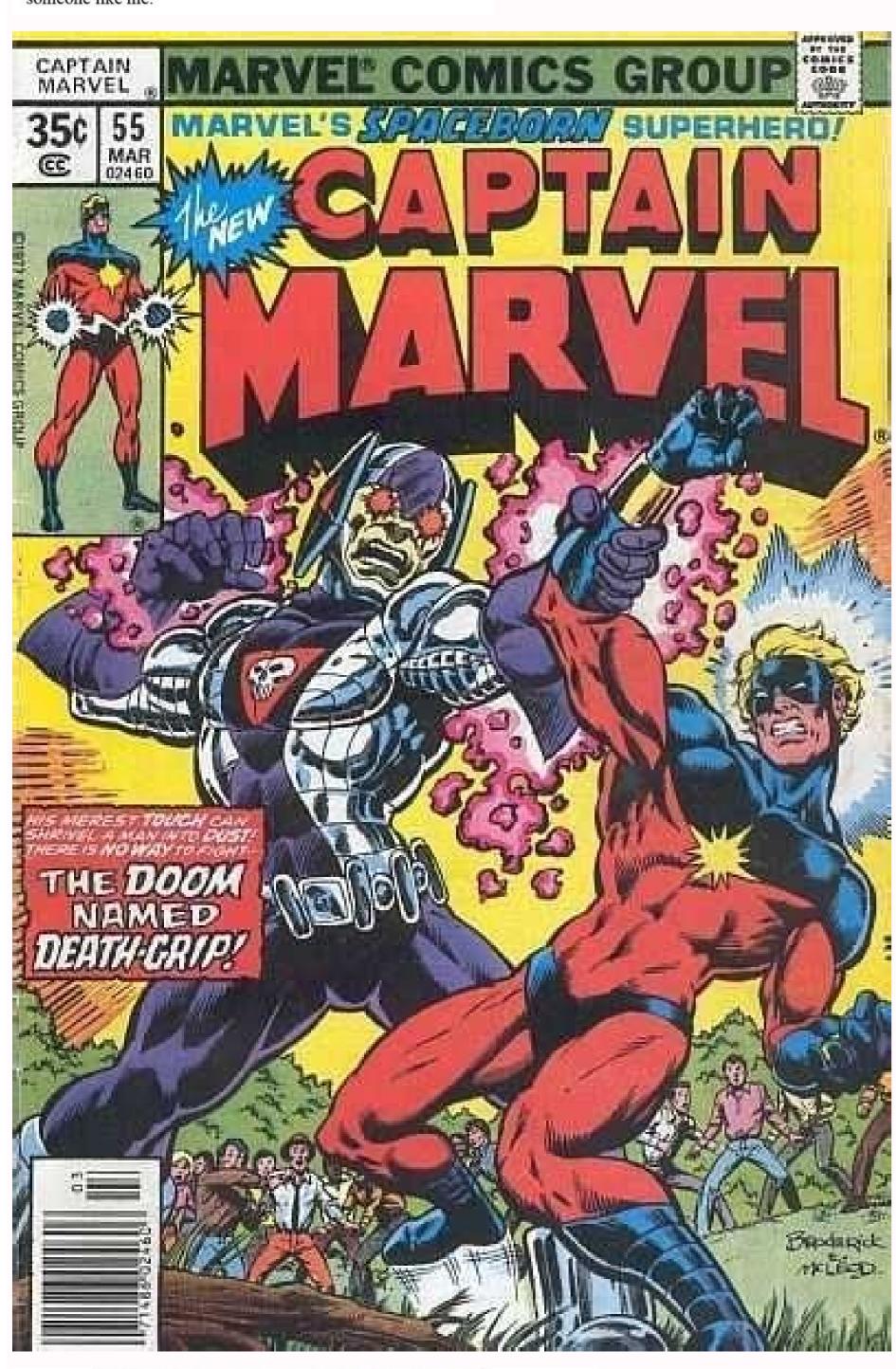
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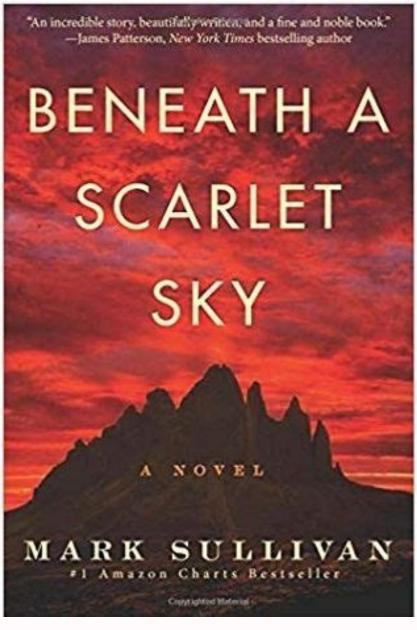
I'm not robot!

color, and his eyes were brown. He kind of looked like summertime, which I guess was attractive to some people. His hair was cropped short and neatly done, and his gray suit was perfectly fitted to him.

But he sat way too rigidly in his chair. He looked so uptight. His clean hair was too perfect, his tailored suit too crisp. He seemed more like a painting than a person. I almost felt bad for the girl who ended up with him. That would probably be the most boring life imaginable.

I focused on his mother. She looked serene. She sat up in her chair, too, but not in an icy way. I realized that, unlike the king and Prince Maxon, she hadn't grown up in the palace. She was a celebrated Daughter of Illéa. She might have been someone like me.





Beneath This Man Audiobok Online Streaming For Android



Beneath This Man Audiobok Online Streaming on iOS

Written By: Jodi Ellen Malpas.
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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, morning fresh air, I make my way to the spot in The 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 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? With the added benefit of Matt's friendly little phone call to my Mum, informing her that I was seeing another man, I'm facing interrogation. I told my mother it wasn't true - it was true at the time, not
now - but I know my Mum well enough to know she didn't believe me, even when I'm on the other end of a phone and I don't know how old he is? He owns a sex club and, oh yes, he's an alcoholic. I've not helped myself by not making the trip to see
them, my work excuse pitiful, and I fully expect the third degree from Dan when I see him tomorrow. I need to prepare myself for his questioning. It's Ruth Quinn. I inwardly groan. This woman is proving to be a challenge herself.
