months.

"Come on, girls!" one of the boys suddenly yells, clapping his hands together three times and startling all of us into action. "Show us what you've got!"

I follow along with the other girls, grateful they've forgotten about me. We're standing in a row in front of the seniors, most of the girls flicking their hair over their shoulders, thrusting their chests out. Trying to look more...sultry? I think that's what they're aiming for, but they just look foolish because, come on. We're all fourteen, maybe fifteen tops, and we don't know anything about being sexy.

Well, save for the one girl in our class who's absolutely stunning. I remember her name. Raina. Her long dark hair with the perfect waves that cascade down her back and her perfect body with curves in all the right places. She's more developed than any of us, especially me. What's worse is she's nice so you can't even hate her for being so beautiful.

Not that I'd hate her for such a superficial reason but... maybe I would.

Yeah. I probably would.

We shuffle and shift positions, excited whispers sounding among us, and the boy who clapped the first time around does it again. We go silent and when I stare straight ahead, I see that I'm in the center of the line. Standing in front of the meanest looking one of the bunch, and the most handsome too. I feel a pointy elbow jab me in the side and when I jerk my gaze to the right, I find said owner of the pointy elbow inclining her head toward the mean boy.

"That's August," she whispers, her eyes wide.

I nod, the implication of what she's said sinking into my brain. This is the boy who my mother wants me to...what? Entice into a relationship so we can make a great marriage

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and Mom will have forever access to the Lancaster social status?

Please. This boy—excuse me, *man*—is going to dismiss me in an instant.

The boys launch into their assessment, all of them having something to say about us while we can only stand there and take it. The warning bell hasn't rung yet. We're all supposed to be in the assembly room for the first day of school speech and orientation. I'm feeling anxious, eager to get going because one thing I hate is being late, and I nearly jump out of my skin when I hear a harsh male voice.

"You. Come here."

My gaze finds August Lancaster's and I realize he's speaking to me.

Oh God. I can't move. I can't even speak. I'm completely frozen, staring at him as if he just sprouted two heads and he's about to attack me. The longer I just stand there speechless, the more pissed off he becomes.

"What the fuck? Are you *dumb?*" A few of the boys start to laugh and he sends them a menacing look, cutting off their laughter in an instant. When he turns his attention back to me, he squints, tilting his head to the side. My body faintly shakes as his gaze rakes over me from head to toe, making my skin tingle. And not in a bad way either, which leaves me even more confused. "I said, come here."

I take a step forward as if I have no control of myself, bowing my head for a moment, trying to gather my courage to face him. I hate how easily he commanded me. I did what he said like I'm a trained pet.

"Hmm." I glance up to find him considering me, tugging on his bottom lip with his thumb and index finger. His mouth is a flushed, deep red. His lips lush and look soft, though I'm sure they're actually hard and demanding. A man like him would

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never kiss a girl softly. He'd kiss with pure intent, never letting up until he got what he wanted.

My heart flutters in my chest and my skin goes hot from the way he's studying me. His gaze meets mine once more and we stare at each other for a moment too long and I frown, confused. But then I can tell by the slight curl of his upper lip that suddenly appears—he doesn't like what he sees.

"Skinny legs," he announces, his deep voice ringing loud so that everyone can hear him. "Flat chested. Built like a boy and she's probably boring too." His gaze flickers away from me and I'm dismissed, just like that. "Next."

My jaw drops and I'm gaping at him, the horror washing over me slowly as the girls laugh at me, their relief apparent because they're so glad I'm not them. All while I stand there with my head hanging down, staring at my flat chest and wishing I could run. I've never been more humiliated in my life. Did he really say I was built like a boy? And he called me boring? He doesn't even know me. How can he sum me up in a few choice words by looking at me for a couple of seconds?

I don't care if he's a Lancaster. This guy is a dick.

And this dick just lifted his hand into the air and snapped his fingers at...me?

"Did you hear me?" His tone is bored, as is the expression on his stupidly handsome face, and I snap my jaw shut, wishing I could come up with a proper insult. But I know better. To say something to him in return would be asking for trouble. "Get out of here. We're not interested in you."

"Not even close," says the one who's standing next to him. He's dark haired with eyes the color of obsidian and I physically recoil when our gazes lock. I can feel the bad vibes coming off of him even from this far.

Turning on my heel, I scurry away, my hurried steps taking me as far as I can possibly get. No cruel laughter trails after me, but I can hear him bark out a demand at another girl and I

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glance over my shoulder, coming to a stop when I realize he's looking at Raina.

