The background is a dark, textured charcoal grey. Scattered across the surface are several smudges of bright red lipstick, some appearing as distinct, slightly blurred impressions of lips, while others are more faint and blended into the background. The smudges are concentrated around the central text, creating a romantic and intimate atmosphere.

**BIRTHDAY  
KISSES**

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**MONICA MURPHY**

# **BIRTHDAY KISSES**

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MONICA MURPHY

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## F *ive days before Christmas*

I WAKE UP SLOWLY, the low hum of conversation rousing me. My eyes pop open and I glance to my left to see Crew's side of the bed is empty.

Huh.

Reaching out, I touch the sheets to find they're cold, which means he's been up for a while. He's not the early bird in this relationship—that would be me, especially these last few months.

Rolling over toward the nightstand, I reach out and grab my phone and see it's past eight in the morning.

I sit up straight, pushing the hair out of my face, trying to ignore the sudden ache in my breasts. Climbing out of bed, I hurriedly slip on an old Lancaster Prep sweatshirt that I still wear because it's so soft and warm, and exit our bedroom, heading toward that conversation I still hear.

It's all one-sided, a deep male voice that makes me go warm inside. I know exactly who's talking, and I know exactly who he's talking to. I even linger just outside of the kitchen so I can spy on them, a smile curling my lips.

“Your mommy is a lazy bird, isn't she? Well, she deserves it. You keep her up half the night because you're so hungry all the time.”

A coo sounds, as if in answer to him and I can't help it. Tears spring to my eyes. I've been so emotional this last year. I feel like I'm always crying.

“Aww, you’re so cute. You look just like her right now. The most beautiful baby in the city. Maybe the entire state? The world? You’re the sweetest little bird. Though you’re more like a tree, though that’s not as great of a nickname, huh? Maybe we should change your name. I think I’m going to start calling you Robin. Blue Jay? How about Pigeon?”

Unable to take it anymore, I enter our tiny kitchen to put a stop to this nonsense.

“Pigeon is the worst nickname in the world and you can quote me on that,” I announce.

My husband and our baby both swivel their heads in my direction, the both of them smiling while I’m left breathless. Crew is sitting at our kitchen table in just a pair of dark green checked pajama bottoms and our daughter leans her cheek against his chest like she can’t help herself.

I don’t blame her. I love pressing my face right in that particular spot where his neck meets his shoulder. He smells good there.

He smells good everywhere.

“Look, there’s your mommy,” Crew croons at her before flashing a smile in my direction. “Good morning, sleepyhead.”

“Good morning.” I smile at the both of them. “It’s so late.”

“Not really. You never get to sleep in thanks to this little bundle.” He lifts Willow up, his hand curved around her tiny butt and she kicks out her legs. “She started to fuss and you were still asleep so I thought I’d help out.”

“How long have you two been awake?” I move further into the kitchen, my fingers itching to grab hold of our daughter and cradle her close. She’s a snuggle bug. We shower her with so much love I sometimes worry she’ll end up spoiled rotten, but Crew reassures me she’ll be spoiled no matter what, thanks to her being a Lancaster.

But a Lancaster spoiled by love? That’s a rarity. Love won’t hurt our daughter. It’ll only make her stronger.

“Over an hour.” He starts sweet talking our daughter. “We’ve had some daddy/daughter bonding time, right, Will? Right?”

I roll my eyes. “Will? That’s a boy’s name.”

“I like it. And I think she does too. Huh, Will?”

Willow gurgles, her eyes sparkling as she smiles at her daddy.

“Hand her over.” I wiggle my fingers at him in the universal *gimme* signal and he deposits her into my arms. I hold her close, her little face

pressed against my neck and I breathe deep her sweet baby scent. “Mommy missed you this morning.”

“Mommy was snoring so I’m pretty sure you didn’t miss her at all.” Crew is already grinning when I send him an evil glare that I don’t mean. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving.” I’ve been breastfeeding for the last five months and I’m always hungry. This child wants to eat all the time, and while I love being able to provide for my baby, I also feel like I’m nothing but a feeding machine most of the time.

“I’ll make you breakfast. French toast?”

I shake my head. He knows that’s my favorite but... “I need to still lose a few pounds.”

He rises from the chair and comes to me, wrapping his arms around me so the two of us are surrounding Willow. “I like you curvy.”

“I was already curvy. Now my boobs are enormous.” I am softly wailing, but I only complain to him.

“You’re feeding our child. Of course, they are.” His gaze drops to my chest, which is straining the front of my sweatshirt that used to fit perfectly fine before I was pregnant. “Stop being so hard on yourself. And it’s almost your birthday. You deserve French toast.”

“Fine.” I give in because arguing with Crew about things like this is pointless. He always gets his way. Not that I don’t benefit from it.

I settle at our table and hold Willow while Crew moves about the kitchen, making us breakfast. I never would’ve imagined this would be our life, but it is. The two of us married with our first child, living in a small apartment on the Upper West Side. And when I say small, I’m referring to Lancaster standards, because his family owns some of the biggest apartments I’ve ever seen in the city. Their real estate holdings are vast and impressive.

One of Crew’s great aunts who never had children died a few years ago, right after our wedding, and she left her apartment to us. It was an unexpected and wonderful gesture, and while Crew’s brothers—who are both in real estate—tried their best to get us to sell the place, thanks to the prices in the neighborhood being the highest they’ve ever been, we refused.

Instead, we had it gently renovated, bringing it up to modern standards without taking away any of its charm. It was built in the late 1800s, and the

moment I entered the apartment, I turned to my husband with so much hope in my gaze, he began to laugh.

“You want to keep it.” He didn’t even bother asking. He just knew.

Nodding, I went to him and threw my arms around his neck, kissing him soundly on the lips. “Yes, please.”

We’ve made it ours. His brothers think we’re crazy for wanting to stay in such a small apartment, but I love it. It’s cozy and warm and every time I walk through the front door, it just feels so right. There are three bedrooms, which is plenty of room for us but someday, we’re going to have more children. We’ll eventually run out of room.

I can’t bear the idea of moving from here.

I’m so lost in my thoughts it takes my daughter to grab hold of a strand of hair and yank it hard to pull me from my reverie. I yelp and the naughty little girl laughs.

Actually laughs.

“She’s more Lancaster than I thought,” I murmur to my husband, who only flashes me a helpless grin over his shoulder before he resumes his cooking duties.

