



HIS

*BOUGHT BY THE BOSS DUET #1*

PRICE

*USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

STACEY KENNEDY

*His Price*

BOUGHT BY THE BOSS DUET #1

**STACEY KENNEDY**

*For my Readers*

# *Contents*

1. [Liam](#)
  2. [Aria](#)
  3. [Liam](#)
  4. [Liam](#)
  5. [Aria](#)
  6. [Liam](#)
  7. [Aria](#)
  8. [Liam](#)
  9. [Liam](#)
- [Epilogue](#)

[Mailing List](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Read on for an excerpt from the conclusion to the Bought by the Boss duet:](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

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# CHAPTER 1

*Liam*

**SHE'S** all legs and innocence. And I want those legs wrapped around my shoulders while I drive into her.

“One hundred thousand dollars,” I call out. Audible gasps come from the crowd sitting around the white linen-covered tables.

There is no price I won't pay for Aria Finley.

In the grand ballroom of the Ritz-Carlton hotel, the rich and famous have come out tonight in support of the Los Angeles Pediatric Hospital. Though the one person here tonight holding my attention is *her*.

Aria stands upon the stage, a stunning brunette wearing a fitted black dress. Her intelligent blue eyes are fixed on me, seemingly completely unsurprised that I went from zero to a hundred thousand dollars for her. Though I'm not surprised by that either. She'd likely anticipated when she entered the charity auction that I would not only bid on her for a weekend date but that I would win.

Because that's what I do. I win.

By the slight curve of her mouth, I assume she wants me to outbid the competition.

“One hundred thousand dollars from Liam Maxwell,” the female auctioneer announces into her microphone, pointing toward me, sitting at the back of the ballroom. “Do I hear one hundred and ten thousand?” A pause. “One hundred and five thousand?” Another pause.

I sip the scotch from my glass, savoring the burn in the back of my mouth before placing the glass down. Crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, casting a warm romantic glow over the crowd. Every pair of eyes is pinned



on me, most in attendance are sitting at the edge of their seats in anticipation.

“Going once,” the auctioneer says. “Going twice.” She drops the hammer down on the podium, indicating the sale is complete. “Sold for one hundred thousand dollars. Congratulations go to Mr. Maxwell in the back.”

Rounds of applause and piercing whistles follow, likely more in support of the large donation I made to the hospital than the fact that I’ve won the date with Aria this weekend.

I lift my glass to Aria and arch a single eyebrow. My gesture isn’t an acknowledgment of our arrangement but a promise that this will be a weekend she’ll never forget. Her sexy smile in response twitches my cock, reminding me that she’s worth every damn penny I spent tonight.

Over the course of three years, I’ve jerked off too many times, imagining her pouty lips sliding up and down my dick, those bright, intelligent eyes of hers on mine. I curse at the tightness of my pants, shifting against my seat, my cock far too eager to wait any longer. When I blow inside Aria the first time, I’m going to make it goddamn memorable.

“You fucking prick.”

I smile at the raw anger in the low voice before turning toward my competition in the game of corporate law, Jackson Keller. Where my features are dark, his are light. His stormy green eyes are narrowed on my face, features tight, matching the hardness of the gel spiking his dirty-blond hair. Our builds are similar, muscular and fit, and I imagine if we fought it’d be an evenly matched fight. His suit is impeccable, showing his excessive wealth. I should know, we use the same tailor. There’s more between us than my winning a date with his assistant. We were once friends. Roommates in law school, in fact. Until Sophia Flynn.

He won her.

I lost.

Our friendship had been the price.

“Is there a problem?” I ask smoothly.

“Do you really want to play this game, Liam?” he growls through clenched teeth.

I arch a brow, leaning back against my chair, staying perfectly calm, which I know will annoy him. “I’m here to support a good cause. That’s what this is.”

“Bullshit.” He slams a hand down against the table, leaning in closer toward me. “You only bought Aria to get at me. You have no business going

anywhere near her.”

I take a quick look around, noticing people are glancing in our direction now. I frown, not wanting any attention. “You’re wrong.” I meet his fiery gaze. “My buying Aria tonight has absolutely nothing to do with you.” Much to my dismay, I had to go this route because of Aria’s loyalty to Jackson. As opposing corporate lawyers, we often end up in meetings together. Meetings where Aria is there, too. From day one, for three goddamn years, I have wanted to get her beneath me. Maybe at first the attraction came from her being Jackson’s assistant. Perhaps I wanted to take something from him like he took something from me. Though over the years, my vengeance lessened and my interest became all about Aria.

She’s walking seduction. And I *will* fuck her until we’re both exhausted. “I bought Aria because she’s a lovely woman, and I’ll enjoy spending the weekend with her,” I clarify, swirling the ice in my glass. “You know my interest in her is not new. You also know that the interest is reciprocated.”

Jackson’s nostrils flare, eyes burn with fury. “You’re taking what doesn’t belong to you, Maxwell.”

My back straightens like a steel rod. “You think Aria belongs to you?”

“Stop it right now, the both of you.”

I glance in the direction of the soft voice, finding Aria standing off to the side of the table, arms crossed. Heat rips through me just that easily. I rise, not only to greet her but to ease the tightness of my pants around my hardening cock. That’s what she does to me. She makes me fucking crazy. “The problem herein lies with Jackson, not I,” I explain.

She purses her lips, shaking her head at me. “Though I’m sure that attitude isn’t helping the situation any.”

I grin in response.

Jackson scowls at me but when he addresses Aria, his expression softens, the tension he showed me now gone. “He’s doing this to get to me, Aria. I will not allow him to use you.”

It’s clear Jackson cares for her. I know him. There’s not lust in his eyes when he looks at Aria, but a protective brotherly type of affection. Perhaps that’s why he wants me to stay away from her. I can only guess he thinks I will hurt her. I wouldn’t even doubt that he has been feeding those lies into her mind when she originally showed interest in me, but my wanting to hurt her is so far from the truth. I want to give this special woman everything I have. Then I want to give her even more. And by the time this weekend is

over, she'll know that she's mine.

I keep the thought to myself, not wanting to antagonize Jackson with Aria here, when she says, "No one will be using me for anything, let's just get that clear, all right?" She draws in a deep breath, and like I've seen her do many times, she spectacularly owns the moment. "We are supporting the hospital tonight. So what is going to happen here is we're going to behave like grown-ups and know that this is only a weekend date, not a marriage proposal."

Jackson's lips part, and Aria says firmer, "I am a grown woman who can make her own decisions. I will—and can—handle myself, thank you very much." His lips part again. I smile. She narrows her eyes at the both of us. "Now, Jackson, go sit back down at your table." She turns to me and adds, "You can really stop enjoying this so much."

"Oh, but I *am* enjoying this," I tell her seriously. Watching her handle Jackson, a cutthroat corporate lawyer, has always been the reason I've been attracted to her, aside from her sensuality and beauty. This woman is fierce. And I fucking love it.

Jackson scowls at me then says to Aria, "Be careful. He will hurt you, only so it hurts me."

I see the way those words affect her. Her shoulders tense and brows pull together. It's clear she believes what Jackson tells her. I hate him as much for that as for how much of an asshole he is.

"Just go," she says softly, glancing around at the crowd. "We have an audience. I'll be fine. I can take of myself. Promise."

Jackson draws in a deep breath before addressing me. "You hurt her, and I'll fucking make you bleed."

I snort. "You could try."

Without another word, he's striding away, back to his table. It's a threat that I'd love for him to follow through on. One hit and I would flatten him in a second. I'd hit Jackson once. The day I found him with Sophia. After that day, I swore I'd never waste energy hating him like I had that day. But one hit, and I'd allow that anger for him I had buried away to return with a vengeance.

"You shouldn't have done this."

I turn toward Aria's soft voice, finding her piercing eyes on me. "Shouldn't have done what?"

"You're creating unnecessary tension in an already tense situation," she states.

She's missing the point but I plan to correct her.

I finish my scotch and move in closer, watching the way her eyes darken with lust. She wants me, I've always known that. "You've given me no other choice but to go about it this way."

She holds my stare. "I will never pick you over Jackson."

I ignore what she's said, staying on task. I've heard that same thing from her time and time again. "I don't want you to pick me." At least not yet. One step at a time. "I want to fuck you," I tell her bluntly, mesmerized by the way her eyes heat, cheeks flush with long denied lust. I know her answer before I ask it but I ask anyway, "Will you refuse me what I want this weekend?"

Her eyes search mine, voice grows raspy. "You know I won't."

I smile slowly, showing her that I'm liking my prize already. "And that, Aria, is exactly why I did this." I shift to the side slightly and press my erection against her thigh, showing her how much I want her. Her lips part, an invitation for me to kiss her, when I add, "I'm going to fuck you soft and slow, and then I'm going to fuck you hard and fast, punishing you for how long you've made me wait for you."

"And then?" she whispers.

I bring my mouth close to her ear and promise, "I'm going to fuck you again."

## CHAPTER 2

## *Aria*

**THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON**, the ringing of my doorbell has me dropping the book I'd been reading and rushing from the couch in the living room of my overpriced six hundred and forty square foot condo in central Los Angeles. I'm annoyed, and determined to find out who dares interrupt my lazy Sunday. It's the one day out of the week that I give myself nothing to do but relax, makeup free, spending most of my day soaking up the sun by the condo's pool.

When I reach the door, I whisk it open and find a delivery man wearing a bike helmet and jean shorts. "Aria Finley?" he asks.

"Yes, that's me," I reply.

"I've got a delivery here for you from Liam Maxwell." He offers me a clipboard and he points to the signature line. "Just sign here."

Curious now as to what Liam sent, I sign quickly and accept the rectangular package wrapped in sleek black paper and a shiny red silk bow muttering, "thank you," while closing the door.

Of course, my mind goes to jewelry. Liam is rich after all. I wouldn't put it past him in the least to try and woo me with his riches. I'm going to need to stay on my toes around him. I can't become a part of this feud between him and Jackson. Because while I know that Liam wants me in his bed, I can't trust that he wants me there for the right reasons. I don't doubt in the least that the reason he wants me so badly is to get back at Jackson. To have something that Jackson holds dear.

While I'm not going into this blind, I also want Liam just as much. This weekend is my chance to let my desires free before reining myself back in

and forgetting all about Liam Maxwell.

I move to my comfy dark gray couch and take a seat, removing the silk ribbon and then ripping open the paper at the sides. I'm thinking diamonds and sparkle when I open the top of the box, but that's not what I find. I slowly begin to grin, realizing I should have known better.

Opening the wooden box, the words LOVE OBJECTIFIED are on the inside and lying against the black satin fabric is a gold dildo. I reach for the note tucked inside the box.

In Liam's handwriting, the note reads: *Think of me.*

Heat courses through me as I run my fingers along the ink. So, this is the game we're going to play, he and I? My tummy clenches with unfulfilled desire. Images of using this dildo while he watches flash through my mind. Perhaps that's his intention, I wonder. Is he going to make himself unforgettable this weekend? Will he make me want more of him than I do right now? Will he be the man that I become so enraptured with I won't be able to let him go?

I know his game. He expects me to be shy, unsure, overwhelmed by his boldness. Maybe at one time in my life I would have been that girl. Not now. I have nothing to lose. All I have is to gain one wild weekend where I give in to the sin that's been burning between us for years.

I slide my fingers around the dildo, and by the weight of it, I'm assuming it might be real gold. Thinking of his intense gaze on me, I grow warm and wet between my thighs. It's easy to imagine him when I slide the dildo within my sex until I'm breaking into orgasm. And as I drag a finger up the side of the dildo, a plan forms, only clenching my thighs tighter.

If he wants to play this game, I'm all in.

## LIAM

Two days have passed since I've seen Aria. She's remained heavily in my thoughts. Her using the dildo I sent yesterday is a constant tease that I can't seem to stop thinking about. I want her to know what will happen this weekend. That the sex we will have will be kinky and hot, and that I plan to draw every erotic sensation out of her.

Sadly, however, by Monday afternoon, I need to focus on business.

I move through the office of Bakker Pharmaceuticals, which is located not far from the Los Angeles Zoo. I stride through the bare hallways, passing by the offices, absorbing the atmosphere around me. The Bakker deal is the beginning of a wave of mergers between a handful of pharmaceutical companies. Whoever wins the Bakker deal will likely stand to win the other two smaller companies preparing to merge with the single goal of producing new life-saving drugs.

My law firm represents Norcross Pharmaceuticals, the company fighting hard to get in front of this merger. With three other companies fighting equally as hard, my team has been working day and night to learn all they can about the CEO behind Bakker, Calvin Bakker. He's been hesitant to accept a deal yet, which speaks that he wants something very specific.

I'm here today to find out what that is.

I stop at the bank of windows and shove my hands into the pockets of my black slacks, gazing into the factory below. I've seen many factory workers before but there is a difference between Bakker's employees and what I've seen at other places.

"What are you thinking?" a soft voice says behind me.

I turn toward Mallory, my assistant and Aria's best friend. For two years, Mallory has worked for me. And in those two years, she's always remained perfectly put together with her long blond hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail, fresh makeup around her bright green eyes, black skirt and white blouse impeccably ironed. She's got the brains, grit, and determination that I depend on daily. "What do you see?" I ask her, curious if my instincts are lining up with hers.

She steps in next to me, glancing down into the factory. "I see happy,



hardworking employees.”

I nod in agreement. “That’s what I see, too.” The mood here appears lighter, happier, loyal even. Within minutes of entering the company, it became evident that Bakker treats his employees well, and because of that they work hard for him. I understand that line of thinking because that’s the way I run my law firm, too.

“Did you see this?” Mallory points to a bulletin board full of papers behind her. “Family barbecues, play days at the beach, movie nights. It seems that Mr. Bakker holds quite a lot of events for his employees.”

“It certainly does.” I glance back at the workers sitting at the tables wearing white lab coats, face masks, and hairnets. “What about their wages?”

Mallory opens the file folder in her arms and flicks through a few documents. “Above standard, for sure.”

I consider that. My instincts tell me we’re moving in the right direction. Two of the other companies have made their offers for the merger, and from my inside sources, I know Bakker is waiting for all four offers to decide. I need an advantage over the other companies, especially the Pioneer Group, since my sources say their offer is high. I feel like right now we’ve found it.

“It’s got to be family.” I turn to Mallory. “That’s what drives a man like Bakker. He thinks of his employees like family. I bet if we focus on his employees, ensuring they are taken care of, we’ll get that advantage we need.”

Mallory nods. “What do you need me to do?”

That’s what I appreciate about Mallory most. She’s the best researcher I know, and whatever I need, she gets me. Every single time. I imagine this is what a marriage feels like, a partnership. In business, Mallory is my better half. Together, we are a kick-ass team. “Find out everything you can about Bakker’s personal life, more about what he does for his employees and what he does personally for his company.”

“Consider it done,” Mallory says with a smile, closing the file folder.

Right then, my cellphone beeps in my pocket, indicating I’ve received a text message. I grab out my phone, and when I see the text message is from Aria, I say to Mallory, “Give me a minute.”

Mallory accepts the order and I watch her walk away, determined to keep my relationship with Aria private. When Mallory vanishes around the corner and there’s no one else in sight, I click on the text message, and my cock hardens so fast I bite back a groan.

Aria is lying on her bed, the photograph only showing her stomach, and the dildo I sent her is resting on her smooth, toned, tanned skin. That's not what throbs my cock, however. It's the way the light is glistening off the dildo, telling me that she didn't only use the toy but she also brought herself to orgasm. Every muscle in my body tenses. I ache to have her, to make her melt beneath my touch.

Another beep.

*Thank you for the gift. I quite enjoyed it.*

I text back and promise, *Your next orgasm will be mine.* Then I shove the phone back into my pocket, knowing the game between us has only begun.

## ARIA

After work on Tuesday, I enter Martini's, a chic restaurant known for its pasta and grilled meats in the Fashion District. With industrial lighting above the tables and red chairs and black couches scattered throughout, the design of the grand space is a mix of modern and elegance.

"Can I help you?" a violet-haired female greets me.

"I'm actually meeting someone here." I quickly look around the bustling restaurant and find Mallory waving at me from the back of the rectangular room. "Oh, she's there." I smile at the greeter.

She smiles back. "Enjoy your dinner."

"I always do," I tell her before hastily moving toward Mallory.

The closer I get, the more Mallory's smile warms, and the more my heart warms. Our friendship grew from working for Liam and Jackson. While they despise each other, they are also insanely professional when it comes to work, and they happen to do a lot of business together, just on opposing sides. Which in reality, I think they both enjoy. Making the other's client pay financially seems as good a way as any to continue to burn each other. Though over the years, Mallory and I became closer, and now we're roommates and pretty much inseparable.

"Hi," I say when I reach her.

She gives me a quick hug. "I'm so happy you called to meet for dinner. I did not want to cook tonight at all, and pasta sounded great."

"Carbs always sound great." I laugh, taking my seat across from her. "How was work?"

"Work was work." Mallory smiles then winks. "Liam, however, is in an exceptionally good mood."

I imagine the photo I sent him helped with that, though I can't deny that he always seems to up the ante. I thought I owned him with that picture, but his response—*your next orgasm will be mine*—sent a ripple of lust through me, making me putty in his damn hands.

Before I can reply, a cute blond waitress stops at our table. "Can I start you off with some drinks, ladies?" she asks.

"We're actually all set to order," Mallory says with a sheepish smile.

“Two fettucine Alfredos,” I tell her with a firm nod.

Okay, so we’re totally predictable and always get the fettucine Alfredo, but it’s like sex in your mouth every single time.

“And we’ll also take two glasses of your house chardonnay,” Mallory finishes.

The waitress smiles at us, and it seems she finds our twin-like behavior cute while she gathers up our menus then hurries off to fetch our orders. That’s always been our way, Mallory and I. She’s the closest thing I’ve ever had to a sister. And coming from divorced parents who hate each other—and who I’m not entirely close to either, having left them both back in Louisville—I appreciate how loyal Mallory is to me. I learned a different type of love when I met her.

“So, the time is counting down,” Mallory says, dragging me from my thoughts. “Three days until you climb into Liam’s bed.”