Beautiful, perfect Raina who stands tall and proud before him, a barely-there smile curving her luscious lips.

August is quiet for a moment, scrutinizing her almost as thoroughly as he did to me.

"You'll do," he tells her, not impressed whatsoever, but she smiles broadly, pleased by his approval. She glances back at the rest of the girls, the triumph on her pretty face obvious and my heart sinks.

God, this school is ridiculous. And I'm supposed to endure the next four years here, dealing with this sort of horrific behavior and misogynistic attitudes? Not that I have much say at all here, but still. I hate this place. More than anything?

I hate August Lancaster.

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1

SINCLAIR

Four years later
Present day

"God, you're so slow. Come on, Sinclair. Pick it up!" My roommate and newest friend Elise comes to a complete stop in the middle of the sidewalk, her exasperation obvious as she gawks at me. "From the way you're acting, I'm starting to think you don't even want to go to this party."

"I don't." I've been telling her that since she first informed me that we were going. Like I didn't have a choice. "You already know this."

"Oh, come on." Elise's tone turns pleading, her eyes going wide. We've only been on campus for a month and while I did the boarding school thing throughout the entirety of high school, this is Elise's first time living away from home. And from the moment she arrived, it's like she's doing everything in her power to go wild during the first semester of university life.

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And going to a party thrown by a particular—and extremely exclusive but wildly popular—frat is top on her wish list. "We're going to have the best time! There are so many hot guys who are in this frat. We'll find boyfriends by the end of the night for sure!"

Her naivety is shocking—and concerning.

"They're all awful, Elise. Not a single one of them wants to be our boyfriend," I remind her for what feels like the hundredth time.

It's laughable, thinking any of them wants to be a boyfriend, especially to girls like us. I'm not knocking myself or Elise, but we're young. Barely eighteen and completely inexperienced. Maybe some of our fellow first years would be interested in us, but strictly for a hookup. And how do I know this?

I went to Lancaster Prep with almost all of them, including the one who shall not be named. He's the president of this brotherhood of assholes—no surprise considering he's king asshole of the world—and this means he basically rules the entire campus, because of course he does. I thought I would only have to suffer that one year at Lancaster dealing with him, but here we go again. I'd hoped to avoid him on campus too. This place is huge and there is no reason for us to interact whatsoever. So why am I willingly walking into the lion's den? "They're only interested in what you can do for them. To them."

"And what exactly can I do for them?" She falls into step beside me, curling her arm through mine and practically dragging me forward so we can keep up with the rest of our new friend group who are all chattering excitedly about the party we're going to. I have a surreal moment of déjà vu and shake my head, telling myself it won't end up like the last time I first encountered *him*. "I'm just little ol' me."

Please. She could do plenty. All of it involving sexual favors. I adore Elise. She's been a great friend and roommate from the

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moment we met during move-in day. But she's also incredibly naïve and adorably wholesome. She grew up in a very small town where she knew everyone and she has trust issues. Meaning, she trusts every single person she meets.

It's a problem. One that I hope won't eventually hurt her. And it won't, as long as I have anything to do with it.

"I'm sure one of the douchebags will approach you," I start.

She cuts me off by clapping her hands excitedly like she's a five-year-old who was just informed she's getting an ice cream cone for a job well done. "That's exactly what I want! Have you seen the guys in that frat? They're all *gorgeous*."

I swear there are literal stars in her eyes. And Elise isn't wrong. It's just that the gorgeous faces and stellar bodies mask their ugly souls and assholish ways.

"And then one—or maybe a few—of those asshats are going to ask you for a hand job. Or a blow job." Now I'm the one who's dragging Elise while she digs in her heels, trying to get me to stop.

"No way." She snakes her arm away from mine and throws her hands in the air, both of us coming to a stop again. We're going to lose sight of the rest of our group if we keep this up. "You think every guy on this campus is looking to hook up with us and nothing more."

I stare at her with a deadpan expression. "Because they are."

"They're not all that bad." Elise rolls her eyes.

"Yes, they are."

"No, they're not." She starts walking again and I trail after her. "Not every man thinks with his penis, Sinclair. I can't help it if you've had a few bad experiences over the years. I'm the eternal optimist."