Wouldn’t the girls—and the guys—of Lancaster Prep fall out of their chairs if they knew the all-mighty leader of our class had become completely domesticated? I don’t take full responsibility for this change. My husband enjoys spending time in our home. Renovating it. Finding art to hang on the walls...

A horrible scent hits my nose at the exact moment our beautiful little daughter passes gas, which of course, makes her laugh again.

“I can smell that,” Crew says as he cracks eggs into a bowl.

“I should probably go change her.” Rising to my feet, I hold Willow closer and shuffle out of the kitchen, heading to her bedroom.

The moment I walk into her room, I’m calm, a smile curling my lips for no reason other than I love it in here. The walls and drapes are cream. The crib is the palest pink, and there’s a giant stuffed pink bear sitting in the rocking chair, his face covered in lipstick kisses.

Crew found that for me. Just like he found the art hanging on the wall of our daughter’s bedroom. When I first asked to move the piece into her room, Crew appeared concerned.

“Are you sure you want it in there?”

My nod was firm. No way could he convince me it was a bad idea. “I’ll be in that room a lot. I want to stare at the piece every chance I get.”

Crew made sure to hang my favorite work of art on the wall that’s opposite of where I sit in the rocking chair with our daughter. Sometimes in the middle of the night, I’ll crack open the curtains and let the streetlight shine into her room. It casts the piece in a beam of golden light, letting me stare at it almost dreamily while I rock and nurse Willow.

Anytime I look at *A Million Kisses in Your Lifetime*, my head is filled with the romantic moments Crew and I have shared. All of the things he’s done for me. All of the lipsticks that still take up most of the drawers in my vanity table. The pink Chanel bag I still carry to this day, though he’s purchased me others since then.

My husband is very generous. And handsome. And sexy. While I’m not feeling particularly sexy lately, he still makes me feel wanted. Cherished. I still get butterflies when I first see him, even just now when he was cooking in the kitchen, I couldn’t help but admire the smooth expanse of his back. The perfect swell of his butt beneath those pajama bottoms.

I’ve got Willow changed and back into her jammies when Crew appears in her bedroom doorway, a spatula still clutched in his hand.

“Breakfast is ready.” He grins, his gaze on our daughter and not me.

I fight the disappointment that threatens. While I know my husband loves me, I still struggle just the tiniest bit with not getting all of his attention. Which makes me sound like a spoiled brat, especially because I dote on Willow just as much as Crew does.

But it’s almost Christmas. And my birthday. I’d like my husband to focus on me.

And no one else.

“Okay,” I say as I approach him, plucking the spatula out of his hand before I hand Willow over to him. “Thanks.”

He chuckles as I walk away and I hear him talk to our daughter.

“What’s gotten into Mommy today, huh?”

I’ll tell you what *hasn’t* gotten into Mommy lately.

That would be Daddy.

**T** *hree days until Wren's birthday*

MY WIFE HAS BEEN in a mood lately.

I get a thrill out of calling Wren that. My wife. I probably sound like a possessive asshole, but I can't help it. The day I made her mine and gave her my last name, I wanted to shout to anyone who would pay attention that she belonged to me. That giant diamond always glittering on her finger proves it.

God, I love her. I love her when she's happy or sad. I love her when she's pushing an eight-pound baby out of her body with all of her might. I especially loved her that night, the pride that filled me while she remained calm and strong. So strong. I was worried about her too—it's fucking stressful, watching the person you love more than life itself go into labor. It was a lot. I thought I had to be there for her, but it was like she didn't even need me. She had her shit that much together.

I was in awe of her. I still am.

Now we've got this adorable little human being in our lives and I can't get enough of our daughter. We spend a lot of time at home, the three of us. And while I know Wren loves our apartment—she fell in love with the place on sight after Aunt Gertrude died and for whatever reason left it to us—I also think Wren is restless.

She wants to *do* something.

I just don't know what.

When I'm not at home, I'm in the office. I work for my brothers' real estate company, and while they're selling flashy homes in new buildings with every modern convenience, I'm the one who's selling brownstones on the Upper West Side. Many of them in my own neighborhood. Both Grant and Finn think I'm ridiculous for focusing on the old stuff, so they leave it all up to me.

And I'm making a shit ton of money in commissions, thanks to those brownstones being in high demand. Not that I need it. The Lancaster wealth is vast and feels never-ending, but I could never just not work. I'd get bored.

I'm at work right now, sitting in my office when my brother Grant strolls in like he owns the place—he does—settling into the chair directly across from where I'm sitting with a shrewd gleam in his gaze.

“What do you want?”

Grant's brows lift. “Is that how you want to greet your oldest brother?”

“You want something from me. I can tell.” I lean back in my chair, contemplating him. “It's three days before Christmas, Grant. I shouldn't even be here.”

“You'd rather be at home with the wifey and baby, I get it. That's why I'm here. Alyssa and I got to talking last night and she made me realize something.” He clears his throat and sits up straighter, like he might be uncomfortable. “We'd like to give your wife a birthday present.”

I frown at him. “Okay.”

“A special one.”

“That's...great.” I have no idea what he's trying to say.

“You're going to benefit from it too.”

“Amazing.”

Grant lets out an exasperated growl. “I'm trying to offer our services to you both, Crew.”

“Services?” I'm more confused than ever.

“Alyssa would like you or Wren to drop off the baby with us and we'll take care of her. Overnight.” Grant grimaces, like he can't stand the idea.

But he has three children already, all under the age of five. Which tells me without actually saying the words that he loves his children and his family with everything he's got. Despite his grumpy demeanor and the

scowl he wears pretty much twenty-four/seven, deep down he's a complete softy for his wife and children.

"You'd do that for us?"

He nods, the grimace still firmly in place. "Alyssa mentioned Wren's mother isn't in the country at the moment, so we know you two are pretty much on your own right now." I start to say something in my defense, but he holds up his hand to stop me. "And while I appreciate you trying to defend yourself and saying how much you love your child and she's the absolute light of your life, you and Wren most likely need some...alone time."

"We get alone time." I frown, thinking of the last couple of times when we tried to have sex. One night, things were becoming especially heated between us when we heard Willow whimper from her room thanks to the camera—and my wife's breasts started to leak milk.

There's some kinky shit about breast milk or whatever on porn sites, but that's not something I'm particularly interested in. Especially when my wife is climbing off of me and rushing to our baby, leaving me aching with a throbbing hard-on.