I laugh softly. We never shy away from talking about my lust for Liam. Mallory’s known I’ve wanted him since day one. It’s never been awkward, and I think that’s because Mallory isn’t close to Liam like I am to Jackson. “To be perfectly honest,” I say, reaching for my napkin and placing it on my lap, “I’m less worried about being in his bed than I’m more worried about not wanting to get out of it. What if I find out he’s this amazing guy and not at all what Jackson claims him to be?”

“He *is* an amazing guy,” she counters. “And why would finding out that he’s a great guy be such a bad thing?”

The waitress returns then with our wine and places our glasses down in front of us. I wait for her to leave before responding, “It’s a bad thing because I don’t want to hurt Jackson. I’m loyal to him, not to Liam. So as hot as Liam is, or even how amazing he is in bed, I can’t let it go beyond this weekend.”

Mallory takes a sip of her wine. “Honestly, I don’t even understand this feud between them. I wish they would just tell us what happened.”

“That’s the frustrating part.” I nod, then take a long sip of my wine, savoring the citrusy hints of the chardonnay. “Jackson’s mood has been horrible all week. He’s barely talked to me. And the only words he has said are work related.” I sigh heavily, hoping he gets over it soon. “The anger they have toward each other is raw. So, if you ask me, I think they are probably just a lot alike, and these two alphas can’t seem to figure out how to be friendly toward each other.”

Mallory nods agreement. “Just be careful okay? I don’t know, I’ve got

this bad feeling about it all. Someone is going to get hurt here.”

“Well, it won’t be me.” I glance into the mirror that’s behind Mallory, seeing my hair is sticking up from the wind outside. I settle the unruly strands into place then add, “I get to have this weekend with Liam, and that’s it. I have no idea why Jackson hates Liam so much, but I can’t hurt Jackson. I’m all he’s got.” Because as much as I don’t have a family life, neither does Jackson.

“That’s why you’re such a good friend,” Mallory comments, giving her sweet smile. “I’m sure Jackson knows that. He’ll get past this and realize he’s being silly, and that you did this for a good cause.”

Part of me wants to believe her. The other part of me knows that I did this so that I could be with Liam for a weekend. I knew the second he saw my name on the charity auction’s list, he wouldn’t stop betting until he won the weekend with me. I did feel bad about that, a little. Though I’m also thinking of me. I need to kill this lust for Liam, and kill it quickly. I’ve been without a steady boyfriend for three years, and I know that’s because no one compares to Liam.

To get the focus off me for a little while, I ask her, “What about your date? Any word on who bought you?” Mallory went onstage three people after me. The bidder had won her through a telephone bid of fifty thousand dollars.

Mallory half-shrugs. “The only thing I know is that we had to change our date from this weekend to start on Tuesday morning and end on Thursday instead.”

“Why?”

“Scheduling conflict or something.” She fiddles with the edge of the napkin on the table. “Anyway, Liam didn’t mind that I took a couple days off during the week, so that was that.”

I ponder. “You still don’t know who the man is that placed the bet?”

“Nope, and it’s beyond creepy. I mean, I really hope I’m not dealing with some sick serial killer who likes blondes.”

I laugh; my girl is always dramatic. “His name will be recorded with the event organizer so I think you’re probably safe.”

“That’s true,” she says with obvious relief. Apparently, she hadn’t considered that. “Regardless,” she adds with a firm voice, “keep your phone on this weekend. I’ll text you as soon as I know who he is so that you have his name and his details in case I go missing.”

“Of course,” I reassure her with a soft laugh. “Who knows, though, maybe you have a secret admirer who’s been lusting after your hot ass for months.”

“Yeah, right.” She rolls her eyes. “Exciting things like that never happen to me. I expect my weekend date to either be with a man twice my age or someone boring as hell.”

“Positive thinking,” I remind her.

Mallory waves me off and grins from ear to ear. “I positively know that you are going to have a wildly wicked weekend.”

I grin back. “I positively know that, too.”

Just as we laugh, the waitress delivers our pasta to the table, setting mine down first. I inhale the comforting scents of butter and cream. I lift my wineglass. “To wild adventures.”

She clinks my glass with hers. “Hear! Hear!”

## LIAM

In the central business district, I sit behind my desk in the corner office on the fiftieth floor. It's a typical Wednesday afternoon in the modern offices of Maxwell LLC, having spent my morning in meetings. I'm preparing for another long round later this afternoon, discussing the Bakker deal to solidify the offer for my clients. Outside my door, the employees of Maxwell LLC hustle, getting the job done. I'm proud of what my law firm has become in the ten years since I left my mentor at one of Los Angeles's top firms to go out on my own. I played the game right, schmoozed the right people, and Maxwell LLC is now a leading contender in corporate law.

And yet as I glance out the bank of windows behind my desk, staring off into the distance at the mountains, I know that while professionally I'm right where I want to be, my personal life has taken a considerable blow. That's not because I've spent too much time working rather than investing my time in a relationship.

Aria. That's my trouble right there.

Ever since I walked into a meeting at Jackson's law firm, finding his new assistant with the expressive eyes and the chemistry burning between us, no one else compares to her. I've tried, and tried hard, to forget her.

That's the problem. She's unforgettable.

I draw in a deep breath, staring down at typical, heavy Los Angeles traffic, knowing I must play my cards right. I cannot fuck this up. I get one weekend with her. This is my only shot. I need to ensure that by the end of the weekend her loyalty shifts to me.

"Vivian Markle is on line one for you."

At the sound of Mallory's voice through the speaker on my phone, I spin in my chair to again face the doorway. She is sitting behind her desk in the office across from mine, her eyes glued to her computer monitor. I press line one and scoop up the phone. "Good afternoon, Vivian."

"Hello, Liam," she replies in her seductive voice. "I hope life is well."

"Incredibly well, thank you." Vivian and I have a very professional relationship, but I've never done corporate law with her. She is the owner of a high-class sex club here in the city, and she's my supplier for all things kink

related. I have plans for Aria this weekend. I want her heart. But first, I'll claim her body. "I need to schedule a visit tonight, if possible," I say.

"Of course," she replies, "do you know what time you'll be arriving?"

"Will seven work for you?"

"That will be fine. See you then, Liam."

"Goodbye, Vivian." I hang up the phone, placing it back onto the receiver, glancing at Mallory who's sitting at her desk, busy on the phone. She normally would have planned all my travel arrangements, but this weekend is personal to me. I can't chance that Mallory will tell Aria about my plans. I want to surprise her. Though Aria also needs to be prepared, so I reach for my phone again and enter the number of Jackson's office that Mallory wrote down earlier on a sticky note.

The phone rings twice before Aria's soft voice says, "Jackson Keller's office."

"Hello, Aria."

A long pause.

When she speaks again, her voice sounds even more sultry now. "Mr. Maxwell, shame on you for making a personal call during work hours."

This is the game she and I play. She tempts me, and she uses that to make me hunger for her. "I am the boss," I remind her.

She laughs. "Ah, yes, but I am not."

"Is Keller working you to the bone over there?" I ask, hearing the bite in my voice. "You know there's a job always waiting for you here."

"I'm sure we can find more interesting things to talk about than my boss, don't you think?"

"Possibly," I reply playfully.

"You have exactly one minute so let's not waste it."

I turn in my swivel chair and glance out the window again to the high-rise where Jackson's office is housed, almost able to imagine Aria behind her desk. Her legs crossed, her sex hot and wet as she reacts sensually to my voice in the same way my cock is hard reacting to hers. "I'm calling to let you know that you'll need to pack a bag this weekend."

"Oh," she says, and I hear the smile in her voice. "Do I need a passport?"

"No, we're staying local."

"Any hints on where we're going?"

"Absolutely none."

She laughs quietly and then her laughter abruptly ends, telling me



Jackson has come to her desk. I wouldn't put it past the fool that he's been listening in on all her conversations to catch when I would call. "Thank you for calling, Mr. Maxwell." Another pause, and then she adds quietly, obviously to avoid Jackson's eavesdropping, "Now stop bothering me at work. You know the rules. You can't see or speak to me before the weekend. That's all you paid for."

"Rules are meant to be broken," I tell her firmly.

"Not these rules."

My mouth creases in heated amusement. "That sounds like you're telling me what I can and cannot have, Aria?"

"That's because that *is* what I'm saying."

There's the push in her voice that she does so well. The edge that she knows drives me fucking crazy. It's a game. She knows it. So do I. She pushes and pushes and pushes, teasing and toying with me, knowing how much I want to take control. "Do you know what happens when you cage a beast, Aria?" I ask her slowly, feeling the burn of power slide through my veins.

Her breath hitches through the phone line, and her voice, while firm, heats with promise. "He sleeps."

The phone line goes dead.

I lean back in my chair and absorb the way she conjures such dominance in me. It's what I've always found so intriguing about her. She makes me want to own her. She's sassy and strong and sexy, and every goddamn thing that I want. She has no idea what she's started here today. I suspect she thinks I'll find what she's said cute, and that I'll patiently wait for her like she's told me that I must do.

Aria doesn't know everything there is to know about me.

*Yet.*

## ARIA

Wednesday's conversation with Liam remains heavy on my mind on Thursday, while I sit behind my desk in my office across from Jackson's. I tease Liam, and I'm not sure why I do it. Maybe it's because I can. I like that I hold power over a man like Liam. It's addictive. It's sinful. It makes me feel powerful.

Through the glass walls of my office, I stare into Jackson's office, seeing his brows draw together tight. He's not wearing his suit jacket and his cuffs are rolled up, which tells me he's feeling flushed. He's not happy, that much I can tell. His mood has slowly and surely been worsening as we get closer to the weekend. I understand why—he doesn't want me anywhere near Liam. It's why I've never allowed this thing to happen with Liam. Hell, it's the *only* reason. Because I care for Jackson. Deeply. And I won't hurt him by being with the man who Jackson hates so much.

I glance at the time on my computer monitor and see that it's nearly noon. I can't leave today with Jackson being so miserable. Hoping to lighten his mood, I leave my desk and move toward his modern large corner office wondering if I can get him happy by filling his belly. "I was thinking I could go and grab us some lunch," I say, leaning against the doorframe.

He doesn't even look up, his voice tight, surly. "Sure."

"Thai?" It's his favorite.

"Sure."

"Pad Thai?"

"Sure."

The third "sure" in a few seconds can't be good. I hate this. Every part of it. I hate how much I want Liam. I hate that I'm looking forward to this weekend. Because I hate what it's doing to Jackson. "You're not still mad at me, I hope." I enter his office, shutting the door behind me. We've been avoiding this conversation all week but I need Jackson to be okay with all this. "My loyalty is to you, and always will be to you."

Jackson heaves a long sigh and glances up, his stormy green eyes narrowed, mouth set into a firm line. "It's impossible for me to be mad at you, Aria, and you know this. I'm concerned for you."

I move toward the brown leather chair in front of Jackson's grand desk and take a seat. "What exactly are you so concerned about? Do you honestly think I can't handle Liam?"

"I know you can handle him," Jackson counters without pause, leaning back in his seat, folding his arms. "I also know that he's very good at handling women, and that's my concern. Do not get caught up in his games."

I shake my head, wishing things were different. "Will there ever be a time that you both finally stop this feud between you?"

"I am over it."

I raise my brows at the curtness in his voice. "I sincerely doubt that."

Jackson pauses again and frowns, then he speaks firmly. "Aria, listen to me very carefully. The only reason Liam bought you is to get back at me. This is the game we've been playing for years. That's the type of guy he is. There were dozens of women that entered the charity event, why else would he have picked you?"

*Because there's this crazy lusty goodness between us that you can't understand.* Of course, I don't say that, and gently offer, "Even if that's true, I think you're reading too much into this. I'll be fine. I'm a big girl, Jackson. I can look after myself. No one is tricking me into anything."

His potent eyes search mine before he curses and adamantly shakes his head, sputtering, "I don't like this."

"I'm sure you don't. You have to share me, and you've never been good at sharing."

"You're right, I don't like to share," he says harshly. "If it wouldn't have made it look like we were fighting for you, I would have outbid him. But I didn't want to put you in the spotlight, something that Liam would do to you."

I ignore his jab at Liam, sticking on the positive things he did say. "Thank you for caring enough about me to consider doing that." We have this odd kind of relationship, Jackson and I, that grew over the years. He doesn't have siblings and neither do I, but we are close like that. In a world of cutthroat business and fake friends, I'm the only real friend he's got. "Please stop being angry about this." Then I say the one thing I know will fix this. "You're upsetting me."

His eyes search mine again, and I make the emotion in my expression thick. He finally sighs, his posture relaxing. "I'm sorry, Aria. I don't mean for you to be in the middle of this bullshit with Liam. You did enter the

auction for charity, and that was kind of you. This is my problem, not yours.”

I smile. “So, we’re good?”

“We’re always good,” he says, giving a soft smile I know is forced.

“Great.” I rise from my seat, knowing things aren’t truly *good* but they’re as good as they’re going to get. I might care about Jackson, and would never intentionally hurt him, but this is my once chance for a taste of Liam, and I’m going to take it. “I’ll be back in a jiffy with our lunch.”

He says nothing more, glancing down at the papers on his desk, clearly getting his mind back on the job.

Done with making sure we talked, and ensuring he gave me more than one-word answers, I move quickly through our office to the elevator. I’m down in the lower lobby striding past security within minutes. When I pass through the revolving glass doors, I step out into the bright sunny day. The streets are busy with typical tourists. The energy of the city is what I’ve always loved.

I take two steps forward but when a firm hand grasps my arm, I’m ready to either kick someone in the junk or yell at them as I spin around and find myself gazing deeply into Liam’s potent eyes.

He’s fancy with his neatly tailored black suit and navy blue tie, and dear God, he is gorgeous. His dark eyes pin me to where I’m standing with the power they possess. His chiseled jaw and sculpted mouth are perfection. Liam is what teenage boys dream of being when they grow up. A sexy as hell *man*.

“Hello, Aria,” he says smoothly, seductively. “Might I have a moment, please.”

He slides his hand down my arm to take my hand. I shiver at the heat of his touch as he leads me into the alleyway, placing us behind one of the walls of the parking garage, keeping us out of sight.

“Do you think it’s wise to tempt me? To tease me?” he asks, stepping closer until my back is pressed against the wall and his hands are on either side of my head.

I swallow against the fierceness he projects. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” *Now maybe not so much*. I admit that I hadn’t expected him to act on it. Hell, I tease him all the time. Though maybe Liam’s reached his limit. I stare into the heated depths of his eyes and realize I’ve never seen him like this. Unleashed. Raw. A burn sizzles through me, pooling heat low in my body.

The side of his mouth arches obviously in response to the hitch of my breath, the flushing of my cheeks. His grin is as deadly as it is sexy. “Do you think I don’t know that if I wanted it, I could have you?” The passion exuding from him consumes me, swallowing me whole when he adds, “I know you are well aware that the *only* reason I haven’t touched you before is because I’m respecting your loyalty to Jackson.”

He leans in and as I inhale his woodsy scent, my heart is racing, thighs are clenching, sex is drenching with desire.

“Do not toy with me, Aria.” He brings his mouth close to mine, his warm minty breath brushing across my parted lips. “Do not push against me because I will not lose. Let this be a reminder of that.” His big, strong hand pushes against my thigh. I’m spreading my legs for him before I even wonder if I should.

His fingers slowly slide upward, giving me the chance to say “stop.” I should end this right now because I’m only proving him right, that where it comes to him I have no control and that I’m all talk, but somehow I can’t stop him.

I want this.

I want him.

When he places a hand on my neck, pinning me to the wall, I’m breathless. A sexy smile creases the corners of his mouth as he slides his hand up my thigh, taking my skirt with it. He tucks his fingers into my panties, pulling them off to the side of my slick heat. I’m trapped in his command, shutting my eyes against all that he creates within me.

His low moan tickles in my belly when he cups my sex. He leans in and his mouth presses against mine, and it’s all I can do not to beg him to get inside me. His lips are firm and demanding, penetrating my soul with every swirl of his tongue. Yet his kisses are so much more than simple affection. It’s a statement. He owns me with every bite of his teeth. I know it with all that I am when his fingers slip inside of me, not slowly entering but demanding he belong there. I soak his fingers as he begins thrusting with intent. His palm bangs against my clit and had it not been for his hand on my neck, I’d be sinking down the wall into the pleasure. As it is, I’m on my tiptoes in my red high heels. I hear the voices of pedestrians walking by. With little effort, they could walk down this alleyway and find us, yet somehow that only excites me more.

I’m moaning and gasping and trembling against the force of what he does

to me. I finally have his touch. It's all that I need and more.

When I reopen my eyes and Liam backs away, obviously to watch me fall into orgasm, I lose myself in the power he commands, easily coming against his fingers thrusting into me. My release is quiet, the only sound a soft gasp from my mouth. A hard shake rocking through my body drops me from the high.

He slowly withdraws his fingers. My panties are back in place. He tucks his finger under my chin, bringing my eyes to meet the fierceness in his. "Don't toy with me again," he states firmly.

With blurry eyes, I watch him walk away, staying plastered to the wall. I tug down my skirt, feeling my orgasm on my inner thighs.

I lost this battle.

And yet, somehow, I felt like I won.

## **CHAPTER 3**

*Liam*

**ON FRIDAY MORNING**, my feet hit the ground along the Santa Monica Pier with the rhythm of the song blasting through my earbuds. Sweat trickles down my face and my torso, my lungs burn with each and every stride. The air is fresh, lacking humidity. The sunrise is casting a somewhat pinkish glow across the Santa Monica Bay.

While I arrived at my beach house last night to get settled in and stock the fridge so Aria and I would have no distractions this weekend, I needed a run before fetching her. It's my therapy and my fuel.

When I spot the thin house with the large one-way glass windows on the front, I slow to a walk on the beach trail, relishing the high that always comes with a good run. On the outside of the house, there's not much to excite, except for the property being located right on the beach. The exterior is chrome and dark gray stucco, which I had done myself with the help of a contractor. When I reach the concrete steps, I grab my keys from my pocket and unlock the door, stepping into the open-concept main floor. The design is modern and sleek with white walls and floors, and white furniture with black pillows. I had hired an interior designer to freshen up the interior of the house and I didn't have any part in it.

