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Beneath This Man

Written by Jodi Ellen Malpas

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Beneath This Man

JODI ELLEN MALPAS



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Chapter One

I've barely mustered up the strength to make it into work today. It's been five days since I've seen Jesse Ward. Five days of agony, emptiness and sobbing.

Every time my eyes close he's there, the images flickering from the sure, confident, beautiful man who totally took me, to the hollow, hurtful, drunken creature who destroyed me. Without him I feel empty and incomplete. He made me need him, and now he's gone.

In the darkness I see his face and in the silence I hear his voice. There is no escaping it. I'm unaware of the activity around me, every noise a distant hum, every image a slow blur. I'm in hell. Empty. Incomplete. I'm in absolute agony.

I left Jesse drunk and raging at his penthouse last Sunday. I've not heard from him since that day I walked out, leaving him yelling and stumbling around. There have been no phone calls, no messages, no flowers … nothing.

Sam is still a regular, seminaked presence at Kate's, but he knows better than to talk to me about Jesse. He keeps quiet and well away. I must be painful to be around at the moment. How can a man who I've known a few short weeks make me feel like this? But in those short few weeks I have known him, I've learned that he is intense, hot blooded, and controlling, but he is also gentle, affectionate and protective. I miss that Jesse so much. But the drunken, hollow man I found at the penthouse was not the Jesse I had fallen in love with. I would gladly take all of his

frustrating, challenging ways over the ugliness that was Jesse drunk.

Apparently, Jesse falling off the wagon was my entire fault. He advised me, on a slur, that he'd warned me there would be damage if I left. He had. He just didn't explain what sort of damage or why. I should have pressed for more, but I was too busy being swallowed up by him. I was distracted from everything, blinded by lust and drowning in his intensity. I never anticipated he would turn out to be Lord of the Sex Manor, and I certainly never anticipated he was an alcoholic. I was literally walking around with my eyes wide shut.

I'm lucky that I've managed to avoid any pressing questions from Patrick regarding Mr Ward's project. When one hundred thousand pounds landed in Rococo Union's bank account, courtesy of Mr Ward, I was immensely grateful. With so much money paid up front, I could fob Patrick off with an imaginary business trip that's keeping Mr Ward out of the country and the project on hold. I know I'll have to deal with this eventually, I just don't feel strong enough at the moment, and I'm not sure when I will. Perhaps never.

Poor Kate has tried so hard to pull me out of the black hole that I've put myself in. She's tried to occupy me with yoga classes, drinks at the pub and cake decorating. But I'm happier festering in my bed. And she meets me without fail every lunchtime. Not that I can eat anything. It's hard enough just to swallow, without trying to get food past the permanent lump that's wedged in my throat.

The only thing I look forward to at the moment is my morning walk. I'm not sleeping, so dragging myself out of bed at five o'clock every morning is relatively easy.

In the quiet, fresh morning air, I make my way to the spot in Green Park where I collapsed with exhaustion the morning Jesse dragged me around the streets of London on one of his torturous marathons. I sit quietly, picking at the dew-coated

blades of grass until my backside is numb and sodden, and I'm ready to wander slowly back to prepare myself for another day without Jesse.

How long can I go on like this?

My brother, Dan, is back in London tomorrow after visiting my parents in Cornwall. I should be looking forward to seeing him, it's been six months since I last did, but where am I going to find the energy to put on a front?

My mobile blurts from my desk, dragging me from my daydreams and tapping pen. It's Ruth Quinn. I inwardly groan. Ruth is a new client and proving to be a challenge already. She rang on Tuesday and demanded an appointment for the same day. I explained that I was busy and suggested someone else might be able to make it, but she insisted she wanted me and eventually settled for my first appointment, which happened to be today. She has since called every day to remind me. 'Miss Quinn.' I greet tiredly.

'Ava, how are you?'

She always asks, which is nice, I suppose. I won't tell her the truth. 'I'm good. And you?'

'Yes, yes, fine,' she chirps. 'I just wanted to check our appointment.'

'Four-thirty, Miss Quinn.' I reiterate, for the third consecutive day. I think I might be pricing myself out of this job.

'Lovely, I look forward to it.'

I hang up and blow out a long, calming breath of air. What was I thinking, ending my Friday on a new client, and a difficult one at that?

Victoria comes breezing into the office, her long, blonde locks fanning over her shoulders. She looks different. She looks orange! 'What have you done?' I ask, completely alarmed. I know I'm not seeing particularly clearly at the moment, but there is no denying the tone of her skin.

