



# WRITTEN

A SUGAR AND SPICE, INK  
NOVELLA

EVAN GRACE

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to locales, events, business establishments, or actual persons—living or dead—is entirely coincidental.

Definition of written: Mark (letters, words, or other symbols) on a surface, typically paper, with a pen, pencil, or similar implement.

**ONE**

# MILES

MY FINGERS FLY over my keyboard as the lead of my crime series, Jameson, finds out that the woman he was sleeping with was murdered by the serial killer, The Midnight Killer, and he's been picked up for questioning. That's a good place to stop, making notes on where I'm going next.

I stand, I shake out my hands, and stretch my arms above my head.

I pick up my phone and see it's two in the morning. After I sit back down, I save my document in three different spots. After losing twenty thousand words before, I've learned my lesson. Now I'm overly cautious. I grab a bottle of water out of the refrigerator and quickly drink it down, leaving the empty bottle on the counter. I should've stopped writing earlier in the night, because I have a phone call with my agent at nine in the morning.

In bed I stare up at the ceiling and smile. I've loved to write since I was a kid. First, it was comic books. Then, it was graphic novels. When I wrote my first Detective Jameson Edwards story, I didn't think it was going to go anywhere. It was just this mini movie that continued to play out in my head until I finally wrote those first words.

The first book was finished in four weeks. I would write for hours and hours, forgoing things like showering, eating right, and sleeping much. I found my editor, Edwin, and he's edited every book since.



I should've played the lottery, the way all things played out. I was signed by the first agent I submitted to. It was when I released book two in the series that I hit the *USA Today* Bestseller list.

Things snowballed from there. I signed a book deal with a big publisher, and my books started sitting on multiple bestseller lists. I've been all over the country for signings, and hopefully I'll be doing some international signings soon.

Up until this past year I've been handling everything myself, but now I'm just too busy so my sister Greta has offered to manage my social media. I've tried to pay her, but she refuses to ever take money, so for her birthday and Christmas I always get her a little something extra.

Within a year I was able to pay off my student loans, made some investments, and then the next year I was able to quit my day job, teaching English, and bought this condo.

There are obvious downsides of sort of being famous, one being the trolls; they usually give bad reviews, and you can just tell they haven't read the book. Occasionally, I'll get a nasty email or DM, but I don't ever respond.

I've had women seek me out when I was just making it big, and I did take advantage at first, but then it became clear that they didn't care about me—they just wanted whatever they thought I could give them.

Now I'm selective; my sister's call it picky. It's probably been at least six months since I went on date and about a year or more since I've had sex. On that note, I close my eyes and sleep claims me.

---

My feet slap against the belt of the treadmill. My building has an amazing gym that I have access to at anytime, which is great since sometimes I keep odd hours—that's usually when I'm in deadline hell.

I've always been physically fit, and all through school I played basketball and ran track. Greta and I are both built like our dad, of course she's the feminine version, but we're tall and lean.

Right after I published my second book, I realized that I'd let myself go a bit and started looking a little doughy. I knew that to have a fresh mind to write, I needed to feel good. Now I make sure I work out or run at least three or four days a week.

Once I'm done, I hop off and then head upstairs to my apartment. After a shower, I throw on jeans and a t-shirt. My cell phone rings from the kitchen, and when I grab it, I see that it is Dad. "Hey, old man," I answer in way of greeting.

"Don't make me fly there and show you just how old I am."

I throw back my head and laugh. "How are you?"

"We're good. Your mom is at the store, and Grandpa is running that nursing home." They're in Arizona after Mom's dad had a stroke. He recovered from his stroke, but sometimes he can be a tad forgetful.

"I'm sure he is. What are you working on?" Dad designs golf courses.

"I'm actually working on one in Scottsdale. I'll have to show you the model when it is finished."

My other line beeps, and I see it is my agent. "Dad, Tim's calling. Is it okay if I take it?"

"Of course, of course. I'll talk to you later. Send our love to the girls and say hi to Tim for me. Love you, son."

"Love you too, Dad."

"Hey, Tim, I was just talking to my dad, who says Hi by the way," I say in one breath.

He chuckles. "Hey, Miles. Your dad's good guy. Next time I'm in Phoenix I owe him eighteen holes." They're around the same age and hit it off when they met.

"He'll enjoy that."

“I did call for a reason. Preorders for this new release have exceeded our expectations.” We go over the numbers and marketing this new book. “We should have a mockup of the cover before the end of the week.”

“Sounds great. I’ll send you this new chapter when I finish it. I think this might be the best story yet.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Detective Edwards has certainly taken on a life of his own. I can’t wait to read the new stuff. We’ll talk soon.” I set my phone down after we disconnect, heading back into my bathroom to rub some product through my hair. Back in the kitchen I grab my phone, wallet, and keys.

I head downtown toward my sisters’ tattoo studio. They started it themselves and worked hard to make it what it is today. I couldn’t be prouder of the. Each of my sisters have tattooed me and I let Greta pierce my right nipple—odd, I know, but I didn’t want it somewhere that people could see unless I wanted them to. She’s the only one who doesn’t tattoo.

The moment I step inside the buzzing of the tattoo machines hits my ears as well as the soft tunes of Lady Gaga. Greta is behind the desk, but when she sees me, she stands and comes around to greet me with a huge hug.

“Hey you. What are you doing here?”

I look around. “I was just taking a break and thought I’d stop by to see you guys.”

She leads me toward the office, and then I hang out with my sisters.

**TWO**

# VICTORIA

I PULL the cupcakes out of the oven and set both pans on the counter. Opening the door to the freezer, I stick them both inside. They'll be easier to frost that way.

Ever since I was little girl I have loved to bake. Instead of learning from my mamá and abuela, I learned from the family cook. I think she simply felt sorry for me that I was alone all the time.

René shared her love for baking with me, and together we made cookies, cakes, and pies. She made me practice over and over until I made the most delicious chocolate soufflé. I can also make a delicious macaron, all thanks to her.

I was sixteen when I found out she had cancer. Before her last day she brought me a book full of recipes, some American and some Spanish dishes and desserts. Although I'm a second-generation Spanish immigrant, same as Joaquin, I still grew up with Spanish staff that helped me learn my culture. God forbid my mother teach me anything except how to wear makeup, wear my hair, and how to dress—all with the hopes of me catching the attention of a man.

I grab the ingredients for the frosting and the ganache. The finished cupcakes will taste like my favorite childhood treat, Kinder Bueno. It's chocolate and hazelnut ganache with a light fluffy chocolate buttercream. I'll top them off with chopped up bits of the treat.

I've worked at Boho Café for the past year, and before that I was an interior designer. Baking and cooking is what I've

always wanted to do, and I'm still learning. I'm doing something I love and not something that was "acceptable" according to my mamá. I couldn't be happier.

Of course, the only one in my family who is proud of me for doing what I love is my cousin, Joaquin. Even though we were both raised by dysfunctional parents and really were raised by nannies, we both have a strong sense of family.

Max is a lucky boy to have such a good Dad. Unfortunately, his mother is a mom just like what we grew up with, but thankfully she rarely sees her child. Yes, I know that sounds harsh, but that sweet little boy gets anxious when he comes home from spending time with her.

It is so hard on my cousin to watch his boy deal with it, but we smother him with so much love Max always bounces back. Now he also has Mona, Joaquin's amazing girlfriend, and her adorable daughter, Iris.

The closer Joaquin and Mona get I know that in no time he won't need me anymore. I definitely feel sad—just a little—but I'm glad that they will be fine. Maybe it could even be time for me to find my own happily ever after.



I pull into the parking lot of Sugar and Spice, Ink. The parking lot is packed, but from what my cousin tells me, the girls are always booked up. I came from the shop, so I'm in jeans, a form fitting t-shirt with the logo on it, and my Adidas. The moment I step inside I'm hit by the coolness of the place.

It's girly, but totally looks like a tattoo studio. There is a picture of all the girls on the wall. They're all so beautiful, and they all look alike, except for the brunette—I'm not sure what her name is.

I walk up to the counter, and the girl with the platinum blonde hair smiles at me. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Victoria, Joaquin's cousin. I was hoping to talk to Mona."

Her smile is wide, and that's when I realize just how much she looks like Mona. "I'm her sister Sierra." She comes around the counter. "I'll take you to her." Sierra loops her arm through mine and leads me down the hallway.

At the end of the hall, we enter the office. Mona is standing in the middle of the room, talking to the most beautiful man I've ever seen. He's tall and lean with brown hair that's just a tad too long and soulful brown eyes.

I focus on Mona, before he catches me staring. "Sorry to just stop by, but I thought we could talk about the Halloween party and dinner when my tio Hector is in town."

She smiles at me. "Sure, come on in." Mona motions to the man standing by her. "Victoria, this is my brother, Miles." Then she motions to me. "Miles, this is Joaquin's cousin, best friend, and co-caregiver of Max, Victoria."

He walks toward me, and my heart races. Miles takes my hand and kisses both of my cheeks. The other two women fall away as I take in his woodsy, manly scent.

I feel disappointed that he pulls away from me, and then the four of us stand in the middle of the room in an awkward silence.

"Oookay. We'll leave you to talk," Sierra announces. "Come on, Miles." She drags him out of the office.

Before I can stop myself, I lean in to Mona and say, "Your brother is very handsome." I can feel my cheeks begin to burn, because I am mortified.

Mona's smile becomes big and bright as she sings her brother's praises. It is clear she loves him very much. "I could give him your number," she tells me.

"You'd do that?"

She tells me about the way he stepped in when she was pregnant with Iris, and it piques my interest even more. Mona's face turns red. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to just blurt that all out."

"Is he coming to the house for Halloween?"

Excitement fills me as she tells me he is. Maybe we'll have the chance to get to know each other better...



**THREE**

# MILES

I HIT SAVE on my file, and then also save the draft to my back-up drive. Once I close my laptop, I turn my chair toward the wall that is a floor-to-ceiling window with an amazing view of the lights of Atlanta. I love the view, and that was one of the key selling points. My niece loves standing at the window at night when the city is all lit up. The best part is no one can see inside.

I close my eyes and tip my head back. The Spanish beauty from earlier pops into my mind. I've never seen a more beautiful woman, one who is so far out of my league. I'm not bad looking, but I'm nothing special. Fuck, that makes me sound like a sad sap.

She smelled like sugar and spice, making my mouth water. I wouldn't mind spending time with her. I'm sure she'll be at the Halloween party since she lives with Joaquin, or at least I hope she's there.

I get up and decide to head downstairs to the gym to work out. I don't have to pick Iris up from school for another two hours. I'll keep her until Mona gets done at the studio.

That little girl has been such a blessing to us. My sister had been so scared to have her by herself, after Sam took off, but I stepped in to help. Of course, Mona is a rock star, so she barely needed my help—she's an amazing mother.

I run five miles on the treadmill and head back up to my condo and shower. After I finish, I get dressed and head out to

the kitchen, making a sandwich. While I eat, I scan all of my social media, check my sales, and answer some emails.

My phone alerts me that it is time to go pick up Iris. I slip on my tennis shoes and grab my phone, calling downstairs for the valet to get my car. Fuck, that makes me sound like a snob—it is a nice little perk, especially when I have Iris.

Downstairs Martin is standing next to my Jeep and hands me my keys. “Is Miss Iris joining you this afternoon?” All of the staff around here love my niece, but don’t blame them, though—she’s pretty amazing.