On my way past the kitchen on the right, I notice that the clock on the stainless-steel microwave above the gas stove shows it's nearing seven o'clock now. I drag a hand through my sweaty hair, hastily moving into the master suite. All white furniture leads to a dark metal king-size bed frame, and the en suite bathroom is equally modern. Light gray tiles cover the large bathroom's floor and extend into the all-glass shower.



Determined to get the show on the road, I strip off my shoes and socks, shorts then boxer briefs, leaving my cellphone on the glass vanity. When I enter the shower, I turn the water on and let the warm stream hit the back of my neck, washing away the sweat, allowing my mind to go to Aria. Soon, I'll be inside her.

Those thoughts harden my cock to steel. I grab the base of my shaft, the water running down over my hardened flesh, teasing me. I don't pause. I don't warm up. I place my free hand against the wall and I jerk my dick hard and fast, thinking of nothing but Aria when I claimed her orgasm. The way she felt. The way she moaned when I made her fall apart. How her eyes widened and became alive in those seconds. How I owned her.

My muscles tighten, a low groan rumbling from my throat when I come, my semen landing on the shower's floor, washing away with the water. It's less satisfying than it is essential. I refuse to blow too fast with Aria. I will take my time savoring every goddamn inch of her. And I know I can't show up today fully loaded.

The beep of my cellphone reminds me that I'm due to pick her up in an hour. With my dick soft and settled for now, I put Aria out of my mind for the moment and set to finish showering and getting dressed.

It's just about an hour later when I'm nearly ready to go. In the kitchen, I'm sipping my coffee after polishing off a plate of eggs and toast. By eight o'clock, I'm on the road in my dark silver Mercedes convertible to fetch Aria. By a little after eight-thirty, I've arrived at central Los Angeles, and I spot her waiting for me outside of her condo with her suitcase next to her.

My cock twitches in my beige cargo shorts, reminding me that jerking off doesn't do much to calm the intensity I feel for Aria, nor has it ever. This morning her hair is down and straight, her makeup light. Her comfortableness in her own skin is one of the things I find so sexy about her. She's wearing a white sundress that I'm sure on anyone else would look cute, but on her, it's fucking sexy portraying innocence that I know is a tease. Because that woman right there might be sweet, but she's dirty as fuck, I can tell. And damn, do I want to play.

I stop next to her and grin. "Looking for a good time?" I joke.

"Depends on what you're offering in return," she jokes back.

"The best sex of your life," I tell her seriously.

She grins. "Well, then, yes, I certainly am looking for a good time."

I chuckle, open the trunk then exit the car, moving to her. She turns to

face me and watches me intently, a delicate flush brushing over her cheeks. It's not shyness, I know that. It's desire. "You look absolutely beautiful this morning." I lean in to kiss her lightly on the lips. It's a tease of what's to come.

She kisses me fully back telling me that she plans to go head-to-head with me this weekend. All bets are off. We're both playing to win.

A cold void overcomes me when I step back and open the passenger door. "Thank you," she says, sliding into the seat. After shutting the door behind her, I place her suitcase in the trunk then join her in the car, when she adds, "Do I get any hints on where we're going this weekend?"

"To my beach house in Santa Monica."

Her eyebrows raise in obvious surprise. "Yours? As in, you own it?"

I get her surprise. Houses don't come for less than five million dollars in that stretch of beachfront properties. "The property belonged to my father," I explain, lowering the emergency brake. "We've owned the house for as long as I can remember. When my father passed away, he gifted the property to me in his estate." My mother never cared; the property always meant more to my father than her. "But I've renovated the house over the years. It's where I go on the weekends."

"Lucky you," she says with a sweet smile.

"Incredibly lucky," I tell her sincerely. My need to be near water as often as possible is a personal thing not very many people know about me. Sure, I love the hustle and bustle of the city, but I need the clear open water and fresh air just as much. "All right, so do you need to make any stops before leaving?" I ask, doing up my seatbelt.

She shakes her head. "I'm good to go. You?"

"I went up last night to get us settled in."

"Did you?" she asks, fastening her own seatbelt.

"I like to be prepared."

She gives a sensual laugh. "I have no doubt that is very much true." When she settles back into the seat and crosses her smooth tanned legs, drawing all my attention there, she adds, "So what have you planned for us this weekend?"

"I have a few ideas."

"Which are?"

I laugh. "Darlin', secrets are a good thing. And it just so happens I don't want you to know all that I have planned for you this weekend."

She draws in a deep breath and gives me a heated grin. “Ah, is that the way we’re going to play this? You want all the control this weekend?”

Something sparks in me then, tightening my muscles. I lean toward her, staring deeply into her eyes. “Of course, I will have all the control this weekend.”

“And why is that?”

“Because that is precisely what you want,” I murmur, stating a truth we both know. “You want me to command you. To take charge. To own you.”

She swallows deep; her mouth parts. I see it in her eyes then, how excited she is. That sends adrenaline pumping through my veins. I almost regret taking her to the beach because of the drive to get there. I want to touch her, taste her, fuck her until we’re both exhausted. But there’s a good reason I want her to experience Santa Monica with me. She knows the business side of Liam Maxwell. Now I want her to know the personal side.

While I take her silence to be slight shock at my boldness, I ask her, “Are you ready for this adventure of ours?”

Her eyes heat, voice grows raspy. “You know that I am.”

I smile back and drive forward, the engine giving off a sexy roar. “You’re right, love, I certainly do.”

## ARIA

There are houses. And then there are *oh, my God* houses.

Liam's beach house is most definitely the latter.

Gorgeous, simple, masculine . . . kinda like the man himself, I decide, stepping into the living room, which consists only of a white leather couch, a couple contour lounge chairs, and a glass coffee table. I quickly understand the reason the designer kept to a white palette since the glass window from ceiling to floor draws the eye immediately. I now realize why this coast costs a pretty penny to live on. Even my breath catches at the dark sand leading to blue water.

"Aria."

The low rumble of Liam's voice vibrates against my skin, raising goosebumps. I know what's going to happen. I want this to happen. Even so, I'm on edge, excited and nervous of what's to come. We've waited three years to cross this line. I draw in a deep breath and face all the energy pulsating in the room. The beautiful view is nothing compared to what's before me.

Liam has been holding himself back, I can tell that now. The flare of his nostrils drawing in my scent, the intensity burning in his eyes. It's no way that he's watched me before. I'm drenching my panties and my nipples pucker, ready for play, just that easily.

The silence between us is powerful. So many unsaid things holding in the quiet space. So many desires unfulfilled. I'm standing there bared for him, stripped of all the reasons I've been shutting him out.

"Show me what I paid for," he says, voice rich with lust.

Maybe I should be offended.

I'm not in the least.

We've both been waiting for this moment. It just so happens that I want to show him all of me. I want him to touch, to taste, to own me. I reach up, tucking my finger into the strap of my dress, slowly sliding it down my shoulder. I look at his crotch and see his bulge; knowing I'm making a man like Liam Maxwell hard tightens my tummy.

When I slide the other strap off my shoulder, his gaze follows, slowly,

pointedly showing me that he's paying attention. I reach back and unzip my dress, my chest rising and falling with my heavy breaths. I keep my eyes on his face as I let my dress flutter to the floor. There, standing in white high heels, I watch as he feasts upon the view of me. It's an addictive thing the way Liam looks at me.

He stalks me with his eyes.

His gaze roams over my white lace bra that I'd chosen purposely because it shows my dark nipples before moving on to my matching thong. When he looks at my face again, he orders, "Turn around."

I smile, embracing the desire he feels for me, and spin, showing him my bare bottom. My eyes flutter, suddenly overwhelmed by the intensity at my back, pulsating in the air, when I hear the rattle of his belt and his clothes hitting the floor. Then he's at my back, not touching me but he doesn't need to. His presence itself is desire and my sex begins throbbing, greedy for his touch.

"Do you know how badly I want to fuck you, Aria?"

His voice is silk, igniting a shiver. "Yes," I rasp.

He threads his fingers into my hair, and he's tilting my head to the side, his lips lowering to my goosebump-covered flesh. "I'm not sure you can possibly understand the level of how insane you drive me."

He cups my breasts, massaging them until he pulls the front of my bra down and has my nipples between his fingers and he's squeezing them. "I do know because I want you as much," I reply.

"No, Aria, this is not want," he murmurs, squeezing my breasts harder. "This is ravenous need." He slides one hand to my hair, fists the strands, and it's right then that I feel like he's taking over my body. "I wanted to fuck you slow. I wanted to savor every fucking inch of you." He tilts my head further to the side and licks a slow line up my flesh. "But now . . ." He grinds his cock against my ass. "Now you're close and all I want to do is get inside you."

"Please," I beg, wanting the same thing. Desperate for it, in fact.

His low moan makes me shiver, a promise of so much pleasure. "I want to take you bare this weekend," he whispers in my ear. "Are you protected?"

I attempt to nod but his firm grip stops me, flooding me with wicked heat. "I have an IUD."

He slides his other hand down my arm to my hip where he squeezes, rubbing his cock against me, teasing me with how thick and hard he is. "I

don't have unprotected sex, Aria. Ever. Not with anyone."

His dick presses against my butt crack, and I can't even care that I know for us to do this means something. I'm crossing lines I don't cross with sexual partners, but I want to feel every goddamn inch of him without anything between us. "Neither do I." I wiggle against him, searching for the tip of his cock.

"Is that a yes to no condom then?"

"Yes," I whisper.

The tension he endures is obvious in the firmness of his body at my back. He's stiff, fighting against his passion. I know why, and I turn in his arms, discovering eyes that are deadly for the way they control my body's responses. My nipples tingle, sex clenches with desire. To be wanted so ravishingly is something I'm not sure I can ever let go of. "What are you waiting for?" I ask him.

His brows draw together tight. "I want to do this right."

I press my hands against his face and state what we both want to hear. "Liam, I want you to fuck me until we're both screaming. No more waiting. No more reasons stopping us. Take what you want."

I can't really say what happens next. All I know is one second I felt like I held all the control, and in the next second, my back is slammed against the wall. My legs are up around his waist and his thick cock is wildly fucking me. My chin lifts against the pleasure, eyes pinch shut, toes curling with every hard thrust that seems to have no beginning and no end. I know nothing else but the way he pounds into me. It's dirty. It's hard. It's rough. It's a loss of complete control that had been building up for three solid years.

His mouth is kissing mine but I can't seem to kiss him back. All I can do is lose myself in how he's driving himself inside me. I dig my fingernails into his back, letting him know I'm there, intense and overwhelmed by how amazing it feels to be touched and taken by him.

With a low growl, his lips move to my neck and he's devouring me. His rough breathing makes its way to my ear while his hands grip my ass, pinning me to the wall. God, his cock is thick and big and he's stretching me, not guiding me into pleasure but pulling satisfaction out of me. Though it's when he leans away and looks at me, my legs falling slightly down his thighs, that I lose all control over my body.

He steals it away with his presence. Within those powerful depths of his eyes, I find my pleasure as he drives into me, hard and forceful. His jaw is

tight, brows furrowed, and I read within his touch that I am *his* in this moment.

A sudden wave of pleasure has my head tipping back, my muscles stiffening against the surge of euphoria, and that's when I hear him.

"Fuck," he roars.

His cock swells inside me, pounding into me, somehow pressing against everything that I need him to press against inside me to send me soaring. While I break apart around him, losing myself in a satisfaction I've never known, I vaguely feel him bucking and jerking before I feel the warmth of his seed spilling inside me.

Many breathless minutes go by.

When I finally have the strength to open my eyes again, his cock is resting between us but still semi-hard. He's got his knee between my legs, the only thing holding me up. I lift my head, discovering he's not looking as satisfied as I feel. He's not done with me, I can tell by the ravenousness nature of his gaze.

Right then, he silently raises his hand to my face, sliding his fingers through my hair until he's fisted the strands. He gives a tug in the same second he removes his thigh and slowly I'm lowering to my knees, staring at his thick, muscular thighs. I tip my head back and the sexy slight smile he gives me storms heat back within me. With a small gesture of his chin, I know precisely what he wants.

I reach for his cock placing it in my mouth and sucking him with slow precision, until his shaft hardens again. I taste me, him, and the perfectness of us.

"Eyes on me," he orders roughly.

I look up at him, bobbing on the tip of his cock. His low groan is more than foreplay to me, it's like a vibrator to my clit. I cup his balls, enjoying the weight of them, loving how his head falls back. I suck on one testicle and then the other before I grab the base of his cock. Keeping my eyes on him, I treat him to my mouth. His fist tightens in my hair and then his other hand is on the top of my head and he's thrusting into my mouth. The thickness of his cock stretches my mouth, the tip hitting the back of my throat but moving so fast my gag reflex never reacts. Until he shoves his dick so far in my mouth, I gag once and he backs away, letting me control my movements again.

I slide my mouth off his shaft, and, showing him that I like it rough, too, I gently drag my teeth across his shaft and his hips shoot forward. "Fuck, yes.

Again.” He grunts.

I do as I’m told, twice more. That’s when he’s apparently had enough. I’m back in his arms and he’s carrying me to the contour chair which he deposits me into. He hooks my legs onto his arms, entering me again in one swift stroke. My pussy—which hasn’t seen a dick in three years—registers the slight soreness of being used so roughly by him. But Liam won’t be refused today, I see that now. And I won’t stop him. I want to wake up tomorrow and remember this moment and every moment to follow this weekend.

In this position, I see more of him. I run my fingers across his flexed chest, down his hard six-pack, loving the way his thick cock, with trimmed pubic hair, slides inside me. God, he’s masculine beauty. I can’t stop the way my pussy squeezes at him, so greedy for another orgasm, which I know he can deliver.

He reaches for my hips, pins me to him, and then I understand what it’s like to be truly fucked. His thrusts are brutal, punishing me maybe for how long I made him wait. Perhaps even rage induced by the situation we’ve been in these past years. Whatever he’s releasing mentally, he’s doing so on my body, and I’m reaping the rewards.

“Liam,” I scream seconds before I tumble into wave after wave of sheer euphoria that is as hot as it is intense.

When I feel his finger tuck under my chin, I open my eyes, discovering his expression is very similar to what I’d seen before. However, this time, he looks even more intense. As he did before, he reaches for my hair, fisting it, sending me to my knees again. When I look up at him, he gestures at his cock. “Again,” is all he says.

That’s when I realize that I’ve been wrong. This weekend isn’t about fulfilling a fantasy. It’s about draining the lust Liam has for me. And he plans to drain it all this weekend. Now I understand that, it’s not about whether my heart can handle this weekend with Liam.

Can my body survive him?



## **CHAPTER 4**

*Liam*

**THE NEXT MORNING**, I step out on the terrace of a private restaurant atop one of the nicest hotels at the Santa Monica Pier, a bright sun high in a clear blue sky. A table covered in white linen is set next to the stone exterior of the building covered by rich green ivy overlooking the soft sands of the Santa Monica Bay. Before I can take in anything else, my cellphone rings. I grab it out of my pocket and lift the phone to my ear. “Why are you calling me, Mallory?” I answer the phone in a brisk voice, not pleased with the interruption.

“Yes, you’re going to kill me, I know,” she says quickly, and I can almost hear her cringing when she adds, “Alas, we are finalizing the Bakker offer. Thomas wanted me to reach out to confirm the details.”

I know this can’t wait, and I remind myself while I’m here, my team are all working faithfully this weekend to ensure we get an offer ready to present to Bakker on Monday. “Go ahead.”

“All right.” She draws in a deep breath before she begins. “We’ve included making a yearly donation to the charity Mr. Bakker supports. We’re also putting a provision in that all his employees will remain on with the company after the merger, and the employees are also to receive Christmas bonuses, which is something that Mr. Bakker doesn’t do. Is there anything else you want to add before we finalize?”

I ponder as I watch a seagull soar through the air, then decide. “Our offer sounds strong and solid. Do the clients have any suggestions?”

“No, they felt right in line with what you proposed.”

“Good. Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s all. Goodbye.”

Mallory ends the call, and I suspect that her mind is now running rampant with ideas of what I’m up to with her best friend. I’ve never crossed that line with Mallory. I’m sure she recognizes my interest in her friend, as I’ve never hid it, but I’ve never verbalized my desire to be with her best friend, nor will I ever discuss Aria with Mallory. Some lines should never be crossed.

With work behind me, and glad the interruption is over, I turn toward Aria. She’s striding through the small garden on the terrace. Her gait is slow, posture relaxed, as she should be. The pathway is lined by flowers and bushes and pergolas, and in front of the garden is where our table for breakfast is set. This restaurant is as private as it is beautiful, and it’s why I’ve come here for the past few years for breakfast every so often.

When she catches that I’m off the phone now and staring at her, she smiles. “Breakfast on a private terrace, pulling out the big guns, Liam?” she asks with a cheeky grin.

“I only have big guns.” I grin back, approaching the table then pulling out her chair for her.

As she moves toward me then takes a seat, she laughs softly. “Well, I do know for certain you have one big gun.”

Before I can reply, the waiter enters the terrace, the steel door closing tight behind him. Wearing all white with a black bow tie, the dark-haired young man with a thick French accent says, “Good morning, Mr. Maxwell and Ms. Finley.” I take my seat when he stops by the table. “This morning the chef is serving eggs Florentine, pastrami hash, and fresh fruit.”

“Sounds amazing,” Aria says.

The waiter smiles; obviously he takes pride in his work. “How about some coffee and freshly squeezed orange juice for this morning?”

“Perfect,” she says.

I nod agreement.

The waiter sends his bright smile my way now and hands me a circular electronic device with a black button in the center. “When you are finished with your meal or if you need anything, press this button and I will return to assist you.”

“Thank you.” I accept the pager.

When the waiter hurries off back through the door, Aria frowns at the pager in my hand. “What was that all about?” she asks.

“I requested a quiet breakfast for us this morning,” I tell her, anticipating

what I say next is going to affect her. “No interruptions. Total privacy.”

And it does. Heat rises to her eyes. Nothing pleases me more. I want her pussy to be soaking wet by the time I touch her again.

Her lips part to answer me, I’m sure, but then there’s a flurry of waiters filling our glasses with water and orange juice, placing our napkins in our laps, and setting our meal out before us.

Once they vanish leaving us alone, Aria reaches for her fork, and asks, “How did you even know about this place?”

“I discovered it mainly through word of mouth.” I sip my orange juice. “But I like it here.” While the beach house is stunning, it’s also not private. “It’s peaceful.”