She rolls her eyes and retrieves her compact mirror from

her Mulberry to inspect her face. 'Don't!' she warns. 'I asked for bronzed.' She scrubs at her face with a tissue. 'The stupid woman used the wrong bottle. I look like a cheese puff!' She continues to scrub her face while huffing and puffing.

'You need to get yourself some body scrub and head for the shower.' I advise, turning back to my computer.

'I can't believe this is happening to me!' she cries. 'Drew is taking me out tonight. He'll run a mile when he sees me like this!'

'Where are you going?' I ask.

'Langan's. I'll be mistaken for a Z-lister. I can't go like this!'

This is a complete catastrophe for Victoria. She and Drew have only been seeing each other for a week, another relationship off the back of my cluster fuck of a life. All I need now is for Tom to walk in and declare he's getting married. Selfishly, I'm not happy for anyone.

Sally, our general office dogsbody, comes scuttling out of the kitchen and stops in her tracks when she spies Victoria. 'Wow! Victoria, are you okay?' she asks, and I smile to myself as Sally gives me an alarmed look. All of this beautification stuff goes straight over our plain Sal's head.

'Fine!' Victoria snaps.

Sally retreats to the safety of the stationary cupboard, escaping a very riled Victoria and an even more miserable me.

'Where's Tom?' I ask in an attempt to distract Victoria from her fake-tan crisis.

She slams her compact mirror down on her desk and swings around to face me. If I had the energy, I would laugh. She looks terrible. 'He's at Mrs Baines's. It would appear the nightmare continues,' she huffs, ruffling her blonde locks around her face.

I leave Victoria and her glowing face, returning to staring numbly at my computer screen. I can't wait for the day to end so I can crawl into my bed where I don't have to see, speak, or interact with anyone.

*

I arrive at a stunning town house on Lansdowne Crescent right on time, and Miss Quinn answers the door. I'm completely surprised – her voice doesn't match her appearance in the slightest. I had her down as a middle-aged spinster, piano teacher type, but I couldn't have been further from the mark. She's very attractive, with long, blonde hair, big blue eyes and smooth pale skin, and she is wearing a lovely black dress with killer wedges.

She smiles. 'You must be Ava. Please, come in.' She directs me through to a horrendous seventies throwback kitchen.

'Miss Quinn, my portfolio.' I hand her my file, and she takes it keenly. She has a really warm smile. Maybe I got her all wrong.

'Please, call me Ruth. I've heard a lot about your work, Ava,' she says as she flicks through the file. 'Lusso, especially.'

'Oh, you have?' I sound surprised, but I'm not. Patrick has been delighted by the response Rococo Union has gotten from the publicity of Lusso. I would prefer to forget about all things Lusso, but that doesn't seem likely.

'Yes, of course! Everyone's talking about it. You did an amazing job. Would you like a drink?'

'A coffee would be good, thank you.'

She smiles and sets about making drinks. 'Please, sit down, Ava.'

I take a seat and pull out my client briefing folder. 'So, what can I help you with, Ruth?'

She laughs and waves the teaspoon around in the general direction of the room. 'Need you ask? It's hideous, isn't it?' she exclaims, returning to coffee-making duties.

Yes, actually, it is, but I'm not about to gasp in horror at the brown and yellow arrangement with faux brick walls.

She continues, 'Obviously I'm looking for some ideas to transform this monstrosity. I was thinking of knocking through and making it a large family room. Here, I'll show you.' She hands me a coffee and signals for me to follow her through to

the next room. The décor is equally as grim as the kitchen. She seems quite young – mid-thirties, perhaps – so I'm guessing she's not long moved in. This place doesn't look like it has been touched with a paintbrush in forty years.

After an hour of discussions, I'm confident that I know what Ruth is trying to achieve. She has good vision.

'I'll draft a few designs in line with your budget and ideas, and get them to you with a schedule of my fees,' I tell her as I'm leaving. 'Is there anything in particular I should allow for?'

'No, not at all. Obviously, I want all the basic luxuries you would expect to find in a kitchen.' She puts her hand out, and I take it politely. 'A wine fridge.' She laughs.

'Absolutely.' I smile tightly, the mention of alcohol making my blood run cold. 'I'll be in touch, Miss Quinn.'

'Ruth, please!' she shakes her head. 'I look forward to it, Ava.'

I drag myself down the street toward Kate's house, hoping she's not home so I can retreat to my room before she resumes mission Perk Ava Up.

'Ava!'

I stop and see Sam hanging out of his car window as he cruises slowly beside me. 'Hey, Samuel.' I say on a strained smile as I carry on walking.