When that sort of thing happens—which is often—Wren always ends up frustrated and so do I. Meaning my brother might be onto something.

"But it's almost Christmas," I remind him. "And don't forget Wren's birthday is actually *on* Christmas. You have family stuff to attend to."

"So do you. That's why I'm making this offer right now." He reaches inside of his suit jacket and withdraws a slim brochure from within, slapping it right in the middle of my desk. "One night at this hotel on Madison. Alyssa booked it for tomorrow tonight. She also scheduled a hair and spa appointment for Wren at Bergdorf's at three."

"Tomorrow?" I'm blown away by my brother and sister-in-law's generosity and speed.

Grant nods and rises to his feet. "Have Wren drop Willow off at our place tomorrow at noon. Alyssa will be expecting her since she's at home with the kids."

"And she wants to add one more baby to the mix?" I'm incredulous. Bowled over by the offer.

Grant makes a grunting noise. "We have nannies, Crew. Alyssa won't do all of this alone."

Alyssa is a very hands-on mother, but she does employ staff, and I can't blame her considering she has three children and they're all Lancaster heathens.

Wren refuses to hire a nanny. She wants to spend all of her time with Willow, considering she doesn't remember her mother being around much when she was younger. And I love that Wren wants to be there for our baby. I feel the same way, but I don't think Willow will remember anything at this young of an age...

Grant snaps his fingers, making my gaze jerk to his.

"Quit your daydreaming and call your wife, asshole. Let her know she needs to pack. She should probably go shopping too. We made dinner reservations for you. I'll text you the information."

Before I can thank him, before I can say anything at all, Grant is gone, slamming my office door behind him.

**T**wo days before Christmas

“ARE you sure you don’t mind—”

Alyssa lifts Willow from my arms and cradles her close, smiling down at her. “Oh, she’s so beautiful. I swear she gets prettier every time I see her. And of course, we don’t mind. It’s going to be so fun, having a little girl to take care of.”

Willow gurgles a response, her wide-eyed gaze only for her aunt. Clearly, she’s agreeable with the situation.

Despite my daughter’s reaction, worry courses through me and I wring my now empty hands together. “This is going to be weird, not having her with me.”

“This isn’t the first time you’ve left her alone with someone, right?” Alyssa’s reassuring gaze meets mine. “It’ll be fine. I have lots of experience.”

That isn’t what worries me. I trust Alyssa so much. She’s been the big sister I’ve never had, always there for me with advice about raising babies and dealing with our rather stubborn Lancaster men.

But I’ve never spent more than twenty-four hours away from my daughter before. And while I’m not breastfeeding her as much, considering we’re introducing other food sources to Willow, my breasts already ache at the idea of not feeding her regularly. And I pumped like crazy before we

left the house. I have a diaper bag full of bottled breast milk with me to prove it.

“I’ve left her with my mom a few times. Charlotte watched her one afternoon recently, which was nice,” I say, referring to my other sister-in-law. I went Christmas shopping by myself that afternoon, which was total chaos and absolute bliss, all in one.

“She’ll be fine. Because you’re a good baby, right, sweetheart?” Alyssa coos at Willow, which causes her to smile her toothless grin. “Oh, the boys are going to love you.”

Did I mention Grant and Alyssa have three boys? She keeps trying for a girl and Grant always obliges because of course he does.

“I guess I’ll go then.” We’re still standing in the foyer of their cavernous penthouse apartment with the sky-high ceilings that overlooks the entire city, which makes me miss our cozy, low ceiling home filled with walls covered in art or photos of us on our travels. I’ve added photos of Willow of course too, and while I think Grant and Alyssa’s home is stunning, it reminds me of the house I grew up in, which felt like a museum. Untouchable.

A little cold.

Two of my absolute favorite pieces hang in our house. Besides *A Million Kisses in Your Lifetime* in Willow’s bedroom, I also have *Two Pussies* in our bedroom, because that was the piece Crew first encouraged me to purchase. The value of that painting has recently skyrocketed. Hannah Walsh Callahan has become a celebrated painter in the art world and to own one of her earliest pieces is a big deal.

“Wren.” Alyssa’s gentle voice breaks through my thoughts, and I blink her smiling face back into focus. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I nod, trying to convince myself, but it’s not really working so I sigh, my shoulders sagging. “I’m distracted, that’s my problem. My thoughts seem to wander off all the time and I sort of forget what I’m doing? Does that make sense? Like I was thinking about art just now.”

The sympathetic expression on Alyssa’s face is obvious. “Do you miss the trips you and Crew used to take?”

Before we were married, we traveled all over the world in search of art. Crew humored me as I’d poke around endless galleries, always looking for the one piece that would take my breath away. It’s happened a few times over the years.

It happened a lot of times, actually. And Alyssa is right.

“I do miss it,” I admit. “But our lives have changed so much. Crew is working more and I’m staying at home all the time, taking care of the baby. I don’t mind, though. I love being with her, and Crew is with us a lot. He’s not a complete workaholic. We’ll travel in search of art again someday, I’m sure.”

“Why not now? This is actually the perfect time to travel. I know it’s a hassle to take a baby on a trip. They require so much stuff. But you only have one, and the both of you are still young. Plus Crew doesn’t *really* have to work, does he?” Alyssa’s eyebrows shoot up at the same time Willow reaches out and yanks on a strand of her dark hair. Alyssa starts to laugh, disentangling Willow’s tiny fingers from her hair. “Oh, you naughty girl. You are a Lancaster, aren’t you?”

Willow’s eyes sparkle with mischief, just like a Lancaster’s would.

“That does sounds like a lot of work. I don’t know. Maybe I’ll talk about it with Crew.” I offer her a bright smile, though my gaze for my daughter only. “Let me hold her one more time.”

“No way.” Alyssa turns away from me slightly, her back to me as her hand curves around Willow’s head. “Time for Mommy to go, right, princess? She needs some alone time so she can get pampered and feel like herself again.”

I stare at Alyssa, shocked by how much her words resonate. “How did you know I don’t feel like myself?”

The knowing smile on my sister-in-law’s face says it all. “Because I’m currently living that life, Wren. And anytime I get out of sorts, Grant picks up on the signals I don’t even realize I’m emitting, and next thing I know, I’m in a hotel room naked in bed and my husband is reminding me that I am still very much his wife and that he loves me. Now, go have fun tonight, okay?”