She rang on Tuesday and demanded an appointment for the same day, and I explained that I was busy and suggested someone else may be able to make it, but she wanted me. She eventually settled for my first appointment, which happened to be today, and she has since called every day to remind me. I should just ignore it, but she will
only call the office. '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.' Page 2 And there you go. She's so demanding. I think I might be pricing myself out of this job. 'Four thirty, Miss Quinn.' I
reiterate, for the third consecutive day. 'Lovely, I look forward to it.' 'Great, see you then.' 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's no ignoring 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 f**k 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, 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. 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. As four o'clock strikes, I shut down my computer and leave the office to head for Miss Quinn's.
I arrive at a stunning town house on Lansdowne Crescent on time, and Miss Quinn answers the door. I'm completely stunned. 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, making a note of her name and address at the top. '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. She walks me to the front door. 'I will 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'm confident that I know what Ruth is trying to achieve. She has good vision. She walks me to the front door. 'I will 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'm confident that I know what Ruth is trying to achieve. She has good vision. She walks me to the front door. 'I will 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. 'I will 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. 'I will 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. 'I will 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. 'I will be a schedule of my fees,' I tell her as I'm leaving.'
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.' Page 3 'Ruth, please!' she shakes her head. 'I look forward to it, Ava.' 'Of course, Ruth.' I leave Miss
Quinn, relieved that I've fulfilled all necessary pleasantries, for now, anyway - until I meet my brother tomorrow. I drag myself down the street towards 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 pass-Sam-off club. I might be forced to move out.' He parks up and gets out of his Porsche, meeting me on the passest on the pass and his mousey.
brown hair a disheveled 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 is usually so carefree and unapologetic. 'To Jesse's place.'
Sam must see the look of horror on my face because he steps towards 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 towards me with his hands outstretched. I didn't realise I was moving
backwards. '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 towards his Porsche. 'Get in. Drew meeting us there, he must have assumed I would agree. I can't blame the guy for being optimistic. 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 2 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 obvious 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 towards the pedestrian gates where Drew is 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. To say he was stand-offish would be a major understatement. 'Ava, thank you for coming.' he says, holding me in his tight clinch. 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. He releases me and offers a small, reassuring smile. It does nothing to reassure me, though. 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. 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 he is. It's working. He looks formidable. Page 4 I take a deep breath and punch the gate code in, pushing it 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. 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 in this place. Lusso was my first major accomplishment in design. My first sexual encounter with Jesse happened in this place. Lusso was my first major accomplishment in design. My first sexual encounter with Jesse happened in this place. Lusso was my first major accomplishment in design. My first sexual encounter with Jesse happened in this place. Lusso was my first major accomplishment in design. My first sexual encounter with Jesse happened in this place. Lusso was my first major accomplishment in design. My first sexual encounter with Jesse happened in this place. Lusso was my first major accomplishment in design.
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. I am far from good. 'You?' 'Yes, 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 towards me, they were not pleasant. 'Clive, I would 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 have 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 told your friends this. If I let you up, it's more than my job is worth.' 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 f**k 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. 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 clearer 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 for anyone to find out about
Mr Gomez's regular visitors, or Mr Holland's aversion to a Thai girl or two.' I spit. He shakes his head and motions us on to the elevator 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 alarmed. I shrug. 'If he has, then there is no way of getting up there.' All of a sudden, I'm stood in front
of the elevator, 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. I stand on the elevator, Sam and Drew flanking me on one side, John on the other. 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 the lift, striding towards the doors and jiggling the handle calmly before he starts hammering on the door like a madman. 'Jesse' Open the f**king 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 himself, but it doesn't budge. I can't help but think I might have been the last penthouse. I remember making a point of slamming the door himself, but it doesn't budge. I can't help but think I might have been the last penthouse. I might have been the last penthouse a penthouse 
rumbles. 'And the mother f**ker has been drowning in his sorrows for too long now. He's got a business to run.' I'm still stood in the elevator 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? Page 5 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 pull up my contact list, dialing Jesse and holding my phone to my ear 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 towards the door. 'I can hear it ringing.' He returns to me, obviously waiting for me to speak down the line, but it
goes to voicemail. My heart constricts. He doesn't want to talk to me. I go to re-board the elevator, 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 follow tentatively behind them and the only thoughts going through my mind are of my last discovery here. Why am I walking this way? Turn around! Get in the elevator! Go, NOW. But I don't. I stand in the doorway and from what I can see, nothing has moved
Everything still seems to be in place. I step a little bit further 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 towards them, still
hearing the guys running around the penthouse, doors opening and closing, his name being called. I, however, am being pulled towards the terrace. I know why. It's the same magnetism that pulls me towards Jesse every time he is near, except 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 either. 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 towards 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.' I plead, giving into hysteria as I look at the man I love, unconscious and non-responsive, 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. 'Mother f**ker.' 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 towards
me. Why haven't I checked this yet? It's the first rule in first aid. I grab his wrist, but my shaking hands won't allow me to maintain a stable hold to establish a pulse. '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 me eyes uncontrollably 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 bodys.