'Ava, please don't join your evil friend in the Piss Sam Off Club. I might be forced to move out.' He parks and gets out of his Porsche, meeting me on the pavement outside Kate's house.

He looks his usual laid-back self, with ridiculously baggy shorts, a Rolling Stones T-shirt and his mousy brown hair a dishevelled mess.

'I'm sorry. Have you moved in permanently now?' I ask on an arched brow. Sam has his own swanky apartment on Hyde Park with much more room, but with Kate's workshop on the ground floor of her house, she insists on him staying at hers.

'No, I haven't. Kate said you would be home by six. I was hoping to catch you.' He suddenly looks all nervous, which is making me feel extremely uncomfortable.

'Is everything okay?' I ask.

He offers a little smile, but it doesn't reach his dimple. 'Not really. Ava, I need you to come with me,' he says quietly.

'Where?' Why is he acting so shifty? This is not like Sam. He's usually so carefree and unapologetic.

'To Jesse's place.'

Sam must see the look of horror on my face because he steps toward me with a pleading expression. Just the mention of his name sends me into panic. Why does he want me to go to Jesse's? After our last meeting, you would have to drag me there kicking and screaming. There is no chance in hell I'm returning to that place – not ever.

'Sam, I don't think so.' I take a step back, shaking my head. My body has started shaking, too.

He sighs and scuffs his trainers on the pavement. 'Ava, I'm getting worried. He's not answering his phone and no one has heard from him. I don't know what else to do. I know you don't want to talk about him, but it's been nearly five days. I've been to Lusso, but the concierge refuses to let us up. He'll let you. Kate said you know him. Can't you just get us up there? I just need to know he's okay.'

'No, Sam. I'm sorry, I can't,' I croak.

'Ava, I'm worried he's done something stupid. Please.'

My throat starts to close up and Sam starts walking toward me with his hands outstretched. I didn't realize I was moving backward. 'Sam, please don't. I can't do that. He won't want to see me, and I don't want to see him.'

He grabs my hands to halt my retreat, pulling me into his chest and holding me tight against him. 'Ava, I wouldn't ask, I really wouldn't, but I need to get up there and check on him.'

My shoulders droop, defeated in his embrace, and a quiet

sob escapes, just when I thought there were no tears left. 'I can't see him, Sam.'

'Hey,' he pulls back and looks at me. 'Just get us past the concierge. That's all I'm asking.' He wipes away a stray tear and smiles pleadingly.

'I'm not going in,' I affirm, my stomach a knot of panic at the thought of seeing him again. But what if he *has* done something stupid?

'Ava, just get us up to his penthouse.'

I nod and wipe away the rolling tears.

'Thank you,' he tugs me toward his Porsche. 'Get in. Drew and John are meeting us there.' He opens the passenger door and directs me into the car.

I climb in and let Sam drive me to Lusso at St Katherine Docks – a place I swore that I would never return to again.

Chapter Two

As Lusso comes into view, I start hyperventilating. The overwhelming desire to open the door and jump out of Sam's moving car is hard to resist. He glances at me, an obviously anxious look on his cute face, as if he senses my intention to bolt.

Once we're parked outside the gates, Sam comes around to collect me, keeping a firm grip on me as he guides us toward the pedestrian gates where Drew's waiting.

He's dressed in his usual finery, all suited and booted, with perfectly styled black hair, but he doesn't make me feel uncomfortable anymore. I'm more than shocked when he takes over Sam's hold of me, though, pulling me into him and squeezing me hard. This is the first actual contact I've ever had with the man.

'Ava, thank you for coming.'

I say nothing because I really don't know what to say. They're truly worried about Jesse, and I feel guilty and even more anxious now. Drew releases me and offers a small, reassuring smile. It does nothing to reassure me.

Sam points up the road. 'Here's the big guy.'

We turn to see John pull up in his black Range Rover, skidding to an abrupt halt behind Sam's car. He slides his big body out, removes his wraparound sunglasses and nods in greeting. This is John's usual wordless acknowledgment. Good Lord he looks pissed off. I've only ever got a brief glimpse of his eyes – they are always concealed behind those glasses, even at night or inside, but the sun is shining now, so why he has taken them off

is beyond me. Maybe he wants everyone to know how pissed off he is. It's working. He looks formidable.