I burst out laughing at her using the word penis. Elise rarely curses or uses crude slang words. She's a good girl and I love

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that for her. I really do. But I also can't always protect her from the scumbags of the earth, which means all of that good girl shine is going to get rubbed off here eventually and she'll end up jaded. Like me.

Not that I have extensive experience with guys. I graduated from high school a dateless wonder. I didn't go to any of the dances with a boy. I've never had a boyfriend. For a while there, I was the absolute laughingstock of the entire school thanks to August Lancaster.

Oh shit. I just thought of his name when I'm not supposed to.

But seriously. He made my first year of high school the most miserable experience of my life. I don't know why or how I became his target, but I was, and it was a nightmare. The things that boy—man—put me through...

A shudder moves through me at the memories.

The moment he graduated from Lancaster Prep, I breathed a sigh of relief. And while I was faintly terrorized at school the beginning of my sophomore year by the boys who were part of his friend group, they eventually left me alone and I was able to walk across campus unscathed. But what came out of my experience with August and his constant harassment for a solid year when I was basically a child?

I trust no one, especially of the male variety. They're the worst. I'm almost proud of my dateless status. I'd rather cruise through life unharmed and untouched than deal with some jackass who gets me to fall hopelessly in love, only for him to dump me hard and leave me a broken, sobbing mess. I saw it enough during high school with the friends I had, and I'm guessing I'm bound to see it happen with my roommate, AKA the eternal optimist.

"Hey." Elise grabs hold of my arm, causing me to stop and I turn to face her. Her expression is grave, her brown eyes wide

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and unblinking. "If you don't want to go, you don't have to. I just thought…"

Her voice drifts and she goes annoyingly silent.

"You just thought what?" I prompt when she remains quiet.

"That it could be a fun way to meet hot guys!" She rests her hands on her hips. "I mean, who cares about that one guy who ruined your life for a year?" Yes, I told her about him because I had to. "I know you hate him, and he deserves your hatred. He's a dick."

I blink at her, shocked she called him that.

"But there are going to be so many people there, I doubt you'll even run into him," she tacks on. "So…screw that guy! Let go of all of your resentment and have fun for once in your life."

I can't even take offense to what Elise said because she's probably right. The parties that this particular frat hosts are huge. The house will be packed with a variety of people and besides, I'm not even on August Lancaster's radar. I'm sure he hasn't thought about me in years. Like why would he? He dismissed me the moment he first set eyes on me.

Well. Sort of. I still don't understand his fascination with me back then. That's the word I use to describe it because why else would he torment me for so long?

"Though he is superhot." Elise giggles, covering her mouth with her fingertips.

My gaze sharpens the moment it lands on her. "When have you seen him?"

"I've seen photos of him. Everyone knows who he is." She shrugs and starts walking. All I can do is fall into step beside her.

And there's the problem. He's practically a celebrity on this campus, the same as he was back at Lancaster Prep. Everyone knew him and bowed down to him. It was annoying and made him incredibly obnoxious. He thought he was untouchable. Worse?

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He was.

"By the way, you look gorgeous," Elise calls from over her shoulder, her steps getting faster. "He'll probably see you and fall instantly in love."

I grimace. "That's the last thing I want."

"Oh, whatever." She waves a dismissive hand. "Don't even worry about that guy. He's not going to know who you are."

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2

AUGUST

It's another Friday night and there's a wild party currently taking place at the house.

Fucking great.

But what else is new? This is the grind we've been on since I showed up on campus three years ago. The AAO fraternity—Alpha Alpha Omega because of course we have alpha in there twice—has been around since the dawn of time. AKA our founding date, which is 1877. Only the richest, most elite families are allowed into the fraternity, and becoming a member is by invitation only.

Generations of Lancasters have been members, not that many Lancasters have gone to college these last twenty years or so. Not even my father, who had no real interest in going to a university. His interests were strictly in my mother, and that isn't even a joke. He admitted as much to me when I was a preteen and hormonal as fuck.

"Hopefully you'll meet a woman like your mother," he said to me, careful not to give me too many details because that is the last thing I want to know about. "And you'll never want to even look in another woman's direction again."

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I adore my mother but that sounded like a death sentence then and it still does now. Why would I tie myself down with one particular woman when I could have...many? Anybody I want?

"You look like someone pissed in your beer."

I tilt my head to the side, contemplating the glass I'm currently clutching. "First of all, I'm not drinking beer because it does, in fact, taste like what I imagine piss tastes like. And second, what the hell do you care how I look?"