She practically shoves me out of the apartment, the door shutting softly behind me, and it’s not until I’m in the elevator zooming to the bottom floor that the giddy feeling starts to build within me.

A night with my husband without any interruptions. Not a single one. No crying baby or me falling asleep in the middle of kissing him. Has that happened?

Maybe.

Okay, yes it did and I was humiliated and embarrassed but staying up most of the night, day after day taking care of a baby eventually takes its toll.

By the time I'm exiting the building and stepping back inside of the sleek hired car I'm using, I can't stop smiling.

Tonight is going to be perfect.

---

CREW

I enter the hotel building and head right for the front desk, my steps clipped as I make my way to the smiling woman dressed all in black. The place smells incredible, with lush floral arrangements everywhere in subtle Christmas colors. A cluster of white-lit Christmas trees line one wall and piano music plays a recognizable tune.

*Have yourself a Merry little Christmas...*

Once I'm given a room key, I anxiously wait for the elevator, jingling my keys in my pocket, eager to see my wife. Alyssa FaceTimed me right before I left the office, letting me know with visual proof that Willow was in good hands.

Not that I ever doubted she was.

I'm in front of our hotel room, my fist raised and ready to knock when the door swings open and my wife is standing there in a dark green sequin dress. She's fully covered. Her neck, her arms, her chest but her legs...

They look endless. The skirt is short. Like *bend over and I might see everything* short.

"You're staring, Crew." Her voice is teasing. Light. Reminding me of our past interactions when I'd get too caught up in her beauty and stare at her like a fool.

"You look good enough to eat, Birdy." My gaze is still on her legs, and I finally drag it upward until I'm staring at her face. Into her eyes.

She looks stunning. The dress brings out the green of her eyes and she's wearing makeup that emphasizes her beauty without overpowering it. Her

long, brown hair is glossy, the ends wavy, and the smile she's wearing is bright.

Happy.

"Thank you." She opens the door wider and steps aside. "Come in and check out the room. It's beautiful."

I enter the room and shove the door shut just before I pounce. My hands are on her waist and I press her against the wall, holding her there as I crowd her, my mouth seeking hers.

I don't give a damn about the room. All I care about is her.

Wren opens to me easily, and a low groan sounds deep in my chest. I wasn't lying when I said she looked good enough to eat. It's been a while since we've done this and I'm starved for her.

Ravenous.

We kiss for long minutes, tongues tangling, breaths catching, my hands wandering all over her lush curves. She finally pushes at my chest, my hand under her skirt, fingers skimming across her ass, and I pull away slightly, frowning at her.

"Why'd you make me stop?"

"We have dinner reservations." She touches the corner of her lips. "And you messed up my lipstick."

I grin. "I know where you can get four hundred more, don't forget."

She shoves at my chest playfully, and I step back, the grin still on my face. "I will never go through all of those lipsticks, Crew."

I sent her all the shades Chanel carries years ago, when we first fell in love. I had it so bad for that girl, and I still do. The woman she's become is just it for me. She is my favorite person in the entire world.

Well, and now our daughter too, of course.

I change into a new outfit while Wren watches me from where she's standing in front of the mirror, her lips parted, a lipstick in hand. Her gaze warms when I whip out of my shirt, her lips forming into a pout when I slip on a charcoal gray sweater.

"You'll get more of this later," I tell her, her cheeks turning crimson at my comment.

That I can still make her blush—I love it.

I love her.

More than life itself.

Once we're both ready, we take the car to the restaurant where Grant reserved a table for us. The place is busy, the décor dark yet inviting, and we're seated at a table almost dead center in the restaurant, where everyone can see us. Men stare at Wren as we walk by their tables and I send each of them a deathly glare, causing them to quickly look away.

I like showing off my wife, but I don't need a bunch of assholes drooling over her.

Only I can do that.

The moment we're seated, Wren leans in close, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "I didn't even get a chance to tell you about my afternoon."

Maybe that's because I had my tongue down her throat the entirety of the drive over. My fingers in her hair, her hand resting on my insistent cock. Like she was reminding it that she's here and she's going to take care of everything later.

I don't give a damn about eating at the moment. This could be a Michelin star, top-notch experience and I couldn't be bothered with any of it. I just want to get my girl back into that sexy hotel room with the lit candles everywhere, and fuck her nice and slow until she's screaming my name.

Sounds like the perfect way to end our day.

Instead, I indulge her, asking, "What did you do this afternoon?"

"I went to Bergdorfs. Alyssa made me an appointment, and I got a trim and the stylist gave me a blow out, plus she curled the ends. My hair feels so bouncy."

I had her hair clutched in my fist only a few minutes ago, and yeah, I noticed that.

"And once that was done, I went to the spa and got a pedicure and manicure." She holds out her hand, showing me her short, dark red nails. "I can't remember the last time I did something like that for myself."

"You've been taking care of a baby," I remind her, grabbing her hand before she can snatch it away, entangling our fingers together. "You deserve all the pampering in the world."

She smiles prettily. "And then, I got a massage. Oh my God, I almost melted into a puddle, it felt so good."

Something sharp pokes at my chest and I sit up straighter. "Tell me the masseuse was a woman."

“Okay, I’ll tell you that yes, he was a woman.” Peals of laughter escape her when she sees the ferocious expression I can feel on my face. “It was a woman. Her name was Phoebe. She was lovely. Very strong hands.”

I relax a little, squeezing her fingers to send a little reminder that she likes to play with fire. “You’re a bad girl, Birdy. Trying to get me all worked up.”

A sigh leaves her and she loosens her hand from my grip, reaching out to drift her fingers across my jaw. “I like seeing you all pissed off and territorial.”

I raise my brows. “Pissed off?”

My wife has never been big on curse words.

She nods, drifting her finger across my lower lip. “It goes against every single feminist feeling I have inside of me, but I can’t help but enjoy it when you’re like this.”

I snag hold of her hand, my fingers curling around her wrist. “You want me to go caveman on you tonight?”

A giggle escapes her, dying on her lips when she sees the serious expression on my face. “Caveman, Crew? Really?”

“We haven’t...cut loose in a long time,” I remind her. “We’re distracted.”

Her smile fades. “Because of Willow.”

“You’re always keeping an ear out for her.”

“So are you.”