I take a deep breath and punch in the code, pushing the gate open for the guys. I wish this was as far as I had to go. Drew gestures for me to lead the way, ever the gentleman, so I pick my feet up and start my walk across the car park in silence. I see Jesse's car and notice his window is still smashed. My stomach flips as we enter the marble foyer of Lusso quietly, except for the thumping of our footsteps. My insides start churning, my breathing speeding up. So much has happened in this place. Lusso was my first major accomplishment in design. My first sexual encounter with Jesse happened here, as did my final encounter with him. It all started and ended here.

Clive looks up from his big, curved marble desk as we approach, his expression screaming tiresome.

'Clive,' I say on a forced smile.

He eyes me, and then the three ominous beings accompanying me, before his eyes settle on me again. 'Hello, Ava. How are you?'

'I'm good, Clive,' I lie. 'You?'

'I'm fine.' He's weary, no doubt after having a few heated encounters with the three men escorting me, and judging by his cold reception toward me, they were not pleasant.

'Clive, I'd be grateful if you would let us up to the penthouse to check on Jesse.' I load my voice with lashings of confidence, but I feel anything but. My heart is speeding up by the second.

'Ava, I've told your friends here, I could lose my job if I allow that.' He flicks a cautious gaze to the boys again.

'I know, Clive, but they're worried,' I say, sounding completely detached. 'They just want to check he's okay, and then they'll be leaving,' I try with graciousness as I know Drew, Sam and John would have been a lot less than that.

'Ava, I have been up and knocked on Mr Ward's door and got no response. We've checked some of the CCTV, and I have not

seen him leave or return on my watch. Security cannot check five days of continuous footage. I have told your friends this. If I let you up, I could lose my job.'

I'm stunned at Clive's sudden turnabout in concierge etiquette. If only he had been this professional and stubborn when I came to see Jesse on Sunday, then we might never have had the altercation we did. But then I would still be blissfully unaware of Jesse's little problem.

I feel Sam press up against my back. 'Let us up, for fuck's sake!' he yells over my shoulder.

I flinch slightly, but I can't blame him for being frustrated. I'm feeling pretty frustrated myself. I just want to get them past Clive and go. I can feel the walls closing in on all sides of me, and I can see Jesse carrying me across the marble floor in his arms. All of the images swamping my brain are now all the more clear for being here.

I turn and see John with a face like thunder and his hand on Sam's shoulder, his way of telling Sam to calm down. I didn't want to do this, but tempers are fraying. 'Clive, I would hate to resort to blackmail,' I say tightly, turning back to face him. He looks at me in confusion, and I can see his brain ticking over, trying to think of what I could possibly blackmail him with. 'I would hate for anyone to find out about Mr Gomez's regular visitors or Mr Holland's fondness of a Thai girl or two.' I watch as Clive's face screws up into a contortion of defeatism.

'Ava, you play nasty, my girl.'

'You leave me no other choice, Clive.'

He shakes his head and motions us toward the lift while muttering insults under his breath.

'Brilliant!' Sam chants as they make their way over to the penthouse lift.

I don't have any idea how it happens, but I find my feet lifting and taking small steps behind them, following them to the lift. 'Jesse might have changed the code,' I say to their backs.

Sam swings around, looking alarmed.

I shrug. 'If he has, then there is no way of getting up there.'

All of a sudden, I'm standing in front of the lift, taking a deep breath and punching in the developer code. There's a chorus of exhales as the doors open and they all get in, and I stand on the outside, looking up at Sam. He smiles, jerking his head mildly, encouraging me to board with them.

I do.

I get in the lift, Sam and Drew flanking me on one side, John on the other, and I enter the code again. We travel up in an uncomfortable silence, and as the lift doors open, we're faced with the double doors that lead into Jesse's penthouse.

Sam is the first to exit, striding toward the doors and jiggling the handle calmly before he starts hammering on the door like a madman. 'Jesse! Open the fucking door!'

Drew and John approach and pull him away, and then John tries the door himself, but it doesn't budge. I can't help but think I might have been the last person to exit the penthouse. I remember making a point of slamming the door as hard as I could.

'Sam, mate, he might not even be here,' Drew soothes.

'Where the hell is he then?' Sam yells.

'Oh, he's in there,' John rumbles. 'And the motherfucker has been drowning in his sorrows for too long now. He's got a business to run.'

I'm still standing in the lift when the doors start to shut, snapping me out of my dazed state. My natural reflex has my arm flinging up to stop them closing before I step out into the penthouse foyer. I know I said that I would get them up here and leave, I know I should just go, but seeing Sam in such a state has me even more worried, and John's words are prickling me. Drowning in his sorrows or drowning in vodka? If I stay, am I going to be faced with drunken, raging Jesse again?