I finally lift my gaze to find my best friend Cyrus Thornhill smiling at me, appearing amused at my expense, which is a normal look for him. He finds me funny, which is unusual because no one finds me amusing, least of all myself. But he's the only person I can tolerate in my presence for an extended period of time, so I allow it.

"You've been in a mood since the semester started." Cyrus settles heavily onto the couch I'm sitting on, jostling me, and I send him a dirty look, which he completely ignores. He comes from a family who made their fortune in biotech—which classifies him as coming from new money, but I don't hold that against him. "What's your problem?"

I say nothing. Just sip on the thirty-year-old scotch that is my personal stash and no one is allowed to drink it. If I catch anyone doing so without my permission, there is always hell to pay.

"You need to get laid." Cyrus's voice is tinged with amusement.

"I had sex last night." I yawn, which I didn't even mean to do, but that's how much it affected me.

"What was her name?"

"I couldn't tell you."

"Hair color?"

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I squint as I try to conjure up her face and hair in my memory, but I come up with nothing. "Brown?"

Cyrus chuckles and swipes the glass right out of my hand, draining it in an instant, the motherfucker. "You're guessing."

A sigh leaves me. "I can't remember a thing about her."

Well, that's a lie. I remember how she squealed when she pretended to come. Like I imagine a stuck pig sounds and it filled me with such disgust, my dick deflated like a balloon and I told her to shut the fuck up. Which she did of course, and then proceeded to give me an adequate blow job. I came on her face and told her to leave.

"You're a callous asshole." He hands me back my empty glass then rises to his feet, heading toward the cabinet where I keep my scotch stash.

"Tell me something we don't know." We're in the sitting room at the back of the house and no one else is with us. They know when they see me sitting alone and glowering at everything that I want to be left alone, and they do exactly that. It's a pleasant feeling, knowing you have so much power. But it's also...

Lonely. Thank God for Cyrus.

"You need to find a cause." He grabs a fresh glass for himself and fills it with a generous pour, doing the same for my glass. Within seconds we're both sipping on the finest scotch that slides down my throat smoothly, Cyrus settling back on the couch next to me, his demeanor casual. Like he has all the time in the world and just wants to have a simple chat.

I call bullshit. More like I'm thrown by his approach and don't quite know what he means by using the word cause, not that I'll admit my confusion out loud.

"What the hell are you talking about?" My voice is gruff, my gaze going to the front of the house, which is currently filled to the absolute brim with people. None of them are familiar. Not even most of the guys, and I'm in the damn fat with them. No one interests me. No one matters, save for the man sitting next to me and my family. Everyone else can go to hell.

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Why the hell am I here again? I should drop out. My parents wouldn't care. Well, my mom might fret over it for a moment and my father will question my decision-making but otherwise, they won't care. We have more money than we know what to do with. It's been properly invested to carry us through multiple generations and maybe that's part of the problem.

I'm fucking bored.

Oh I know, poor pitiful me. Rich boy singing the blues. It's pathetic, I get it, but it's true. I'm lonely. Bored. I need some excitement in my life, and I'm wondering if continuing with my education, even though I'm so close to graduating, is a mistake.

"You sit idle in class. Here in the house. During a party for the love of God. You don't even drink to get drunk. It's because you think this shit tastes good." Cyrus takes a sip, making a disgusted face. "It's horrible."

"You have zero class, Copeland." He knows it, too. "It's the finest scotch you can buy."

"And it tastes like shit." He swigs it down like a heathen, finishing it in one gulp while I watch him, my lip curling in faint disgust. "What the fuck do you even stand for, Lancaster?"

I jerk my gaze away from his, watching the front of the house once more, my gaze snagging on the door, which is currently opening. A group of girls enters the house, wearing matching expressions of wide-eyed wonderment as they look around. They all look painfully young and I'm about to blast Cyrus with a scathing response when my gaze snags on one of the girls in particular.

And lingers.

It's the utter contempt that's on her face that catches my attention. All of the other women surrounding her are practically bouncing, they're so delighted to be here. Not her. She's got her arms curled in front of her in pure defensive mode and they're nestled just underneath her tits. They're the perfect size —her tits—not too large and not too flat either. Her hair is a

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rich, dark brown and flows just past her shoulders. I can't tell what color her eyes are, but it doesn't matter.

There's something about her that feels almost...familiar. Is it because she appears as irritated as I feel? Perhaps. Or is it something else?