She glances out at the water, smiles softly. “It is wonderful,” she finally says, scooping up a small bite of her eggs.

I follow her move, eating for a moment, savoring the spicy hints of nutmeg in the thick creamy sauce before addressing her again. “I’m sorry about taking the phone call. Believe me when I say, for the most part, I do not have work calls on the weekends. Sadly, I’m in the middle of a deal that needed my attention.”

“It happens.” She shrugs, clearly understanding the trials and tribulations of business. “Was the call important? Do you need to—”

“It’s fine.” I stop that line of thought before it can even develop. There’s no chance in hell I’m leaving her. “I anticipate that by the time we’re back home, the Bakker deal will be in Bakker’s hands and we can forge ahead.”

“The Bakker deal?” She sips her orange juice.

“It’s a pharmaceutical merger.” Of course, she’s interested. When it comes to corporate law, we speak the same language.

“Sounds lucrative.” She waggles her eyebrows.

I nod and smile. “It is.” I hesitate, eating another few bites, hating that I must even worry about being honest with her. Aria is Jackson’s assistant, and I know right now her loyalty lies with him. It’s rare I talk business outside of my team but I want Aria to be in my personal circle, not out of it. Besides, Jackson doesn’t represent any of the clients fighting for the merger. “Bakker is a good man. Solid.”

“How so?”

I wipe my mouth with my napkin. “He’s not after money.”

“How did you find that out?”

“I went to see what his company was all about myself. After a few

minutes of being there, it became obvious that his employees are family to him. So, that's what we're planning on using as a bargaining chip."

"What are you offering?"

"Giving employees Christmas bonus from the parent company, and the company will continue to support cancer research in honor of Bakker's wife."

Aria smiles. "I see now why Jackson calls you a real threat."

My back wants to stiffen that Jackson would even dare talk to Aria about me but all I care about is her being mine by Monday. "A threat to Jackson, possibly," I clarify. "To others, I lead with a powerful, wise hand, not a forceful one."

Her smile widens. "In all aspects of your life, I've come to discover."

"Indeed." I chuckle.

We finish our meal in silence. And as I place my napkin onto my plate, I shift the conversation where it belongs. "Tell me more about Aria."

She drops a couple sugar cubes into her coffee and uses the small spoon to stir. "What exactly do you want to know?"

Everything, I want to say. I'm desperate to get inside this woman's head. "What excites you?"

"I think you've already figured that out, don't you?" She laughs, raising the mug to her lips.

"Yes, I'm well aware of which buttons of yours to push." Desire flickers in her eyes, and I like the way she lights up. "What I mean is, what makes you happy? What is something that excites you in your life?"

"Passion excites me."

"Explain." I reach for my black coffee.

She sips her coffee then lowers her mug to the table. "It can be about anything really, but I love when people get passionate. I like being around the energy of that. Whether it be at work, or an art show, or even sitting around talking to someone who is making something. When people get passionate, that gets me excited."

Her answer surprises me. "Do you mean that even if you hated art, if someone else was passionate about it, then you'd enjoy it because they were passionate about it?"

"Exactly." She smiles and sips her coffee before addressing me again. "It's infectious, and I like being around people who love the life they are living. It reminds me to live the same."

"An easy woman to please," I note.

She grins. “Maybe.” Her gaze lifts overhead as another seagull soars by us before she’s addressing me again. “I like seeing the world through other people’s eyes, and what they find beautiful. There’s not much I wouldn’t do or wouldn’t see. But I need that person to be present while doing it with me, enjoying it as much as I am. Something real . . . authentic, you know?”

I nod. “In a world of fakeness and materialism, a little realness goes a long way with me, too.” That’s to the heart of what makes this woman stand out; she’s so damn real it’s breathtaking. “Do you know a lot of these passionate people?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised how few there are out there. I’ve only met a handful of people who truly know who they are and are true to themselves. Mallory is one of them. Jackson—” She cringes.

I chuckle softly. “You can speak about him. Jackson is in your life. I can handle that.”

“Can you?” she whispers.

I nod. “I can.”

She shrugs a little, brushing off the awkwardness surrounding Jackson. Awkwardness that Jackson put there and that I must clean up. “It took a while for me to get a good group of people in my circle and get rid of all the negativity,” she explains, “but my group of friends now . . . they don’t come any better.”

I consider what she’s said. Hearing all this only makes me appreciate her more. “The way you live is really quite amazing.”

She takes another sip of her coffee. “Why do you think that?”

“Because it’s beautiful. You’ve found a way to center yourself around what makes a person most happy. You fully support their passions. I can only imagine that inspires people to be better when they’re around you. To live to their full potential.” Maybe that’s why she’s been so unforgettable. Her happiness is based on something so pure, so real. I want to taste that.

She gives me a sweet smile. “What about you? What excites you?”

“I like to win,” I admit, even though I know it’s a two-edged sword. Before she can assume the worst of me, thinking that I’m only with her now because I wanted to beat Jackson, I add, “I like to face obstacles and find that special little thing that everyone is missing so that I come out on top.”

She cocks her head. “Meaning?”

“I mean that I like to play clean and win fairly in this cutthroat game of law. It’d be easy to get drawn into the dark side of this business. To make

deals with the Devil for money, for fame.”

“You’ve never done that?”

“I’ve never needed to.” I lean back in my seat, gazing into the richness of her eyes. “I win, but not by playing dirty. I win by playing hard.”

The side of her mouth curves as she gives me a very long regard. “Well, color me surprised. I wouldn’t have expected Liam Maxwell to have such heart.”

“That’s because you’ve never given me the chance to show it to you.”

“I suppose that’s true.” She studies me again, eyes searching mine. “But how can I know this isn’t all an act to schmooze me?”

Anger slides through my veins. Jackson’s fed her a story about how I’m using her. Fuck, it’s such a lie. One that by Monday she won’t believe anymore. “When it comes to you, there is only one game I will ever play.”

“What game is that?” she asks, a little breathless.

“Come here and I’ll show you.”

The sides of her mouth crease as she rises, accepting my dare. I push my plate to the side of the table, shifting my chair back. When she moves to my side, I help her so she’s straddling my chair, her bottom resting on the table. I never stop looking at her, keeping that connection. “Lift your skirt, sweetheart.”

Slowly, she does, revealing she’s not wearing panties. “Already playing a game yourself, hmm?” I lean back in my chair and drag my hands up her thighs, pausing to state my truth. “This is my game, Aria. My only game. Do you want to play this morning?”

“Yes,” she breathes, eyes hot on me.

I rub my finger through her slick folds. “Look at you, swollen, all used up.” I glance at her face and grin. “Your sweet body isn’t used to all this attention.” I run my palm over her clit. “Are you sore, Aria?”

“A little.”

I slide a finger inside her slick tender heat. “Not sore enough,” I tell her, when she tosses her head back. I gaze upon the long, sexy line of her neck. “You won’t refuse me my fill, will you?”

“God, no.” She moans.

That desperate moan tells me I have her right where I want her. I drag my finger out of her tight heat and state firmly, “Return to your seat, Aria.”

Her head snaps up, expression aghast. “What?”

“You wanted to play a game. Let’s play it.” She studies me a moment

then obviously agrees to play along and rises. Before she can sit, I grab her chair, position her closer beside me. "Take a seat." I pat the chair.

"What are you up to?" She regards me with suspicion.

"Anything I want." She lowers down into the chair, and I pull her under the table, the linen now over her lap. "Spread your legs and rub that sweet pussy for me, will you, love?"

Heat and lust burn in her eyes. "And then?"

I lean closer, cupping her chin, demanding she only look at me. "Then you're going to bring yourself to orgasm."

"And then?" she whispers, breathless.

"You're going to ask me permission to come."

Her gaze hardens, the fight I love in her appearing. "Why would I do that?"

"Because that's the game we're playing."

Keeping her eyes on me, obviously not prepared to fight against something we both know she wants, she widens her legs and then slowly slips her hand beneath the table. She's under the white linen, hidden from me, but that doesn't matter. I see the exact moment she strokes her clit, the heightened pleasure washing over her expression.

"Is this what you want me to do, Liam?" she asks, voice raspy.

"That's exactly right, beautiful." I reach for the buzzer. Her eyes widen as I press down against the button, calling the waiter back to us. The pleasure is gone from her face, expression hard. I arch a brow. "No longer interested in the game, darlin'?"

I see the power in her eyes, the challenge there. I know she won't stop either, because as much as I like to win, she likes to push against me. That is our game. It's addictive and fun and sexy as fuck. Even now, the sparkle in her eyes tells me that she's going to follow through to show me that she's as daring as I am. That tempts me to find out how far I can take us both.

Right then, the metal door whisks open, and a flurry of waiters return. Aria looks from them to me and then smiles, and I see the slight shake of her dress, telling me she's moving her fingers again, faster now. In a single breath, the pleasure returns to her face, flushing her cheeks a stunning pinkish hue.

The waiter smiles at Aria. "Did you enjoy your breakfast?" he asks her.

"Entirely, thank you." Her breath hitches.

He glances to me, obviously not seeing or hearing the heady pleasure



she's enduring. I smile at him and nod. "Please give our compliments to the chef, everything was incredible."

"I certainly will, sir," the waiter says, beginning to clear our plates.

Over his shoulder, I notice another waiter at the door, watching Aria very closely. Too closely, in fact. By the redness in his cheeks, I'm only assuming he has noticed what I can see plain as day. When I glance back at Aria, I understand why. Her cheeks are stained dark red and that stunning color descends down to her chest, her eyes lost in desire, mouth parted with her heavy but quiet breaths.

I am unsurprised. She's being watched. She's being dirty. Those can be the magical ingredients for heightened arousal.

"Do you need anything else?" the waiter asks me.

I turn to him and shake my head. "That will be all, thank you."

"Take your time, and enjoy the view," he says. "You have the terrace for another hour."

"The view is quite stunning, isn't it?" I'm not talking about the beach.

The waiter agrees with a nod, and then he, along with the other waiter, leave through the door and it shuts behind them. I assume they're huddling together now talking about what's going on here. I only care about the woman riding her pleasure.

I rise and move to her side, tucking my finger under her chin, commanding her gaze. "Do you want to come, Aria?"

"Yes."

"Ask my permission."

Her chest rises and falls with the hitch of her breath. "May I come?"

I slide my thumb over her puffy bottom lip. "Look at me while you do it, and you may."

She gasps and moans and trembles, her arm moving faster. I stay focused on her eyes, feeding how she likes to be watched. And when she peaks, her eyes widening into euphoria, it takes all my strength not to bend her over this table and drive my throbbing cock into her. But this is for her, not for me.

A memory belonging all to her.

I become lost in the depths of her surrender as she strains to keep her eyes open, to listen to my instructions, but soon the pleasure steals her control. Her head tilts back, eyes flutter shut, and her moan is soft and sensual and goddamn entralling.

When she finally opens her eyes to me again, revealing such beauty in her

seductive satisfaction, I know then and there, she's forever ruined me for any other woman. No one can ever compare. Not to her. Not like this.

She dips her chin down, taking my thumb into her mouth, giving it a hard suck before releasing it to say, "Now is it your turn?"

"This was not about me, beautiful. Believe me, I like watching you come as much as I like feeling it." I lean down and take her mouth, passionately staking my claim then and there that I've won her surrender, and that is pleasure to me.

"So, in this game of yours, what happens next?" she whispers against my mouth.

I grin. "I've already told you."

She laughs. "Anything you want."

"That's right, sweetheart."

## **CHAPTER 5**

## *Aria*

**A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER**, after strolling along the Third Street Promenade, where people flock to the open-air shopping district of Santa Monica to spend their money and enjoy a day of sun and sand, Liam stops at a souvenir shop. A high-pitched scream has me glancing at the bright yellow roller coaster off in the distance. In fact, though, I can't be sure the screaming isn't coming from the Ferris wheel.

When I look back at Liam, I find him staring at something on top of the showcase. I move in next to him as he takes a red and yellow abstract ceramic heart ornament off the golden hook. "This right here," he says to the girl behind the counter. "I'll take this one for the lady." She accepts the ornament from him and he grabs his wallet, handing her a fifty. He accepts his change before spinning around to me with the ornament hanging off his finger. "A gift to remember this weekend."

I stare at the ornament, completely taken aback by his gesture.

Something Liam clearly takes notice of. "You don't like it?" he asks, a frown marring his gorgeous face.

"On the contrary," I say, a little breathless. "It's perfect, and completely unexpected."

He smiles, warming the richness of his eyes. "Well, I'm glad then." He wraps an arm around the small of my back, bringing me in close against the strength of his body. "Though you've also made me curious. Why is this gift so unexpected?"

I glance down at the ornament, running my hand over the smooth shiny ceramic. "I guess I would have expected you to . . ."

“Spend thousands on you?”

I cringe. “God that sounds so awful, doesn’t it?”

“No, it doesn’t sound awful. I’m sure that’s what I would have expected if I was you.” He leans in and grins. “Let me also remind, I already have spent thousands on you.” I blush and glance away but his finger on my chin demands my gaze. “I know you, Aria, and I know this ornament is something that would mean more to you.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you love Christmas.”

I stop breathing, staring at him. It’s a little detail about me that’s true and personal. Some women go crazy for purses or shoes even. For me, it’s Christmas. “Did Mallory tell you I love Christmas?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t talk to Mallory about you.”

“Ever?”

“Never.” He gently guides me forward. We continue walking by the shops with his arm around my waist. “It would cross a boundary, and truthfully, I like unearthing all your secrets myself.”

“How did you unearth this secret then?” I need to understand, and I’m not even really sure why.

He gives a soft smile. “Because you light up around Christmastime.”

“I do?”

He nods and chuckles. “There’s a brightness about you, and I’ve never heard anyone else talk about Christmas right after Halloween. I’ve heard you say to Mallory after meetings that you were going home to watch *Christmas Vacation*, and it was in November.”

I laugh softly. I can’t recall that conversation but it’s totally something I would do.

He glances down at me, a strand of hair falling out of place. “Besides, I’ve heard Mallory mention a gift she’s bought for you now and again in the office, and it’s always Christmas related.”

I gape at him. Honestly, gape at him.

He watches me, his eyes twinkling when he spins me into him, wrapping both arms around my back. “It appears I’ve dumbfounded you.”

“To be perfectly honest with you, Liam”—I stare into the warmth of his eyes, seeing things I never saw before—“it’s so incredibly sweet of you to notice something like that about me.” Maybe even the most touching thing anyone has ever noticed. It has nothing to do with my looks, my brains, or

anything. He noticed something that warms my heart. No guy has ever paid that much attention to me before.

“See, and that’s why I like to win.” He smiles. “That look right there on your face. That’s what I like.” I smile back, and lean into him as we continue walking again. A few steps later, Liam breaks the silence. “I am interested, though, why is Christmas so important to you? Any meaning behind that?”

“My parents are divorced,” I tell him, not feeling like I need to hide this part of myself. I hook my arm through his and set to explaining. “They were two of the most miserable people when they were together. But no matter what, they always put their feelings aside and got together on Christmas Day for me.”

“Even after their divorce?”

I nod. “Even after.” We pass by a man painted silver and pretending to be a statue. Believable enough that even a pigeon is perched on his head. I smile at them both before addressing Liam again. “Of course, it took me a long time to figure out that’s why I loved Christmas so much.”

“It’s a nice thing to love,” he says, taking my hand. “For a very good reason.”

“It is,” I agree.

We stroll along passing by break-dancers and then further down is a crowd gathered around a magician. With each step I take, I become more curious about the man who seems to understand the way I tick. “What is your Christmas?”

“This.” He gestures with his chin. “Santa Monica is my Christmas.”

“Is there any special meaning behind why you love it here so much?”

He draws in a deep breath glancing out in front of him. “I feel right when I’m here.” The side of his mouth arches, and he looks at me. “Does that make sense?”

I nod and smile. “It does to me.” I realize though there is a lot I don’t know about him. Considering he knows a very personal thing about me, I feel like a bag of shit for that. “What of your family?” I ask to correct my error.

“My family is small,” he explains, moving to a bench facing the water and gesturing for me to sit. After I do, he sits next to me. “My father passed away six years ago. My mother lives in a retirement community in Florida.”

I like how it feels when he possessively drags an arm across my shoulder. Like it a little too much, in fact. “She went that route, huh?”

He nods. “All of her friends ended up moving to Florida so she jumped

on that train.”

“How often do you see her?”

“Not often enough, really.” The tension in his eyes tells me he’s close to his mother. “I travel there to see her every couple of months, and of course over the holidays. But she has a good life out there. A busy life with a new husband.”

“She sounds happy.”

He gives another firm nod. “She’s a ball of sunshine and bourbon, my mother.”

“She sounds like a woman I’d like.” I chuckle then admit, “Though, honestly, I can’t imagine why anyone would want to leave this behind for Florida.”

“Neither can I.” He drags his fingers along my shoulder, glancing out at the beach ahead of us.

Silence settles in, and it’s a comfortable silence, I come to realize. I’m highly aware of the way I lean into him, how that single touch of his rises my body temperature, and how I pay attention to his every move. Though my mind is on hyperdrive, and I need answers. I glance at Liam next to me. His gaze seems to have never moved away. “What about friends? What do you do for fun?”

“I mingle,” he says.

“With people you do business with, you mean?”

He inclines his head. “Business takes up a lot of my free time.”

“No close friends other than that?”

“I have a few college buddies. We get together when we can. Somehow, though, life seems to get busy, and not just for me.”

I consider that, thinking men are so different than women. Or maybe just businessmen are different. Their professional life and personal life are so intertwined. I can’t imagine that. Sure, Jackson and I catch a game at the pub sometimes. But I consider Jackson a close friend, family even.

Liam suddenly chuckles, dragging me from my thoughts. “You think there’s something wrong with my not having close friends?” he asks.

“Not wrong, exactly,” I clarify with a shrug. “I just can’t imagine that. I have Mallory. And before Mallory, I had other close friends. I still talk to those friends, but life has taken on new directions and stuff.”

Something crosses his face then. It’s like I’ve touched on a sore spot. I begin to wonder if maybe he once did have a close friend.