Drew knocks on the door calmly. It's laughable. If Sam's

relentless hammering doesn't get a response, then I doubt Drew's gentlemanly tapping will.

He steps away from the door and drags Sam over to me. 'Ava, have you tried calling him?' Drew asks.

'No!' I blurt. Why would I do that? I'm pretty sure he wouldn't want to talk to me.

'Can you try?' Sam asks pleadingly.

I shake my head. 'He wouldn't answer, Sam.'

'Ava, will you just try?' Drew pushes.

I reluctantly get my phone from my bag and dial Jesse while Sam and Drew watch nervously. I'm not sure what on earth I'm going to say if he answers.

Drew's head snaps toward the door. 'I can hear it ringing.' He returns to me, obviously waiting for me to speak, but my call goes to voicemail and my heart constricts. He doesn't want to talk to me. I go to reboard the lift, the hurt enflamed by his rejection of my call, but then an almighty crash sounds out around the foyer.

Sam, Drew and I all whip our heads around to the double doors leading into Jesse's penthouse and find John on the other side, surrounded by a splintered doorframe. He nods at us, and Sam and Drew fly forward into the penthouse. I find myself following tentatively behind them, remembering the last time I was here.

Turn around! Get in the lift! Go, NOW.

But I don't. I stand in the doorway and from what I can see, nothing has moved. I step a little bit farther into the open area and hear the guys running around upstairs and down, searching for Jesse. And as the bottom of the stairs comes into view, I notice the empty bottle of vodka is still on the console table. Then I see the terrace doors wide open. I take cautious steps toward them, still hearing the guys running around the penthouse, doors opening and closing, his name being called.

I, however, am pulled toward the terrace. I know why. It's

the same magnetism that pulls me toward Jesse every time he is near. Only this time I know it won't be *my* Jesse. Do I want to face him again when he is in such a terrible state, when he is so vicious and hateful? No, of course I don't, but I can't seem to turn away.

As I approach the doors, I try to prepare my eyes for a drunken mess, sprawled across one of the sun loungers, clenching a vodka bottle. But instead, I'm greeted by Jesse's naked, unconscious body face down on the decking.

I choke on my heart, and my pulse starts pounding in my ears. 'He's here!' I scream, running toward his lifeless body and throwing my bag down as I collapse by his side.

I grip his big shoulders to try and turn him over. I don't know where I get my strength from, but I manage it, yanking him over so his head is cradled in my lap. I start desperately smoothing my hands over his bearded face, noticing his hand still swollen and bruised, with dried blood all over his knuckles.

'Jesse, wake up. Please wake up.' I plead, giving into hysteria as I look at the man I love, unconscious and unresponsive, lying in my lap. Tears pour down my face and spill onto his cheeks. 'Jesse, please.' I desperately run my hands over his face, his chest, his hair. He looks hollow, he's lost weight and his jaw is covered in a week's-worth of stubble.

'Motherfucker,' John rumbles when he finds me on the terrace with Jesse supported in my lap.

'I don't know if he's breathing,' I sob, looking up through glazed eyes to the mountain of a man stalking toward me.

'Here,' John gestures, kneeling down and taking Jesse's arm from me.

I look up and see Sam skid to a halt at the door. 'What the …'

Tears are invading my eyes and everything has gone into slow motion. Sam makes his way over and lowers himself down next to me. He starts rubbing my arm.

'I'll call an ambulance,' Drew says urgently as he finds us all crowded around Jesse's motionless form.

'Hold up,' John barks harshly, leaning over Jesse and pulling his dried lips apart, inspecting every part of his limp body. 'The stupid motherfucker. He's drunk himself into a fucking coma.'

I look at Sam and Drew, but I can't fathom their reaction to John's conclusion. How does he know this? He could be half-dead for all John knows. He certainly looks it. 'I think we should call an ambulance,' I whimper between sniffles.

John looks at me sympathetically. I've never seen anything but a completely impassive expression on his hard face, so the way he is looking at me now, all sorrowful and like I'm a little naive, is strangely comforting.

'Ava, girl. I've seen him like this, more than once. He needs his bed and some care to get him through this. He doesn't need a doctor. Not that sort, anyway.' John shakes his head.

Oh? How many times is more than once? John sounds like he knows the drill. He's not at all concerned by the condition of Jesse lying in my lap, whereas I'm a hysterical wreck. Sam and Drew are not all that good either. Have they seen him like this before?

John clucks my cheek and hoists himself up off the floor. I've never heard him say so much. The big, silent giant turns out to be the big, friendly giant. But I still wouldn't want to cross him.