The server appears and we make our drink orders. I order a whiskey neat and Wren orders some fruity cocktail with a holiday theme, plus she asks for an appetizer. We continue chatting, sipping our drinks when they arrive, eventually ordering our entrees once the server brings us our appetizer. By the time dinner is finished, I’m leaning back in my chair, two whiskeys in, my gaze locked on my wife’s flushed face as she slurps from her second Christmas cocktail of the night.

“I’m such a lightweight.” She hiccups, setting her glass down at the same moment her eyes go wide. “I probably shouldn’t have drunk all that.”

“Why not?” Can’t hurt to loosen up a bit, right?

“It could get in my breast milk.” She clutches her ripe tits for emphasis. “What if I get Willow drunk?”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “You won’t get our daughter drunk. By the time we pick her up tomorrow, it should all be out of your system.”

“Are you sure?”

“Babe.” I grab her hand yet again and give it a squeeze. “I’m positive. Now let’s get the bill paid so we can get the hell out of here and I can get your pretty, naked ass in bed.”

The sly smile on Wren’s face makes my heart beat a little harder, swear to God.

“I’m so full,” I say as Crew practically drags me down the hall toward our hotel room.

Ugh, it’s true. I’m full of delicious food and I’m a little drunk on sweet, holiday themed cocktails, and I sort of want to take a nap. That sounds delicious. Almost as delicious as the food we ate and the drinks I consumed. Probably as delicious as the taste of my man’s lips and the way his eyes roam over me, like he’s imagining me naked.

Okay, maybe I’m not that full. I need to stay awake and alert because something amazing is sure to happen once we get inside that hotel room. Anticipation floods my veins, settling with a throb between my thighs, and when we come to a stop in front of our room door, I press my thighs together to stave off the sudden ache.

Crew opens the door with ease and ushers me inside the darkened room, the door slamming shut and cutting off the light shining from the corridor. Once again, I’m pushed against the wall, my butt hitting it first before he’s on me, his mouth finding mine, his tongue sliding into my mouth, his hands everywhere at once.

It’s an assault to my senses, the way he’s consuming me. As if he can’t get enough. I feel the same hunger rising within me, my hands running down the front of his chest, fingers teasing the hem of his sweater, brushing against the hot, hard skin of his stomach.

“Take it off,” I murmur against his mouth, and he pulls away without saying a word, whipping the sweater up and off, letting it fall to the floor. I

reach for him once more, eager fingers skimming over his naked skin, drifting across the center of his chest, where I can feel his heart beat.

With a languid sigh, I lean in, pressing my cheek against his chest, listening to the rapid thump of his heart. He rests his hand against my hair, the other hand tugging on the hem of my dress, and when I pull away, I see the darkness filling his blue eyes. I know what he wants.

So I give it to him.

I grab the bottom of my dress and pull it up, over my head, wincing at all of the sequins getting tangled in my hair before I eventually remove it completely. I drop the dress onto the floor, standing in front of him in just my black thong, the black industrial strength maternity bra that keeps my breasts in place, yet also somehow manages to look sexy, and my silver heels.

“Woman.” He rubs at his chin while he studies me, his gaze eating me up from head to toe. “You are sexy as fuck.”

There are stretch marks on my stomach and a hint of cellulite on the back of my thighs but I still stand up straighter, practically preening for him. “You know just how to boost my confidence, Crew.”

“I love you.” His words, his gaze, they feel so serious that my mood becomes somber too. “I love you so fucking much, Wren. You don’t even know how bad I have it for you.”

I saunter toward him, my heels clicking on the hardwood floor, his hands finding my hips the moment I’m close enough to him. “I think I know,” I whisper when I wrap my arms around his neck. “Because I feel the same exact way.”

I have no recollection how we got there, but we somehow end up on the bed, Crew lying on top of me, my legs spread to accommodate him. I can feel his erection nudging against my throbbing center and I wiggle beneath his weight, trying to get him to hit a particular spot that I know will feel good.

Without warning he reaches in between us, his fingers finding the front of my damp thong, pressing against me with just enough pressure that when I close my eyes, I see stars. He kisses me hungrily, only breaking away to whisper, “I don’t know if I should fuck this pussy first or eat it.”

His fingers press harder, making me hiss in pleasure.

“Eat it,” I say without hesitation. “Please.”

He chuckles. “Whatever my wife desires.”

Within seconds he's sliding down my body, his mouth mapping my skin, kissing me in spots that haven't been touched by his lips in ages. It's not that we don't have sex anymore—it's that we don't have sex as often as we used to, and when we do, it's usually hurried. Or I'm either too tired or feeding Willow or...

"Wren."

His firm voice breaks through my thoughts and I glance down at him to find he's lying between my spread legs, his mouth perilously close to where I want it the most. "Y-yes?"

"I think I lost you for a second." He grabs hold of my hand, interlacing our fingers and I cling to him, watching with breathless anticipation as he leans in and presses his face directly against me. He breathes in, as if he's inhaling me, his eyes closing. He glances up, his lips curled into the faintest smile.

Then he nudges aside the thin fabric of my thong and attacks me with his greedy mouth.

I throw my head back on a moan, my hand taut in his, gripping him tight as I lift my hips to seek more of his mouth. He licks and sucks, slides a finger inside of me carefully, like he's testing me, and a groan falls from my lips.

"Still want me to eat it? Or fuck it?"

I crack open my eyes and glance down to find him watching me. The words sound extra filthy coming from his damp lips, and I answer without hesitation.

"Eat it. Then fuck it."

"Dirty girl." He grins just before he tugs my thong down, yanking it off quickly and tossing it aside. He drapes my legs over his shoulders and settles in, his tongue searching, covering every single spot until I'm a gasping, straining mess. My orgasm is there, just on the horizon and I reach for it, closing my eyes tight, smashing my torso against my husband's face. It's so close yet so far—

"Birdy, calm down." His soothing voice does something to me. Unfurls the tension winding its way through my body and I concentrate on that sensation. The slow unraveling. My whole body melting. "Just...relax and enjoy it."

Once I'm relaxed enough for his standards, he licks at my flesh, his tongue light. Flickering. Teasing my clit. Circling it over and over before he

sucks it between his lips. I breathe deep, my heart pounding, and I close my eyes, trying not to concentrate too hard.

I need to just let this happen, but it's like my body and my mind aren't on the same frequency.

"Roll over," he murmurs just before he does it for me, flipping me over with his hands, yanking me into position so I'm on all fours. He rises up, his mouth finding me from behind, making me jolt, his insistent tongue causing me to cry out.