"You're staring." Cyrus states the obvious and all I can do is grunt, annoyed that he caught me. "Want me to go get her for you?"

That sounds fucking awful. Like I'm a god and I expect to be served the tastiest morsel in the house—and right now, that would be her. "No."

"Oh, come on. It's the first time I've seen your eyes spark like that in a while."

"My eyes don't spark." I shake my head. Rattle the ice in my now empty glass. When did I finish that off anyway? "Spark. What the hell, Copeland? You sound like you're interested in me romantically."

His laughter is a booming, pleasant sound, but I refuse to smile. That'll only encourage him. "You wish, Lancaster. I could give a shit what you do—sexually—and apparently you feel the same considering how you can't even remember who you fucked last night."

"They're all the same." I can't look away from her. They're moving as a group deeper into the house, a bunch of my fraternity brothers approaching them. I would guess these women are freshmen. Babies. Probably not even worthy of the word women because they're barely out of high school. I'm not interested.

Yet I am.

"Except for that one," Cyrus observes.

Except for that one.

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3

SINCLAIR

This house is nothing like I thought it would be. I've watched enough movies and shows to get the general idea of what a frat house typically looks like. Older and a little run-down. Full of guys who are all slobs and can barely keep the place clean. Beer cans stacked everywhere and liquor bottles tipped over, spilling their contents onto the floor. There should be a couple sitting on top of the pool table, making out, and loud music playing and beer pong being played somewhere.

But there's none of that here at Alpha Alpha Omega—God, what a fitting name, right? The interior is immaculate, with plush, oversized midnight-blue velvet couches and glittering chandeliers hanging above us. Portraits of past members line the walls, some of them photographs and the older ones are actual paintings. There's not a single red Solo cup in sight. Everyone is clutching an actual glass and they look expensive, reminding me of my mother's Baccarat highball glasses she never let any of us touch when we were growing up. She was always afraid we'd break them.

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No one is afraid in this house, though. Everywhere I look,

someone has a beautiful glass in their hand, filled with a brownish liquid that tells me they are definitely not drinking beer.

What the hell kind of frat party is this anyway?

"It's so quiet in here," I murmur close to Elise's ear.

She sends me a quick look before speaking in a hushed tone. "I feel like I'm in a library."

Huh. This party is a real rager.

"Well hello. What are your names?" We're greeted by a tragically beautiful, dark-haired woman who's watching us with the deepest brown eyes that immediately make me think of sadness, hence the tragic thought. She has a smile on her face, her lips slicked in the deepest ruby red lipstick shade I think I've ever seen. She's dressed in all black and there's not a single logo on display, but I can tell her clothes are expensive. She even smells like money—meaning her perfume is a deep, rich scent that I know is pricey.

"I'm Elise, and this is Sinclair." Elise points at me before flashing that disarming smile of hers at the woman, whose lips don't shift whatsoever.

"Were you invited?" the woman asks, her tone cool.

Elise lifts up on her tiptoes to try and look beyond the woman's shoulder, where the rest of our group is already mingling with the guys. "We're with them."

The woman doesn't even bother looking in the direction Elise is pointing. "You're underage."

Elise's expression turns crestfallen. "Well, ye—"

I nudge her in the ribs extra hard, which makes her stop talking, thank God. "I know practically every man in this room." I rattle off a few names, most of them obscure ones because why would I state the obvious ones? Everyone has heard about them and she'd think I was lying. "I went to school with them."

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Her right eyebrow arches perfectly, her disbelief obvious. "And where exactly did you go to school?"

I tilt my chin up and say with as much pride as possible bleeding into my voice, "Lancaster Prep."

And with that answer, she appears duly impressed, which was my plan. "Ah. Well, then. Welcome. My name is Yolanda. I'm the housemother. Would you care for something to drink?"

Well, that was easier than I thought it would be. "Please. Whatever everyone else is having."

"Same," Elise offers weakly.

Yolanda's head inclines toward us. "Will do."

She turns on her heel and hurriedly walks away, off to fix our drinks, I suppose. Elise's shoulders sag the moment she's out of sight.

"You knew just what to say." Her voice is tinged with the faintest hint of awe. "I was panicking."

"You almost agreed with her about being underage and she would've kicked us out." I make a scoffing noise, shaking my head. "What frat cares about how old the partygoers are?"

"I guess this one is different." Elise tilts her head back, taking everything in. "This house is massive. And so clean."