'What happened to his hand?' Sam asks when he clocks the bloodied, bruised mess.

It really looks terrible and probably needs looking at. 'He smashed the window on his car,' I sniffle, and they all look at me. 'When we rowed at Kate's,' I add, almost ashamed.

'Should we get him into his bed?' Drew asks timidly.

'Sofa,' John instructs. We're back to a few words.

I watch as Sam gets up and collects an empty vodka bottle from under the sun lounger. He looks at it in complete disgust and dramatically smashes it on the side of a raised planter,

making me flinch at the loud noise that echoes around us, but more significantly, it makes Jesse flinch, too.

'Jesse?' I shake him slightly. 'Jesse, please, open your eyes.'

Sam, Drew and John all crowd around us, and Jesse's arm starts to rise above his head, flapping around in thin air. I clasp it and place it back by his side, but as soon as I release it, he brings it back up in front of my face, mumbling inaudibly and thrashing his legs about.

'He's looking for you, girl.' John says quietly.

I throw a shocked glance at John, and he nods at me. He's looking for me? I reach for his hand again and guide it to my face, spreading his palm against my cheek. He instantly calms. His cold palm on my face offers me little comfort, but it seems to soothe him, so I hold it there and let him feel me, horrified that he has, quite possibly, been out here on the terrace for days, unclothed and unconscious. It might be mild in the daytime, but nightfall brings cooler temperatures. Why did I walk out on him? I should have stayed and calmed him down, not walked away.

'I'll go and get some bedding from upstairs.' Drew says, heading back into the penthouse.

'Shall we?' John prompts, nodding at Jesse on the floor.

I reluctantly release Jesse's hand and let Sam and John flank him on either side to coordinate a lift. As he's lifted from my lap, I pull myself up and run ahead to make sure their path is clear and the entire leather corner couch free of a million cushions – all courtesy of me – so it looks more like a bed when I'm done.

As Drew comes down the stairs with his hands full of blankets, Sam and John wait patiently with Jesse's naked weight spread evenly between them. I take a velvet throw from Drew and lay it over the cold leather, and then move back so John and Sam can lower him onto the couch before propping his head up on some pillows and laying another throw over his naked body.

I drop to my knees at his side, smoothing my hand down the side of his stubbled face, regret washing over me, tears starting to fall again. I could have stopped this. If I hadn't stormed out, he wouldn't be in this state now. I should have stayed, calmed him down and sobered him up. I hate myself.

'Ava, are you okay?' I hear Drew's quiet voice over my suppressed sobs, and a hand starts rubbing my back.

I sniffle and wipe my nose with the back of my hand. 'I'm fine, sorry.'

'Don't apologise,' Sam sighs.

I lean over Jesse and rest my lips on his forehead, leaving them to linger for a few seconds, and as I lift myself from the floor, his arm shoots out from under the blanket and grabs me. 'Ava?' His voice is cracked and hoarse, and his eyes open slightly, searching around the room. And when they find mine, all I can see are empty pits of nothing; his usual green, addictive eyes are bordering on black.

'Hey,' I place my hand over his on my arm.

He starts to lift his head from the pillow, but before I have a chance to push him back down, he gives up trying. 'I'm so sorry,' he murmurs, his hand starting to pat its way up my arm to find my face again. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry …'

'Stop,' I whisper on a quivering voice, helping his hand to reach my face. 'Please, just stop.' I turn my lips into his hand and kiss his palm, and when I turn to face him again, his eyes are closed. He's gone again.

Taking his hand and placing it under the blanket, I make sure he is tucked in well before pulling myself up and turning to see Sam, Drew and John, all standing silently watching me tend to him. I had completely forgotten I wasn't alone with Jesse, but I'm not in the least bit embarrassed.

'I'll make some coffee,' Sam breaks the silence and heads for the kitchen, John and Drew following.

I take another glance at Jesse, my instinct telling me to crawl onto the sofa and snuggle up to him, stroke him and soothe him. I might just do that, but first I need to talk to the guys. I follow them into the kitchen and find Sam and Drew picking up barstools and John heaving the freezer up from the floor. It wasn't like this when I left on Sunday. Jesse clearly flew into a rage.

'I've got to shoot,' Drew says regretfully, placing the last stool upright. 'I'm taking Victoria out.' He looks a little embarrassed.

'You go, bud,' Sam says as he hunts for the mugs. 'I'll call you later.'

'Last cupboard on the right, top shelf,' I give Sam the directions to the mugs, and he turns, looking at me quizzically as Drew leaves.

I shrug.