'The stupid mother f**ker. He's drunk himself into a f**king coma.' I look at Sam and Drew, but I can't fathom their reactions 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 push 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 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 am 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. Page 6 '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. I flinch at the loud noise that echoes around us, but more
significantly, Jesse flinches 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 no sooner have I released 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 quide 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 May daytime, but nightfall brings cooler temperatures. Why did I walk out on him? I should have stayed and calmed him down, not walk 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. I free the entire leather corner couch 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 washes 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 bordering on black. 'Hey,' I place my hand over his on my arm. He tries to lift his head from the pillow, but I
don't have to reprimend him. Before I have a chance to push him back down, he gives up trying. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm
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, li take his hand and place it on the blanket, then 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 wanting 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
'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. I shrug. 'I'll be off then. Speak to you tomorrow.' Drew says. I offer a small smile and John does his signature nod as Drew leaves us to it and Sam finishes the coffees. 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. Page 7 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 have
surely phoned the police. John pipes up. 'Everything is running smoothly at The Manor. We don't have to worry about that. He'll be back to normal after nursing a week long 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
small smile. 'You helped, girl.' 'What did I do?' I ask defensively. I don't know why I sound so hurt by John's statement. He has just told me I 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. We were not together in the couple sense for me to leave him, though. Nothing had been established as to where we both stood. We never did get to lay our cards on the table or sort this shit out. 'It's not your fault, Ava.' Sam reassures me firmly. 'You weren't to know.' 'He never
doing that out of guilt or because I love him? He might not even want me here. He was so mad at me. My head is a jumbled mess. I prop my elbows on the counter and plant my head in my hands. 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 laidback type, but I have only ever seen snippets of a laidback 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 it with me...lucky me. What would they be faced with if I was to walk away again? '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 mother feek business.' He gets himself up from the barstool. 'Ava, you need my number. Where's business.' He gets himself up from 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. I approach quietly and 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 whole Manor shock.' Page 8 'Don't, Sam.' 'When he drinks, he really drinks.' I imagine he will be. The Jesse I know is strong, confident, domineering and a whole strong is 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 strong is 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 strong is 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 strong is 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 strong is 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 is 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 is 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 is a proud man, Ava. He'll be mortified that we've seen him like this.' I imagine he will be mortified that we've seen him like this.' I imagine he will be mortified that we've seen him like this.' I imagine he will be mortified that we've seen him like this.' I imagine he will be mortified that we've seen him like this.' I imagine he will be mortified that we've seen him like this.' I imagine he will be mortified that we've seen him like this.' I imagine he will be mortified that we've seen him like this.' I imagine he will be mortified that we've seen him like this.' I imagine he will be mortified that we've seen him like this.' I imagine he will be mortified that we've seen him like this.' I imagine he will be mortified that we've seen him 
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 lay 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 put himself about, that he must have put himself about himse
dumping them in a couple of black bin liners. I empty the fridge of more vodka, tipping it all down the sink. I'm staggered by how much he has loaded up in there; he must have bought a whole crate of the stuff. It's obvious he planned on being here alone with his vodka for quite a while. I do know one thing, though; 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 Clive 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 may 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. This thing is like a yoyo between
Kate's house and Lusso. 'I just chucked anything in it.' 'Thanks.' I take the bag. 'So, you're staying for?' Kate asks. That's a point. How long for? 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 back at Kate and shrug too. I'm suddenly aware that I've left Jesse upstairs 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 towards the elevators. '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 goodbyes and I promise to call her in the morning before I head back to the elevator, 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 shut the door, but it doesn't secure fully. It will do until the repair man turns up, though. I wander into the living room and see Jesse still asleep. So, what do I do now? I look down my body and note I'm still in my taupe dress and heels, so I take myself upstairs, allocating myself the natural room at
too long. It'll have to wait. 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. 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. This is the kitchen, I figure it would be a good idea to read up on alcoholism. Jesse must have a computer somewhere. 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. This is the kitchen, I figure it would be a good idea to read up on alcoholism. Jesse must have a computer somewhere. 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.
man has personal security issues. 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 "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 myself. 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. These are not the sort of questions you just come right out and ask. Page 9 My mind
flicks back to last Sunday and the things he said to me. "You're a f**king prick tease, Ava", "I needed you and you left me". Then I had left him...again. He'd said he didn't tell me because he didn't
then doesn't that make him an alcoholic? 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 and I don't want to make 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 met by a duller version of the
green I know so well. I jump to my feet and smack my ankle on the coffee table. 'Shit!' I curse. 'Watch your mouth!' he scolds me, his voice gritty and broken. I grasp my feet and smack my ankle on the coffee table. 'Shit!' I curse. 'Watch your mouth!' he scolds me, his voice gritty and broken. I grasp my feet and smack my ankle on the coffee table. 'Shit!' I curse. 'Watch your mouth!' he scolds me, his voice gritty and broken. I grasp my feet and smack my ankle on the coffee table. 'Shit!' I curse. 'Watch your mouth!' he scolds me, his voice gritty and broken. I grasp my feet and smack my feet and 
awake!' I cry. He winces, clasping his head with his good hand. Oh shit! He must have the hangover from hell and here I am screeching like a banshee. I walk back the few steps needed to find the chair behind me, and then lower myself onto the seat. I have no idea what to say to him. I'm not about to ask how he's feeling, that is pretty obvious, and
I'm not going to hit him with a lecture about personal safety or for disregarding his health. I really want to ask him if he remembers our fight. What should I do? I don't know, so I resolve to sit with my hands in my lap and shut up. I look at him, looking at me and my mind is racing with things I want to say, none of which I can. I want to tell him that I
love him, for a start. And I want to ask him why he didn't tell me he owns a sex club or that he has an issue with drink. Is he wondering what I'm doing here? Does he want me to leave? Oh, God, does he need a drink? The silence is killing me. 'How are you feeling?' I blurt, instantly wishing I had kept my mouth shut. He sighs and inspects his damaged
hand. 'Shit.' he states sharply. Oh, okay. Now what do I say? He doesn't seem pleased to see me at all, so perhaps I should go before I push him to crack another bottle open. He'll have to go buy some more, though. That will probably be even more of a reason to be mad at me. I decide he must need some fluids, so I get up and head towards the
kitchen. I'll get him some water and then I'll leave. 'Where are you going?' he asks, slightly panicky and bolting upright on the couch. 'I thought you might need some water.' I assure him, my heart lifting a little. He doesn't want me to leave. I've seen that face plenty of times. The domineering control freak usually follows, after he's pinned me down
somewhere, but I won't get my hopes up too high. He hasn't got the strength to be chasing, pinning or dominating me at the moment. I'm disappointed. He settles at my response, and I carry on my way to the kitchen, glancing at the clock on the oven as I fetch a glass. Eight o'clock. I've slept for ten hours straight. That hasn't happened since...well
since I was last with Jesse. I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and fill the glass before traipsing back into the vast open space to find Jesse sat up on the sofa with his head in his hands, the blanket pooling in his lap. When I reach him, he lifts his gaze to mine and our eyes lock. I hand him the water. With his good hand, he takes the glass, his