He glances at the Ferris wheel. “You and I live in two very different worlds, Aria. You see brightness in the darkness. You see good where there isn’t good. And that’s one thing about you that is undeniably beautiful.”

My heart squeezes at the way he speaks about me. It’s sincere and honest, and it feels like it comes from such an honest place. “You seem to see brightness in people as well,” I point out.

He turns and gives a small smile. “In you, I see brightness.” My breath catches at the emotion in his eyes when he adds, “Only in you.”

Unexpected tears rise in my eyes that shock me as much as they overwhelm me when I reach for his hand, holding it in my lap. Liam is power, sex, and control. Yet there’s a sweetness about him. A sweetness that he has toward me that I am only seeing now. Maybe because I’m finally letting myself see it.

With heavy emotions clawing at my throat, I look out at the water, hoping he doesn’t notice he’s affecting me. If he does, he doesn’t say anything. He’s silent beside me, taking in Santa Monica moving by us in a blur. I’m lost in the way I feel in this exact moment.

Here, there’s no feud. There’s no confusion. There is only us. And us feels pretty damn great.



## ARIA

By the time we return to the house, my belly is full from the seafood dinner we had on the pier. Darkness has settled over the skies, and I leave Liam in the living room, quickly scurrying off to the bathroom, pretending I have to pee. My emotions feel put through the wringer. I'm questioning everything I think I know when I enter the sleek bathroom and shut the door, locking it behind me. I move to the closed toilet lid and take a seat, my cellphone a heavy weight in my hand.

First things first, the information that I learned from Liam over breakfast about the Bakker deal is circling in my mind. What Liam doesn't know, and what Jackson didn't want Liam to know to gain leverage over him, is that Jackson is secretly representing one of the clients fighting for the merger, the Pioneer Group. Our clients recently fired their lawyers, hiring Keller LLC instead. It's something the public doesn't know yet, and clearly Liam doesn't know it either because he's told me something he shouldn't have. I don't know if it's because his guards are down, or if he simply trusts me more now, but I feel like I'm being torn in two directions.

Jackson could use this information to seal his deal. I know what Liam is planning to offer Bakker now. Jackson could easily win this by offering something better. Because there's something I know that Bakker's employees also don't have. And that's a pension. But can I sell Liam out like that?

Before today, yes, in a second. I'm loyal to Jackson.

After today?

I don't know anymore. My heart feels different than it did yesterday. "You've gone and made this fucking complicated," I chastise myself, knowing I can only do one thing now. I click the button on the side of my cell, awakening the screen, and call Mallory.

She answers on the third ring. "Shouldn't you be having the best sex of your life right now instead of calling me?"

"I *am* having the best sex of my life," I reply.

"If that's true, then why are we talking?"

I pause, trying to put into words how I'm feeling. My heart is tied up in knots. I didn't know it would be like this with Liam. I thought he'd flaunt his

money all over me. Isn't that what rich, powerful men do? But he's not about money at all. His beach house belonged to his father. That was meaningful. He likely paid a lot for our breakfast, not to wow me, but for privacy. Just the two of us. The ornament was so damn thoughtful, I still can't wrap my head around any guy doing stuff like that for me. Mallory does, of course. But men usually don't get me that way.

"Aria?" Mallory asks gently.

"I like him," I blurt out.

"You. Like. Him?"

I drop my head into my free hand. "Yes, he's practically perfect in every goddamn way."

"Okay," Mallory says slowly. "You're going to have to catch me up on this because I'm confused as shit over here. Is liking him a good or a bad thing?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly, staring down at my pink painted toenails. "I mean, he's everything I knew he would be. Hot. Intense. Incredible lover. But then he's so much more."

"I'm still not catching the bad part in all this."

I curl my toes underneath themselves, wanting to curl into myself. "Okay, so today, we had this amazing, and sexy, I might add, breakfast. Then we spent the rest of the day at the Santa Monica Pier, shopping, having the most romantic sunset dinner, and honestly just having fun. It was a perfect day, Mallory. Totally and mind-bogglingly perfect."

"Wow." Mallory snorts a laugh. "You're right, that all sounds terrible."

I snort. "I'm not supposed to like him, remember? I didn't come here to fall for Liam. I came here to get him out of my system."

Mallory pauses then gently says, "I don't think this should really come as any big surprise. You guys have had this crazy thing going on for a long time."

"My point exactly," I retort. "We *can't* have this crazy thing on. I told myself that I couldn't. I swore to myself that I wouldn't. I can't do that to Jackson."

"I think all of this is just so stupid," Mallory says, anger edging her voice. "Why can't you two be together? I know Liam. I care for him. He's a good guy. He'd make you happy. You'd make him happy. You guys would be so great together—which I have told you a thousand times before now. Why is Jackson stopping that from happening?"

“Because he hates him.”

“For what, though?”

“I don’t know.” And that was the problem. “Whatever it is, Mallory, it must be serious. They loathe each other, and right now I can’t see who is really at fault. Because as much as Jackson has told me that Liam is going to play me like fiddle, I don’t see it. Everything he does, it’s with me in mind.”

“Well, yeah, that’s because Liam is in love with you, which I’ve also told you.”

“I know you have, and I’m starting to believe you,” I finally admit to both her and myself for the very first time.

She pauses again, obviously shocked by my admission. Hell, even I’m shocked by my admission. Okay, yes, I knew there was something special between us but maybe I’d convinced myself that I had some way of controlling it.

I was dead wrong.

When Mallory speaks again, her voice is softer now. “Did he say those three little words to you?”

“He doesn’t need to, I feel them right in my bones, Mallory.”

Another pause. Then, “I guess the only thing left to ask is how do you feel about him?”

I draw in a long deep breath, allowing myself to absorb the meaning behind the words before I let them free. “You already know how I feel about him.”

“Yeah, I do know.”

I don’t need to say those three little words as much as Liam doesn’t need to tell them to me. It’s strange falling for someone you have a business relationship with, but Liam’s right, in our world professional and personal mix often. I think keeping things professional kept a boundary up, but now we’ve crossed that line and there is no going back.

When the heart knows, it knows. But what in the fuck do I do now?

The thought of hurting Jackson devastates me. Liam has hurt him, that much I know. He might not have told me what stands between him and Liam but his pain has always been clear to me.

Though can I say goodbye to Liam tomorrow?

“I should get going,” I say, lifting my head, knowing I’m never going to have that answer tonight. “I’m sure Liam’s wondering what I’m doing in here. And I really don’t want him thinking I’m sick or something.”

Mallory barks a laugh. “Total sexy killer.”

I laugh with her, glad for the break in the tension. “Before I go, how about you? Any news on your front about your date?”

“The only news at all was a message from the event coordinator telling me that a driver would be picking me up Tuesday morning.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

For Mallory’s sake, I’m hoping this date happens. Unlike me, she actually dates, but she’s been unable to hold down a steady boyfriend. I don’t really know why. She’s beautiful, sassy, and smart but she’s picky. Very picky. Though I’m also starting to wonder if someone bet on her at the auction to donate the money to the charity but doesn’t want the date to happen. “Keep me updated on that, all right?”

“Will do,” she says then hesitates. “And, Aria?”

“Yeah.”

“I know you and Liam both very well. I can’t say why Jackson hates him. Maybe Liam burned him somehow. But that had to have happened a long time ago. Everyone deserves a second chance, and Liam never hurt you. In fact, I’d say the only person possibly hurting you right now is Jackson if he’s holding you back from being incredibly happy with Liam.”

“Saying it like that makes it sound all very simple.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

I rise and stare at myself in the mirror, seeing a sparkle there behind the tension. It’s that feeling when someone understands you, truly, and appreciates you. It’s infectious and warm, and the fact that I’m feeling it with Liam is incredible. “It would be, if I could trust what I’m feeling around him. If I could trust the words that come from his mouth.”

“Trust is a prickly bitch,” she says in total agreement. “Well, then, all I can say as your bestie is trust your gut. It’s never led you wrong.”

“I love you, Malls.”

“Love you, too.”

The phone line goes dead before I can say anything more. I turn off my cell, shutting out the world for a little bit longer, and exit the bathroom. Silence surrounds me when I journey down the thin hallway of white painted bare walls. I expect to find Liam in the living room but he’s nowhere in sight, though I notice the sliding door in the living room is wide open. I leave my cellphone on the counter then pad my way across the white ceramic floors

and step outside.

That's when he appears.

Beneath the full moon, Liam stands at the edge of the water, power and calmness all in one. There's a lot on my mind, that much I do know. A lot I need to figure out. But what this man does to me, the control he has over my body is not one of them.

## CHAPTER 6

*Liam*

**MY TOES** dig into the sand, the cool water splashing up on my legs. The night is quiet with a slight breeze creating waves out on the water. When warm hands slide beneath my arms and over my chest, I smile and turn to Aria. I catch the strain in her eyes, and understand perfectly. I'm right there with her.

Tonight is all we've got left.

I can only hope I've begun to show her that right here with me is where she belongs. Though as I stare into her eyes, I'm torn between wanting her to realize this and hating to see her struggle like she is. "You don't want this night to end?" I ask, brushing a thumb across her cheek.

"Here everything is very uncomplicated," she admits.

I brush my fingers across her cheeks, tucking her hair behind her ears, appreciating her honesty. "What's so complicated?" I need to get through to her, no matter what.

She stares into my eyes, the moonlight casting a stunning glow across her face. "I thought we'd have this epic weekend of hot sex."

I arch a single eyebrow. "Have we not had that?"

She laughs softly, leaning her palms against my chest. "Of course, we have, but it's more than hot sex. I like being with you. Today, it was . . ."

"Easy," I offer, understanding completely.

She nods and smiles. "It feels good being around you."

Now that's exactly what I want to hear. "I know it feels good."

"How do you know?"

"Because it works, you and I."

Her brows draw together, confusion so heavy in her eyes. “How can you be so sure about me?”

“You’re unforgettable, Aria.”

I see the way my words affect her, softening her eyes. “See, it’s things like that. Why do you have to say stuff like that?”

“It’s the truth.”

“Is it?” she asks, wide-eyed.

That’s when I see what this is all about. Jackson has poisoned her mind. She’s desperate to believe me but she can’t. And she can’t because Jackson has clearly told her not to trust me. I hate him for that, as much as I hate him for everything he’s done. I refuse to waste my last night with Aria thinking about Jackson. I step closer, sliding both of my hands across her face. “Stay here with me, Aria.” I brush my lips across hers. “Can you do that?”

Her eyes search mine. It’s clear she’s fighting against all the lies in her mind to what the truth of my touch holds. “I can try,” she says gently.

“That’s all I ask.”

It wasn’t, though. Not truly. She knows that truth. So do I. I want her to give me everything. I want to wake up next to her in the morning. I want to go to sleep with her safe in my arms. There is not a memory from this night on that I don’t want her in.

To remind her how real things are between us, and to break the hold the lies have on her mind, I take her hand and lead her back into the house, locking the door behind me. Up until now, I’ve played gently. I won’t anymore. She’s mine, and it’s about time she knows it.

When we reach the bathroom, I stop in the middle of the room and look at her. I drop any shields I usually keep up, where I fight the dominance I feel around her. Now I flood her with all of me. Perhaps it’s the way I look at her, or something more, but her pupils dilate, lips part and she begins breathing heavily, anticipation peppering the air.

“Undress and then press your hands against the vanity and wait for me,” I tell her.

I don’t stick around to see if she obeys my instructions. I know she will. I leave the bathroom and move to the bedroom, opening the dresser drawer when I get there. I fetch out the items I bought before the trip and then I return to Aria. I stop in the doorway, studying the beauty who did exactly as I asked. My vision narrows on her, a gorgeous woman there for my taking. “I want you,” I tell her, not getting closer, letting her anticipate my moving to



her. “All of you. Will you give me that, Aria?”

“Yes,” she rasps, staring at me in the mirror.

I smile letting her know I like that answer then approach. When I step in next to her, I place the black crop, black silk ribbon, and a silver butt plug on the vanity in her line of vision. “Do you truly want to give me everything I want?” I ask again, letting her back out.

“Yes,” she says.

I slide my hand across the small of her back feeling the slight tremble beneath her flesh. “If you say stop, I stop. This isn’t about pushing limits. Do you understand?”

She shivers against me. “What if I want to push my limits?”

Regardless that I find her amusing and grin, I lean down and nip her shoulder hard, loving the gasp she gives me. I look at her through the mirror and say more firmly now, “Do you understand?”

Dark eyes greet me. “Yes.”

“Good girl.” I reach for her hands, taking the black ribbon and tying her wrists. “Ah, look what I have here, such a pretty present.” I hook that ribbon over the faucet, keeping her bound there, then I step in behind her, undressing as I stare at her. “Spread your legs.” She wiggles her legs open wider, and I instruct, “Arch your back. I want to see what’s mine this weekend, Aria.”

Her bottom jiggles slightly with her shiver as she arches her back, showing off her damp folds glistening in the light. “That’s it,” I murmur, absorbing the desire she pulls out in me. “So very pretty.” I reach for the crop and slide the leather up her thigh over her bottom to drag down the other thigh. I don’t stop that teasing, continuing to drag the crop up the long line of her spine, letting her anticipate when I’m going to strike her.

Just when I see the slight quiver, a telling sign her adrenaline is running high, I lightly tap my way down her spine to her ass, where I swat each butt cheek before I slide the leather against her reddened flesh.

I glance at her face in the mirror and she’s watching me intently, a sexy gleam in her eyes. It’s playful. I like her this way, surrendering to me. I glance away from her face, paying attention to her body while I continue to drag the crop over her until I’m sliding it down her puckered knot and over her wet folds.

She moans, and I listen to what she’s telling me. I step in behind her, squatting and staring at her ready entrance. I gently tap the crop up against her clit, once, twice, three times.

Just when I can tell she's *right there*, I use the flat of the crop to rub against her bundle of nerves until her legs begin shaking. It's a sexy show of her accepting pleasure, and it hardens my dick to steel.

Her breath hitches, her moans cutting off with her rising pleasure, but I won't allow her to come this way. I drop the crop, spread her cheeks with my hands and from underneath, I suck on her clit. Hard. Purposeful. Intent.

It's no surprise she immediately explodes against me. The only thing holding her up is my hands and her shuddering pussy against my mouth. When her knees lock again and she's gasping for breath, I lick her slit, treating myself to her taste.

When her soft, satisfied moans fill the air again, I rise and move to the drawer taking out the bottle of lube. I drop a generous amount into my hand then stroke the butt plug as I move to her. I rub the remainder of liquid on my hand across her puckered knot, then I spread her cheeks and place just the tip of the plug against her ass.

With my free hand, I grab her hair, loving the way she moans when I do. I'll use each and every *on* button she has to my advantage. I lean down kissing her shoulder while I use my hand to bend her head, exposing her neck to me. I wait until her moans grow deeper, raspier, then I push against the plug, slowly. I don't need to rush. I want her body aching for whatever I give her, opening to all that I want.

I drag my lips from her neck to her mouth when I grab her neck, holding firmly while I take her mouth in the ways I've yearned to take her. It's dominating. It's passionate. It's wild and dirty. And I fucking love how she melts beneath me.

When the plug finally pushes past the tight rim and settles into place, I finish with a slow slide of my tongue against her parted lips before I lean away and lift the thick ribbon off the facet and tug her forward. Her eyes are dark, nipples tight, all but begging for my mouth.

I grab the lube again before we step into the shower, and I grasp her hip, positioning her to stand under the water. My focus narrows on her when I turn the cold water on. Her eyes go huge and her gasp sizzles over me; I like waking her up like this. From hot to cold, I want her fucking alive for me.

Only when I note her hard tremble do I add warm water and step under the stream, grabbing her chin and using my body to push her back against the wall. I kiss her mouth, her cool soft flesh against my hot, hard body; it's a stark contrast that I revel in. I slide my hands up her arms raising them above

her head, deepening the kiss. I reach for the ribbon and attach it to the hook that I added there Thursday night for this sole purpose.

Now bound in the shower beneath the stream, and with the intensity of what I feel for her burning through me, I grab her chin firmly, angling her mouth and kissing her roughly. I bite her lips and suck on them, telling her I own her. She's doing what I want her to do, she's softening beneath me, gasping against my lips, owned by my pleasure.

The water is warm over her, trailing down my face splashing against our mouths. I refuse to wait any longer. I grasp her hip and bend slightly at the knee finding her slit, then I enter her in one swift stroke. Her loud moan echoes against the shower walls while I pump my throbbing cock inside her. I don't play around when I fuck Aria. I know she likes it hard. And that's how I'll give it to her. Because I want her exploding into her orgasm.

I feel the early quivers against my cock, the tightening of her inner muscles, telling me I could easily send her flying but I don't want that. I want nothing less than her boneless tonight. I spin her so she's pressed against the glass shower wall, tightening the bindings on her wrists. I reach down and grab the lube, keeping myself out of the stream of the shower, and drench my cock in the lube before dropping the container to the shower's floor again.

Then I focus on her, caressing her wet, smooth ass.

I reach for the butt plug and slowly take it out, dropping it to the floor. I don't pause, giving her no time to worry or fret. With one hand on her hip, the other on the base of my dick, I press my cockhead against her puckered knot and I slip the tip in, the plug softening the tight rim as I had hoped. I push inside, steady and gentle, and reach around her body and begin stroking her clit, feeling the shake of her legs.

"See how you like this, Aria? How much you like that I'm touching all the places that you know belong to me?"

"Don't stop." She gasps.

I push my hips forward, shoving more of my dick in her ass. I see the way I'm overwhelming her as she's full-out shuddering now. It's then I can tell she has a virgin ass. No one's ever dared touch her this way. Or perhaps knew how to do it right so she didn't hurt. Because I'm either fulfilling a fantasy or she's simply overwhelmed by me. Whatever the reason, I like the intensity she's projecting when I begin shifting my hips. I don't move fast. I take this slow. I savor the way she squeezes my dick so tight. I moan as the rim slides up and down over my shaft, the water only adding to the

overwhelming pleasure. But it's the statement here I like most of all. She will give me things she's never given anyone.

The man in me likes that.

It makes the beast inside want to demand more.

Though as the minutes go by, I realize, no matter how tight her ass is and how much I revel in how she feels, I need to see her face when I come. I withdraw, spinning her, loving the half-lidded eyes she's giving me. I squirt some soap onto my hand and give my dick a clean under the stream of water before I reach for her hip and reenter her swiftly, determined to get us both off.