I pull into the pickup lane at her school and put my Cherokee in park. After unhooking my seatbelt, I grab Dave Grohl’s hardback, find where I left off, and start reading.

This is such a great story, and every time I pick it up I get sucked into his memoir.

Knock, knock, knock. I’m startled and look up to find a woman standing at my window smiling. I roll it down. “Hi, can I help you?”

“You’re Iris’ uncle, right?” I nod. “I’m Callie, Iris and my Saraya are good friends. Maybe we could get together for a playdate.” I don’t miss the true meaning behind those words.

Luckily, before I have to answer, the bell rings, and kids start spilling out of the building. “Maybe some other time. Iris and I already have plans.” I’m just not going to tell her it’s having a snack and then helping her with homework.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” she says before giving me a finger wave.

The back driver’s side door opens. “Hey, who the heck are you? I’m supposed to be picking up Iris Collins.”

Iris leans between the seats. “Uncle Miles, don’t be silly. You know it’s me.” She kisses my cheek before sitting and buckling her seat belt.

“How was school today?”

She sighs. “It was okay, but I wish Max and I went to the same school.” In the rearview mirror I watch her stare out the

window.

“I met your friend Saraya’s mom. She said you should have a playdate,” I tell her.

“Uncle Miles, Saraya is not my friend. She’s mean and picks on Trevor because he’s owtistic.”

“It’s autistic, and that is not very nice.”

When we get back to my place, Martin comes out and opens Iris’ door. “Hello, Miss Collins. I hope you had a good day.” He’s old enough to be Iris’ great-grandfather, but he’s always so sweet to her.

His wife even buys her birthday presents. My niece is lucky to have so many people who care about her, and she loves every single person who comes into her life.

She gives him a big hug before we head inside. Once we’re upstairs, she drops her backpack and climbs up on a barstool in front of the breakfast bar. “I’m hungry, Uncle Miles.”

“What do you want? How about a PB&J and carrot sticks?” She and her mom are both vegetarians.

“That sounds yummy. Is your book almost done?” Iris gets on her knees on the stool.

“It’s getting close. Tomorrow is the Halloween party at Joaquin’s. Are you excited?”

She smiles bright and leans forward. “Yep, Mom and the aunties are going to be unicorn butterflies like me.” Iris’ joy is palpable. “Mom says you’re going to be a Jedi; that’s so cool.”

I make her snack, and then we work on homework.



I pull up in front of Heidi and Greta’s apartment and shake my head as I get a good look at them. They’re both dressed like unicorns and have butterfly wings in their hands. They climb

inside the Cherokee. “Really?” I ask as I pull away from the curb.

“Whatever, Obi Wan,” Greta says from the back, and then I watch in the rearview mirror as she sticks her tongue out at me. “How’s the writing going? Is there anything you want me to share this week on social media?”

“Ughh... No shop talk.” Heidi turns to look at me. “A little birdy told me that Victoria thought you were good looking. They also told me that she was hoping you were coming tonight.”

I have to try very hard to keep my face from blushing. My heart beats a little faster. Man, it’s like I’m fourteen all over again and asking Stephanie Stewart to the school dance.

“Miles and Victoria sitting in a tree...” Greta starts singing from the back, but I crank the radio up to drown her out.

They both cackle, and I swear to God they love torturing me and have since we were all younger. From Mona and Sierra dressing me up like a girl to Greta and Heidi following me and constantly telling on me just because they could.

Of course, the best part about being the only boy is I always had my own room, while the girls all had to share. We get to Joaquin’s and park right next to Nick and Sierra, who are climbing out of his car.

I read the front of Nick’s shirt as I reach out to shake his hand and crack up. It says “Female Body Inspector, F.B.I.” The guy is nuts, but in a good way. We step inside and find everyone in the kitchen.

My adorable niece hits me first. “How do I look, Uncle Miles?”

I smile. “You look like the cutest unicorn butterfly I’ve ever seen.” I casually look around and don’t see Victoria.

Mona comes over, greeting all of us and then Joaquin takes Heidi, Greta, and me on a tour. Sierra and Nick disappeared, and I don’t even want to know what that’s about.

Once we come back downstairs, I notice that Victoria is here and is dressed just like the girls, but I can't take my eyes off her. She makes her way over to me. "Hi," I say, like a fucking nerd.

"May the force be with you," she says and then winks at me. "How are you, Miles?"

"I'm well; thank you. Your costume is great."

Victoria gives me an adorable curtsy. After a round of picture taking, the others take off to trick or treat, and I volunteer to stay back with her to hand out candy. We get a steady stream of kids, so we don't get a chance to talk too much at first.

Once the crowd dies down, I pour us a glass of sav blanc and we sit at the kitchen island. "Finally, now we can talk," she says as she sits next to me. Victoria picks up her wine glass. "To new friends."

"To new friends." We clink our glasses together, and I hold her gaze as I take a sip. Fuck, she's so pretty, and I'm dying to get to know her.

**FOUR**

# VICTORIA

“TELL me what it’s like to have four sisters?” I take a sip of my wine.

Miles grins, and I swear it makes my heart beat a little bit faster. “It was tortuous, crazy, but so much fun. I’m younger than Mona and Sierra, but older than Greta and Heidi.”

A thought occurs to me. “Are you and Greta twins? You look so much alike.”

He laughs, and it’s soft and sultry—it is music to my ears. “We’re Irish twins.” I have heard of that, but I don’t have a single clue what it means. Miles must see the confusion on my face. “It just means we were born within the same year. She was born when I was ten months old.”

“Oh my, your mother must be a saint.” That is a lot of children close in age.

“She is. She knew how to keep us all in line. Especially since sometimes my dad travelled for work and she’d be doing it alone.” He takes a sip of his wine. “What about you, any brothers and sisters?”

My stomach turns when I think about my messed up family. “I am the only child from my mamá y papá. He has two sons: one by his first mistress and one by his third wife. I don’t know either of them well. My father got his sons, and I think he forgot he has daughter.” Oh god, I just blurted that all out. “I am so sorry.”

He places his hand on mine. “Don’t be sorry. I’m sorry your father is a fool.” The feel of Miles’ hand on mine fills me



with a warmth I haven't ever felt. I like it, I like him. "Tell me what you do for a living."

"Well, I used to be an interior designer." I look around. "I did Joaquin's place, and as much as I enjoyed doing it, it wasn't my passion. I always loved cooking and baking since I was younger and so I got a job at Boho Café. I help make the food we serve and have started making the desserts."

Miles snags a cupcake off the counter. "Did you make these?" He holds up a cupcake with a marshmallow mummy on top.

"I did. It's a malted milk cupcake and chocolate malted frosting. Of course, topped with a marshmallow mummy per Max's request." I pluck it off Miles' cupcake and take a bite. I hold out the rest of it, and my heart beats wildly in my chest as he holds my eyes and leans forward, grabbing the rest of it with his teeth right out of my hand.

I take the cupcake from him and grab the knife off the counter and then cut it in half. I hand him half, and we clink them together. Miles brings it to his lips, and the moment he takes a bite, his eyes close and he moans.

"This is the best cupcake I've ever eaten," he says as he shoves the rest of it in his mouth.

He has a little bit of frosting on his lip, and without thinking I reach out and rub it off with my thumb. "Sorry." My cheeks heat up in mortification.

"Don't be sorry, and I'm serious—that was delicious." The door bursts open, and then suddenly everyone is back. Mona smiles at me before winking, and they disappear into the family room.

"You're very sweet." I take a sip of my wine.

Greta and Heidi come walking in. "Hey, are you about ready?" they ask their brother, and I'm filled with disappointment. I'm not ready for him to leave yet.

Miles looks at me and then at his sisters. "I'll be right out."

They both hug me and then disappear. I put on a fake smile and turn back to Miles. “It was nice talking to you.” Oh god, I’m a nerd.

He grabs my hand in his. “Come with me to take them home. We can go grab a coffee, if you want.”

I shouldn’t appear too eager, but I smile widely. “I’d love to.”



Miles pulls into the parking lot of Pancake Haus. He comes around and opens my door for me and helps me down. With a hand on the small of my back, he leads me inside.

The hostess smirks when she sees us. I wanted to change, but Miles asked me not to. “Table for two,” she chokes out.

“Ahem ... yeah, thanks.”

We’re led to a table in the corner. I slide into the booth, and he slides in across from me. Our waitress stops at our table, and we order the French press; there’s enough in there for two people. We both refuse dessert. As soon as she walks away, I turn to look at Miles. “I’m really glad you asked me for coffee. I was a little disappointed when I thought you were leaving.”

He surprises me by reaching across the table and grabbing my hands—hands that are nervously shredding the paper napkin. “I was disappointed that they wanted to leave.” Miles is quiet for a minute. “I like you, Victoria, and I want to get to know you better.”

I want to squeal and jump up and down; instead, I smile softly. “Aquí igual, same here.”

Our waitress brings our coffee, and Miles lets go of my hands to pour us each a cup. Then we talk, and talk, and talk.

Best coffee date ever.

**FIVE**

# MILES

I SET my laptop down and pump my fist. “Yes.” I just typed “The End” and this might be my favorite book to date. I gave Detective Edwards the most satisfying ending I think all his fans will love.

The only downside is I haven’t seen Victoria since Halloween and our post party coffee date. We’ve talked on the phone and have texted, but I haven’t seen her. The plus side is we’ve really gotten to know each other.

We have a lot in common—we’ve both stepped in to help with kiddos; we prefer sitting home and relaxing with a nice glass of wine instead of going out to party.

Since we met, she’s started my series, and even though she really only reads romance, Victoria has really enjoyed it, which thrills me.

I focus on my laptop and quickly save and back up the file. In the kitchen I grab the bottle of Dom out of the fridge, ready to pop the cork and celebrate, but I stop myself from opening it.

I grab my phone and send Victoria a text.

**Miles: I just typed “The End.” I’m getting ready to pop some champagne. Would you care to join me?**

I set my phone down; otherwise, I’ll just stare at it, waiting for her to answer. I make myself a sandwich. While I eat, I send Edwin an email letting him know that I’ll be sending my manuscript to him by the end of next week.

My phone pings, and I practically sprint across the kitchen and scoop up my phone.

**Victoria: Congratulations, and yes, I'd love to drink some champagne with you.**

I give her my address and let the doorman know that she's coming. After throwing the Dom back in the fridge, I quickly jump in the shower and then throw on some black track pants and a blue Adidas t-shirt. Back in the bathroom I run some product through my hair.

I grab the air freshener and spray it through my house. It doesn't smell, but I have been on a deadline, so I haven't been cleaning like I usually do. A half hour later there's a knock on the door.

The minute I open the door, she steps forward and wraps her arms around me. I wrap mine around her, and it feels so right to have her in my arms. It should freak me out, that I feel this connection to her already.

"Congratulations on finishing your book." She pulls back and smiles at me. "Now what do you do?"

I grab her hand and pull her into the kitchen. "First we'll pop some bubbly." Victoria leans against the counter while I pull the Dom out then two flutes. She laughs and then claps when the cork pops and the bubbles spill out of the bottle.

I pour both of us a glass and hand her one. "Thank you," she says and then holds her glass up. "Again, felicidades. Congratulations." We clink our glasses together, and then she holds my gaze as we tip back our glasses.

The bubbles tickle my tongue, and I'm suddenly warm all over. I don't know if it's the champagne or the woman standing in front of me. "Thank you," I say and then grab her hand. "Come look at this view." Victoria's fingers intertwine with mine.