fingers resting over mine. I retract mine quickly, the water splashing out of the glass. I don't know why that happened, and the look on his face makes me feel instantly heartless. He's shaking dreadfully, and I'm wondering if it's withdrawal. I'm sure I read shakiness as a symptom, along with a catalogue of other signs. He follows my eyes to his hand
and shakes his head. This is weird. Things have never been like this between us. Neither of us knows what to say. 'When did you last have a drink?' I ask. This is pink elephant in the room territory, but I've got to say something. He sips his water and then slumps back on the sofa, his abdominals looking sharper from his slight weight loss. 'I don't
know. What day is it?' 'Saturday.' 'Saturd
brain for the right thing to say. I hate this. I wouldn't usually think twice about diving on him and throwing my arms around him, letting him smother me completely, but he's so delicate at the moment, which is crazy, considering his tall, if a bit leaner frame. My strong rogue is reduced to a shaking mess. It's killing me. And on top of all that, I don't
even know if he would want me to. I'm not sure I really want to either. This man is not the man I fell in love with. Is this the real Jesse? Page 10 He sits and fiddles with his glass thoughtfully, the familiar sight of the cogs turning is comforting, it's a little piece of him that I recognise, but I can't bear this silence. 'Jesse, is there anything I can do?' I ask
despairingly, while silently pleading for him to give me something - anything. He sighs. 'There are lots of things you can do, Ava. But I can't ask you to do any of them.' He doesn't look at me. I want to scream at him, tell him what he's done to me. Sat here looking at him, all disheveled and tracing the rim of his glass, is just reinforcing the sensible
side of my brain's instinct to run. 'Do you want a shower?' I ask. I can't sit in silence anymore. I'll tear my hair out. He leans forward and winces. 'Sure.' he murmurs. I watch him struggle to his feet, and I feel like a cold cow for not helping him, but I don't know if he wants me to, and I'm not sure that I can. The atmosphere between us is so awkward
on it or over it. My shoulders droop and I sigh as I start walking with him up the stairs to the master-suite. It takes a while and we're surrounded by an uncomfortable silence the whole way, but we make it, eventually. I don't know how much longer I can stay here. This is a million miles away from what I'm used to with this man. 'Would a bath be
better?' I ask, walking ahead into the bathroom. He looks exhausted after his trek up the stairs, so standing in the shower isn't going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom. He looks exhausted after his trek up the stairs, so standing in the shower isn't going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom. He looks exhausted after his trek up the stairs, so standing in the shower isn't going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom. He looks exhausted after his trek up the stairs, so standing in the shower isn't going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom. He looks exhausted after his trek up the stairs, so standing in the shower isn't going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom. He looks exhausted after his trek up the stairs, so standing in the shower isn't going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom. He looks exhausted after his trek up the stairs, so standing in the shower isn't going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom. He looks exhausted after his trek up the stairs, so standing in the shower isn't going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom. He looks exhausted after his trek up the stairs, so standing in the shower isn't going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bathroom is a going to be fun. A good muscle soak in the bat
desperately hoping I knew, but I'm destroyed to discover that I don't know him at all - not even a little bit. I'll ring John and see what he suggests. I'm not cut out for this. He is inhibited, withdrawn and all of the hurtful things that he bellowed at me during our altercation are getting louder and clearer the longer this goes on. Why did I get into that
elevator? I turn the giant mixer tap on and run my hand under it until the temperature is right, while trying my hardest not to think about tub talk and the fact that Jesse is a self-proclaimed bath man now - but only when I'm in there with him. I push the button for the plug and let the water run, knowing the giant thing will take an age to fill. I turn
and come face to face with the vanity unit. That is where we had our first sexual encounter. This bathroom is where I last saw him. Stop! I shake my thoughts away and busy myself finding some bath soak and generally pottering about, while Jesse
stands propped up against the wall in silence. As I knew it would, the bath takes forever to fill, and I begin to wish I had just shoved him in the shower. Finally, it's full enough. 'There.' I say shortly, walking out of the bathroom. I've never felt compelled to escape his presence. I've stormed off in strops and evaded his touch for fear of losing my mind
but I've never really wanted to leave. I do now. 'You're acting like a stranger.' he says softly, just as I reach the door, stopping me in my tracks. This is so very painful. I don't turn around. 'I feel like a stranger.' he says softly, just as I reach the door, stopping me in my tracks. This is so very painful. I don't turn around. 'I feel like a stranger.' leave the says softly, just as I reach the door, stopping me in my tracks. This is so very painful. I don't turn around. 'I feel like a stranger.' leave the says softly, just as I reach the door, stopping me in my tracks. This is so very painful. I don't turn around. 'I feel like a stranger.' leave the says softly, just as I reach the door, stopping me in my tracks. This is so very painful. I don't turn around. 'I feel like a stranger.' leave the says softly, just as I reach the door, stopping me in my tracks. This is so very painful. I don't turn around. 'I feel like a stranger.' leave the says softly, just as I reach the door, stopping me in my tracks. This is so very painful. I don't turn around. 'I feel like a stranger.' leave the says softly, just as I reach the door, stopping me in my tracks. This is so very painful. I don't turn around. 'I feel like a stranger.' leave the says softly, just as I reach the says softly the says so
instructions tangling in my head. I really don't know what to do for the best. I thought the pain couldn't get any worse. I thought I was in the lowest level of hell already. I was wrong. Seeing him like this is crippling me. I need to leave and continue with my battle to get over this man. I feel like I've been knocked back a few steps, now that I've seen
him again, but the truth is, I hadn't really made any progression in my recovery. If anything, this will make the whole painful process easier. 'Please look at me, Ava.' My heart sprints up to my throat at his words that are a plea rather than the usual demand. Even his voice sounds different. It's not the familiar deep, husky, sexy rumble I know. Now, it
is cracked and broken. He is cracked and broken, which means I am cracked and broken, which means I am cracked and broken. I slowly pivot to face the man who is a stranger to me, finding his bottom lip wedged between his teeth as he looks at me through hollow green eyes. 'I can't do this.' I turn and leave, my heart hammering, but getting slower at the same time. It's going to stop
                I hear him coming after me, but I don't look back. He's not at full strength, so this might be the only time I actually get away from him. What was I thinking coming here? Flashbacks of last Sunday overwhelm my head as I take the staircase, I feel the familiar grip of his my vision blurry, my legs numb. As I hit the bottom of the staircase, I feel the familiar grip of his my vision blurry, my legs numb. As I hit the bottom of the staircase, I feel the familiar grip of his my vision blurry, my legs numb. As I hit the bottom of the staircase, I feel the familiar grip of his my vision blurry, my vision
hand around my wrist, and I panic, flying around to push him away from me. 'No!' I scream, frantically trying to release myself from his harsh hold. 'Don't touch me!' 'Ava, don't do this.' he pleads, grabbing my other wrist and holding me in front of him. 'Stop!' Page 11 I crumble to the floor, feeling helpless and fragile. I'm already broken, but he can
dish the final blow that will finish me off. 'Please, don't.' I sob. 'Please, don't.' I sob. 'Please, don't make this harder.' He collapses to the floor with me, pulling me onto his lap and smothering me completely. I sob relentlessly into his chest. I can't control it. His face pushes into my hair. 'I'm sorry,' he whispers. 'I'm sorry,' he whispers. 'I'm sorry,' he whispers. 'I'm sorry,' he whispers.' I sob. 'Please, don't deserve it, but give me a chance.' He
squeezes me hard. 'I need another chance.' 'I don't know what to do.' I'm being honest. I really don't know what to do. I feel the need to escape him, but at the same time, I feel the need to stay and let him make things better. But if I stay, will I get dealt that death blow? Or if I leave, will that be the death blow? For both of us? All I know is the strong
firm, assertive Jesse, the Jesse who broods when I defy him, manhandles me when I threaten to leave him and f**ks me until I'm delirious. This is the furthest away from that man 'Don't run away from me again.' he begs, holding me tight. I notice his shakes have subsided. I pull back, wiping my tear stained face with the back of my hand, my eyes
fixed on his stomach, his scar bigger and more obvious than ever before. I can't look at his eyes. They are not dark with no comfort to offer me. Despite that, though, I know if I walk out of that
door, I'm finished. My only hope is to stay, find the answers that I need and pray they don't destroy me. He has the power to destroy me. His cold hand slides under my chin and pulls my face up to his. 'I'm going to make this all right. I'm going to make you remember, Ava.' I stare into his eyes and see determination through the haze of green.