My thrusts are hard, my pelvis smacking against her, water splashing up around us while I drive lust into her. I cup her face, angling her chin, showing her how I can pin her and make her mine, and within seconds, she's falling into where I'm taking her.

With a hitch of her breath and a piercing scream, she goes wild, thrashing against me. The fierceness of her orgasm brings mine with little warning. Pleasure rushes down my spine pooling into my cock until I'm roaring and bucking, spurting my seed into her.

When my vision clears and she's all I see again, I discover something different. A new side of her, maybe. There's more to her eyes now than satisfaction, there's something so much deeper, so real and honest. In this second, I have exactly what I asked for. All of her. Without the barriers. Without the poison.

## **CHAPTER 7**

## *Aria*

**THE RICH AROMA** of coffee brewing stirred me from sleep the next morning. A couple of hours atop, beneath, and draped over Liam's hard body kick-started my day with a smile on my face. It wasn't until we drove back to central Los Angeles later that Sunday morning that I was reminded how soon this fantasy of ours would come to an end.

Last night I had wondered if maybe I'd wake up with some clarity in how to make this all work but the truth is, I have no idea. I can't hurt Jackson in the way I would if I chose to be with Liam. Though the thought of walking away from Liam today, pretending that what I experienced with him wasn't real and incredible, seems wrong, too.

I sense a similar tension in Liam. He's been too quiet on the drive home, obviously lost in his thoughts the same way I'm lost in mine.

When he pulls to a stop outside my condo, there's nothing I want to do more than stay in this car next to him. My heart suddenly feels like it's ripping in two, and I'm scrambling to somehow put the pieces back together again. Knowing I must, I turn to face him, discovering his conflicted stare on me. "So . . ." I begin, not really knowing what to say, or how to leave him.

His eyes search mine then he gestures. "Come on." He opens his door. "Let's take a walk." He's out of the car a second later, moving quickly to my side and opening the door for me.

Once I join him outside, the warm sun squinting my eyes, he shuts the door behind me. Silently, he takes my hand and walks across the street toward the small park. The heavy silence between us continues as we stride along the pathway, passing by people and their dogs enjoying the beautiful

day.

Liam finally gestures to one of the benches overlooking the expanse of the park with the branches of mature trees waving with the breeze. He sits first then I join him, staring off at a group of young women sitting under a tree, breaking into laughter. I draw in a big long breath, taking it all in. The sun. The silence. My park. The place I walk daily. Life seems exactly like it did when I left on Friday. Yet everything feels different.

Liam eventually breaks the silence. "I don't want to give you up."

I swallow the emotion rising in my throat and turn to face him, discovering his gentle expression. "I don't know how to make this work," I tell him honestly.

"Do you want this to work between us?"

How easy it would be to say yes. "It's a complicated answer, and you know that."

"Why, because of Jackson?" Liam's voice blisters.

I nod, glancing down at his strong hand cradling mine. "Jackson is like family to me," I explain, returning my attention to him. "To be with you would hurt him, and I can't do that."

Liam cocks his head. "The problem here is that you think I've done something to wrong him. Is that right?"

I shrug. "Jackson has never told me what went down between you two. But dating you when I know he hates you would be unfair of me, especially since I knew him first."

Liam snorts, glancing away. "Unfair of you." He shakes his head, obviously frustrated, then looks at me. "In this, you're thinking of him, not of yourself." He brushes his knuckles across my cheek. "How sweet you are, Aria."

A moment passes between us. Liam watching me intently, obviously thoughtful. He draws in a very long, deep breath, shutting his eyes. When they reopen, his brows are drawn, lips pinched. "Jackson is not who you think he is. He does not deserve the kindness you bestow on him."

I sigh, expecting Liam to go this route. "Please don't do this. Bashing Jackson isn't going to get you anywhere but my leaving."

"This isn't about bashing him," Liam counters, releasing my hand to lean his elbows on his knees, hands twined in front of him. "Remember when I said that I like to win fairly?" He glances sideways at me and waits for my nod before adding, "It's why I've never told you the truth about what

happened between Jackson and me. I didn't want to destroy him to win your loyalty."

"Then why are you now?" It had to be asked.

"Because Jackson stands between you and me. He's poisoned your mind with things that aren't true. Maybe in fear of losing your friendship, which I can tell is very important to him." Liam pauses to draw in a long breath, telling me this conversation is hard on him before adding gently, "You can't make a choice without all the knowledge. And I won't force you to decide, but I will arm you with the information."

"Okay," I say, "then arm me."

"Has Jackson ever told you about Sophia?" he asks.

I don't recognize the name and shake my head.

"I suppose that shouldn't be much of a surprise." Liam glances out at the young couple playing Frisbee before he looks back at me. "Sophia was my girlfriend in law school. We were together just shy of two years."

"Was the relationship serious?" I hadn't known he'd had a long-term girlfriend before but I guess that shouldn't be much of a surprise. He is in his early thirties.

"We were very serious," he explains. "I thought I'd marry her."

My throat tightens at the darkness in his expression. I reach for his hand again and squeeze, somehow wishing I could erase the memory of Sophia from his mind. "All right, so what does Sophia have to do with you and Jackson?"

"I'm guessing since you didn't know about Sophia that you also don't know that Jackson and I were roommates in law school."

I can't stop the widening of my eyes. "No, he never told me about that." Now I'm beginning to wonder why. Sure, Liam could be making this up. I'm even more sure that's what Jackson likely wants me to think. But I can tell by Liam's relaxed posture, the softness in his eyes, the haunted look on his face that he's not lying to me now.

"I can't believe he told you none of this," Liam bites off, shaking his head in obvious frustration. "You know nothing, and I'm guessing what you do know—if anything at all—is probably total bullshit." After another long deep breath, he adds, "Back in those days, I considered Jackson to be my closest friend."

Something about all this begins to raise the hair on the back of my neck. "I take it this Sophia caused a fight between you?"



Liam gave an unamused smile. “I see where your mind is at. You think this is typical male bullshit, one guy fighting another over a woman, don’t you?”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking.” Because that makes sense.

“Well, you’re wrong.” Liam turns his head to stare at a couple walking by, and his eyes gloss over, obviously, he’s lost in a memory. “We were happy, Sophia and I. In fact, I told Jackson I planned on proposing to her. I’m not sure how or even why it happened, but one night Jackson and I were talking about if a woman could be faithful. Jackson didn’t think she could.” Liam turns to me, gives a sad smile. “*Women always cheat*, Jackson told me. He thought any woman could be swayed with the right moves.”

I snort. “That sounds like the Jackson I know.”

Liam nods in agreement. “And like we know, Jackson has those moves and knows how to use them.”

Of course, I did. Jackson’s gorgeous, rich, and cocky as hell. Women lust after him, like I lusted after Liam. “I’ve seen those moves work on a few ladies, yes.” I shake my head, though, trying to understand. “But again, how does this relate to Sophia?”

“I’ll get to that, I promise,” Liam continues, voice soft. “The conversation that night became heated. Maybe it was the booze or testosterone. But what got started that night would change lives forever.”

I stare into Liam’s eyes and now I understand completely. “You challenged Jackson, didn’t you?”

“It’s sad how predictable we are.” Liam snorts.

It’s not hard to put two and two together. “I take it that Jackson won the bet.”

“That’s where things get interesting,” he explains. “I honestly hadn’t even thought about it after that night at the bar. One afternoon just before classes started, Jackson texted me to come home. It was an emergency, he said. I tried calling him but he never answered so I rushed home.” Liam hesitates, obviously to prepare himself for a hard admission. “When I entered the house, Jackson was fucking Sophia on our kitchen table.”

My hand comes to my mouth, and I’m speechless, trying to understand why Jackson would ever do that. Nevertheless, horrified all the same.

Liam nods at my shocked expression. “Yeah, that’s probably how I looked, too. In Jackson’s mind, he decided to show me up. Instead of choosing any woman with a boyfriend to win his bet, he picked the woman I

loved.”

Tears fill my eyes but not for me. For Liam. I see the way it destroyed him, the pain he still feels from the heartbreak in his life. The betrayal, by both Jackson and Sophia, must have been fierce. “I’m sorry that happened to you, Liam.”

“Don’t be sorry for me,” he says with a soft smile, tucking my hair behind my ear. “It was a hard lesson but I learned from it.”

“What could that possibly teach you?” Except to hate Jackson and Sophia.

“To be very careful who I trusted.”

God, I want to cry at that very thought. “No one should have to learn that lesson. I can’t believe Jackson did that to you. Did he say anything to defend himself?”

“We didn’t exactly talk things over,” he states with a dry laugh. “We beat each other senseless. After that, I moved out. We didn’t talk again until we began doing business with each other. Then we simply stayed professional.”

I search his eyes, perplexed by his decision. “You never wanted to understand why Jackson did that to you? I mean, he had to have a reason, don’t you think?”

“I didn’t care what his reasons were.” Liam frowns. “The friendship was over.”

I glance away, looking at a couple under a big shade tree, cuddled in each other’s arms. It’s a sweet thing really that no matter how badly Liam had been burned in his past, he’d still waited and wanted *me*. Of course, one could think he only did this to get back at Jackson but I know that isn’t the truth. I can feel Liam’s affection, and Liam isn’t a spiteful man. Though the longer I look at the couple, the more I can’t believe Jackson would ever be so cruel. Why did he do this to Liam? More importantly, why didn’t he tell me? We were close, as close as brother and sister.

“I wanted you to know the truth,” Liam says, dragging me out of my thoughts. When I look at him, I find his gaze strong again, the painful memory obviously pushed away. “I wanted you to know of what stands between Jackson and me, and to understand what happened in our pasts so you could make a conscious decision going forward.” My heart feels squeezed in my chest when he rises and adds, “I will never make you choose between us, Aria. But you need to ask yourself a question.”

“What’s that?” I barely whisper.

He arches a single eyebrow. “Does Jackson deserve your unwavering loyalty?” My breath hitches, the world spinning slightly around me, when he leans forward and presses his lips against my forehead. “You know where you belong, Aria. And you know that I’ll be waiting for you.”

A chill in the air brushes over me when his lips leave my skin. He turns and strides down the pathway, leaving me alone with my confused heart, my jumbled thoughts, and a very big decision to make.

## CHAPTER 8

*Liam*

**LATE INTO MONDAY AFTERNOON**, I sit behind my desk in the corner office, gazing out at the bustling downtown core through my window. The longer I've sat here today, the more my muscles twitch with the need to run and fetch Aria. It's been twenty-four hours since I last pressed my lips to hers, and those hours have been long and brutal.

Before this weekend, I'd been convinced that not fulfilling the lust I endured with her had been torture. I was wrong. When I walked away from her yesterday at the park, it had been the hardest thing I've ever done as a man, and quite possibly will ever have to do.

For three days, my life had meaning. *Her*.

Now without her, I'm spiraling out of control, drowning in the darkness, unable to fully get air into my lungs. It's hard to remember what it felt like to not touch her. Everything seemed so natural, so easy. I want that. I want her.

For what has felt like hours, I've been stuck, staring at the high-rise housing Keller LLC, where Aria is working this morning. I've recounted all the reasons I shouldn't go to her, and then I've reminded myself of them again. Repeatedly. On one hand, my arms ache to possessively take her in close declaring that she's mine. On the other hand, I know that I cannot make this decision for her. This isn't a game. This isn't about winning. I want her to choose to be mine.

I suppose that's why I can't seem to move, sitting here wishing my reality was different. She hasn't come to me. She's picked Jackson. And now the red-hot anger blistering my blood toward Jackson isn't about his betrayal with Sophia. It's about the way he's poisoned Aria's mind against me and the

power he has over her. Power that shouldn't belong to him. Power that I want to shift to me.

"Today is a very good day."

At the low gravelly voice filling my office, I turn in my swivel chair to face the doorway, finding Thomas Henry, Maxwell LLC's COO, and my right-hand man, entering the room. He's a strong man, both in looks and in character. He's thick around the middle, salt and pepper on top, and his dark blue eyes shine with the wisdom of the killer negotiator and savvy businessman that he is. "You've come with good news on the Bakker deal, I take it?"

"Excellent news, indeed." Thomas smiles, his teeth stained from coffee and cigars. He opens his suit jacket and sits in the brown leather chair in front of my desk. "Bakker's team, including Bakker himself, is coming in within the hour to negotiate some of the terms, but from what I hear it's nitpicky stuff that shouldn't give us too much of a problem."

The little stuff went hand in hand with negotiations, and I'm not concerned. "Good. Norcross will be pleased." And pleasing the clients pleased me, but I wasn't alone in handling this deal. I lean back in my seat, stretching out my legs. "I appreciate you taking over control of this while I was gone this weekend."

"Ha! What did I do?" Thomas quips, crossing an ankle over his knee, arms draped on the armrests. "You're the magic behind this deal, Liam. And from what I hear, Bakker took your offer over the Pioneer Group's solely based on the fact that we focused on the employees of the company. That was all you. I had no part in that."

"It was a fifty-fifty shot," I admit, knowing how risky the move had been.

Thomas agrees with a nod. "And yet it worked. Another game won."

That's the part of corporate law I enjoy. The high. Even now, I sense the adrenaline pulsing through my veins, knowing that Norcross is likely celebrating their win. This deal puts Maxwell LLC into the forefront of corporate lawyers, and I'm proud of that.

Though the heaviness in my chest is overshadowing the high. I scan the law books behind Thomas, so much history, so much knowledge. I win. I don't lose. And if I do, I go down fighting hard. Even with all that I know, all that I am, I can't figure out how to make Aria choose me over Jackson. Yesterday, I was sure being honest with her would force her to see Jackson for the shithead he is. I'd never hated being wrong this much before.

Refusing to allow my mood to ruin Thomas's excitement, I bring my thoughts back to task, asking Thomas, "Have you called in Norcross to attend the meeting as well?"

He cocks his head, eyes inquisitive. "Do you think that's necessary?"

I nod without pause. "Considering how important the personal touch seems to be to Bakker, yes, I think it's not only important but necessary." For me, no deal is done until the signatures are dry on the paper. "Bakker can still change his mind," I remind Thomas. "Let's not give him a reason to." I draw in a long breath and consider the next steps before adding, "Perhaps ask Eric"—the CEO of Norcross—"to bring his children, too. They don't need to come into the meeting but having them in the office will only feed Bakker's love of family."

Thomas rises from his chair. "Consider it done."

I nod and smile in thanks then turn in my chair again. My gaze falls to the high-rise once more, my thoughts returning to Aria just that easily. I understand people, it's why I'm good at what I do. But Aria, she's the one person I can't read. I like that. She's a challenge. I also hate it, and I feel like I'm staring at a solid brick wall that I can't break through.

"Has there been any word from Keller?"

I jerk my head to the doorway, surprised that Thomas hadn't left yet. "No, why would there be?" Jackson is the last person I want to hear from.

Thomas shoves his hands into his pockets and studies me intently before he shakes off his obvious shock. "Ah, I'm sorry, I thought you heard. Keller represented the Pioneer Group."

The Pioneer Group, a powerful and wealthy company, had been the leading contender on this deal—until I snuck in and stole it out from under them, of course. "What do you mean Jackson represented them?" As far as I knew, they were represented by the lawyers of Clark and Sacks.

"From what I heard this afternoon, I guess a few days ago, Pioneer decided Clark wasn't doing a good enough job and canned him. Keller took over the deal, choosing not to tell any of us he represented the clients until this morning. Perhaps that was Jackson's strategy."

I snort. "If we thought we were up against some small-time firm we'd go easier on the deal." Sounds like something smart and dirty Jackson would do. "It's not a bad strategy."

"Perhaps not." Thomas grins. "Lucky for us it didn't work."

I nod in agreement but I'm lost in my thoughts, unable to speak. I absorb

what Thomas has told me, the world slowing around me.

Jackson was on the other side of this deal. Aria had to know that. Sure, I could focus on the fact that she never told me when I mentioned the deal to her. I also don't give two fucks about that.

However, there is something I do care about.

Over breakfast on Saturday with Aria, I had unknowingly given Aria the information she needed to close the Bakker deal for Jackson. She knew what we were going in with. She could have used that to her advantage to get Jackson the deal. "A quick thing before you go," I say to Thomas, hands pressed flat against my desk. "Do you know the stipulations of Keller's offer?"

"A cash deal," Thomas reports. "Half a million more than our deal."

"Nothing about employees?"

Thomas shakes his head. "Not that I'm aware of. That was your secret arsenal and damn, didn't it work nicely."

It did but I'm not thinking about Bakker right now in all this. Or Jackson. Aria, she's all I'm thinking about.

Thomas slaps the doorframe. "I'll get on the phone with Norcross now and get them in for the meeting."

"Excellent. Thank you, Thomas."

I watch him stride down the hallway through the glass walls, and glance at Mallory's desk. She's got her head down, focused on whatever task she's doing. While I've never discussed Aria with Mallory, I almost wish I did now. She knows Aria better than anyone, and I don't want to overstep. I don't want to force her like Jackson had poisoned her. But I don't want to put Mallory in that position either. She's already being quiet with me today, telling me that Aria filled Mallory in on all that transpired this weekend. Perhaps Aria even shared her feelings, though I suspect she kept what Jackson had done a secret. Aria's too loyal to share something so private about someone else.

Conflicted about what to do next, I rise from my seat and move to the bank of windows, staring off in the distance at the mountains. When I returned from Santa Monica, the world seemed different, changed now that I'd experienced what life with Aria would be like.

I didn't want to choose for her.

I wanted her to come to me.

The thing is, I'm done waiting.





## ARIA

Later that evening, after quite possibly the longest day of work that I've ever had to endure, I'm doing what any normal woman does when life is in the crapper. I've got mindless television on and a large bowl of potato chips in my hands. I haven't even made a dent into the mound of deliciousness when my doorbell rings. I'm off my couch in an instant, whisking the front door open not a second later, still holding my bowl of chips, expecting to find Jackson.

That's not who I find.

Dressed in his fine black tailored suit with a dark red tie, Liam's gaze roams my face, a frown marring his. "You've been crying."

It's a statement, not a question, and Liam is obviously not happy about my tears.