Oh God, that feels good. So good. *Too* freaking good.

I grip the sheets with my fists and hang my head, panting as he continues to eat at me from behind, his tongue everywhere. I tilt my hips toward him, arching my back, wanting more, and he gives it to me. I rock against his mouth, splaying my legs wider, his tongue teasing at my clit and a low moan comes from deep within me.

His hands are splayed on my ass, gripping and kneading as he continues to lick and suck. My thighs shake. My stomach flips. My skin feels electric.

And when he finally slides two of his fingers inside of me and begins to thrust, I'm done for.

His name falls from my lips as my entire body begins to shake, the orgasm washing over me. I'm coming so hard I fall forward onto my elbows, gripping the pillow that's directly in front of me and using it to muffle my screams. I'm trembling, the orgasm radiating throughout every part of me and I can't breathe.

"Fuck, Birdy." He sounds pained as he pulls away from me, his hands now gripping my hips. "I can't wait anymore."

Before I get a chance to catch my breath, he slides deep inside of me. From this angle I feel incredibly full, the throb of his cock buried inside of me matching the pounding of my heart. We stay in this position, motionless, only the sound of our mingled breathing filling the room, the occasional car honk sounding from the street far below us.

"Too much?" he asks when I remain silent.

I slowly shake my head, glancing over my shoulder to find him already watching me, completely naked, his expression thunderous. Sexy. I don't even remember him taking off his trousers but I've been in a bit of a daze so I suppose I can't keep up with all of the minor details.

"You are so fucking beautiful." He punctuates each word with a thrust, sliding almost all the way out of my body before he slams back inside. I

whimper with every single one of those thrusts, his fingers pressing deep into my flesh, most likely marking me.

But I don't mind. I'm enjoying how rough he's being. Ever since I've had Willow, he has treated me like a delicate doll. As if I'm fragile and need special care.

Did he not see me push a giant baby out of my body? I'm not delicate. After giving birth, I feel like a freaking warrior. Like I can do anything with this body of mine.

Including having rough sex with my husband.

---

CREW

I grip her lush hips, pounding deep inside of her, as far as I can go. Her ass jiggles with my every movement, and those little whimpers she keeps making?

Fucking sexy.

This woman is the key to my world. Who knew that we could end up like this? In love and starting our own family. We both come from fucked up circumstances but we overcame them somehow.

Pretty sure it was from the help and love we gave each other.

I worry about hurting her though. Of being too rough. She's the mother of my child. I want to protect her at all costs, even from myself. So when I slow down my movements and lessen my grip on her hips, I swear to God, I hear her growl her protest.

"Don't stop," she encourages, wagging her ass for emphasis.

"Don't stop what?" I pause, enjoying the sensation of her hot pussy gripping me tight. It's taking everything I've got not to just give in and spill inside of her welcoming body.

"Fucking me like that," she says with the faintest whine.

I blink at her, shocked she would say such a thing. This is Wren, after all. She's not one to say "fuck" much.

So she must really mean it if she's using that particular word. Twice so far tonight.

I grab hold of her hips once again and ram inside of her, groaning when I feel her inner walls clench around my cock in a stranglehold. I fuck her

hard, over and over, the orgasm growing. Building. Until it becomes an unstoppable force barreling down upon me...

Her pussy spasms around my dick at the same time I feel that first spurt of cum leave me. I keep her close, fucking her in short, deep jabs, grunting with every thrust until finally I think I'm done. Though my body still shudders and shakes, and I swear to God my heart feels ready to jump right out of my chest.

We collapse onto the bed and I tug her in close, holding her, our sweaty skin causing us to stick together. She bats her hair away from her face and scoots up, her lips finding mine in a sweet, soft kiss, which is a total contradiction to the way we just fucked like animals only seconds ago.

"Wow," is all she says, which makes me chuckle.

She giggles.

And then we're both laughing, clutching each other, wrapped up in our own little world. Within seconds I've got her on her back and her fingers are curled around my stiffening cock, stroking me firmly.

"Should we do it again?" I ask as I hover above her.

Wren nods, her skin, her eyes glowing. I kiss her because I can't resist those lush lips and the moment I break away, she's pouting, her fingers still around my cock.

"I forgot to mark you." When I frown, she explains. "With my lipstick."

"Wife, you've left your mark on me from that first moment we spoke in psychology class," I tell her, the truth ringing in my every single word.

She smiles, her expression turning sultry in an instant. "Hmm, I love that. Almost as much as I love you."

Wren drops her hand, her body undulating beneath mine, her pussy rubbing against my dick and I know without a doubt.

I'm going to fuck her all night long, and she's going to love every minute of it.

## C *hristmas morning*

I WAKE up to find my husband and my daughter are in bed with me, the both of them watching me with their matching blue eyes. I blink them into focus, smiling when Willow leans forward, almost falling out of her daddy's arms, her little fingers trying to grab hold of my lips.

I wrap my fingers around her wrist to stop her, scooting closer so I can drop a kiss on the back of her hand. "Good morning, Willow. Merry Christmas."

"Happy Birthday to my Birdy," Crew murmurs, and I swear my heart swells to overflowing. He's greeted me like this since the first time we spent my birthday together, and I've always loved how he makes this day about me first.

"Thank you," I tell him, letting go of Willow and sitting up so we're shoulder to shoulder in bed, Willow still in his arms. He's not wearing a shirt, and watching our daughter drool on his bare pecs shouldn't be sexy.

But it sort of is. I love seeing him with our child. Loving on her and sweet-talking her and cuddling her close. It's the sweetest thing.

"We have a present for you." When I meet his gaze, he smiles.

"What is it?" Anticipation fills me, my breath catching in my throat when he reaches over the side of the bed, and whips out a beautifully

wrapped present, holding it out to me while he still clutches Willow, her back to his chest.

“Open it and see.”

I take the present from him and study the beautiful white and gold printed paper, the sparkly gold ribbon wrapped around it. “It’s almost too pretty to open.”

He chuckles. “Just do it, Birdy. You know you want to see what’s inside.”

The box is small, so I can only assume it’s jewelry. Carefully I undo the ribbon before I tear into the thick wrapping paper, revealing a rectangular green box, a color I recognize. I glance up at him to find he’s watching me, and I swear I see a flicker of nervousness in his gaze?

As if he has anything to be nervous about. I will love anything he gives me.