Determination is good, but does it eradicate the pain and madness that has come before it? 'Can you make me remember the conventional way?' I ask seriously. It's not a joke, although he smiles a little. 'I'm making it my mission objective. I'll do anything.' His words, a repeat from the launch night of Lusso, are spoken with as much resolve as they
were back then. He kept his promise to prove that I wanted him. A small flicker of hope lightens my heavy heart, and I sink my face back down into his chest, clinging onto him. I believe him. A guiet exhale of breath escapes his lips as he pulls me closer and holds on like his life depends on it. It probably does, And mine too. 'Your bath will get cold.'
looks terrible. I hope it's not broken because five days without any medical treatment could have the bones setting out of place. 'Come on.' I peel myself out of his vice grip. He grumbles but releases me. Standing up, I put my hand out to him, and he looks up at me with a small smile before taking it and lifting himself from the floor. We walk quietly
up the stairs and back to the master-suite. 'In you get.' I order quietly, pointing at the bath. 'Are you making demands?' His eyebrows rise. He obviously finds the reversal peculiar too. 'It sounds like it,' I nod towards the bath. 'Are you making demands?' His eyebrows rise. He obviously finds the reversal peculiar too. 'It sounds like it,' I nod towards the bath. 'Are you making demands?' His eyebrows rise. He obviously finds the reversal peculiar too. 'It sounds like it,' I nod towards the bath. 'Are you making demands?' His eyebrows rise. He obviously finds the reversal peculiar too. 'It sounds like it,' I nod towards the bath. 'Are you making demands?' His eyebrows rise. He obviously finds the reversal peculiar too. 'It sounds like it,' I nod towards the bath. 'Are you making demands?' His eyebrows rise. He obviously finds the reversal peculiar too. 'It sounds like it,' I nod towards the bath. 'Are you making demands?' His eyebrows rise. He obviously finds the reversal peculiar too. 'It sounds like it,' I nod towards the bath. 'Are you making demands?' His eyebrows rise. He obviously finds the reversal peculiar too. 'It sounds like it,' I nod towards the bath. 'Are you making demands?' His eyebrows rise. He obviously finds the reversal peculiar too. 'It sounds like it,' I nod towards the bath. 'Are you making demands?' His eyebrows rise. 'I not towards like it.' I nod t
'It's not natural, Ava. For me not to touch you, it's not right.' He's right, but I can't allow myself to get swallowed up by him. I need to keep a level head because as soon as he gets his hands on me, I'm distracted. I don't say anything. I just look at the bath again before returning my eyes to him. He shakes his head, un-wrapping the blanket from
around his waist before stepping into the bath and lowering himself gingerly into the water. I collect a cup from the vanity unit and crouch by the side of the bath to wash his hair. 'It's not the same without you in here with me.' he grumbles, leaning back and closing his eyes. I ignore his gripe and start washing his hair and soaping his fine body from
head to toe, fighting off the inevitable fizzles streaming through me at the contact. Lingering around his scar on his abdomen thoughtfully, I quietly hope it will prompt him to explain it. It doesn't. He keeps his eyes closed and his mouth shut. I have a feeling this is going to be a tough ride. He never volunteers information, and he dodges my questions
with a stern warning or by distraction tactics. I can't let that happen again. This is going to take all of my strength and willpower. It's just not natural for me to evade him. I run my hand down his rough face. 'You need a shave.' He opens his eyes and cups his chin with his good hand, stroking his stubble. 'You don't like it?' Page 12 'I like you however.