He transports three mugs of black coffee to the island where John and I have taken our seats. 'We won't risk the milk, that's if he's even got any. Black okay?' Sam asks.

I nod and help myself, John following suit, putting an incredible four sugars into his coffee. I know there is no milk, but it would be pointless sharing this.

'So,' Sam begins, 'now we've found him, what are we going to do with him?' he jokes.

Carefree Sam is back and it's quite a relief. Seeing him so fraught had only fuelled my own worry, and as it turns out, he had every reason to be anxious. I inwardly shudder at the thought of Jesse alone and suffering for the last five days. How much longer would he have been lying there if I had refused to come? They would surely have phoned the police.

John pipes up. 'Everything is running smoothly at The Manor for now. We don't have to worry about that. He'll be back to normal after nursing a weeklong hangover.'

'Doesn't he need to go to rehab?' I ask. 'Or therapy, I don't know.' I have no idea how these things work.

John shakes his head and puts his glasses back on, and I start to wonder about his relationship with Jesse. I thought he was just an employee, but he seems to be the one in the know about all of this.

'No rehab,' John states firmly. 'He's not obsessed with alcohol, Ava. He drank to lighten his foul mood, to fill a gap. Once he starts, he can't stop.' He offers me a small smile. 'You helped, girl.'

'What did I do?' I don't know why I sound so hurt by John's statement. He has just told me I helped the situation, but I can't help feeling like he's insinuating that I might have helped with the relapse as well.

Sam places his hand over mine on the worktop. 'His attention was focused elsewhere.'

'But then I left him,' I say quietly. I'm just confirming what they are both thinking.

'It's not your fault, Ava,' Sam reassures me firmly. 'You weren't to know.'

'He never told me,' I whisper. 'If I had known, things would have been different.' Really, I'm not sure how things would have been different if Jesse had told me. But I know I never want to see him like he was last Sunday again. If I leave now, will that happen? My head is a jumbled mess. I prop my elbows on the counter and plant my head in my hands. What the hell am I supposed to do?

'Ava?' John's deep rumble pulls my head back up. 'He's a good man.'

'What made him drink? How bad is it?' I ask. I know he's a good man deep down, but if I know more I might understand better.

'Who knows?' John muses, and then looks at me. 'Don't be thinking he was smashed all day every day. He wasn't. How he is right now, that's just because of misery, not because he's an alcoholic.'

'And he didn't drink when I turned up?' I can't believe that.

John laughs. 'He didn't, although you have brought out some other rather nasty qualities in him, girl.'

I frown, but I know exactly what John's talking about, and so does Sam by the look on his cheeky face. I've been told Jesse is usually quite a laid-back type, but I have only ever seen snippets of a laid-back Jesse Ward, and that was mostly when he was getting his own way. Most of the time, all I've seen is an unreasonable control freak. He even admitted himself that he's only like that with me … lucky me.

'I'll stay, but if he comes round and he doesn't want me here, I will be calling one of you two,' I warn.

Sam visibly sags. 'That won't happen, Ava.'

John nods. 'I need to get myself back to The Manor and run that motherfucker's business.' He gets himself up from the barstool. 'Ava, you need my number. Where's your phone?'

I look around for my bag and realize that I've left it on the terrace, so I jump up and leave Sam and John in the kitchen while I go to fetch it.

On my way back to the kitchen, I see Jesse is still out for the count. How long will he be like this, and at what point should I really worry? I have no idea what I'm supposed to do.

I stand silently watching him, his lashes flickering mildly, his chest rising and falling steadily. Even unconscious he looks troubled. Approaching quietly, I pull the blanket up to his chin. I can't help it. I've never looked after him before, but it's instinctive. I kneel and rest my lips on his cold cheek, soaking up the little bit of comfort I get from the contact, before standing and making my way back to the kitchen. John has gone.

'Here,' Sam passes me a piece of paper. 'John's number.'

'Was he in a rush?' I ask. He could have waited for me.

'He never hangs around for longer than necessary. Listen, I've spoken to Kate. She's bringing some clothes over for you.'

'Oh, okay.' My poor clothes are going to wonder where they live. They have been transported back and forth to this place on numerous occasions.

'Thank you, Ava.' Sam says sincerely.

'Don't thank me,' I protest, feeling uncomfortable, especially since this is partly my fault.

Sam shuffles nervously. 'I know. It's just … well, after last Sunday, the Manor shock.'

'Don't, Sam.'

'When he drinks, he really drinks.' Sam laughs lightly. 'He's a proud man, Ava. He'll be mortified that we've seen him like this.'