Slowly I open the Van Cleef & Arpels box, sucking in a sharp breath when I see the necklace nestled within.

“Oh my gosh.” I lift my head, my shocked gaze meeting Crew’s. “This is...this is too much.”

“It’s perfect. I saw it and thought of you.”

It’s a diamond and ruby necklace, the stones set in rose gold and formed into the shape of a chain of flowers, each of them unique and delicate. I brush my fingertips across the flowers reverently, tracing one after another, slowly shaking my head.

“It’s beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful. Here.” He hands me Willow, and I set the box beside me on the bed, taking the baby from him while he grabs the jewelry box. “Turn around.”

I do as he says, a startled gasp leaving me when he sets the cool diamonds around my neck, his fingers brushing my nape as he fixes the clasp. I glance down, trying to see the necklace but it’s awkward, especially with Willow squirming in my arms.

“Come on.” Crew climbs out of bed and takes my hand, helping me out. He leads me over to the dresser and we stop in front of the mirror, Crew standing behind me, his arms coming around my waist. “Look at you.”

I stare at my reflection, reaching up to drift my fingers across the stones, Willow flailing her arms and making disgruntled noises. Crew takes her

from me and I step closer to the mirror, turning my head left to right, watching the diamonds and rubies sparkle in the light.

“I love it.” I turn to my husband, grinning at him. “It’s gorgeous. I feel classy, even in my pajamas.”

“You’re classy no matter what you’re wearing.” He leans in, dropping a kiss onto my upturned lips. “I love you. Happy Birthday.”

“I love you too.” I pull him in close, resting my forehead against Willow’s before I rest my cheek upon Crew’s chest. “I love the both of you.”

A contented sigh leaves him, and I want to melt at the way he holds us. Like he never wants to let go. And the low timbre of his voice when he murmurs against my temple makes my heart trip over itself. “I’m a lucky man, Birdy.”

My gaze goes to the piece I made for him that’s hanging on our bedroom wall. The 11x14 canvas I purchased at an art supply store and then kissed over and over again with the Chanel lipsticks he bought for me, layer upon layer of different colored kisses, just like the original piece. I promised I would make him his own Million Kisses in His Lifetime, just for him, and I did.

And now he’s gifting me a freaking diamond and ruby necklace that’s probably worth close to half a million dollars for my birthday. This man...

I am keeping him forever.

## Wren's birthday

WE'RE SITTING on the floor by the Christmas tree, the white lights the only ones on in our dimly lit living room. The windows are uncovered but it's gloomy outside, the clouds in the sky dark and foreboding.

"It's going to snow," Wren announced when she first saw them and I had to agree. It's definitely going to snow, and I'm sure my wife will be happy.

A white Christmas—and her birthday—is her favorite.

She helps Willow open her gifts, her voice soft and melodic as she croons to our daughter. I watch them, my chest aching with the love I have for both of them.

Wren catches me staring and she offers a sweet smile. "Are you going to open your present?"

I glance down at the box next to me, wrapped in bright red paper with gold snowflakes scattered all over it. "I like watching Willow open her presents first."

"More like I'm opening them." A sigh leaves her and she drops a kiss on Willow's downy soft hair. "Next year she'll be able to open her presents."

"Maybe. She might still need some assistance though."

“From what I remember with Grant and Alyssa’s boys, she’ll probably like the boxes better than the actual presents.” Wren laughs, giving our daughter a squeeze.

“Probably.” I pull the present into my lap and start unwrapping it. “What did you get me anyway?”

“Open it and find out.” Her smile is mischievous.

I tear at the wrapping paper, tossing it aside before I crack open the box to find an expensive looking watch nestled inside. When I spot the brand name on the interior of the box, I know without a doubt it’s a pricey watch.

“It’s Patek Phillippe,” Wren says to fill in the silence as I admire the gorgeous piece. “I saw it and thought of you. You don’t wear a watch much, but I thought it would give you a dignified air while you’re at work or showing houses. Meeting with clients.”

“You don’t think I have a dignified air already?” I meet her gaze, hoping she can tell I’m just teasing her.

“Oh, you’re very dignified.”

“I’m not having dignified thoughts about you at this particular moment.” My gaze snags on the necklace I got her, the stones sparkling around her slender neck, thanks to the lights on the tree. She’s got on black silk pajamas and while she looks adorable, I’d love to see her in that necklace and nothing else later tonight.

Her eyes are wide and full of innocence, reminding me of the girl I first saw all those years ago at Lancaster Prep. The one who I thought I couldn’t stand, even though it had more to deal with my frustration that she wasn’t mine.

That’s all I wanted, even though I didn’t realize it at first. Her.

I wanted her for myself.

“Do you like it?” she asks, gesturing toward the watch.

“I love it.” I pull it out of the box, strapping it to my wrist. I hold my arm out, turning it this way and that as I examine it. “It looks good.”

“I was nervous,” she admits. “It’s not something you asked for, so I didn’t know if you’d like it.”

“I love anything that you give me. And I didn’t really ask for anything. I have everything I already need. You.” I watch as Willow takes the stuffed Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer Wren must’ve bought her and shoves the red nose into her mouth. “Our daughter.”

“Our life is pretty great, isn’t it,” Wren whispers, her eyes full of love.

“It is. Though I don’t want our girl to choke on Rudy here.” I reach over and yank the stuffed animal out of Willow’s mouth. She cries out in protest, reaching for him again.

“Oh no!” Wren turns Willow around so she’s facing her and lifts her up, their gazes meeting. “You can’t eat Rudolph, sweetie. But you can cuddle him.”

“She’s ruthless,” I tease, pride running through me as usual when I talk about Willow. Everything she does is like a little miracle. She’s the best baby on this planet, if you ask me.

Though I’m sure most parents feel that way about their children, especially their first born.

“I’ll say.” Wren kisses Willow’s cheeks. “Ooh I love this baby so much. I could eat her up.”

“Now you’re the ruthless one, wanting to eat our baby.” I rise to my feet and go to the Christmas tree, remembering I left a present behind it, against the wall.

“What are you looking for?” Wren asks when I dip behind the tree and snag the present I bought for my wife for Christmas.

“This is for you.” I hold the box out to her.

She blinks at it for a moment before lifting her gaze to mine. “Another gift?”

“It’s your birthday and Christmas, Wren. You deserve two.”

“You spoil me,” she chastises as she starts to take the gift from me and I lift it up higher at the last second. “Hey.”