you come.' Just not drunk! The fleeting look that passes over his face nearly has me convinced he's read my mind, but then he's probably thinking the exact same thing. 'I'm not touching another drop again.' he declares confidently, ensuring he maintains our eye contact as he makes his vow. 'You sound confident.' I retort quietly. 'I am.' He sits
himself up in the bath and turns to face me, lifting his battered hand to cup my face and wincing when he realises he can't. 'I mean it, never again. I promise you.' He sounds so sincere. 'I'm not a raving alcoholic, Ava. I admit I get carried away once I do have a drink and I find it hard to stop, but I can take it or leave it. I was in a bad place after you
left me. I just wanted to numb the pain.' My heart tightens in my chest, and I feel a sense of relief mixed with a little doubt. Everyone gets a little carried away when they've had a drink, right? 'I came back,' I look past him, trying to piece together what I need to say. Millions of words have been trampling my mind for days, but now I can't think of any
                  didn't you tell me sooner? Is this what you meant when you said I would cause more damage if I left?' His head drops. 'That was a shitty thing to say.' 'It was.' He returns his eyes to mine. 'I just wanted you to stay. I was stunned when you told me that I had a nice hotel.' He smiles a little, and I feel stupid. 'Things got
pretty quickly. I didn't know how to tell you. I didn't know how to tell you. I didn't want you to run away again. You weren't supposed to come to
The Manor like that. I wasn't prepared, Ava.' That much was obvious. All of the times I had been to the supposed hotel, I'd been chaperoned or confined to Jesse's office. I'm sure people were warned off talking to me and no one approached Jesse when I was with him. And he's right, things did get pretty intense, pretty quickly, but that was nothing to
do with me. God, there is so much to talk about. I need to know things and he has got to tell me. The masty little creature who Jesse pounded on at The Manor had some pretty interesting things to say. Has Jesse had an affair with his wife? So many questions. I sigh. 'Come on, you're pruning.' I hold a towel up, and he mirrors my sigh before pushing
himself up on the side of the bath with his good hand. He steps out and I run the towel over his body as he watches me closely. The corners of his lips lift slightly into the semblance of a smile when I reach his neck. 'A few weeks ago, I was nursing your hangover.' he says quietly. 'I bet your head is banging a lot harder than mine was.' I dismiss his
reminiscing and secure the towel around his waist. 'Food and then the hospital.' 'Hospital?' he blurts, his voice startled. 'I don't need a hospital, Ava.' 'Your hand.' I clarify. He probably thinks I want to section him. I see understanding surface in his eyes as he lifts his hand up to inspect it. The blood has all washed away, but it still looks nasty. 'It's
fine.' he grumbles. 'I don't think it is.' I protest softly. 'Ava, I don't need to go to the hospital.' 'Don't go then.' I turn and walk into the bedroom. Following me in, he collapses on the end of the bed and watches as I disappear into his huge walk-in-wardrobe. I rummage through his clothes, finding him some marl grey sweatpants and a white t-shirt. He
needs comfort. I retrieve some boxer shorts from his chest of drawers and walk back over to find him sprawled back on the bed. Just getting him upstairs and bathed has knackered him out. I can't imagine a hangover on this scale. 'Here, put these on.' I place the clothes on the bed next to him, and he turns his head to inspect my selection, letting out
a heavy, tired breath. When he makes no attempt to dress himself, I pick up his boxers and kneel down in front of him, holding them at his feet. He's done this to me plenty of times. I tap his ankle and he pushes himself up on the bed, looking down at me, a small twinkle lighting his eyes. It's another familiar trait. He silently lifts his feet into the
waiting holes and stands so I can negotiate the boxers up his legs, but then his towel drops when I'm halfway up his body and I come face to face with his huge arousal. I release his boxers and jump back from him, like it might burn me or something. Not all of him is broken then, I think to myself, trying to ignore the steel rod of flesh within touching
distance. I flick a glance up to him and for the first time, his eyes sparkle fully, but it's not a good thing. I've seen that look, more than once, heaps in fact, and it's not what I need right now, although my body is completely disagreeing with my brain. I struggle to control the urge to push him on the bed and straddle him. I'm not risking sidetracking
either of us with sex. There's a lot to talk about. He reaches down to pull his boxers up the rest of the way. 'I'll go to the hospital.' he says. 'If you want me to, then I'll go.' I frown at him. 'Agreeing to have your hand looked at won't make me fall to your feet in gratitude.' I say curtly. His eyes narrow slightly at my harshness. 'I'll let that slip.' Page 13 'I
need to feed you.' I mutter, turning and walking out of the room, leaving Jesse to put his sweatpants and t-shirt on. I need him to want to sort himself out, not just do things because he thinks it will get him closer to me. That won't help. It would just be another form of manipulation, and I've got to avoid anything that influences the small part of my
mind that is functioning correctly. Chapter 4 I examine the contents of his fridge. There is nothing I can do with a can of squirty cream, a jar of chocolate spread or a shudder. 'You have nothing.' I say as he approaches behind me and grabs
the jar of peanut butter. He cradles the jar under his arm and unscrews the lid with his good hand, tossing it on the breakfast bar, before perching on a barstool and proceeding to dunk and lick his finger from his mouth. 'I'll come.' 'Okay.' I
carry on my way. 'I'll come because I want to.' he says quietly. I stop in my tracks. 'Okay.' 'Ava, will you look at me?' His voice is impatient. I don't appreciate it. I turn to face him, silently pleading with him to instigate a talk, but he just stares at me, looking almost mad. 'I'll get ready.' I turn, leaving him in the kitchen. I shower in the spare room en-
suite, leaving myself standing under the hot water for an eternity, like it might wash away all of my troubles. When I eventually emerge from the shower enclosure, I search through my bags and find that Kate has, quite literally, chucked anything and everything in. I throw on a cornflower blue fifties dress which flares at the waist and my cream ballet
pumps before rough drying my hair and pinning it in a low mess at the nape of my neck. A quick flick of blusher and mascara and I'm done. I present myself to the mirror, but I don't look much better after my attempts to make myself appear better. My eyes are probably matching Jesse's on the hollow scale and the empty feeling that's been lingering
since last Sunday has not been filled by Jesse's presence. Maybe I've got all of this wrong. Maybe I am better walking away because I certainly don't feel any better for being here. I sigh at my reflection, willing it to give me some answers, but I know the only place I can find the answers I'm looking for is sat downstairs feasting on peanut butter. I
grab my bag and make my way down to him. He's asleep. I look at him sat on the sofa, one leg up, one hanging off the edge, his palm resting on his chest. His mouth is slightly parted and his lashes are flickering. I leave him, taking myself to the kitchen to down my pill and use the time to send a quick text to Kate, letting her know all is fine, even
though it's not, and then I ring my brother. With all that's happened, I forgot I'm supposed to be seeing him today. 'Ava?' 'Dan!' It's so good to hear his voice. 'Where are you?' 'Well, the hotel I was booked into let me down, so I'm staying with Harvey.' he teases. I ignore his little dig. He doesn't care that he's had to find somewhere else to crash. He
hated Matt. 'How are Mum and Dad?' I ask. 'Worried,' he states flatly. I knew they would be. 'They needn't be.' 'Yeah, well, they are. And me too. Where am I? I can hardly tell him exactly where I am and with who. 'Kate's,' I lie. It's not like he'll be talking to her or visiting her to discover the truth. And anyway, Mum knows I'm
supposed to be at Kate's and I'm certain she would have told him. Is he testing me? Silence falls down the phone line at the mention of Kate's name. 'I see,' he says shortly. 'Still?' Oh, the detachment in his voice. They haven't seen each other for years, but time, it would appear, is not a healer. 'It's just temporary, Dan. I'm looking for somewhere as
we speak.' Actually, as we speak, I'm sitting in the penthouse of Lusso waiting for the Sex Lord of The Manor - who has a raging hangover and with whom I'm in love with - to wake up so I can take him to the hospital and get his hand seen to - the one that he put through a window because I pissed him off. I start pacing around the kitchen island.