I lead her to the windows, and she looks outside. "Wow, this view is amazing."

"This was a big selling point." I pull her away from the window. "Have a seat. I'm going to grab the champagne."

In the kitchen, I grab the bottle and then carry it into the living room. I sit close to her, but not so close she thinks I'm a creep. She holds her glass out, and I refill it and then do mine.

“How good does it feel to finish a book?”

I smile and take a sip. “It feels great. After a week I'll read through it again and then send it off to my editor.”

Victoria kicks off her shoes and then tucks her legs under her—I like that she feels comfortable here. “I don't know how you do it. How do you create these fictional worlds?”

“They play like mini movies in my head. I always start with a general idea, and then when I start typing it all just plays in my head on a loop.”

She leans forward and places her hand on my leg. “You're amazing.”

I feel my cheeks heat up and take a drink to hide the fact that I'm blushing. “Thank you. Are you hungry?”

“I could eat,” Victoria says with a smile.

We order some Thai and talk until it's delivered. We eat and drink more champagne, all while sitting on the living room floor.

“They locked me in the closet,” I say, wheezing from laughing so hard. “When Mom found me, Mona had me in one of her dresses, and they'd raided Mom's makeup and gave me a ‘makeover.’ After Mom quit laughing and taking pictures, she had to scrub about two layers of skin off my body to get me clean.”

“Please, please let me see that picture.” She holds her sides while laughing.

“If I let you see it, you have to promise not to steal it from me and plaster it all over social media.”

Victoria gets on her knees and does the sign of the cross. “I promise. I won't steal it and post it on social media.”

“I'll be right back.” I pop up and head into my bedroom, grabbing the photo album.

I find Victoria right where I left her in the living room. She takes a drink of her champagne and then claps when she sees what I have in my hands.

I sit on the floor next to her. I flip the album open, the picture she's eager to see the first I turn to. She motions for the album, and I hand it to her, pointing out the picture. She smiles so wide I can practically see all her teeth.

She hugs the album to her chest. "This is the best thing ever." Victoria turns her back to me, and I know immediately what she's doing. I reach around and snatch the album out of her hand. "Hey."

"I said no pictures," I say in a mock stern voice.

She gives me an adorable little pout and takes a drink of my champagne. "You're a party pooper."

Without thinking I wrap my arm around her, hugging her into my side. "Well, you're fucking beautiful." Her light floral scent wraps around me.

Victoria turns her head and smiles up at me.

**SIX**



# VICTORIA

MY EYES ZERO IN ON MILES' lips. They're lips made for kissing, but I'm scared to make the first move. What if he denies me; I'd be humiliated? I want to kiss him so bad.

"I want to kiss you too," he whispers quietly.

Oh God, I actually said it out loud, and he heard me. I'm going to shrivel up in embarrassment, but then Miles pleasantly surprises me by sifting his fingers through my hair.

He leans in, and at the first brush of his lips I swear I see fireworks. Miles pulls back, and I'm afraid that's it, but he pulls me onto his lap and attacks my mouth in the most delicious way. This man can kiss, and I absolutely want to keep doing it.

I wrap my hands around the back of his neck, holding on as he brushes his tongue against the seam of my lips. I eagerly open to him, and his tongue brushes against mine. Our tongues duel, and I moan into his mouth.

I whimper when he finally pulls away, and my lips tingle as I touch them. I focus on Miles, and he smiles slowly. I want to ask why he stopped, but he can apparently read my mind.

"I only stopped because that was intense, and I don't want you thinking that the only reason I invited you here was for that. Can I maybe take you out for dinner tomorrow night?"

I want to squeal and do a happy dance, but instead I smile. "I know you didn't invite me over for that." I reach out and use my thumb to wipe the lipstick from his lips. "I'd love to have dinner with you."

Miles leans in, ignoring the fact that I just cleaned his lips off and kisses me softly on the lips. “I can’t stop kissing you,” he whispers against them.

We kiss for a little longer, and then I begin to yawn. I cover my mouth. “I’m sorry.” I shake my head.

“Don’t be sorry.” He stands and pulls me to my feet. “Tomorrow night, you’re mine.”

The way he says it, I feel like there is so much behind his words, and I begin to tingle in all the right places. He walks me down while I wait for my Uber. I turn to look up at him. “Thank you again for asking me over to celebrate with you,” I say as my car pulls up.

Miles opens the car door and kisses me one last time. “Thank you for coming.”

I slide inside the car, and he closes the door. As the car pulls away, I wave to him, then I sit back and smile the whole way home.

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I carry the box of cupcakes out to the customer. “Here you are,” I say as I set them on the counter. “How do they look?” I open the lid, and she peers inside.

“Oh my god. These look amazing.” She smiles up at me. “These are just what I wanted; thank you.”

I want to cry anytime a customer is happy with the treats I made them. “You’re so welcome.” She pays and then picks the box up off the counter. “Have a good day.”

It’s time for me to leave, so I take off my apron and toss it into the laundry; whoever opens the following day does the laundry from the day before.

Tonight, Miles is taking me out to dinner. I’m not sure where we’re going, but I want to look beautiful for him. The way he looks at me is intense, and if he looked at me like that every day, I would be a happy woman.

Usually, I date men who are average size and average build, but Miles is tall, lean, with brown hair that is so soft and with just a hint of wave in it. His brown eyes are like pools of milk chocolate with flecks of gold.

There is an undeniable chemistry between us, and I would love nothing more than to explore it. Part of me is worried because if things don't work out then I could lose Mona and Iris; how would they even want to be around me if we didn't make it?

Oh God, I'm breaking us up before anything even happens. Dios mio, I'm a fool. When I get home I see that Mona is here, probably with Max and Iris. I step inside and shout, "Hello."

"In the kitchen." I hear Mona shout. Max's dog, Fluffy, comes tearing around the corner, wiggling his little body when he sees me.

"Hi, baby boy." I scoop him up, and he treats me to a face lick and snuggles. My favorite little boy and little girl come running around the corner. "Hey principito y princesa, how was school today?"

"Hi, Tia Victoria, it was great; except this one wasn't there." Max points at Iris.

I wrap my arms around the little blonde princess who has stolen my cousin's heart, along with her mama. "You never know what could happen."

I find Mona in the kitchen cutting up some veggies. She smiles when she sees me. "Hello, sweetheart," I say and give her a half hug while she cuts up what I'm sure are snacks for the kids.

"Hey, gorgeous. Are you excited for your date tonight?" Of course she knows about it, but thankfully she's smiling.

I nod. "I am, but I'm nervous." I grab a carrot stick. "I really like him."

"Don't be nervous. Do you want to show me what you're wearing tonight? She calls the kids into the kitchen. "Eat your snack before homework. I'm going to help Tia Victoria pick out a dress for her date with Uncle Miles."

“Ewww....” The kids cry in unison before giggling and then dig into their snacks.

Mona loops her arm through mine. “Now, let’s get you looking good for your date.” We head toward my room, and a half hour later I have the perfect outfit laid out on my bed.

I begin getting ready, with butterflies constantly flitting around in my belly, but I can’t wait.

# SEVEN

# MILES

I STRAIGHTEN my tie in the mirror. Tonight I'm wearing a navy blue fitted suit with a white dress shirt and navy blue tie. I run my fingers through my hair, glad I got it cut earlier today.

I slip on some dark tan dress shoes and my belt that matches. In the kitchen I grab my phone and then stand in front of my full-length mirror, taking my picture. With quick fingers I tap out a quick text to my sisters.

**Miles: Well??? Do I look okay?**

The dots start bouncing simultaneously, and I shake my head.

**Sierra: Lookin' good, bro! You're such a big boy.**

I can just hear the teasing tone in her voice.

**Heidi: Damnn... My big brother is a stud! ;)**

**Mona: Awww, so handsome. Iris says you look like a movie star.**

**Greta: Wowza! You look really great. Iris is right, you do look like a movie star. Have an amazing time with Victoria.**

My phone rings, and it's Greta. "So I really look okay?"

"Yes, absolutely. Is that the suit that Joaquin took you to shop for, for your headshots?"

My future brother-in-law always dresses nice, and I had asked him to help me find a couple suits for pictures I needed to get done. Plus, it probably was a good investment.

“Yeah, I wasn’t sure I was going to like it so fitted, but I do. I’m freaking out, Gret.” I start pacing back and forth in the living room. “I haven’t had good luck in the women department. Victoria is so beautiful and is so far out of my league.”

She sighs into the phone. “Miles, listen to me very carefully. She’s not like the dipshits you used to date.” My sisters have been just as protective of me as I have of them. “Yes, she’s beautiful inside and out, but you’re not so bad yourself. You are totally in her league. I saw you two together on Halloween. The sparks were flying, and it was very clear that she was into you. Now get your shit together and have the best night ever.”

“Yeah, okay. Love you.”

“Love you too, knucklehead.” She hangs up without saying goodbye, but that’s her M.O. I quickly head back to my bedroom and gargle some mouthwash and look myself over one more time before I grab my keys and head out.

---

The moment I pull into Victoria’s driveway, I park next to my sister’s car. I take a deep breath. “Don’t be an idiot. You’re not a nerd,” I whisper to myself. Fuck, I’ve lost my mind.

I get out and head toward the door. The moment I ring the doorbell I hear the little furball, Fluffy, bark. A moment later Joaquin opens the door. “Hey, Miles.” I reach out and take his offered hand, and he pulls me into a bro hug. “Mona went to grab Victoria.”

He scoops up Fluffy, who is pawing at my legs. I reach out and scratch the pup’s head. “Thanks. Where are the kids?”

Joaquin points up. “Playing video games. Probably Minecraft or some other game that doesn’t make any sense.”

I hear the click of heels, and we turn as Victoria and Mona come around the corner. I’m struck speechless at this moment,

and I wish someone was recording it for posterity. As Victoria walks toward me, I take a second to take her in.

Her dress is red, with one sleeve that's long and wide. The dress skims over her body, highlighting her slight curves. The hem hits Victoria a little longer than mid-thigh and makes her legs look incredibly long. On her feet are black stiletto booties.

“Wow,” I whisper.

Her cheeks turn a beautiful shade of pink. “Wow to you too.”

I know I'm being rude ignoring my sister, but I can't take my eyes off Victoria. I hold out my hand to her and she accepts. I walk us outside and open the passenger door for her. Once she's inside, I close the door and round the hood to the driver's side.

Mona and Iris are in the doorway watching with big smiles on their faces. I give them a wave before climbing in and shutting the door.

Victoria's light fruity scent wraps around me, and I'm embarrassed because my cock is hard as hell right now. I start when I feel a hand touch my thigh. “Sorry,” she says softly.

I place my hand on hers to stop her from pulling away. “Don't be sorry.” Turning to look at her, I'm not prepared for the way my heart begins to pound. “You look so good I almost don't want to share you with anyone.”

Fuck, she's going think I'm a creep.

Instead, she leans forward. “Why don't we go grab a drink and order our food to go, then take it back to your place.”

“Deal.”

We head toward Nicholas, and Victoria's hand rests on my thigh the whole way there. Once we pull up front, the valet comes around to my side. I get out, before coming around and helping her out.

I wrap my arm around her waist and lead her inside. The hostess greets us, and I tell her we want to sit at the bar. We



take a spot at the end and let the bartender know we want to order something to go.

He hands us our menus. “What can I get you to drink?” he asks.