My head hurts too much to take the road of gentleness. "Why are you here?" I ask bluntly.

Liam's eyes widen, seemingly I'm surprising him. Soon enough calmness and confidence replaces the shock. "Your loyalty has shifted to me." He shoves his hands into his pockets. "Did you honestly think I wouldn't come for you when I heard Jackson represented the Pioneer Group?"

"Of course, I knew you'd come," I whisper, emotion clawing at my throat. Because maybe I want that. Maybe I don't want to be alone anymore. "But just because I made that choice doesn't mean I have to feel good about it. And I don't."

Liam's brows draw together, expression thoughtful, while he keeps a careful distance, studying me intently. "So, is that what's upsetting you? You feel guilty?"

I know he wants to understand. Hell, even I want to understand everything that happened today but my mind is spinning, the world unsteady beneath my feet. "If only it was that simple," I say to the both of us.

Liam exhales a heavy breath, softening his expression. "Aria, do not go through all this alone. You don't have to. I'm here. Tell me what's wrong, and I'll do whatever I can to help fix it."

I don't know if it's what he said, the strength and meaning behind his

words, or how he looks at me, like he'd run through flames for me, that hits me straight in the heart, but that's exactly what happens. He's what I need. I draw in a deep breath then suddenly everything I've been holding in all day comes out in a blubbing mess. "Everything is all fucked up."

I'm standing there alone and then I'm not, wrapped in his powerful arms, the woody scent of his cologne a comforting aroma, his arms the perfect strength I need. "Tell me what's happened," he says, gently soothing his hand across my back.

I press my face against his dress shirt, warm tears flooding my cheeks. "Jackson is really pissed off."

Liam keeps an arm around me, shutting the door then moving us to the couch. We lower together against the cushion. My head on his shoulder, he wraps an arm around me. "Now what's this about Jackson? Did you talk to him and he got upset?"

I get the feeling that if Jackson had been angry with me, Liam would handle him. "No, in fact, it was the exact opposite," I correct, grabbing a tissue off the coffee table and wiping my nose. "Jackson showed up at work this morning, found out we lost the merger to you then left, without saying a single word to me. And he wouldn't answer any of my calls or texts."

"That doesn't sound like Jackson," Liam says, his finger slowly trailing over my shoulder, brows drawn. "He's not the type of man who runs from anything."

I agree with a nod. "It doesn't make sense," I say. "We'd come to an understanding about the weekend date before I left, and he seemed to accept it." I pause, trying again to think this through, like I'd been trying to since the second I realized he walked out the door without speaking to me. "The only thing I can think of is that he knows that you told me about Sophia and maybe he doesn't want to face that truth, but how would he know that?"

One eyebrow arches. "Believe me, he knows that I would tell you at some point this weekend. Jackson is not stupid. I can only imagine he's aware that once I had you, I would refuse to let you go, including telling you about the real guy he is."

I sigh, believing that to be the truth. "God, what is he thinking now?" My heart clenches, throat tightens. "He must believe I think the very worst of him."

Liam's brows arch higher. "You don't?"

He's not upset, I can tell. He is curious, however, so I set to explaining.

“What Jackson did to you was wrong. So wrong.” I pause and add gently, “But he did that to you, Liam, not to me. And it happened a really long time ago.” I draw in a long breath collecting my thoughts before continuing. “I’ve made quite a few mistakes in my life. I can’t judge him for making a mistake, no matter how terrible it was. Jackson has been nothing but supportive, loving, and kind to me. The thought that he’s alone somewhere, hurting, thinking that I hate him breaks me.”

Liam stays silent, obviously assessing me. He eventually asks, “You really care about him, don’t you?”

I nod, tears on my face. “I love him.”

Liam’s gaze flicks up to the coffered ceiling a moment, his jaw muscles clenching and unclenching before he gives the longest sigh I’ve ever heard. “We’ll make this work,” he says, returning that potent stare on me.

I blink. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I will make peace with Jackson,” he states. “I will do whatever I can to ensure that Jackson is not angry at you, and I will forgive him, putting the matter to bed once and for all.”

My eyes go wide. I can’t help it. “You. Will. Forgive. Him?” I’m not sure I ever could.

“For you, yes.” He tucks a finger under my chin, commanding all my attention. “Though don’t forget, I will do this only for you because as much as I want you to be with me, I also want you to be happy.”

I want to believe him. God, do I want to, but life isn’t that easy. “While that paints a pretty picture, how will that work? If I go out for dinner with Jackson sometimes, will you honestly be okay with that?”

“Yes.”

I snort and shake my head softly. “I don’t believe you. I know you want to believe that, but the hatred you two feel is nothing I’ve ever seen in anyone before. You can’t simply get over that from one weekend.”

Something crosses his expression then. Something intense. Liam shifts on the couch facing me, his hands slide possessively across my face. “I want you, Aria. That’s the endgame here. I refuse to spend another goddamn hour without you. If that means I have to tolerate Jackson and deal with you spending time with him without me, then I will deal with that. That’s on me, my shit to deal with. And I will deal with that.”

“Really?” I ask, my heart hoping that’s true.

“Really.” He leans forward, his mouth moving closer to mine. “Tell me

what I need to hear, Aria.”

There are things I know he wants to hear. But I have things of my own to tell him first. “Do you want to know what makes you so unforgettable, Liam?” I ask, slowly dragging my lips across his.

“Yes,” he says gruffly.

“It’s the way you see me.” I flick my tongue across his bottom lip. “I’ve never had anyone look at me the way you look at me.”

His eyes darken, rich lust in their depths. “That’s because you’re the most stunning woman I’ve ever seen.”

I press a soft kiss to his mouth. “I’ve never had anyone want me like you want me. Crave me like you do.”

He nips my bottom lip, the side of his mouth arching. “You drive me crazy.” He tucks his thumb under my chin. “Tell me what I want to hear, Aria.”

“I love you.”

Intensity flashes in his eyes, his hands tight on my face. “I love you, too.” His lips drop to mine then and his kiss is strong but his affection holds a different edge, a softer edge that’s all mine. When he leans away, he whispers against my mouth, “Feels good finally saying that, doesn’t it?”

I laugh softly against his mouth. “It does.”

He wipes the tears from my cheeks. “No more tears, all right? We’ll figure this out.”

That’s when I know I’m staring into my future. I have him. He has me. And somehow, no matter what happens, that means things are going to be okay.

“So, what now?” I ask.

Liam tucks my hair behind my ear and smiles gently. “We’ll talk to Jackson together tomorrow morning and get this matter put to bed.” He grins then, a little devilishly with heat rising into his eyes. “For now, can I take you somewhere I’ve always wanted to take you?”

I grin back. “Where’s that?”

“To my bed.”

## CHAPTER 9

*Liam*

**FORTY MINUTES LATER**, I open my front door and stay back as Aria enters the penthouse only blocks away from my office. She kicks off her shoes, passing by the rustic computer desk. My gaze narrows on her as she moves past the sitting area with television stand to the left and strides under the circular wrought-iron chandelier to the bank of windows. I shut the door, lock it, then turn back to her, finding her staring out at the L.A. skyline. “Do you like it?” I ask her.

“Like it?” She turns back to me, giving a soft laugh. “No, Liam, I don’t just like this condo. I am in love with it.”

I step out of my shoes, leaving them at the door, then begin to approach her. Energy bounces between us as it always has but seems more powerful now. Richer, even. “That’s a bit of good news, then.”

“Why is that?” she asks, a playful edge to her voice.

“Because you’re going to live here with me. Maybe not now. But eventually you will.”

She presses her back against the glass, grinning. “You’re so sure of that, are you?”

“I’m *that* sure, yes.” I unbutton my jacket, leaving it on the dark gray chair I pass, watching her follow me as if I am everything she needs and more. My cock hardens under the lust in her eyes. The way she’s telling me she wants me to fuck her all by a single look. When I reach her, I slide my hand across her hip, pulling her in close. “Do you have a rebuttal, Ms. Finley?”

The side of her mouth curves slightly, giving me that sexy smile that’s

always owned me. “Not at this time, Mr. Maxwell.”

“Good, because I would fight like hell to win this argument.” I slide my hands across her face, dropping my lips to hers. My kiss is soft, slowly building where I want us to go. “These lips are mine.” I move my hands down her shoulders and around her back, pulling her as close as she can be, needing that all for myself. “Your skin is mine.” I thrust one hand into her hair, angling her head to deepen my kiss, loving the way she melts into me.

I place my hands on her hips turning her to face the window and reach for her shirt, pulling it up over her bra. “Fuck, sweetheart, I want you so bad.” I squeeze her breasts, relishing the moans she gives. I reach up, unhooking her bra then hastily remove her shirt and bra, returning my hands to her breasts, tweaking her nipples until they form tight peaks. I turn her sideways, licking around her nipples as she reaches for my shirt, lifting it up. I have it off over my head a second later, and she’s removing my belt. I let her undress me, while I grab hold of her nipples squeezing them tight.

She gasps and shivers, and I like the intense way I make her react. I groan, ready to fuck her against the window for all of Los Angeles to see when she pushes my pants and boxer briefs down while she lowers to her knees. She leans back on her legs and gives me a sexy smile. I slide my hand across her cheek, staring into seductive eyes when she grabs my cock and tongues the head. I breathe deep with the pleasure. “You’re a fucking temptress, do you know that?”

She grins, playfully kissing the tip. “Yes, I do know that.”

I lose sight of her eyes as she takes my dick in deep, flooding me with pleasure, sucking her cheeks in around me. I toss my head back when her lips slide down my shaft, and she draws a low groan from my throat. Her hands run up my thighs to my abs, where I grab her hand holding it there, while I drop my head to watch her suck me off like she’s been starved of my cock.

Back and forth, she bobs on the tip. I thrust my hand into her hair again, demanding her gaze meet mine. I expect to find the vixen that dug her claws into me staring back at me. Instead, I discover softness in the depths of her eyes, warmth and affection, and something yet undiscovered between us.

She kisses the tip again before leaning back on her legs, slowly stroking her hand up and down my wet shaft. “You asked me before why I’ve been single.” She presses my cock against my stomach, leaning down to suck on one testicle before moving on to the other. “And the answer is, it’s because of you.” She brushes her lips across the tip of my cock before she tongues the



slit. Again, she leans away, slowly stroking me, staring me boldly in the eye. “I want you, Liam. Only you. Always you. No one else.”

Whether it’s the words she’s declared, the meaning behind them, or something else, I can’t exactly pinpoint the reason my control snaps but it does. I can no longer allow her to rule this or me. I lower my mouth down to hers, sliding my hand across her neck, tipping her head back. I kiss the pretty mouth that has haunted me for years. She’s doing what I want her to do, parting her lips, accepting my kiss until I’ve had my fill. I reach for her arms, helping her to her feet, and then I lift her up. Her legs wrap around my waist as I carry her into the bedroom.

Once we enter, I allow her to slide off my body and let her look around a moment, taking in the space I call mine. The walls are a deep, dark gray with silver accents. The light gray fabric headboard rests against the far wall with a set of light gray and dark gray sheets fitting perfectly smooth. On either side of the king-size bed is a pair of long mirrors with dark silver frames.

While she’s looking around, I turn and move to the chest I keep off to the right of the bed. A chest that is full of things I’ve imagined using with her. Things I bought at Vivian’s place before our weekend away. And there’s only a single purpose driving me now. I reach in and grab out a blindfold. When I turn back to her, she’s watching me closely. “Do you trust me?” I ask her, holding up the blindfold.

“That depends.” Her mouth twitches.

I arch an eyebrow. “On?”

“What you plan on doing to me while I’m blindfolded.” She laughs softly.

I chuckle, enraptured by her beautiful smile when I stand in front of her. “Well, love, that’s where the trust comes in.”

Her smile widens before she shuts her eyes, giving me the permission I need. I place the blindfold around her head, tying it tight. The red blindfold is stunning against her skin, calling to me. I drag my fingers over the hard line of her collarbone, across her shoulder, down her arm until I reach the curve of her breast. Using my knuckles, I caress her nipple, grinning when she trembles. “Ah, she likes that,” I murmur.

She tips her head back and moans.

I return to the chest, grabbing out a paintbrush and the small container of black paint on the small shelf. I take my time returning to her, letting anticipation build. Her chest is rising and falling quickly, and the flush of

cheeks against the red blindfold stirs a lust so rich and ravenous inside me my cock grows even harder, my balls aching to blow.

When I move in front of her again, I drag the tip of the paintbrush across her nipple. Her gasp brings heat into my sac. I continue to tease her, letting her mind imagine what it is I'm touching her with and what my plan is. I like her guessing. Fuck, I like surprising her even more. Which is why I slowly open the paint, leaving the lid on the table in the sitting area of the bedroom. I dip the brush in and slide the cool paint across her arm.

There's that half-smile again, and I smile with her, liking this between us. After which, I focus on *her*, painting her body in the only way that feels right between us at this moment. I don't count the minutes, or worry I'm taking too long. I take my time, getting this right, letting the silence flow between us. We have each other, and for right now, I'm content with that.

I squat, moving the brush across one thigh. Then the other, working my way back up to her toned stomach, where I slide the brush, slowly, teasingly making her feel like it's my tongue. One look at her nipples and I see how hard they are, how turned on she is. I don't need to feel her cunt to know she's soaking wet for me. Her little tremors, deep breaths, parted mouth already let me know that I have her on fire.

After my final stroke, I take a step back, studying the work of art before me. "You're stunningly perfect, Aria."

"Thank you," she whispers, hands flat against the sides of her thighs.

I turn back to the table, placing the paintbrush on the lid and leaving the small glass container there when I focus on her again. I take her hand, leading her beside the bed. I position her right where I want her, in the center of the mirror, not too close, leaving her able to see the room, us, and everything I want her to see.

I step in behind her and slide her hair back over her shoulders, then I reach up and remove the blindfold. She blinks once, obviously adjusting her vision to the light. Then her eyes squint before they slowly grow wide. I regard what she's looking at, too.

*Fearless. Kind. Strong. Beautiful. Sexy. Smart. Fiery.* They are all words I've painted across her flesh, along with a few more. "These reasons and more are why I've loved you from the very first moment I set my eyes on you."

Tears fill her eyes.

I kiss her shoulder softly, running my hand down her arm. "Tell me what

you're thinking."

A single tear slides down her cheek. "The words seem to hold more meaning painted on my body like this." She glances at me in the mirror. "I've never had a man love me like you love me. So fiercely. So decidedly."

"That's because I am the only man supposed to love you like this."

She turns then and slides her hands across my face. It's in this exact moment that I know I have her. Fully. Completely. Tears in her eyes, she whispers, "I'm sorry I made you wait so long."

"You made me earn you, appreciate you, and crave you in ways I've never wanted anything." I place a finger under her chin, tilting it up, ensuring she hears me. "Never be sorry, Aria. You made me *see* you in ways I've never seen anyone."

I lean in and my lips meet hers. It's passion. It's desire. We're unleashed. I press my body against hers, feeling the paint between us and nothing else, and I inch her back toward the mattress, helping her into the middle of the bed. I slide my thighs against her legs, spreading her open. "There are many ways I can take you tonight. So many kinky things I want to do to you." I shift my hips, pressing the tip of my throbbing cock against the warmth of her slit, sliding the weight of my body against hers, pressing her down into the mattress. "But tonight, your first night in the bed where I've imagined you for years, you're staying close. Your eyes on me."

She moans and arches into me as I slide inside her. I groan against how wet and hot she is. I press my face into her neck, grabbing her hips and slowly shifting my hips, feeling her hot lower lips sliding over my shaft.

When I lean away, I note the flush of her cheeks. She likes being pinned by me, I can tell. I reach up, grabbing her wrists, placing them above her head, and pump my hips. Her rich gasps and groans are what I need. Keeping her wrists above her head with one of my hands, I use the other to grab her leg, hooking my arm around her thigh to drive inside her. Christ, I'm as close and deep as I can get, and it's what I've wanted. What I've craved.

She's going to make me blow far sooner than I want. I flip our positions, keeping her chest pressed against mine, the paint sliding between us. I grip her round ass, taking control of her movements, and slide her up and down on my cock, her moans a stunning raspy sound in my ear. I wrap an arm around her and then press her back into the mattress. I lean up on my hands, staring down into her soulful eyes while she raises her hands to cup my face. "Tell me," I say to her.

“I love you,” she whispers, fully understanding what I want.

Her breasts are jiggling, her sexy body laid out before me, welcoming me in, time and time again, nothing between us anymore. I look into her eyes. “Again. Tell me.”

She slides her hands down my chest. “I love you, Liam.”

I groan and rock against her, feeling the beginnings of her quivers. I rise on my legs and grab her thighs, pressing her legs open so I can watch my cock disappear inside her. I enter her and when I withdraw, she’s soaking me, her arousal glistening off the light.

“Nice and slow, baby.” I glide my cock in and out, and her chin tips back, lips part, fingers digging into the bedsheets. Paint covers her skin now, and I assume mine as well but I’m not looking. I’m focused on the way her body is quivering. “Mmm . . . she likes this.”

“Don’t . . . stop . . .” She tenses against me, her legs straightening, and I growl with the way her pussy suddenly soaks and tightens against my dick. Her eyes snap open to mine, the bedsheets clutched in her hands, and she’s gasping against the pleasure. Her cheeks are pink and the flush descends down her chest.

Though it’s those eyes that get me. They own me.

And I lose myself in them. I drop down on top of her, sliding my hands back up her arms to place them over her head. I tangle my hands with hers, and I keep my rhythm slow but powerful, slapping my pelvis against hers, making her mine right here and now.

She’s safe beneath me. She’s mine to love. She’s mine to claim. And she’s arching against me, bucking and jerking her pleasure, and I ride her hard now until my cock is growing harder. I’m right where I belong. Inside her. My climax hits hard and fast and her inner muscles pull every last drop of cum I have to offer, while I roar my satisfaction.

On the last wave of energy, I switch our positions, her body flat against mine, my dick still pulsating inside her.

She laughs.

I wish I knew what was behind that laugh. Soon I will. Soon I’ll know how this woman thinks and what makes her click. For now, I ask, “What’s on that mind of yours?”

“I’m thinking that we ruined your very nice sheets.”

I chuckle, flipping us onto our sides, pushing the hair off her face. “I imagine in the years to come, we’ll ruin many bedsheets.”