'Have you spoken to that twat of an ex?' he asks. The spite in his voice is palpable. 'No, but I've heard he's been in touch with Mum and Dad. That's very nice of him.' 'Fucking prick. We need to talk about this. Mum filled me in on her little chat with Matt. I know he's a snake, but Mum's worried. It didn't help you not coming down to Newquay.' 'I
rang,' I defend myself. 'Yeah, and I know you've not given her the whole story. What's with this new man?' I freeze mid-pace. That's a good question. 'Dan, there are some things you can't tell your parents.' 'Yes, but you can tell your brother.' he says firmly. 'Can I?' I blurt. I highly doubt that. Big brother would probably join my Dad in the heart attack
ward. This is the reason I didn't go to Newquay; interrogation and nagging. I will have to face up to it eventually, but not now. I've never been so glad that my parents live so far away. 'Yes, you can. So, when can I see you?' he asks, chirping up a little. Page 14 See me or squeeze me for information? 'Tomorrow?' I try. 'I thought we were doing today?'
He sounds so disappointed. So am I. I really want to see him, but I really don't too. 'I'm sorry. I'm looking at a few places to rent, and then I've got stacks of drawings to finalise.' I lie again, but I couldn't possibly muster up the strength to appear reasonably normal in such a short space of time. Maybe by tomorrow I'll have dragged myself out of my
hole of depression and uncertainty. I very much doubt it, but at least I have time to try. 'Great, we'll make a day of it.' he confirms my fears. A whole day of evading his questions? 'Okay, ring me in the morning.' I say, and secretly hope he goes out with all of his mates tonight and suffers a dreadful hangover which delays his call to me. I need time.
'Sure thing. See you tomorrow, kid.' He hangs up. I start thinking of ways to get around this and after an hour of aimless pacing around the penthouse, I come up with none. I can't avoid him forever. The intercom phone system chimes and I answer it to Clive. 'Ava, the maintenance man is on his way up to fix the door. Oh, and Mr Ward's window has
been replaced.' 'Thank you, Clive.' I hang up and make my way to the door. I answer to an old boy, who is already inspecting the damage. 'You have a rhino ram-raid you?' he asks, scratching his head. 'Something like that.' I mutter. 'I can secure it for now, but it'll need replacing. I'll get it on order and let you know when it arrives.' he says, placing
his tool box on the floor. 'Thanks,' I leave him door, 'What's going on?' he asks. 'John had a fight with your front door when you didn't open it.' I inform him dryly. His eyebrows shoot up, but then he looks worried. 'I should ring him.'
'How are you feeling?' I ask, assessing him and concluding that he looks a bit brighter after an hour power napping. 'Better. You?' 'Fine, I'll get my bag.' I sidestep him and wait for a follow up, any words that are going to make this all better, but I get nothing, just his heat
seeping into my flesh from his harsh grip of my arm. I look up at him and find him watching me, but he still doesn't open his mouth. I sigh heavily and pull myself free, but then I remember my car isn't here. 'Shit.' I curse quietly. 'Watch your mouth, Ava. What's up?' 'My car's at Kate's.' 'We'll take mine.' 'You can't drive one handed.' I turn to face
him. His driving scares the shit out of me at the best of times. 'I know. You can drive.' He tosses his keys at me, and I panic slightly. He trusts me to drive a car worth more than one hundred and sixty thousand pounds? Holy shit! 'Ava, you're driving like Miss Daisy. Will you put your foot down?' Jesse moans. I throw him a scowl, which he chooses to
ignore. The accelerator is so sensitive, and I feel so small behind the wheel. I'm scared to death I'm going to scratch it. 'Shut up.' I snap, before doing as I'm told and roaring off down the road. It's his tough shit if I do bump someone. 'That's better.' He looks at me and smiles. 'It's easier to handle if you're not pu**y footing around on the power.' I
could pin that statement on him. He is right, though, but I'm not telling him so. Instead, I concentrate on the road and getting him to the hospital in one piece. After three hours in Minor Injuries and an x-ray, the doctor has confirmed that Jesse's hand is not broken, but he has some muscle damage. 'Have you been resting it?' The nurse asks, 'If it's
been a few days since you incurred the injury, I would expect the swelling to have subsided by now.' Jesse looks at me quiltily as the nurse wraps his hand in a bandage. 'No,' he says quietly. No, he's been clenching bottles of vodka in it. 'You should have been,' she reprimands him, 'And it should be elevated.' I raise my eyebrows at him and he rolls
his eyes while the nurse puts his arm in a sling before sending us on our way. As we get to the entrance, he removes the sling and chucks it in the litter bin. 'You bloody are!' I yell, fishing it out of the bin. I'm shocked. This man has no regard for the
wellbeing of his body. He has assaulted his internal organs with gallons of vodka, and now refuses to co-operate so his hand heals properly? I stalk after him, but he doesn't stop until he gets to the car. I'm holding the keys, but I don't trigger the door release. We glare at each other over the top of the DBS. 'Are you going to open the car?' he asks.