“I’ll take a Tito’s and soda with two limes please.” Victoria smiles at the bartender, and of course he doesn’t miss how beautiful she is because he’s openly gawking at her with his mouth hanging open.

“Yeah, man, could I get Don Julio 42 neat?”

He realizes I just spoke and turns to me. “I-I’m sorry 42 neat?” I nod. “Coming right up.”

Victoria giggles softly from beside me. “You are amazing.”

Thankfully the bartender stays at the other end of the bar after we order our meals and he delivers our drinks. I also order crème brulee for dessert.

“Did you have a good day today?” She grabs my hand when she asks.

I grab my glass and take a sip. “I did. I talked to my agent and discussed my release strategy. They want to book some interviews, both television and podcasts.”

“That is so exciting.” She holds up her drink. “To the upcoming success of your book.”

God, she’s sweet. I clink my glass with her. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

As we are finishing up our drinks; Nick comes out with our food. “Hey, man, why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” He sets the bag on the counter and pulls me into a backslapping hug. He turns to Victoria. “Hey, beautiful,” he greets and kisses her cheek.

I’m not even jealous because I know they’re like brother and sister. Plus, he has something going on with Sierra.

“Sorry, man. We just wanted to grab something before heading to my place.”

“No worries, man.” He picks up the bag and hands it to me. “Dinner’s on me tonight.”

“Man, I can’t let you do that.”

Nick shakes his head. “Too bad. You guys enjoy.”

I throw a fifty down for a tip, and he chuckles. He slaps me on the back and hugs Victoria. She laces her fingers with mine as we head outside. We’re both quiet while we wait for my Jeep, but the air around us is charged with sexual tension.

The moment we see it pull up, I practically dragging her to it. Her laughter makes me smile. She kisses me softly before climbing in. I place our food in the backseat and then climb in.

We reach my condo, and I park in the garage; I pay extra to have a spot close to the door to the elevators. Before I can help her, Victoria gets out and opens the back door to grab the food.

I grab her hand, and we head toward the door. The minute we reach my floor I pull my keys out of my pocket and let us in, with her hand in mine. I lock the door, and then we head into the kitchen.

She sets the bag on the counter and pulls the containers out. As cheesy as it is, I’m drawn to her like a moth to a flame. I come up behind her, and she freezes.

**EIGHT**

# VICTORIA

MY HEART HAMMERS in my chest when I feel Miles come up behind me. I close my eyes as anticipation fills me. His chest brushes my back, and I swear my nipples harden immediately.

He places his hand on my hip, and his thumbing brushes back and forth. I feel his lips brush my ear and goosebumps pop up all over my body. “Tell me not to touch you,” Miles says. “We can eat dinner and just watch a movie. I don’t care; I just want to spend time with you.”

I turn around, and my chest brushes his. Placing my hands on his chest, I slide them up until they’re behind his head. I pull him to me until our lips meet. Just like every other time, it’s an explosion between us.

Miles wraps his arms around me, and suddenly I’m grateful I wore this pair of five-inch peep toe booties because he’s so tall, and they bring me closer to his mouth—his hot, sexy mouth. I feel this kiss all the way down to my nether regions.

His hands slides down my back and over my ass. He pulls me forward, and I don’t miss the large erection pushing against my stomach. I moan against his lips, and he takes that opportunity to thrust his tongue into my mouth.

Our tongues duel, and I feel his hands slide lower to my thighs as he begins inching my dress up. My pussy spasms because she really likes what is happening. He gets it up to my panties and then his hands slide down my thighs.

He grips them and then lifts me. I wrap my legs around his hips and begin to feel us move. My heart races because I know where we're heading. A moment later he reluctantly pulls away. "Put your legs down, baby."

I do what Miles says and let my feet drop to the floor. He reaches around me and immediately finds the zipper. As he eases it down, he stares at me with a look so intense his eyes look almost completely black.

The minute my zipper is down I let my dress slide down my body and pool at my feet, leaving me in a black lace strapless bra and matching panties. Miles steps back and lets his eyes do a lazy perusal of my body. "You are so fucking beautiful."

I step closer to him and reach up, pushing his suit jacket off his lean frame. He holds my gaze as I undo his tie, before pulling his shirt from his pants. Miles steps back, kicking off his shoes, and then undoes his belt and pants.

Finally, we're both in our underwear, and I check him out. He has a nipple ring and a tattoo of a dragon on his chest. He has a skull on his right shoulder and on his ribs are the words, "The scariest moment is always just before you start."

"It's a quote by Stephen King," he says. "Heidi did that, Mona did the dragon, and Sierra did the skull. Greta pierced my nipple since she doesn't tattoo."

I run my hands over his ink and the piercing. "I like it; your sisters are a part of you." I run my hands down his hard abs. Miles is making me feel bold, so I reach out and cup his hard cock. He moans, and it fills me with a powerful feeling. Holding his gaze I drop to my knees and don't miss the way his breathing speeds up.

I reach out and grab the waistband of his boxer briefs and pull it down so his cock springs free. Looking at it, my mouth begins to water. It's long, thick, and stands straight up.

Leaning forward, I kiss the tip and then lick the precum that beads up at the top. His moan eggs me on, and I lick the

tip. The moment I engulf him with my mouth, his hips buck slightly, his fingers sift through my hair, and then he grips some strands in his fist.

I only get to do it for a minute before I'm being lifted and tossed, landing on his mattress that feels like a cloud. Of course, I only have two seconds to think about it because my panties are ripped from my body, and then Miles' tongue is licking my pussy.

"Eso es muy Buena." I moan as he eats my pussy like he's starving for it. "Please. Miles, I need you. I want the first time I come to be with you inside me."

He growls against my wet, heated flesh. Miles kisses up my body, and when he reaches my bra, he quickly divests me of it. I arch my back off the bed as he latches onto one nipple, sucking it in deep pulls and then nips the tip. He switches to the other side, giving it the same treatment.

Miles lets it go with a pop and then pushes himself up so we're face to face. "We can stop if you want to."

I reach up and grab his face. "Please don't stop. I need you, I ache for you."

He doesn't have to be told twice. Miles reaches out to his nightstand and pulls a condom out of the drawer. My mouth waters as I watch him open the packet and then roll the condom down his cock.

I hold my breath as he grabs hold of his length, rubbing the tip through my wetness. He lines up with the entrance to my pussy and begins, working himself in and out until I moan as he sinks deep inside me.

"Fuck, you feel good." He groans. Slowly he eases almost all the way out of me before thrusting back in. I grab his ass and feel his muscles flex every time he thrusts inside me.

The desire to come hits me hard. I moan and dig my nails into his flesh. My stilettos dig into his thighs. He reaches between us and rubs my clit until I cry out. My orgasm goes on and on, and I'm barely aware of Miles picking up the pace.

I hold on as his thrusts become faster and harder, triggering mega aftershocks. He buries his face in my neck, groaning against my heated skin as he jerks inside me, coming over and over.

We collapse, and I hug him to my chest. “Sorry that didn’t last very long,” Miles whispers against my neck.

“You stop ... that was ... wow, that was amazing.” I kiss his temple and whimper as his softening cock slips out of me.

He pushes up and smiles at me as I brush his hair out of face. I lean up and kiss him. My stomach growls, interrupting our moment, and it makes us both laugh. “Let me get rid of this, and then we’ll go eat. We’ll need to fuel up. It’s going to be a long night.”

I giggle and watch his fine naked ass walk into the bathroom, and it’s a long time before we go to bed.

**NINE**



# MILES

I SIP my tequila and smile as I stare at my laptop. My preorders for this book are triple what the previous books were. I just finished the last proofread of my story before it gets formatted.

My phone beeps, and I see I have a text from Victoria. It has been a little over a month since we had sex for the first time. That night I kept my promise. After we ate, I sat her on the counter and proceeded to eat the crème brulee off her. I think we used every surface and finally passed out as the sun rose.

We haven't seen each other as much as I would like, but so much has happened. Mona and Joaquin almost broke up but then worked it out. Iris's biological dad signed away his rights to her; thank God. I'm sure when Joaquin and Mona get married, he'll adopt my niece who he loves so much.

Sierra and Nick are an item ... I think. It changes day to day, but I know that Nick is crazy about my sister; hopefully, she gets her shit together. That's not all either. Nick is one of the owners of the Atlanta Fire, and their new quarterback is Colton Winters, Heidi's high school sweetheart, who broke her heart.

I swear sometimes it feels like we're on some television drama. At least Greta is drama free for now.

I pick up the phone and read Victoria's text.

**Victoria: Are you done?**

She has been so supportive, knowing that I'm on a deadline. She's even delivered me lunch or snacks while I was deep in edits. Last week she moved into Mona's old house to give Mona and Joaquin and the kids their privacy as they get used to living together.

**Miles: I am. Are you unpacked?**

**Victoria: Just about. I only have a few pictures to hang, and I think that's it.**

I dial her number, and she picks up on the second ring. "Hey you. I'm glad you finished. I miss you."

I smile when she says that. "I miss you too." Fuck, I really, really like her, but I haven't said anything because I don't want to scare her away. "How about I pick up dinner and come over.

"That sounds great."

"How about Thai?" That seems to be a favorite for both of us.

"Yummy. You know what I like."

"I'll be there in an hour." We hang up, and I jump in the shower quickly. When I'm done, I get dressed in blue with a white stripe track pants and a light grey thermal shirt.

I call in our order and then head downstairs to make my way toward Thai Xplosion. While I wait for our food, I check my email. My formatter got the manuscript and Tim, my agent, got a copy too.

This is when the excitement of an upcoming release kicks in. There are still two months until release day, but I'll be busy promoting like crazy. The host brings me my order, and then I head toward Victoria's.

By the time I pull into her driveway, my stomach is growling. The smell of the food is making me salivate.

The front door opens as I walk up the path to the door. "Hi." Victoria smiles at me and then tips her head back to accept my kiss. "Come inside."

I step inside and look around. “Wow, it looks the same, but different.” My sister had it looking very boho chic, and now its sophisticated and chic. “I can see why you used to be an interior designer.”

She follows me into the kitchen and starts unpacking the bag. “Thank you, honey.” She smiles up at me, bumping my hip with hers.

I grab us some napkins and bottles of water. We sit at the little table in the kitchen. “I’m starving,” I say as I dig into my Pad Thai.

We are both quiet as we eat, but as it always is with her, it’s a comfortable silence. Once over half of my food is gone, I set my fork down and focus on Victoria. “I sent my book off to get formatted and then sent a copy to my agent.”

“That is so exciting. I am so proud of you.” She doesn’t know how much I like hearing her say that.

“T-thank you. I’m excited about this release. I love the story so much, and I hope that came through in the writing.”

Victoria grabs my hand. “I’m sure it will.”

I pull her into my lap. “I know I already said it, but I missed you.” Grabbing her face, I pull her in for a kiss. “I’m addicted to you.” It’s the honest to God truth.

“Well, that’s good because I’m addicted to you too.”

I help her up, and we clean up our containers. Then, with her hand in mine, we head into the living room and sit together on the sofa. Victoria grabs the remote and turns on Parks and Recreation, and we spend the rest of the evening snuggling on the sofa.

---

“Fuck me, you’re so tight.” I grunt as I grip her hips as I fuck her from behind. She pushes back against me, moaning and crying out with each thrust. “That’s it, baby, give it to me.”