I imagine he will be. The Jesse I know is strong, confident, domineering, and a whole heap of other things. Weak and helpless are not included in the long list of Jesse's attributes. I want to tell Sam that The Manor and its activities have been diluted by this drink issue, but it hasn't. Not really. Now I'm here and I've laid my eyes on Jesse again, it's all screaming very loudly in my head. Jesse owns a sex club. He also uses the facilities of his own club. Sam confirmed it, even though it was glaringly obvious when I was faced with the husband of one of Jesse's conquests. I knew deep down that he must have slept around, that he was a pleasure-seeking playboy, but I certainly didn't ever imagine how.

We spend the next hour collecting empties and cleaning up the penthouse. I empty the fridge of more vodka, tipping it all down the sink, thinking I won't be drinking it ever again.

Clive rings up to tell me that a young lady is in the foyer by the name of Kate, and after I've advised him of what we've found, we go down to meet her, each dragging a black bin bag full of rubbish and empty bottles. I make a mental note to sort the mangled door out.

When we arrive in the foyer, Kate is waiting under the close

observation of Clive. 'Hey,' she says cautiously as we approach, dragging the clanging bin bags with us. 'How is he?'

I release the bag, causing more clanging, and give Clive the eyeball, just to let him know that I'm really pissed off with him. If he had let Sam, Drew or John up to Jesse's penthouse before now, we might have only found him drunk instead of completely comatose. He has the decency to look apologetic.

'He's asleep,' Sam answers her when it becomes obvious that I'm too busy making Clive feel guilty.

When I turn my attention back to Kate, I see Sam slip his free arm around her and give her a hug. She bats him away playfully. 'Here,' Kate passes me my overnight bag, 'I just chucked anything and everything in it.'

'Thanks.' I take the bag.

'So, you're staying here then?' she asks.

'Yeah,' I answer on a shrug. Sam gives me that appreciative stare, and I immediately feel uncomfortable again.

'How long are you staying?' Kate asks.

Good question. How long do these things take? He could wake tonight, or it could be tomorrow or the next day. I have a job to do and an apartment to find. I look at Sam for some clue, but he only shrugs, so I look back at Kate and shrug too.

I'm suddenly aware that I've left Jesse upstairs alone, and I start to panic. He might wake up and no one will be there. 'I should get back up there,' I say, looking back toward the lift.

'Sure, you go,' Kate shoos me with her hand and takes the bin bag from the floor. 'We'll get rid of these.'

We say our good-byes and I promise to call her in the morning before I head back to the lift, instructing Clive to sort out Jesse's car window and the door to his penthouse on my way. He, of course, gets straight onto it.

When I arrive back on the top floor, I wander into the living room and see Jesse still asleep.

So, what do I do now? I'm still in my taupe dress and heels, so I head upstairs and allocate myself the room at the far end of the landing. Then I change into my ripped jeans and a black T-shirt. I could do with a shower, but I don't want to leave Jesse alone for too long. It'll have to wait.

After making my way back downstairs, I make a black coffee and as I stand sipping it in the kitchen, I figure it would be a good idea to read up on alcoholism. Jesse must have a computer somewhere, so I go in search, finding a laptop in his study. I fire it up, and I'm immensely relieved when it doesn't prompt me for a password. I take it downstairs and settle myself in the big chair opposite Jesse so I can keep an eye on him. Pulling up Google, I type in 'alcoholism,' and I'm presented with seventeen million results. At the top of the page, though, is 'Alcoholics Anonymous.' That would be a good place to start, I suppose. John might have said that Jesse isn't an alcoholic, but I'm doubtful.

After a few hours of browsing the Internet, I feel like my brain cells have been zapped. There is so much to take in – long-term effects, psychiatric problems, withdrawal symptoms. I read a piece about severe childhood trauma leading to alcoholism, which leaves me wondering if Jesse had something happen to him when he was a boy, the vicious scar on his abdomen springing to mind immediately. There are also genetic connections, so then I wonder if one of his parents was an alcoholic. I'm bombarded with information, and I don't know what to do with any of it.

My mind flicks back to last Sunday and the things he said to me. *You're a fucking prick tease, Ava. I needed you and you left me.* Then I had left him … again. I shut the laptop in exasperation and put it on the coffee table. It's only ten o'clock, but I'm totally spent. I don't want to go upstairs to bed in case he wakes up, so I gather a few cushions, lay them on the floor next to him

and settle myself, resting my head on the sofa and stroking the hairs on his toned arms. It relaxes me to have the contact, and it's not long before my eyes are heavy and I'm drifting off.