"Here you go." Yolanda appears before us again like magic, a drink in each hand. We take them from her, the both of us murmuring our thank yous. "Enjoy yourselves."

She's gone before we can say anything else, and Elise and I share a look before we each take a sip from the glass.

"Oh God," I choke out once the liquor hits the back of my throat. It burns going down, settling warmly in my stomach. "That's strong."

Elise starts coughing, drawing the attention of pretty much everyone in this house, and all I can do is stand there, patting her on the back awkwardly, sending an apologetic smile at everyone staring, and they all look away from us. Some of them roll their eyes. A few of them even laugh. At Elise. At us.

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I don't like any of them. This house—this fraternity—sucks.

"We should leave," I tell my friend once she's composed herself. "This isn't our type of party."

"No, see that's where you're wrong. I think it's definitely your type of party considering you know everyone here. I'm the sore thumb who stands out." Elise sets her glass on a nearby end table, wiping her hands together.

"I don't really know them. I just know *of* them. That's a big difference." I very much kept to myself at Lancaster Prep and never really felt like I belonged there. It doesn't help when the most popular, influential Lancaster calls you out for your flaws and harasses you for a solid year.

"Hey, are you okay?" A tall, golden-haired god is standing at Elise's side, his hand on her elbow, his voice full of concern as is his expression. His cheekbones are sharp and his jaw square and it appears he's been carved out of granite. "Do you need any help?"

I'm about to tell him to leave us alone but then I catch the starstruck look on Elise's face and the way her eyelashes flutter. "The drink—it was just—so strong."

"Ah, whiskey will do that to you. Would you like something else to drink?" His tone is gentle, as is the glow in his hazel eyes, and I press my lips together so I don't say anything to ruin the moment. I don't know him at all. His face isn't familiar, and I can tell Elise is struck dumb by his good looks and attentive ways. I get it, I do.

"Do you have any Trulys?" she asks as he steers her away from me and they both start to walk.

"No, but we'll find something you might like." He sounds amused at her Truly question. I watch them go, about to trail after them because I don't want to be left alone in this house and I know Elise wouldn't mind.

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But then a strange feeling spreads over my skin, making every hair on my body stand on end. Someone's watching me.

I can tell. And while it's the tiniest bit creepy, there's also something intriguing about it. Who's watching me? Is he as handsome as the man who just basically swept Elise off her feet?

Slowly I turn in the direction where I think the person watching me is standing, anticipation making my movements slow. I lift my head, my gaze searching, landing on the last face I expected to see.

August Lancaster.

Seriously?

We stare at each other from across the room. He's sitting on one of those plush couches, his curious gaze locked on me. He doesn't appear disgusted by my appearance, which throws me a little because I'm not used to him studying me with...God, what is that? Interest?

No freaking way.

His gaze shifts, raking over me slowly, taking me in and for the briefest, strangest moment, I...I like it. My skin tingles everywhere his gaze lands and when it finally returns to mine, I see it. A flicker in those familiar blue eyes that my body automatically responds to with an unfamiliar, clenching sensation between my thighs.

I'm captivated by his attention, my lips parting, my nipples actually hardening behind my bra and I stand a little taller, pushing my hair over my shoulder so it's trailing down my back. Drift my hand down my front like I'm...what? Some sort of seductress set out to entice August Lancaster? The bully of my high school life? The horrible boy who made my life absolute torture?

Clearly, I've lost my mind.

A huff leaves me as I turn on my heel and start walking. Fast. I'm disgusted by my response to him. I have no business thinking that way. He's horrible. A menace. A goddamn monster if I'm being truthful so what the hell was that reaction

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I had? Is there a secret part of me who wants to be accepted by him? Do I want him to find me attractive?

Maybe. And God, it kills me to even contemplate that thought.

I'm not even paying attention to where I'm going as I move through the cavernous house, my vision blurry. My thoughts hazy. All I can think about is that I need to leave. Get out of here and get away from this boy—man—who would most likely toy with me to get what he wanted and then leave me in the gutter somewhere out in the cold. All alone and crying over him yet again.

Ugh, my thoughts are dramatic and ridiculous. I can't help it.

I blindly push past a cluster of people, then another, ignoring the way one of the girls snaps, "Hey!" when I barely run into her.

"Sorry," I mutter, coming to a brief stop so I can polish off the rest of the liquor that's in the glass I'm still holding. I drink it all in one swallow, ignoring the burn in my throat and waiting for the warmth to coat my stomach, which happens in seconds. Giving me the comfort and the absolute strength that I need to get the hell out of this house and away from August.