I feel her warmth and wetness as she ripples around my aching cock. I slap her hard on the ass, and she explodes around me, throwing her head back as she cries out, over and over.

She has my cock in a chokehold, so I grip her hips and thrust into her at a punishing pace. In no time at all I begin to come, groaning as I bury myself deep inside of her. Victoria's pussy continues to ripple around my cock, milking the last bit of my cum from me.

Our panting breath is the only sound filling her bedroom. I bend down, kissing the middle of her back, and she giggles. I pull out and wrap my arms around Victoria's waist and situate us so we're chest to chest, with our legs intertwined.

I brush her hair back and lean in, kissing her. "Can I tell you something?"

"Si, of course."

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm going to fall in love with you." Fuck, why did I just tell her that? Oh, I know, I'm a stupid idiot. She leans in, kissing me, and then snuggles against me, but doesn't say anything back. "Baby, let me get rid of the condom, and I'll be right back."

I slide out of bed and head into the bathroom. Once I take care of business, I wash my hands and then head back into the bedroom. Victoria is asleep and I slip in bed with her. She rolls toward me and wraps her arm around my waist.

I stroke a hand up and down her back. I feel like I really messed up telling her that, but I didn't want to lie about the way I'm feeling about her. It's a long time before I find sleep, and when I finally do, it is restless.

TEN

# VICTORIA

MY PHONE RINGS, and I see that it is my father. I tip my head back and look up at the ceiling. I haven't heard from him since my birthday last year, and it was a five-minute phone call before he had to go into a meeting. He missed my birthday this year, but he did have his assistant send me a diamond pendant with a card that just said, Alejandro.

I'd like to just ignore it, but if I don't answer then he'll keep calling, over and over. "Hello, Father." Yes, it is that formal when we talk.

"Victoria, how are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you?"

I hear him talk to someone in the background and then he's talking to me. "Julio is graduating from NYU in May. I'll expect you to be there." I've met Julio once because, of course, he is no longer married to his son's mother.

"I'll see if I can make it." I won't go; why should I? He's never been there for me. I've already told Joaquin if I ever get married, then Joaquin will give me away.

"*Bueno.*" He disconnects. That'll be the last time I talk to him for a while but, as usual, it makes me sad that I don't have a good relationship with him. Of course, my mother is just as bad.

Miles' words come back to me from the other night. I wanted to cry when he said he was going to fall in love with me because I could feel myself fall in love with him too, but I don't know if I'm cut out for long term relationships. The only

functional one I've ever seen is Mona and Joaquin. Yes, they're newish, but they're both in it for the long haul.

I never should've started anything with Miles. I knew that I wasn't cut out for long term, but I ignored that tiny little voice telling me to stay away from him. How could I when I felt such a strong connection to him.

I grab my phone and text my cousin.

**Victoria: Are you free? Can I come see you?**

The dots bounce immediately.

**Joaquin: Of course, I'll see you soon.**

I love my cousin.

---

I step off the elevator and spot Shane behind his desk. He sees me and gets up from his desk. "Hey, gorgeous." He looks me over and smiles. "You are glowing like a woman in love."

My stomach twists, and I want to deny it, but I can't. I may not be in love yet, but my feelings for him grow every time I'm around him. "Thank you." That's all I can say before I freak out.

He gives me a double cheek touch. "Go on back."

I head down the hall and spot Lauren, Joaquin's secretary/keeper. "Hi, Victoria, go ahead and head inside. He's waiting for you."

"Thanks, Lauren, it was good seeing you." I give a knock and find my cousin behind his desk with his feet resting on the edge. "I knew you didn't actually work, lazy."

He laughs and then stands up, coming around to pull me into a hug. "I've missed you. How are things at the house?" Joaquin asks as he leads me over to the little sofa in his office.

"Good, I'm almost done decorating. What about you? Everything good?"

His lips spread into a wide grin. “Fantastic. I finally convinced Mona to let me pay for Iris to go to school with Max. I had to do a lot of convincing.” He then wiggles his eyebrows, making me fake gag. “Not that I’m not happy to see you, but what brings you by?”

“You and I were raised basically the same. How do you have a relationship without being scared about how it’s going to work out?” I tell him what Miles said and that I was so overwhelmed in the moment that I kissed him and then pretended to sleep when he came back to bed. “I feel the same way, but we had terrible role models. I don’t want to be in a relationship where we’re unhappy or cheating on one another.”

He turns toward me, so we’re face to face. “You know what I do? I do exactly the opposite of what either of them would do. Their mistakes are not ours. Just because they love dysfunction doesn’t mean we have to. Hell, you’re already breaking the cycle by doing a job that you love and are passionate about. Miles is a good man, a man I know will be an amazing partner to you.”

Joaquin pulls me into a hug. “Thank you for always being there for me. I just started to get cold feet, thinking about forever, and then *Papá* called to make sure I would come to Julio’s graduation from NYU.”

“I swear I’d love nothing more than to throttle that man. His precious sons are why he’s basically stopped talking to you. That man makes me sick.” He grips my chin, making me look him in the eye. “You’re not them. I’m not them; we’re going to do better than they did.”

I nod. “You’re right. I’d regret it the rest of my life if I didn’t give Miles a chance.” This time I pull him into a hug. “Thank you for always being there for me.”

“Of course. After you stepped in for Max and me, I’ll never be able to repay you for putting your life on hold to help me.”

My nose burns, and I know I’m going to start crying. “I’d do it all over again too.”



---

I decide to take an Uber to Miles' condo. The doorman smiles when he sees me. "Good day, Miss. The elevator is all ready for you."

"Thank you." I hop in and watch the numbers light up as I cruise higher and higher. The minute the doors slide open, I find my man standing on the other side. I jump right into his arms, wrapping my legs around his hips. "I'm sorry I didn't say anything when you said you were going to fall in love with me. The truth is, you know my parents suck, and they're full of dysfunction. I've always been scared that I would turn out like them."

"Baby, that's not possible. Do you want me to back off?" He sits on the sofa with me on his lap. "I just want you to be happy."

I have no doubt that he'd do that if I asked. "No, but please be patient with me."

"Of course, I will." He kisses my forehead. "I see good things in our future."

"I do too," I say, and then I hug him tight.

**ELEVEN**

# MILES

A year or so later

“BABY, YOU ABOUT READY,” I call out from the living room. Victoria and I are in New York for a book signing that we were at earlier, and now we’re going down to Time Square. A little birdie told me to watch the billboards by Barnes and Noble. It’s a surprise for her; she has no idea.

The past year has been a game changer for us. It wasn’t long after our talk before she came over to cook me dinner and then told me she was in love with me. Three months ago, I released my new book, and it stayed on the bestsellers list for a long time. A week after that, Victoria moved in with me.

It’s been so easy. Yes, sometimes we argue, but we have such a great relationship. She loves taking care of me when I’m on a deadline with my face buried in my laptop. Of course, I try to reciprocate when I can. A minute later Victoria comes out in skinny jeans with rips up both legs, a pair of wedge tennis shoes, and an off-the-shoulder t-shirt.

“Damn, baby, you look beautiful.” She comes toward me and pushes up on her toes to kiss me.

She runs her hand over my chest. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

I’m in jeans, a Henley, and tennis shoes, but the way she looks at me makes me feel like I’m in a tux. “Thank you, baby.”

We head out and wait for the elevator. I discreetly check my pocket and it's still there. Grabbing her hand, we step onto the elevator and take it downstairs.

We decide to stop for a piece of pizza and eat it while we stand at the counter. "This is so cool," she says as she smiles up at me.

I've never seen someone who can look so sexy eating a greasy piece of pizza. I check the time just as we finish and realize that we have twenty minutes to get to Time Square. We stop and grab a latte before we head to our destination.

My palms begin to sweat the closer we get. Tim told me where to stand, so when I spot the billboard, I lead us over to the spot for us to watch.

"What are we here to see?" Victoria slips her arm through mine as we watch people wander about.

"It should be up any second." The minute my book shows up, she freezes. "What do you think?"

"Oh my god! I can't believe it." she screams and claps all while hopping up and down. People looking at her as she points to the building. "That's my man's book. He's a bestseller!" Some people congratulate me, and some just walk on by.

Victoria is filming it, and I smile as I watch someone who has become my biggest cheerleader. I reach into my pocket and then get down on one knee beside her. She looks at me, and her eyes widen as she starts to cry.

"Baby, I love you. We've only been together for a short time, but I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Please, will you marry me?"

She throws herself at me. "Yes, yes, yes. I want to be your wife."

Right in the middle of Time Square my beautiful girl makes me the happiest man on the earth.

We stop at a bar for a celebratory drink and call our family. Thankfully, they are thrilled for us. The only one I need to call

separately is Greta, and that's because she is on a trip with the movie star. I don't like it, the guy has a reputation, but as long as he treats her right, we won't have a problem.

Joaquin said he's throwing us an engagement party after we're home and Greta is home, so we can all celebrate together.

After our drink we head back to the hotel to celebrate alone.

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My cell phone ringing pulls me from my sleep. Victoria is sleeping soundly next to me. I lean down and kiss her forehead. Earlier, when we came back, I had her naked immediately and fucked her against the wall by the door. We then drank champagne in the tub, which led to making love.

We were both exhausted once we climbed into bed and passed right out. My phone starts ringing again, and I grab it. The clock says it is three in the morning, and the display says it's Greta on the phone.

“Hey, everything okay?” I say, my voice thick with sleep.

“Miles?” I sit up when I hear the tone of her voice. “Miles, I want to come home.” She starts sobbing.

I feel Victoria move behind me.

“Greta, what's going on?”

“I-I don't want to talk about it. Please come get me.” The tone of her voice scares me. “I'm in Greece.”

Victoria puts her hand on my back and then holds her phone out. I read the title of the article, and my blood boils.

“Okay, sweetheart. Victoria and I are in New York. Let me make some arrangements, and we'll get you home; I promise.” She cries harder. “Gret, are you going to be okay? We're going to come to you.”

She blows her nose. “I’ll be okay until you get here. I’ll text you where I’m at.”

“Okay, good. Try to get some sleep, and I’ll text you when we get on the plane and text you when we land.” I pinch the bridge of my nose while Victoria disappears into the bathroom. “You’re going to get through this, okay? I love you.”

“I love you too, Miles. Thank you for coming to get me.”

We disconnect when Victoria comes back into the room. “My father has a private jet. I’ll see if we can use it.”

“I’m going to kill Jett Hamilton.”

# EPILOGUE

Five years later

Victoria

I PULL the cake pans out of the oven, setting them on the cooling racks. Today is our son's, Mauricio, third birthday. We're having family over tonight for his birthday party.

He was born almost nine months exactly after our wedding. Ricio is the sweetest boy who is obsessed with his dad, and Miles is obsessed with him. It makes me a little sad that our boy wants him all the time, but I know that could change.

I rub a hand over my swollen belly as our daughter gives me a kick. We haven't told anyone, but we're naming her Valencia. I can't wait to see who she looks like, since Ricio looks just like his daddy, but with a hint of my skin tone.

We definitely want at least one more child. Miles came from a big family, but for a long time I was an only child. So we compromised on three. Over the past few years, I've gotten to know my brothers. We're still not totally comfortable around each other, but at least we're all putting in the effort. Only time will tell what happens.

I focus on the soccer ball cake I'm making for Ricio's party. I stick the pans in the freezer, and while those cool I make the frosting. Being almost eight months pregnant I

should've just hired someone to make this, but I've made his first two cakes, and I want to continue doing it.

