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This Man

Written by Jodi Ellen Malpas

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This Man

JODI ELLEN MALPAS



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Chapter One

I riffle through the piles and piles of paraphernalia sprawled all over my bedroom floor. 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, her red hair piled high in a mass of curls. She looks up at me with a tired expression. It's an expression that I've become used to recently.

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

'They're on the table under the mirror 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 belt, heels and laptop. I make my way downstairs from the flat above Kate's workshop, finding her spooning cake mixture into various tins.

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

Yes, my personal organisation skills are pretty shocking, especially since I'm an interior designer for Rococo Union and spend 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 heels, and present myself to the wall mirror.

'I thought you stuck to the city,' she says from behind me.

I ruffle my long, dark hair for a few seconds, flicking it from one side to the other 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 stuck with this.' I sweep the wand of my gloss across my lips, smack them together, and 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 workstation.

Despite my lateness, I drive my little Mini with my usual care to my office on Bruton Street, and 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's 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 and 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. 'Are you sure I'm the person you want on this, Patrick?'

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 specialty of traditional design, were missing out. When it took off and the workload got too much for me, he employed Victoria.

'They asked for you, flower.' He pushes himself to his feet and my desk creaks 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? 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 e-mail, sifting through to delete or respond where necessary.

At eleven o'clock I pack up my laptop 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 and 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 sunshine and head for my car. Friday mid-morning traffic is a nightmare, but once I'm out of the city, the drive onward is pretty straightforward. The roof is down, and Adele is keeping me company. A little drive in the countryside is a lovely way to finish my work week.

I pull off the main road and onto a little lane, where I find myself in front of the biggest pair of gates that 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 tree-lined gravel road that seems to go for miles, images of a stuffy, cigar-smoking Lord of The Manor springing to mind immediately. I get out of my car and walk up to the gates, looking for an intercom.

'It's behind you.' 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. 'Hello?'

'Over here.'

I turn and see the intercom farther down the lane. I drove straight past it. I run over, pressing the button to announce myself. 'Ava O'Shea, Rococo Union.'

'I know.'

I look around and spot a camera installed on the gate. 'Well are you going to let me in?' I ask, just as 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 after a mile or so I pull into a perfectly round courtyard. I take my sunglasses off and gape at the huge, looming house. It's superb.

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

I 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 that 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 is obviously expecting me.

While I'm pondering my next move, the doors open, revealing the biggest man I've ever seen. He saunters out to the top of the steps, and I physically flinch at the sight of him, stepping back slightly. He has on a black suit– specially made for sure because that's no regular size – a black shirt and a black tie. His skin is the colour of rich ebony, his shaved head looks like it's been buffed to a shine, and wraparound sunglasses conceal his eyes. If I could build a mental image of who I would have expected to walk out of those doors, he, most definitely, would not be it. The man is a mountain, and everything about his presence screams bodyguard. 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 panic 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.

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

I consider cutting and running, but the daring and dangerous side of me is curious about what lies beyond those doors. Grabbing my bag, I shut my car door and climb the steps, crossing

the threshold into a huge entrance hall. I gaze around the vast area, and I'm immediately impressed by the grand curved staircase that leads up to the first floor.

The décor is opulent, lush, and *very* intimidating. Deep blues, taupes with hints of gold, and original woodwork, along with the rich mahogany parquet floor, make 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, but that would've been before I got a glimpse of the place. 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 after him, my tan heels clicking on the parquet floor as he leads me toward the back of the mansion.

I hear the hum of conversation and glance to my right, noticing many people seated 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 understand. It's a hotel – a posh country hotel.

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 that I'm following. Although the click of my heels must tell 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 before he leads me into a summer room – a massive, light, stunningly lavish space that's sectioned off into individual seating areas with sofas, big arm chairs and tables. Floor-to-ceiling bi-fold doors span the room, leading to a Yorkstone patio and a vast lawn area. It's really quite awe-inspiring, and I inwardly gasp when I spot a

glass building housing a swimming pool. It's incredible, and 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 led down a corridor until Big Guy stops outside a wood-paneled door. 'Mr. Ward's office,' he rumbles, knocking on 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 Two

'Jesse, Miss O'Shea, Rococo Union,' Big Guy announces.