She blinks, her eyes twinkle in orgasmic bliss. “Maybe a couple bed frames, too.”

Breathless, I kiss her forehead. “I will forever endeavor to fuck you hard enough to break bed frames.”

“Well, then”—she leans up, resting her hands on my chest—“that surely sounds like a pretty good happily-ever-after to me.”

She’s playful and light and happy, and I like her like this. But tomorrow we face Jackson, and now that she’s here, in my bed, a sudden intensity fills me. Possessive intensity. “Nothing else ever stands between us again,” I state, stroking her cheek with my knuckles.

Her eyes search mine. “Nothing ever comes between us again.”

And when she seals her mouth across mine, falling perfectly into my kiss, I know for certain, I have what I’ve always wanted.

Her heart.

# *Epilogue*

**“JACKSON, I’M WITH LIAM NOW,”** I say sternly, chin lifted, hands on my hips. “You’re either going to have to accept that or you’re going to have to fire me.”

The squeak of a door followed by, “Aria, will you get out here,” echoes in the employee bathroom at Keller LLC.

I sigh at Liam’s firm voice and continue to stare at myself in the mirror above the row of sinks. Okay, so maybe this is way harder than I expected it to be last night. Nerves are fluttering in my belly; my palms are sweaty. “Please be okay with us being together, Jackson. I need you in my life, too.” I say a final plea that this won’t end in an epic disaster and pick up my handbag off the vanity.

I move toward the bathroom door, knowing that Jackson will be here and this conversation will happen.

When I exit the bathroom, I find Liam standing in front of the door, arms crossed over his chest, a big grin on his face. “How was the pep talk, love?”

God, my gaze narrows on his sculpted mouth. All power in a tailored suit. Clean shaven. My belly tightens and sex tingles, I’m so incredibly aware of him when I reply, “Perfectly fine, thank you.” I gesture toward the hallway. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

Liam chuckles and takes my hand. I can tell he’s enjoying this, and I’m not going to refuse him that right. What Jackson did to him was beyond shitty, and I still intend—not now, of course—to find out why Jackson would be so cruel.

Hand in hand, we move down the hallway. The offices we pass are

empty. It's only eight o'clock in the morning, and while Jackson and I have always started at that time, no one else rolls in until closer to nine o'clock. "You promise to stay quiet and let me do the talking when we're in there, right?"

"Of course," Liam says.

I note the little twinkle in his eyes. "And of course, I don't believe that at all. I'm not even sure why I asked." I heave a long sigh and stop just outside of Jackson's office, beginning to wonder if bringing Liam here was the biggest mistake of all. Though he's right—we need to do this together. "Whatever happens, do not hit him. Promise me that, at least."

Liam frowns.

"Liam," I snap.

"Aria," he says with tight grin.

"For me. Promise me."

His jaw clenches. "I promise not to hit him square in his lying mouth."

I smile because, really, what else can I do? "I heard a promise in there so that's all that matters." Ready to get this over with, I lift my chin and enter Jackson's office but I stop short when I discover his chair empty.

"Well, that was anticlimactic," Liam says from behind me.

I turn to him, and just when I'm about to voice my concern, my cellphone beeps, indicating a text message. I grab my cell from my handbag and glance at the screen, convinced I must be seeing things wrong. "Holy shit!"

"What is it?" Liam moves closer.

I blink, speechless, and turn the screen to face him.

Liam's gaze roams over the message, and I swear every single word he absorbs deepens the rage in his stormy eyes. I totally get it. Even I'm still taking in the text from Mallory, trying to understand.

*Jackson is my date. Yeah, you read that right. P.S. Don't worry about me. I've got this, girl!*

When I'd gotten home on Sunday, I told Mallory everything about Liam and me, minus what Jackson had done to Liam. She'd listened and hugged me, telling me everything would be all right. Yesterday I stayed the night at Liam's, sending her a text after she was done with work letting her know where I was, and another text early this morning wishing her well on her date. Both times, her replies were quick but full of love. "I don't get this. Jackson kept his buying Mallory a secret? He changed the dates to be with her this week instead of on the weekend." I glance at Liam. "Why?"



Positively rich masculine anger peppers the air. “You know why, Aria.”

Sadly, I did. I think I simply didn’t want to accept it. “To punish you,” I offer. “He wanted you to be back at work so you would have to see her empty desk and know she was with him.”

Liam nods. “And he couldn’t leave on Monday because of the Bakker deal.” He gestures to his phone. “Call her. Immediately.”

With shaky hands, thinking of my sweet best friend who doesn’t deserve to be drawn into their dark and cruel past, I press her phone number in the text. The call goes immediately to voicemail. “She’s not answering. What do we do?” I ask, breathless.

“What can we do?” Liam says, more of a statement than a question. He begins to pace the room back and forth before finally stopping and facing me. “We wait until she gets back, and we hope that this fucking game he’s playing hasn’t hurt her.”

My head is spinning. “Why would he do this to her?” I can’t get a grip on that.

Liam gives me a knowing look. “Because he knew that I would get through to you this weekend. He knew that you would believe me, not because it’s a game but because it’s the truth. And I’m sure he realized that you would perceive him differently. I can only imagine he’s with Mallory to spin some story that will get her on his side. Because that’s the game he plays.”

My heart can’t accept that. “I can’t imagine Jackson doing that, though.”

Liam tilts his head. “I couldn’t imagine him fucking the girl I planned to marry either.”

I raise my hand to my mouth, sick over this. “What if he hurts her?” I barely manage. Mallory would be used terribly because of me. Because of Liam. Because of us.

Liam frowns, eyes dark. “Then I’m afraid that promise I made to you earlier not to punch him will become null and void.”

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## *About the Author*



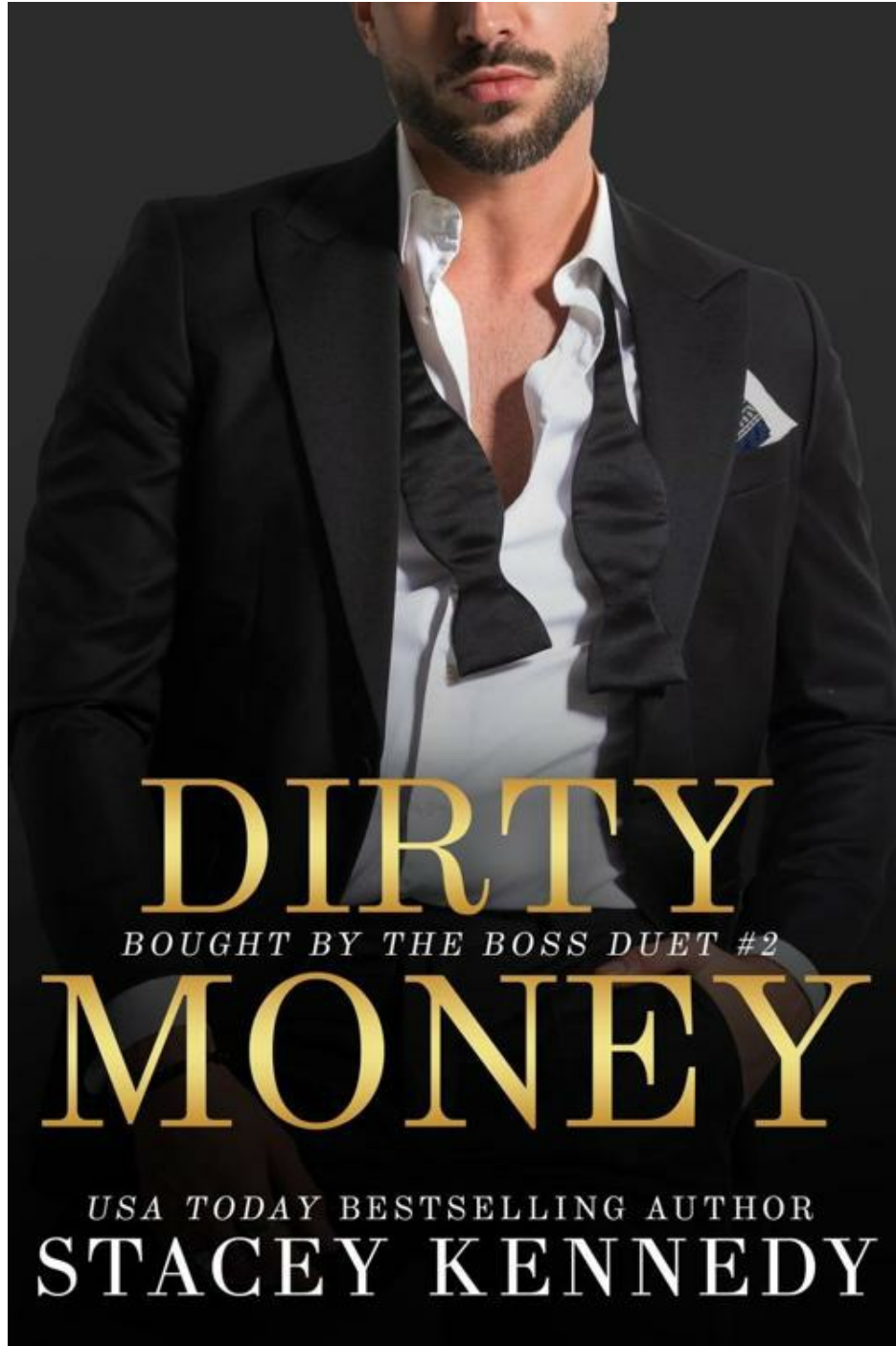
USA Today bestselling author STACEY KENNEDY has written more than fifty romances, including titles in her wildly hot Club Sin, Phoenix, and Devil's Bluffs series. Her books are about real people with real-life problems, searching for that special thing we call love . . . in a very sexy way. When she's not burning up the pages and setting e-readers ablaze, she's living her happily-ever-after with her husband and two children in southwestern Ontario, Canada. She's a firm believer that wine, chocolate, and sinfully sexy books can cure all of life's problems.



## *Acknowledgments*

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Read on for an excerpt from the conclusion to the Bought by the Boss duet:  
DIRTY MONEY



# Chapter 1

Fifty thousand dollars.

That's the amount of money the man that I'm walking toward paid to have a weekend date with me. Though in actuality, our weekend date got scrapped because of scheduling conflicts. His, not mine. Now, on maybe the nicest Tuesday morning we've had in Los Angeles yet this summer, with the perfect ratio of blue sky to clouds and a break in the humidity, I'm slow when I approach the sleek black Lexus. I try to stay calm, totally faking that this isn't the weirdest thing I've ever done.

Who am I kidding?

This entire thing is nuts. I don't even know the identity of my date. He wanted secrecy, placing his bid over the telephone at the charity auction for the Los Angeles Pediatric Hospital last Saturday. Even all the communication about our date had come through the event coordinator. She'd been the one to tell me that I needed to be outside my condo at the ungodly hour of six a.m., the type of car my date drove, and that I needed to bring my passport with me.

My tummy somersaults when I draw closer to the curb of the condominium that I share with my best friend, Aria Finley. Most days, I love her to pieces. This morning, I could kill her for getting me involved in this. Why do I have to be such a good friend?

For three years, she's wanted my boss, corporate lawyer Liam Maxwell, and she knew the charity auction was her best way to get a weekend with him. It wasn't any surprise when Liam bought her at the auction. Though somehow, I got talked into this insanity, too, because Aria didn't want to attend the event alone.

I'm beginning to regret my decision.

With each step I take, getting closer to the car, my heart is hammering, my palm is sweaty against the handle of my suitcase that I'm dragging behind me. Who is this man? A surgeon? A pilot? Maybe a businessman? More importantly, why did he buy *me*?

Not that I don't have a few things going for me. I've got awesome long honey-colored hair that naturally curls in beachy waves and bright blue eyes, but I'm still a total plain Jane. I prefer flats to heels. I loved every type of music growing up. And I might have a slight obsession with horror movies; *Friday the 13th* is my absolute favorite. So, of course, I'm naturally curious why, out of all the gorgeous women auctioned that night at the event, this man paid so much for *me*.

Butterflies swirl in my belly when the driver's side door begins to open, my breath catching when a man steps out. I take in his brown leather sandals, strong thick legs which meet dark khaki shorts, and a hunter green shirt stretching across a fit, muscular frame. I slowly look up, scanning over a chiseled jawline, sculpted lips which curve into a sinful half-smile. I stop at the stormy green eyes holding an equal amount of power and seduction.

I finally blink, woken from the spell. "What. The. Fuck," is all I manage.

Jackson Keller, Aria's boss, and my boss's archenemy, grins at me, raking a hand through his dirty-blond hair. "You know, most people start a conversation with 'good morning.'"

I'm stunned. Totally completely stunned speechless. I can't seem to figure out what to say but I know I should be saying something. For a split second, I'm flattered and begin wondering if Jackson has a crush on me. It only takes me another second to realize how utterly stupid that is. He's Jackson Keller, son of George Keller, one of the richest entertainment lawyers in Los Angeles. I'm a legal assistant from Wisconsin, whose mom stayed at home and dad worked construction. And another second after that, I'm beginning to think what I should be doing is slapping him across the face.

First things first, understanding his motive. "*You* bought the date with me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to," he says smoothly, reaching for my suitcase and placing it in the backseat before turning to face me again. "We need to get moving. Our flight leaves in a couple hours." He shuts the back door then

opens the passenger door.

My knee twitches to kick him where it counts. I know all I need to know in the way he quickly looks at his shoes, not able to meet my eyes. *Son of a bitch*. He bought me to get back at Liam for buying Aria at the auction. That's exactly what his motive is. And that's exactly why I'm here.

Liam and Aria are a complicated duo. They're in love with each other, and have been for years. But there's a catch—Liam and Jackson have bad blood between them. Out of loyalty to Jackson, due to their professional and close platonic personal relationship, Aria wouldn't allow Liam to pursue her.

Until the charity auction.

I stare at the back of Jackson's head, knowing this move by him confirms he isn't happy about Aria having spent the weekend with Liam either. And now I'm somehow brought into their stupid feud that's spanned the entire time that I've worked for Liam. A total of two years. Jackson doesn't want me. He simply wants Liam to think he does. To taunt him.

I cross my arms and declare, "You are out of your fucking mind if you think I'm getting in that car with you."

Jackson turns back to me and gives me an easy smile. It's sexy. It's sinful. It's trouble. "I bought you for fifty thousand dollars, if you recall." One sleek eyebrow arches in the most absurdly gorgeous way. "Do you really want to disappoint the charity by not holding up your end of the bargain?"

I narrow my eyes on him, hating both that he's right and that I feel excited when he looks at me with all that intensity. Jackson is a dick. He's arrogant. He's also such an asshole that my boss hates him. And Liam hates no one. The problem is, Jackson is also mouthwateringly *hot*. Furthermore, he also happens to be the guy I think about when it's just me and my vibrator.

Still, he can't play me like I'm a damn violin. "What exactly do you think taking me away is going to accomplish?"

"It's going to accomplish relaxation," is his carefully worded reply.

"Relaxation," I say with snort, though now I'm mildly curious where he's taking me. "You're telling me you're not doing this because Liam bought Aria at the auction."

Jackson doesn't even bother playing coy. "Actually, no, that's not what I'm doing." He faces me, shoving his hands into his pockets. "I bought you because I wanted to give to the charity. Since you're best friends with Aria, I figured that means that you're probably not batshit crazy and maybe even fun to be around. That's what this is."



He's completely full of shit. Hot as hell, but still, one hundred percent full of shit. "I don't believe anything that just came out of your mouth," I clarify. "Regardless, indulge me: where are we going?"

"Ontario," he explains. "Muskoka, to be exact."

"Canada?"

He nods.

My heart jumps a little; I've always wanted to go. "All right so maybe that idea is fantastic, but still, whatever you think you're going to prove to Liam, let me be the first to tell you that I won't allow you to use me like some pawn in this game between the two of you." I point at him. "Got it?"

His mouth twitches. "I think you've made your point perfectly clear." Suddenly, his head cocks, and he examines my face for a moment. "You know, I don't think I've ever seen you with your hair down before." He grabs the end and tugs a little. "It's nice."

"Nice?" I step back, telling my damn puckering nipples to cool it already.

"Yes, nice." He nods. "You always wear your hair in a ponytail, but I like it like this. It's nice," he repeats, as if I didn't hear him the first time, and then he gestures me inside the car. "I really must insist we get going or we're going to miss our flight."

There is more to my irritation than whatever plan Jackson has here. He knows I want him and that I *like* his compliments. I can see it in the haughtiness on his face. That fucking half-smile. Why are the jerks always so damn sexy? "Fine," I say, flicking my hair over my shoulder. "But don't think I won't resort to violence if you deserve it."

He barks a loud laugh now. It's irritating how much warmth fills his eyes, and how my body temperature rises. "Good to know," he states.

I move by him and scowl, both at him and at the throbbing between my thighs. While I slide into my seat, I get a good whiff of his spicy cologne before he shuts the door behind me. *Really?* Does he even have to smell so good, too?

Through the windshield, I watch all that power and masculinity pass by the hood of the car, devising my own plan. Jackson believes this is going to upset Liam. To ensure it doesn't, I grab my phone from my purse and begin texting Aria.

*Jackson is my date. Yeah, you read that right. P.S. Don't worry about me. I've got this, girl!*

No matter what, I can't let anything come between Liam and Aria,

including whatever Jackson thinks this date is going to accomplish. I love Aria, and I care deeply for Liam, and they are meant to be together. I refuse to let Jackson ruin this for them. He might be determined to play some fucked-up game to get back at Liam. But I won't let him. And it just so happens that with the heart of my best friend on the line, I'm playing to win.

When the driver's-side door opens, I turn off my phone, not wanting interruptions which I anticipate will be worried calls from Liam and Aria. Jackson asks with a panty-melting smile, "All set?"

I want to be giddy that I'm with the guy I've wanted naked, sweaty, and riding me hard for two years, of course I do. But I know why I'm here. It's so Liam can't find me. It's so Jackson can torture him. And that's the game here. It's not about using me or mistreating me, it's all to get inside Liam's head. I can't ever forget that, no matter how much that smile charms me. I give him my most pleasant smile and finally answer him, "Ready."

*Game on.*

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