My phone pings, and I pick it up, seeing it is my sister-in-law Greta.

**Greta: Hey, girly, we'll be there at five. Can't wait to see you.**

They've been in New Zealand for the past two months.

**Victoria: Great, can't wait to see you.**

I hear the front door open, and Miles comes in with Ricio in his arms and his parents behind him. They flew into town earlier this week to see all the grandbabies.

"Hi, guys." Miles comes and kisses me on the lips. My son reaches for me, and I pull him into my arms. "Hi, birthday boy. Did you have fun with Daddy, Nana, and Papa?"

"Yes." He thrust his little fists in the air and then yawns.

My mother-in-law takes our son so they can put him down for his nap. As soon as they disappear out of the kitchen, my man wraps his arms around me. "You doing okay?" I had terrible morning sickness this time around, and every now and then I still get sick.

"I'm good. I think once I get his cake done, I'll lay down for a little bit." I smile up at him when he rubs his large hand over my belly. "Greta texted me. They'll be here around five."

Miles kisses my temple. "I can't wait to see them."

I should mention that right after I got pregnant with Ricio, we sold the condo and bought a four-bedroom ranch near Joaquin and Mona. It was a fixer upper, but that just means we got it a lot cheaper than other houses around us, and then I got to decorate how I wanted.

Miles has an office in the back of the house, so when he's on a deadline he has the peace and quiet to get his writing done. The kitchen is perfect for me to cook and bake, and at night we spend a lot of time in here, drinking wine, talking, and laughing together.



Kathy and John come back into the kitchen, and she comes around the counter and braces my shoulders in her grasp. “Oh, you look so beautiful. The backyard looks great too.”

“Thank you and thank you. I hope he loves it. Did he fall asleep fast?” He’s at that point where naps are few and far between.

“As soon as his head hit the pillow.” She wraps her arms around me, and I kiss her cheek.

My parents don’t have much to do with us, which is good and bad. Once my father learned we were having a boy, he set up a trust for him. We’ll decide as he gets older what to do with it.

At least our children will have two grandparents who are crazy for them, and that makes me smile.

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## Miles

Today was the best. My son was showered in so much love, his smile was permanently on his face. He ran around the backyard, playing with his many cousins, and having a blast. My wife’s soccer cake was amazing and delicious. Our boy even had his own little soccer ball cake to eat.

It was great for everyone to be together, and lots of pictures were taken. We are truly blessed to have such an amazing family who took part in this celebration. My gorgeous wife was exhausted but still was the most gracious host. It wasn’t until my sisters all ganged up on her, making her sit down, that she finally put her feet up.

I peek in on Ricio and find him passed out. I step further into the room and grab his blanket, pulling it up and over him. He’s so tired he doesn’t even budge. I close the door behind me and walk further down the hall to our bedroom.

I find my wife snoring softly, wrapped around her body pillow. She's a trooper, though. Ricio was almost ten pounds, and he just popped out—well, not popped, but she had an easy pregnancy and delivery. This pregnancy has been a little more challenging. Victoria never complains about it, and she still wants to have one more after this one.

After stripping off my clothes, I climb into bed and wrap myself around her.

I'm not sure how I got so lucky to have her come into my life, but I am, and I will be forever thankful that she walked into Sugar and Spice, Ink that day over five years ago. Our happy ending isn't finished yet, but I know it is going to be amazing.

The End

# MEET EVAN

A Midwesterner and a readaholic most of her life until one day an idea came into Evan's head and a writing career was born. She's a sucker for happily ever afters and loves creating fictional worlds that others can get lost in. She loves putting her characters through the ringer, but loves when they get to that satisfying, swoony ending.

When the voices in her head give it a rest, which isn't often, she can always be found with her e-reader in her hand. Some of her favorites include, Aurora Rose Reynolds, (the queen) Kristen Ashley, Kaylee Ryan, Natasha Madison, and Harper Sloan. Evan finds a lot of her inspiration in music, movies, TV shows and life.

She's a wife to Jim and a mom to Ethan and (the real)Evan, a weightlifter, a home healthcare scheduler, and a full-time author. How does she do it? She'll never tell.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to my husband, Jim. Whenever I'm on a deadline, you always step in, handling the cooking and cleaning while I work. I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you, but I'm sure I'll think of something.

Kaylee, thank you for always answering my many questions and for just being an amazing person and author.

To my amazing ARC team, thank you from the bottom of my heart for your never ending support. I know sometimes I like to spring those new releases on you, but you still give me your all.

Evan's Entourage, my most excellent readers group. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your support and enthusiasm, I love you all.

To Silla, thank you for helping make my story the best it could be and for making it look pretty for my readers. I know I was so late this time and needed a lot more help, but you're always encouraging and pushing me to be better.

Ben, my amazing cover designer, thank you for making me the most perfect and most beautiful cover ever. It was like you crawled inside my head and knew exactly what I wanted. This may be my favorite one.

Also a quick thank you to anyone who has ever read any of my books; thank you for letting me live my dream.

# REALISM

SUGAR AND SPICE, INK # 1

# PROLOGUE

***“A SINGLE PARENT, opposites attract romance that will captivate you from the very first page”- New York Times bestselling author, Kaylee Ryan***

Ordinary, typical, conformed, are words never used to describe me. I’ve never been one to play by the rules. It’s my world, my life and I do things my way.

I see the way they stare at my body covered in tattoos and my lavender hair, I just don’t give a damn. There is only one thing in this world that can get me fired up, that’s screwing with my daughter. As a single mom, it’s my job to protect her, fight for her. She is and will always be my top priority.

So, when I get a call that she’s in trouble at school, with a boy- no less, my claws are out and ready to strike. And the boy’s father, some high society stockbroker, isn’t about to deter me. I don’t care how sexy, smart and rugged he is.

Opposites may attract, and I’ve been down that road before, it’s one I never plan to travel again. A man like that would never be interested in a woman like me. That I know for certain, after all I’m a realist.

**ONE**



# MONA

MY ALARM CLOCK BLARES, causing me to groan. Those last couple tequila shots last night were such a mistake. Tequila has never been my friend, and I don't know why I thought last night would be any different. I push myself up into a sitting position, but that is a mistake because it feels like my brain is rattling around in my skull. I grab my head as I crawl out of bed and gingerly make my way into the bathroom.

After quickly relieving myself, I grab a bottle of Ibuprofen out of the medicine cabinet. I shake a couple into my hand, pop them into my mouth, and stick my mouth under the faucet. After swallowing them down, I shuffle back to my bed, crawl under the covers, and pray for death.

While buried under my blankets I feel my orange tabby, Peanut, jump on the bed, spin in circles, and then snuggle into my side. As soon as his furry ass begins to purr, I feel my eyes get heavy and let sleep pull me under.

I finally feel semi-human and climb out of bed, heading back into the bathroom. I brush my lavender-colored locks up into a bun on top of my head and jump into the shower. Once I'm scrubbed clean I feel more like myself.

Back in the bedroom, I throw on a pair of black leggings, white camisole, and a blue off-the-shoulder t-shirt. I pad through the house and stick a piece of bread in the toaster and brew some coffee. When the toast is done, I slather it in Nutella and then pour myself a cup of coffee.

Keys jingle, and the front door flies open. My reason for living comes running into the kitchen. “Mommy!”

I catch my daughter and lift her into my arms. “How’s my beautiful girl? Were you good for Uncle Miles?”

My brother leans against the open doorway. “She was perfect as always. We had a blast, didn’t we, Goober?”

“Yep, Uncle Miles bought me lots and lots of candy.”

Of course, he did. My brother has been such an incredible help with Iris, but the man can’t ever tell my daughter no. I set her on the ground. “Why don’t you go put your dirty clothes in the hamper, and go play with Peanut because I know he missed you.”

She kisses me and my brother before running out of the kitchen, yelling for our cat. I grab my brother a cup of coffee, and we sit at the little dinette in front of the window. “How was your girls’ night?”

“It was good. Sierra was in rare form and forced me to do two shots of tequila after mass quantities of beer, and then I had to Uber it home.”

There are four daughters and one son in our crazy family. I’m the oldest, then Sierra, Miles is in between us four girls, and then there are Greta and Heidi. We’re super close, especially Miles and me. Maybe because he stepped in to be there when Iris’ dad split, which was basically the moment the pregnancy test came back positive.

“I’m sure she had to twist your arm too.” He stands and pulls me up into a hug. “I’m gonna take off. I’ve got a book to plot.” Miles is a crime fiction writer and, the amazing man he is, a New York Times Bestselling author.

“Have fun with that, and thanks again for keeping Iris.” I smile up at him.

“You know I’d do anything for my girls.” He calls out goodbye to my daughter, and she comes running out to her uncle.

Iris launches herself into his arms. “Bye, Uncle Miles.”

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow from Kiddie college.”

He leaves, and I smile down at my champagne blonde-haired, blue-eyed angel. “Today is a Mommy/Daughter day. We’re going to make a veggie pizza, some chocolate chip cookies, and have couch snuggles.”

“Yay! Can you polish my nails?”

I nod. “Of course.”

She hops up and down. Her joy is infectious, and we start our Mommy/Daughter day, which indeed ends with snuggles on the couch.

At the end of our day, I tuck her into bed, brushing her hair out of her face. Iris gives me that smile that’s like a balm to my soul. “Sleep well, baby girl.”

“I love you,” she whispers before rolling to her side and closes her eyes. I don’t move right away; I sit and watch as she falls asleep. The steady rise and fall of her chest signals she’s out.

From the moment she was born I’ve watched her sleep more times than I can count. She’s the best thing I’ve ever done, and Iris makes me proud every day.

Is everything always rainbows and unicorns? No, definitely not, but my girl can handle anything thrown our way.

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“What do you mean they want to have a meeting about Iris?” I look down at the paper that my brother brought to me after he picked up Iris from Kiddie College. He dropped her off at the tattoo studio I own with my sisters, just like he does every day.

Sierra and I started Sugar and Spice, Ink four years ago. We’re all artistic and fell in love with tattoos and piercings. When I decided that I wanted to be a tattoo artist, I met with the one who did a lot of the ink on my body and got him to

agree to mentor me. As his apprentice, I cleaned up the shop and answered phones all while learning to tattoo.

Sierra followed in my footsteps almost a year later.

Over the past four years, we've worked our asses off to make a name for ourselves. Because our studio is exclusively female artists, a lot of people didn't take us seriously. We had to work hard to get word of mouth referrals and prove we were just as talented.

We started getting followers on social media and really used the power of the web to make a name for ourselves. Now, four years later, we've been featured in Ink'd magazine twice, we've been interviewed on Atlanta's morning news, and we were even approached for a reality show, but declined.

I focus back on Miles. "I'm not sure, but they want you there tomorrow morning."

Miles and I step out of my office and head into the main part of the studio. I'm always in awe of the place we've created. The walls are a deep purple, almost an eggplant color, with white swirls. Our tables and chairs are black and chrome.

We have a lot of our artwork on the walls in frames. Some of the tattoos on display are ours, and Greta is on display for her piercings. My favorite photo is of the four of us girls in black Sugar and Spice Ink, sleeveless t-shirts, jean shorts, and red Converse. Heidi did our hair and makeup pin-up girl style.

We find my daughter and Sierra sitting in the waiting area drawing together. Through the entrance to the back, I hear the buzz of a tattoo machine, which is so fucking relaxing.