I spot the front door that we just walked through only minutes before. It's heavy and darkly stained, with a small square window that's covered in two strips of hammered iron. Looks like something straight out of medieval times and I wonder just how old this stupid house is. I'm reaching for the door handle when I hear a voice. The voice.

His voice.

"In a hurry?"

It's deep and settles all over me like syrup poured on my skin, sweet and sticky and stopping my progress completely. Hanging my head, I take a deep breath, exhaling slowly before I turn to face him. My nemesis.

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The most beautiful man I've ever seen.

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4

SINCLAIR

I steel my spine along with the spinning out of control emotions that are currently running through me like water when I finally face *the* August Lancaster, lifting my chin up. Trying my best to appear haughty. Completely unaffected by him and his electric proximity.

Because that's what it feels like, standing this close to him. Electric. As if there's a current running between us, drawing me closer to him despite my reluctance. And I'm definitely reluctant. I don't want to be anywhere near this guy. He's the freaking worst.

August tilts his head to the side as he studies me, his gaze still curious, though his face is mostly expressionless. He doesn't want to give away a thing, I'm sure, and I envy him in that moment. That he can appear so unaffected while I'm standing in front of him, rattled to my core.

"Why are you leaving?" His voice is much deeper than I remember and that makes sense, considering it was four years ago when he terrorized me. He's older now. More of a man than ever and God, I can see it in his frame. The impressive height

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and breadth of him and that look on his chiseled face. I called the guy who approached Elise earlier a golden god but I was mistaken.

The true golden god is August. The rest of the men in this house are mere mortals, while he is Zeus, the ruler of Mount Olympus. My thoughts are ridiculous but come on. *Look* at him. His face is constructed of pure marble. Hard and smooth and made up of clean, sharp lines. The only thing soft are his lips. They're a rich, deep pink, and I'm struck with the sudden urge to kiss them.

I shake my head once, pushing the thought out of my brain. I have clearly lost all sensibility being in this man's presence. I cling to my old hateful feelings, reminding myself that I don't like him. At all.

"Why do you care?" I finally toss out, my tone as snotty as can be. At least my voice isn't shaking, which is a miracle as I am currently trembling from head to toe.

His smile is faint. As if he likes the idea that I was rude to him. "You just got here."

"You were paying attention?"

"I keep watch on everything that happens in this house." He takes a step closer and I practically throw myself against the heavy wooden door, my fingers curling around the handle. "Who are you?"

"No one that matters." I shake my head over and over again, not about to say my name. It's not the most common name there is—Sinclair is my mother's maiden name and since she is one of three sisters, she felt bad that the family name wasn't going to be carried on so she did the next best thing and gave her first daughter her maiden name. I hated it growing up. I always wanted to be named Kylee or Casey or any type of "ee" name because I was surrounded by girls with cutsie names just like that.

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His smile is a faint curling of his lush mouth and my heart trips over itself at the sight of it. "I doubt that." His gaze drops to the hand that is still holding the glass. "You want another drink?"

I would be a fool to accept his offer. I need to leave. Now. At this very second.

"Please," is what I say instead, mentally cursing my weakness.

He reaches for me and I shrink back, which makes him pause, his brows drawing together. "Care to hand over the glass?"

"Oh." I push away from the door completely, coming closer to him, and I catch a whiff of his cologne. It's spicy and warm and I have the fleeting thought that I want to bathe in it, which is just...what? Oh, I know. Unsettling. "Here."

I hold the glass out to him and he takes it from me, his fingers purposely brushing against mine, sending a jolt of electricity straight up my arm. I contain my reaction to him as best as I can, pressing my lips together. Only for my mouth to fall open when he turns his back to me and starts walking without saying another word.

Go after him, the tiny voice inside my head whispers and I bolt into action, following August as he moves deeper into the house. Until he's in the massive room where I first spotted him, heading straight for the bar that's set up in the farthest corner. There is a variety of cut-glass decanters and containers sitting on the bar and not a single bottle of wine or alcohol with a label in sight. Everything is clean and elegant and absolutely beautiful. Impressive. My family would never—my dad proudly displays the expensive wine and liquor bottles in their home. Always flaunting their wealth once they came into it, while I was uncomfortable about it. I was twelve when my father's startup began amassing actual money. My parents immediately

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