'Perfect. Thanks, John.'

I'm dragged from my awed state straight into high alert, and 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 breastbone and my nervous breathing rockets to dangerous levels. I suddenly feel light-headed, and my mouth is ignoring my brain's instruction to 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 … the sight of him has just turned me into a non-responsive, quivering wreck.

He rises from his chair and my gaze travels up with him. 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 toward 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 blond 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 tension – 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 inertia, 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 standing 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 sides.

'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, and sparks fizz, a curious look flitting across his stunning face as 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 a few steps. '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 toward two brown leather couches, positioned opposite each other in front of 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 toward 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 toward me, and 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 are shaking.

Christ, woman. Get a grip! I feign making notes as he strolls

back over, placing my water and a glass on the table before he sits on the sofa opposite me 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 rein 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, may I ask why?'

'You may.' 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 elabourate 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. Country estates 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 toward 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, but it's only thanks to Patrick for giving me free rein on the expansion of his business. In four years, I've left college, picked up a job in an established design company – that had financial stability but lacked 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 with 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 poker-faced.

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 right 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 work 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 of 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 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 toward the door, feeling his eyes on me, burning a hole through my dress, so 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 effect on all women. When my brain fails to deliver on anything suitable to say, I just smile.

She returns my smile, amused and knowing 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 details on the job, and be gone. My heart is pleading for some relief. 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 sitting 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 worst 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 your 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 that is.

He raises his eyebrows, clearly surprised by my change of approach. 'Sure.' He gets up from the sofa and strides over to his desk to collect his mobile while I gather my things, stuff them into my bag, and then 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 toward 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 effect 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 pick up my pace to break the contact, 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 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?'

'Snowboarding, mainly, but I've tried my hand at white-water rafting, bungee-jumping, and skydiving. I'm a bit of an adrenaline junky. I like to feel the blood pumping.' He watches me as he speaks, making me feel scrutinized. 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 humor 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 two men by clapping them on the shoulders. The men are very attractive, young – probably late twenties – and drinking bottles of beer.

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

'Good afternoon,' Drew drawls. He's handsome in a rugged kind of way, his black hair perfectly styled, his suit pristine and his eyes shrewd. He's likely a smart, confident business type.

'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, and 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 boyishness, 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. And 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.

'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.

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, but I'm the first to break it. 'Shall we?' he asks, pushing himself up from the stool and gesturing toward 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.

I turn to the two guys at the bar, smiling my good-bye, prompting them to raise their bottles before they continue with their conversation. Walking toward the door that leads back to the entrance hall, I feel 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. Jesse Ward is 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 and I follow him up to a huge gallery landing. 'These

are the private rooms,' he says, pointing to various doors off 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, and 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 another 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 and directs me into a freshly plastered room. It's vast, and the new windows are a perfect match to those of the original 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 women?

'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 that I'm the right person for this job.' I sound regretful, which is okay because I am. I'm regretful that I can't pull myself together.

He looks at me, those sludgy eyes stabbing at my defences, making me shift on my heels. 'I think you have what I want,' he says quietly.

'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, because 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 gauge 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 kind 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 into 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 not faux beams. 'Do all of the rooms have those?' 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 toward 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, and 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, wishing that my handbag contents consisted of spare knickers, a blindfold, earplugs and some armour. 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 making 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 emphasizes 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, and 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 I do – 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 toward Ward. She's attractive – all blond, 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 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. Good-bye.' 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 rearview mirror at the imposing manor getting smaller and smaller behind me, and there, standing at the top of the steps watching me leave, is Jesse Ward.

'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 PJs on and chill out. After the day I've had, winding down my racing mind is paramount. I've got a headache, and I've 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?'

I laugh. 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 couldn'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 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, and 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?'

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.

I shrug. 'The man's attractive and he knows it.' I see her eyes light up as the spatula 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.

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 breakup, 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 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 PJs. 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.

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, but it's impossible. My mind's eye is trampled by a tall, lean, dark blond, 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' pinballing around my head.