"Hey, sweet girl, why do they want me to come into the school and talk to them?"

She doesn't look up from her drawing. "I kissed Max," Iris says it so matter-of-factly that I'm taken aback.

"Who's Max?"

"Max Pena. He's my best friend." She has a smile on her lips. Man, I'm in trouble with this girl.

I sit next to her. “Did he not want you to kiss him, is that why I have to go in?”

She shakes her head. “No, he wanted me to,” Iris says.

I don’t have much longer to think about that because my last appointment of the day has just shown up. Since I have Iris, my sisters and I agreed it best if I open the shop daily, then I can get out of there by five or six, and I love them for it.

After my appointment, I clean up my workstation and find my girl in my office watching *Tangled* on my iPad. “Are you ready to head home, baby girl?”

“Yep.”

I help her gather her stuff, and then hand in hand we head out to the work area and say our goodbyes.

Once we get home I make us some veggie quesadillas. Iris and I are vegetarians, which I wasn’t until I was up in the middle of the night with a newborn and watched a documentary about where our meat comes from. After that, I just couldn’t do it. I didn’t set out to make Iris one too, but she loves to do what her mom does.

We eat at our little table in the kitchen, and she tells me about her day at Kiddie College. Things have been much easier this summer with Iris able to go there during the day.

After dinner, we snuggle on the couch and watch *Modern Family*. I can tell she’s getting tired when she starts slowly tracing the tattoo of her name on my forearm. Sierra did it for me when Iris was a year old. *Iris* is done in beautiful calligraphy surrounded by gorgeous flowers.

Before she falls asleep, I maneuver her to the bathroom so she can go and then brush her teeth. In her bedroom, she changes into her pink nightgown with sugar skulls all over it.

Iris climbs onto her bed and under her purple butterfly-covered comforter. “Are you all snuggled in?”

“Yes, Mommy.” I know my girl’s tired. She only calls me Mommy when she’s sleepy—much to my chagrin. “Will you lay with me?”

I crawl into bed with her and lean against the headboard. She rests her little blonde head in my lap. “Do you want me to tell you a story?”

She yawns and nods. “Tell me about the day I was born.”

Iris has always preferred my stories over the ones in storybooks. I stroke my hand over her soft wavy locks. This is her favorite story, even though it was the easiest labor and delivery ever. “Okay, baby girl. It was two days before your due date, and I was working at a little tattoo studio by Georgia State.” My mind goes back to that day...

*My back aches, but I ignore it while I continue working on this arm piece. I've worked on this piece for four hours this go around and four hours a month ago. That time was just the outline and details. Today I'm doing the coloring.*

*I don't know why I keep working. My due date is fast approaching, and it's been so hard to work with my big, protruding belly, but I wanted to keep going as long as possible and to make as much money before his or her arrival.*

*I never expected to become a mother at twenty-two, especially a single one—no one does—but I'm ready and prepared. I'm just wiping off my client's tattoo. I let her stand and take a look at it in the mirror, smiling as she squeals with delight.*

*She comes back over, and I wipe some ointment on it before putting plastic wrap over it. I stand to walk her to the counter when I feel a trickle down my leg. “Oh shit.”*

*Buck, the owner, is sitting behind the desk and looks up at my exclamation. The girl I just finished working on turns toward me as well. “Did you just pee your pants?” She laughs.*

*“No! Of course not, my water just broke.” I turn to Buck. “Can you take care of her? I'm calling Sierra.”*

*“You've got it, doll. Good luck.”*

*By the time my sister comes to bring me to the hospital, my contractions are four minutes apart. On the way, I called my mom, and she's meeting us there.*

*Two hours later, I'm now dressed in only a sports bra and squatting in the water while leaning against the side of the pool, moaning through my contractions. I wanted a natural childbirth, and my midwife had told me about water birth, so that's what I decided I wanted to do.*

*My mom and Sierra help me through labor as my contractions grow stronger and extremely close together. As my stomach tightens, I rest my head on the side of the pool, moaning softly as my sister fans me, and my mom places a cool washcloth on my neck.*

*It isn't long before I'm hit with the desire to push. The midwife checks me and says it's time to start pushing. They have me squat in the water, and I begin to push. After pushing for a half hour, they have me reach down to feel the top of my baby's head. I moan as I push with all of my might, and then I feel the baby slip from my body.*

*They help me grab the baby, and as soon as they lift her out of the water, my beautiful baby starts to cry. The nurse lifts one of the legs and announces, "It's a girl." I begin to cry and hug my daughter to my chest.*

*Before my mom even cuts the cord, my daughter is latched onto my breast, nursing happily. I'd go through the pain of losing her dad and the pain of her birth to do it all over again.*

*"What are you going to name her?" Sierra whispers before kissing my cheek.*

*I've had a couple names picked out for both boys and girls and kept them to myself. I didn't want anyone to influence my decision. I stare at my beautiful baby girl and whisper, "Iris Clementine Collins."*

*Clementine was my mom's favorite aunt's name, and Iris because I've always loved it for a little girl's name, and it's my favorite flower. Both Aunt and Grandma lean in whispering their "hellos" to my beautiful baby girl.*

*"Mommy?"*

*I look down at Iris. "Yes, baby?"*

“I love you.” It warms my heart every time she tells me that. I can’t imagine my life without her in it.

“Love you too.” In seconds she’s out, hugging her stuffed unicorn to her chest.

I slip out of her bed, turn on her nightlight, and shut the door. Out in the living room, I light my candles, turn out the lights, and grab my meditation pillow. I set everything up in front of the coffee table and ask my *Alexa* to turn on my *Chill Zone* mix.

On my pillow, I get into full lotus position, close my eyes, and clear my mind. I’m not sure how long I’ve meditated until I open my eyes and see that a half hour has passed. Peanut is sitting in front of me wearing the same bored expression he always does.

“What?”

He tips his head to the side and gives me a “meow”. I reach out and scratch behind his ear and then yawn. His fluffy butt follows me as I lock the front door, check on Iris, and he follows me into the bathroom, watching me as I take care of business in here.

I strip down to my tank top and panties, curling up under the sheets and blanket. Peanut jumps on the bed, and I feel him circle his spot behind my knees before he settles in and begins to purr. Not long after, sleep pulls me under.



**TWO**

# JOAQUIN

I PULL my Range Rover into the parking lot of Edgewood Community College where I've been summoned by Mr. G, the head of the kiddie college that my son Max attends. My son's a good kid, so I'm not sure why Mr. G wants to see me, and my son has said zilch.

I turn to my boy in the backseat. "You ready to go inside, *mijo*?"

My mini-me looks up from his tablet and smiles. "Yeah, Dad." He shuts it off and sets it on the seat. I hop out and meet him at the front. Max may be seven, but he's an old soul. I'm blessed to be his dad.

I'm a single father and have been since he was a toddler. His mother and I were never right for each other. She was the daughter of one of my father's associates. She was a gold-digging whore, and I wasn't going to let her lead me around by my dick.

She trapped me by getting pregnant on purpose, but she's definitely not mother material. Melina hired a nanny when Max was barely a week old. I, of course, fired the woman because I grew up with nannies, and that wasn't going to be the way my son grew up.

Max only sees her once or maybe twice a year, and it's usually awkward and confuses my boy. His mom's remarried now and someone else's problem—thank God. My cell phone rings as we walk through the halls toward the office of Mr. G.

I look and see that it's my secretary, Lauren. "Hold up, Max. I have to take this." I swipe the screen. "Hey, Lauren."

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Pena." I roll my eyes because I'm constantly telling her to call me Joaquin, but she refuses. "Your three o'clock appointment called and said that they could reschedule for four-thirty. Correct?"

"Yes, as long as they're my last appointment. I promised Max I'd grill burgers tonight, and I don't want to be at the office late." Max smiles up at me, and I ruffle his brown, shaggy hair. I'll need to make him an appointment for a haircut.

"You're all finished after that. I'll make the arrangements. Shall I have coffee waiting?" Lauren is by far the best secretary I've ever had.

"That would be great, thank you." I disconnect and shove my phone inside the pocket of my favorite dove gray Tom Ford two-piece suit. My shirt is a dark salmon pink color, as is the pocket square, and I'm not wearing a tie. On my feet are my favorite Ferragamo Benson burnished leather loafers.

We turn the corner, and I notice a woman with lavender hair braided and hanging over one shoulder. She looks up as we approach, and I'm hit by some unknown force right in the solar plexus. Her eyes are a sparkling cornflower blue. She's got lips made for kissing—*made for kissing?*

Her sun-kissed arms are covered in gorgeous, colorful tattoos. Her white t-shirt hangs off one dainty shoulder, black legging capris cover her legs, and hot pink Converse cover her feet.

"Iris!" Max runs past me to the beautiful little blonde who looks like her mom's twin, but without the lavender hair and ink.

"Max!" She jumps up, and they hug each other. They move to the opposite bench, talking quietly to each other.

"Um ... hi. I'm Mona." The lavender-haired beauty holds out her hand. I take her hand, ignoring how soft and small it feels in my much larger one.

“Mr. Pena and Ms. Collins, I’m Mr. G.” I turn away from Mona and look at the short man with a major paunch and thinning hairline.

I don’t miss the way he looks at Mona, what with the tattoos and the lavender colored hair; she doesn’t look like a lot of the parents who bring their kids here. I hold my hand out, squeezing his hand a little harder than necessary. “I’m Joaquin, Max’s dad.”

“Pleasure,” he says and then holds his hand out to Mona. “Please follow me into my office.”

We both sit in front of his desk while the kids are led to one of the classrooms to give us some privacy. Mr. G sits behind his desk like he’s all high and mighty.

The man looks between the two of us. “Before we begin, will Mrs. Pena be joining us?”

Had the moron read Max’s information he’d see that she’s not. “His mother is on vacation with her husband. He lives with me full-time.”

The idiot nods. “Yesterday, there was a situation with your kids. It was snack time, and the children weren’t with the class, so one of the aides went looking for them. She found the two of them by the bathroom, and they were kissing on the mouth.” He crosses his arms and looks between us.

Before I can respond, Mona chimes in, “And???”

“Ms. Collins, we don’t tolerate that sort of behavior here.” The fat prick scowls at her.

Mona leans forward. “I understand that, but did either of them appear to be in distress?”

“Well no, but they’re seven years old, and they shouldn’t even know about that stuff.” Mr. G stares at Mona with a judgmental look on his face.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mona tense, gripping the armrests of her chair. She looks ready to snap, and I do the only thing I can think of and put my hand on her knee. I don’t

miss the way she freezes, and I certainly don't miss the way she trembles under my hand.

I remove it and ignore the fact that it made my dick twitch and my pulse race a little. I open my mouth to speak, but Mona chimes in again. "They shouldn't know about that stuff? I beg your pardon, but people kiss in cartoons. My daughter sees her grandparents kiss. I'm not going to make her feel ashamed that she did it." She stands. "I will talk to her about sneaking off with her friends, and she won't do that again."

"Ms. Collins, I can see you're upset, but the kids aren't in trouble. We just wanted to make you aware of what happened, and maybe you both could discuss with them what is and isn't proper behavior in school." He stands from behind his desk. "I want you to know that your daughter is a joy to have in our creative writing class. She's got a natural gift."

We follow him into the classroom that's off his office and find Iris and Max sitting together coloring. Mona sits across from them. "That's a great tree, Max."