“I forgot how heavy it is. Give me Willow and we’ll trade.”

She does as I request, handing over the baby before I give her the gift. I settle on the couch right behind where she’s sitting on the floor, Willow in my arms so we can both watch Mommy open her Christmas present.

Wren tugs the purple ribbon off the box, then carefully undoes the wrapping paper. It comes undone without a single tear and the box that’s revealed is covered in kissy lips.

Just like her favorite art piece.

“Oh, this is so cute!” Wren glances at me from over her shoulder, the surprise on her face obvious. “I love it!”

“That’s not even the gift,” I tell her with a smile. “Open the box, Wren.”

She pops the lid off, a gasp leaving her when she sees what’s inside. “Oh my God, I love this so much!”

It's a perfume from Bond No. 9. The scent is Nolita and the bottle is white, with the same kissy lips all over the front like the box. Only this bottle is a special edition.

The lips in the center are covered with over one hundred red Swarovski sparkling gems.

"This is amazing." She pulls the lid off and immediately gives her wrist a spritz before bringing it up to her nose so she can sniff, her eyes falling closed for a brief moment. "It smells like heaven."

"You like it? When I saw the bottle, I immediately thought of you."

She gets up and joins us on the couch, snuggling close, her face in mine as she leans in for a long, sweet kiss. "I love it. It smells so good! And I love that every time you see lipstick kisses, you think of me."

"I can't help it." I keep my hold on Willow tight as I reach for my wife, touching her cheek, skimming her jaw with my fingertips. "Think you'd want to mark me up later tonight?"

Her eyes sparkling, she nods. "You don't think we'll be too tired after going to Grant's?"

My brother is hosting the annual Christmas together for our branch of the Lancasters at his place. He does this so we don't have to go to our parents and be subjected to our father all night long. He gets cranky when he's away from home and always leaves early, much to all of our disappointment.

Ha. Kidding. We're glad when the old man bails. That's when the real fun begins.

"I won't be too tired for you. Not tonight. After all, it's your birthday." I lean in and kiss her again, ignoring the little cries of protest from our daughter. "I love you, Birdy."

"I love you too, Crew." It's her turn to touch my cheek, her gaze thoughtful as she studies my face, just before she glances toward the window. "Oh my gosh, it's snowing!"

We make our way to the window and stare out at the city below, the snowflakes falling steadily. I wrap my arm around Wren's shoulders and pull her in close, our baby in her arms, all three of us watching the snow fall in silence. Like the sap I've become, I feel tears spring to the corner of my eyes and I close them tight for a second, chasing those tears away. This isn't a time to cry, for Christ's sake. I'm just overwhelmed with love.

With happiness.

I never thought life could be this good.

## THANK YOU!

I hope you enjoyed this little glimpse into the future of Crew and Wren Lancaster (doesn't that sound so good? Wren LANCASTER?!). A few months ago, I just knew I had to write a fun little short story for readers in celebration of Wren's birthday. If you think about it, A MILLION KISSES is at its core, a holiday romance. I just didn't make it central to the story.

Did anyone notice how Crew didn't make Christmas the focus in A MILLION KISSES? He made it all about Wren's birthday first because damn it, he's just that thoughtful. As usual, I'm acting like I had nothing to do with them and they're real people but sometimes, a couple comes into my head and they just take over my entire brain. Like, I live and breathe them for weeks while I write their book. And I was 100% obsessed with Crew and Wren.

I adore these two and so did a lot of you, which I appreciate so much. Thank you for reading their story. And thank you for reading THIS story. It's my Christmas gift to you. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Oh and Happy Birthday to our Birdy, Wren.

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Playing by The Rules

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A Million Kisses in Your Lifetime  
Promises We Meant to Keep

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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



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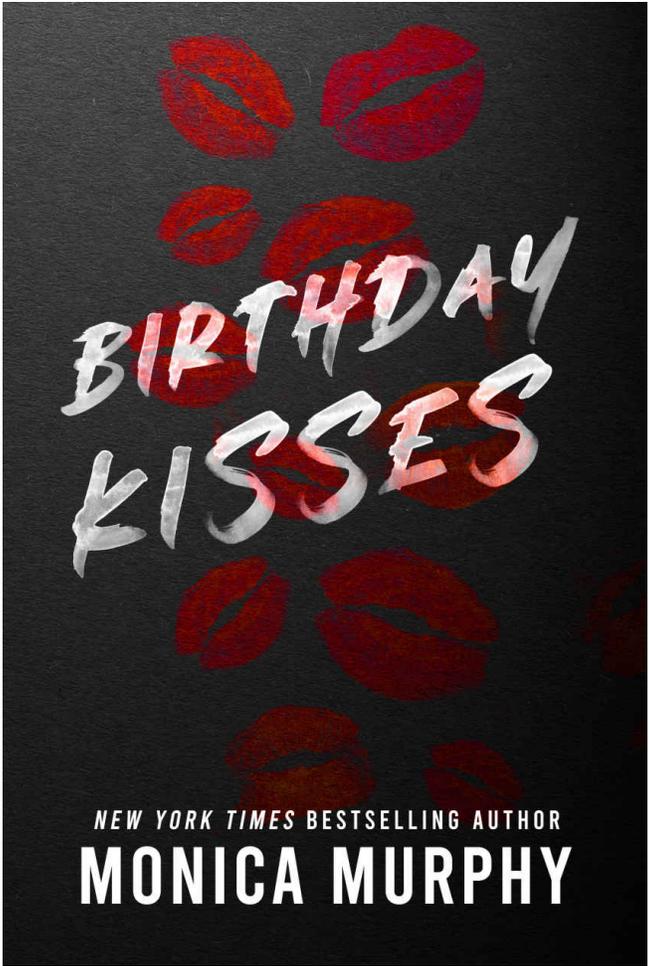
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Cover design: Emily Wittig  
[emilywittigdesigns.com](http://emilywittigdesigns.com)

Proofreader: Sarah, All Encompassing Books

The background of the cover is black and features several red lipstick smudges scattered across it. The title 'BIRTHDAY KISSES' is written in a white, hand-drawn, brush-stroke style font. The words are stacked, with 'BIRTHDAY' on the top line and 'KISSES' on the bottom line. The letters have a slight shadow and are partially overlaid by the red smudges.

BIRTHDAY  
KISSES

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**MONICA MURPHY**