My boy smiles up at her. "Your hair is pretty." He's a charmer, that's for sure.

Mona reaches across the table and grabs Max's arm. "Thank you. Iris, come give me a hug goodbye. Uncle Miles will pick you up and bring you to the studio, okay."

"Yes, Mom. I love you."

I walk around the table, ruffling Max's hair. "I'll be back after my meeting to get you. I love you, *mijo*."

As soon as I leave the classroom I spot Mona up ahead, but I don't rush to catch up with her; there's no point. Like I said, she's not my type. Plus, my focus needs to be on my son, not pussy.

I head downtown to my office. I have to prep before my meeting. My partners and I keep things flexible, which is great and I'm able to get off at a reasonable time so I can still be a father to my boy. My father is a workaholic, and growing up I watched as my mom grew to resent him.

They both began screwing around on each other, and that led to a nasty divorce. Now they live on opposite sides of the country. Dad is on marriage number four, and Mom is on marriage number two, but things are rocky.

When I divorced Max's mom I swore, I was never going to get married again. She reminded me exactly why I wanted to always stay single, but I'll never regret my boy. Once I reach the office, I park in the garage and head to the elevator, taking it up to my floor.

I share a floor with a marketing agency, but they're on one side, and I'm on the other. My partners and I have had our own brokerage firm for the past three years. Before that, I worked for my father's firm. When he decided to retire down in Florida, his partners became mine, and his clients followed me.

Our receptionist for the office greets me from his desk. "Good morning, Shane."

"Morning. I love that suit; it's my favorite," he says with his usual flourish. The man basically runs the office and is my personal shopper. He and Lauren are the backbone of the company. I'd be lost without either of them. He flirts with me a little, but it doesn't bother me; he's harmless.

I shake my head and head toward the back. Lauren stands as I approach. "How was the meeting?"

"My son and a little girl snuck off, and when they found them they were kissing on the lips. Iris is his best friend I guess. Anyway, the guy was a pompous ass. Iris' mom let him have it."

"My boys were rascals like that when they were his age. I'm sure it was harmless." Her boys are in their early twenties, and even though I'm thirty she treats me like one of her kids, but not in an obnoxious way. "I've got the conference room set up for your meeting. When they arrive, shall I bring you coffee?" She follows me into my office.

"That would be great." Lauren hands me my messages and then closes the door behind her, letting me get to work.

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# AFTER WE MET



# PROLOGUE

Gorgeous. Sweet. Funny. He made me feel things that I've never felt before. In just one short week over Spring Break, I began to fall in love. That is until it all fell apart. Now, here I am, three years later and I've moved on, at least that's what I told myself until he came crashing back into my life. Things have changed. I've changed, and there's something he doesn't know.

He wants me to give us another chance. I try to fight it, but it's not long before all of those same old feelings come rushing back. I know he feels it too. I can see it every time he looks at me. I can feel it every time he touches me.

It feels like I'm missing something though, like there's something that he's not telling me. Something that has the potential to tear it all apart. After all, it's not easy when you fall in love with your best friends' father. I didn't stand a chance after we met.

**ONE**

# LANI

“ARE you sure your dad is okay with me tagging along? I don’t want to get in the way of your visit.” My best friend, Molly, sits down next to my carry-on bag as I stuff my toiletries inside it.

She grabs my hand before I can zip the bag shut. “Of course he doesn’t care. He said it’d be good if I brought someone just because he may have to run to the bar. Plus, he says that he’s pretty boring and I’d want someone to go dancing with.”

Molly’s dad paid for my plane ticket, and when I refused to accept it, she made sure to let me know that her dad got non-refundable tickets. Molly told her dad that I’d refuse them—that’s why he did it.

Of course he was taking a gamble that something would keep one or both of us from going.

“Okay, I am pretty excited to swim in the ocean.”

I’ve never really been anywhere, and I’ve certainly never been to the coast. Growing up, it was just my mom and me. I never knew my dad, and my mom sometimes had to work two or three jobs to keep food on the table and clothes on my back.

I met Molly our freshman year at the U of I in Iowa City. We’re both elementary education students. Now we’re on spring break of our senior year. She and I are both so ready to be done and get teaching jobs. Part of the reason she wants me to go with her to Florida is that once we’re both out in the real world, one or both of us could end up moving away.

My mom and I have had the discussion multiple times. We're super close, but she also knows that I'll need to go where the work is.

"Hello?" Molly waves her hand in front of my face. "Where'd you go?"

I shake my head. "Nowhere, just spaced out for a second. Are we taking an Uber to the airport?"

"Yeah, I figure that way we don't have to worry about parking." She reaches out, grabbing one of my sable locks. "Your hair grows so fast. I'm so jealous of your curls." She's one to talk. My gorgeous friend has sleek sheets of auburn hair, sparkling blue eyes, and a willowy body—with great breasts.

Me, on the other hand, I've got dark hair and eyes, light tan skin and I'm pretty muscular. I joined CrossFit after I gained my freshman thirty. Now I've got muscles and I'm fucking strong. Molly assures me all of the time that my body is still girly.

I grab my bag and Molly stands up. We're dressed almost exactly the same. We're both in black leggings, long sleeve t-shirts with zipped up hoodies over them. I'm wearing a beat-up old pair of Adidas and she's wearing Nikes.

She orders our Uber as I carry my bag and tote out into the living room and set them down next to Molly's stuff. Nervous anticipation fills me because I've never flown before, but I downloaded movies on my iPad to distract me and bought some books that I've downloaded on my Kindle.

When the driver is a couple of minutes away, we lock up and head downstairs.

It takes us about a half hour to get to the airport. After checking in and going through security, we make our way to our gate. We sit next to each other—I pull out my Kindle and she pulls out her phone.

Molly grabs her bottle of Xanax out of her purse and breaks one in half and hands it to me. "This is a low dose. It'll help take the edge off."

I take it, pop it in my mouth, and wash it down with my bottle of water. My knee bounces up and down while we wait to begin boarding. By the time we're getting on the plane, I feel loosey-goosey. I follow Molly to our seats, and I give her the window seat because I don't think I'm ready for that yet.

When we're ready to take off, I ask Molly to tell me more about her dad. I know that he and Molly's mom weren't married for very long, and he owns his own bar down in Key West. They had her young, and unfortunately he moved away due to his job and she didn't get to see him as often as she'd like.

Her dad's supposed to be the complete opposite of her mom. Molly says he's a free spirit and a bit wild, but a good and loving dad. I've seen pictures and he's definitely hot. He looks like Samantha's boyfriend from *Sex and the City*. I'm sure the women hang all over him.

When we finally land, the sun is starting to set. I look out Molly's window and am in awe of the view. The water looks dark blue, and I can't wait to see it in the sunshine. As soon as the seatbelt light goes off, Molly pulls out her phone. "I'm texting Dad that we're here."

I stand up and stretch my poor body—fuck me, there's no room on these planes. Molly grabs our bags out of the overhead compartment and hands me mine. I follow closely behind her as we make our way out of the plane on to the tarmac.

Molly screams, drops her bag, and takes off toward baggage claim. I follow much more sedately and smile as she flings herself at—who I'm assuming is her dad. He sets Molly down and I smile as I watch him hug her tightly.

I hear her say my name, and then they turn toward me. My stomach does a little flip as he smiles at me. Oh God, I can feel my nipples hardening. What if he can tell?

"Lani, come meet my Dad. Dad, this is my bestie, Lani. This crazy man is my dad, Damon." Oh great, even his name is hot.

I reach my hand out. “It’s so nice to meet you. Thank you for letting me come with Molly.”

He grips my hand in his. I try not to stare at his beautiful face, but I can’t help it. His square jaw is covered in light stubble. His blue eyes are highlighted by beautifully long eyelashes, and he’s got lines around his eyes that just add to his gorgeousness. He’s got that dimple in his chin, and full lips I want to kiss. *What?*

“I’m glad you could come and keep my girl company and you’re very welcome.” We follow him outside to his black Jeep Wrangler.

The wind blows through my hair as we make our way toward her dad’s place. We pull up in front of the cutest little house I’ve ever seen. It’s exactly what you’d expect a house to look like in a beach town. “You girls each have your own room with a Jack and Jill bathroom in between. Your bedrooms are upstairs. Mine is on the main floor.”

We step into the house and I’m immediately in love. The floors are a light wood. The walls are a light tan-ish yellow with white trim. The sofa and two chairs are the color of watermelon.

I don’t get to look too much before he shows us to our bedrooms upstairs. Full-size mattresses fill both rooms, but Molly’s has pictures on the walls and nightstand. A teddy bear also sits on top of her bed. “I’ll whip up something for dinner while you get settled.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Molly hugs him before he disappears downstairs. “Go get your stuff put away and get comfy. We’ll rest until dinner is done.”

On the way into my room, all I can think is that her dad is hot and it’s going to be a long week.

**TWO**

# DAMON

I HEAD DOWNSTAIRS, ignoring the reaction I had to Lani. The moment I laid eyes on her, I felt like I'd been kicked in the gut. I've *never* in my forty-two years *ever* had that reaction to a woman like this before.

Wouldn't it just figure that she's forbidden times two: She's my daughter's best friend and I'm old enough to be her father. I grab the salad out of the refrigerator and the chicken breasts I've had marinating all day. It's a homemade marinade that Molly and I "invented" when she was visiting the summer after her freshman year in high school.

We named it Monroe's special sauce, I know... real original. It's got red wine vinegar, olive oil, soy sauce, garlic, oregano, and it's got a real nice tang to it. I take it out and turn on my gas grill. Once I place the chicken on the grill, I close the lid and run the bowl inside.

I head back outside and take a drink of my beer when arms wrap around my waist. I wrap my arm around Molly's shoulders and hug her into my side, kissing her forehead. This beautiful girl is the best thing I've ever done. I tried making it work with her mom, but she was jealous and never trusted me.

Every time I had to travel and do a shoot, she'd accuse me of cheating, which I never did. It got to be too much, so when Molly was three, we split. At first, I was able to see her a lot, but when the modeling jobs started drying up, I got offered a job and worked for a short time at one of the TV stations here, but I hated it.



I decided to buy an old run-down bar that was no longer open. It took me almost a year to get it to where I wanted it and now *Molly's* is a hot spot. We're right near the water, which makes it a tourist attraction. We're nothing special, no gimmicks, no dance floor, but we still pack them in.

"Oh, is that Monroe's special sauce?" She takes a big whiff and I swear I hear her stomach growl.

"Of course it is. I bought a couple bottles of Riesling for you. I know you said that you liked sweet wines. Tomorrow night I'm throwing you girls a welcoming party. It's nothing big just a few friends that want to see you, and meet Lani."

She gives me another squeeze. "That's great. I've missed you," Molly says quietly. She's always been a daddy's girl even when we were far apart.

"I've missed you too, baby." Out of the corner of my eye, I find Lani standing a few feet away from us looking unsure of herself. "Lani, I hope you like chicken."

She walks toward us. "I do, thanks. Your home is really beautiful, Mr. Monroe."

"Nope, don't call me mister, it makes me feel old." The lights above the grill show off the pink tinge of her cheeks. "Please just call me Damon." I look to my daughter. "Why don't you ladies get a drink and set the table by the pool. Dinner will be ready in about five minutes."

Molly grabs Lani's arm and drags her toward the house. My eyes immediately go to Lani's ass in the little shorts she's wearing. Fuck, her legs go on and on, and... of course she turns and catches me staring at her.

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