'No, not until you put this back on.' I hold the sling above my head. 'I told you, Ava. I'm not wearing it.' I roll my eyes before narrowing them back on him. 'Why?' I ask shortly. The stubborn Jesse is back, but this trait I'm not so pleased to see. 'I don't need it.' 'Yes, you do.' Page 15 'No, I don't.' he mocks. Good Lord! 'Put the f**king sling on, Jesse!' I
shout over the car. 'Watch your f**king mouth!' 'Fuck!' I hiss back petulantly. He scowls real hard at me. What must we look like in the middle of the hospital car park, shouting f**k at each other over the roof of an Aston Martin? I don't care. He is such a caveman sometimes. 'MOUTH!' he roars, and then winces at the sound level of his yell, his bad
hand shooting up to class his head. 'FUCK!' I burst into laughter as I watch him dance around in circles, shaking his head off. That will teach the obstinate fool. 'Open the f**king car, Ava.' he shouts. Oh, he's mad. I squeeze my lips together to suppress my laugh. 'How's your hand?' I ask on a giggle that breaks out into a full
belly laugh. I can't hold it in. It feels so good to laugh. When I recover and straighten up, he's looking at me fiercely over the car. 'Open,' he demands. 'Sling,' I snap, throwing it over the roof. He grabs the material and throws it on the tarmac before returning his furious eyes to me. 'Open!' 'You're a child sometimes, Jesse Ward. I am not opening the
car until you put that sling on.' I watch as his eyes narrow on me and the edges of his mouth lift into a concealed grin. 'Two,' His tone is cool and casual, while I'm stunned. He leans his elbows on the roof. 'One,' 'You can get stuffed!' I
scoff, standing firm. I only want him to put the damn sling on for his own sake. It makes no odds to me, but this is principle. 'Zero,' he mouths, and starts stalking around the front of the car towards me, while I instinctively head around the back. He stops and raises his eyebrows. 'What are you doing?' he asks, circling the other way. I know that face;
that's his you're-really-copping-it face. I know he won't think twice about pinning me to the ground and torturing me until I submit to whatever he demands through fear of peeing myself. What would I be submitting to, though? 'Nothing,' I say, making sure I keep to the other side of the car. We could be here all day. 'Come here.' His voice is that low
husky familiar tone that I love, and another piece of him that has returned, but I'm being distracted. I shake my head. 'No,' Before I can anticipate his next move, he breaks into a full sprint around the car, and I dash off in the opposite direction on a squeal. People are staring as I weave myself through the other parked cars in the car park like a
deranged madwoman, before I skid to a stop at the back of a high top, four wheel drive. I peek around the corner to see where he is. My heart falls out of my mouth, straight on to the tarmac. He's doubled over, his hands braced on his knees. Shit! What the hell am I doing encouraging such stupid behaviour when he should be recuperating? I run
towards him as a few passersby clock him and start to approach. 'Jesse!' I shout as I near. 'Is he all right, love?' An old boy asks me as I make it to him. 'I don't...WHAT!' I'm hoist off my feet with one arm and thrown over Jesse's shoulder. 'Don't mess with me, Ava,' he says smugly, 'You should know by now, I always win.' He reaches up my skirt and
rests his hand on the inside of my thigh as he strides towards the car with me draped over him. I smile sweetly at everyone we pass, but I don't bother to fight him. I'm just happy he has the strength to lift me. 'My knickers are flashing.' I complain as I reach around to smooth my full dress over my bum. 'No, they're not.' He lowers me down his body
slowly until my face is level with his, my feet off the ground, his chest firm and warm against me. His eyes have won back a bit of sparkle and they are searching mine. He's going to kiss me. I have to stop this. I wriggle in his arms. 'We need to go to the supermarket.' I say, focusing my sight on his chest as I squirm my way free. He sighs heavily,
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dropping me to my feet. 'How can I fix things if you keep dodging my attempts?' I brush my dress down and return my eyes to his. 'That's your problem, Jesse. You want to fix things by distracting me with your touch instead of talking to me and giving me some answers. I can't let that happen again.' I trigger the door release and climb into the car, leaving Jesse with his head hanging, chewing his lip. We pull into the supermarket and I drive up and down looking for a parking space. I've learnt something new about Jesse today - he's a crap passenger. I've learnt something new about Jesse today - he's a crap passenger. I've learnt something new about Jesse today - he's a crap passenger. I've learnt something new about Jesse today - he's a crap passenger. I've learnt something new about Jesse today - he's a crap passenger. I've learnt something new about Jesse today - he's a crap passenger. I've learnt something new about Jesse today - he's a crap passenger. 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I want to blame him for distracting me from my normal personal organisation skills have always been rubbish. I was forced to pay another mortifying trip to Doctor Monroe to replace the second batch of contraceptive pills that I lost in a week, and I made myself have tests to ensure I hadn't contracted any sexual diseases after constant unprotected sex with Jesse. The suggestion of Jesse's active sex life left me little choice. Page 16 'Did you miss any?' he asks, his lips pressing into a straight line. He's worried I could be pregnant? 'My period came last Sunday evening.' I say. Like an omen or something, I want to add, but I don't. I switch off the car and wait for him to eject himself. 'Could you have parked any further away?' he grumbles, joining me on my side of the car. 'At least I'm parked legally.' I walk to the rack of trollies lined up at the shelter and slip a pound in the top to release one. 'Have you ever been to a supermarket?' I ask as we make our way up the canopied walkway. Jesse and a supermarket is not something that fits together naturally. He shrugs. 'Cathy does it. I usually eat at The Manor.' The mention of Jesse's super plush sex club has me bristling and losing all enthusiasm in tryinggether naturally. to make conversation. I feel his eyes on me, but I ignore it and focus ahead of me. As we make our way around the supermarket, I load in the essentials and Jesse loads in a dozen jars of peanut butter, a few jars of chocolate spread and a several cans of squirty cream. 'Do you not have anything?' I ask, dumping milk in the trolley. He shrugs and takes control with his good hand. 'Cathy's been away.' I guide him around into the next aisle and instantly realise that I've unwittingly led him into the alcohol section. I fly around in a panic and get the trolley rammed into my shin. 'Fuck!' I exclaim on a wince. 'Ava, watch your mouth!' I rub my shin. Damn that hurts. 'We don't need this aisle.' I blurt, frantically pushing the trolley back towards him. He walks backwards. 'Ava, stop it.' 'I'm sorry. I didn't realise where we were.' 'For God's sake, woman, I'm not going to dive into the shelves and rip the caps off that I wasn't paying attention to where we were. I lean down and run my palm up my shin. It bloody hurts. I go to straighten up and I'm stunned when I find Jesse on his knees in front of me. He rests his damaged hand around the back of my leg and lifts with his good hand to sit my foot on his knees in front of me. He rests his damaged hand around the back of my leg and lifts with his good hand to sit my foot on his knees in front of me. Saturday afternoon and he is literally on his knees kissing my leg. 'Better?' he asks as he looks up at me. 'I'm sorry. For everything, Ava.' I look down at his beautiful, stubbled face and I want to cry. I can see total sincerity in his eyes as he looks up at me. 'Okay.' I reply quietly, not knowing what else to say. He nods and sighs, then leans up and plants a chaste kiss on my stomach before getting to his feet. He leads me away from the alcohol aisle and straight to the cosmetics section where he collects some shaving gel and blades. I look up at his overgrown stubble and wonder whether I want him to get rid of it. The more I look at it, the more I like it. By the time we get back to Lusso, it's six o'clock and we find the door has been repaired. Jesse goes to lie on the sofa, exhausted from a few hours out, and I stand in the kitchen after unpacking the shopping, wondering what to do. It's Saturday evening and usually at this time I would be cracking open a bottle of wine and settling down for the evening. There is no wine and I can't settle, so instead, I ring Kate. 'What are you up to?' I ask as I plant myself on a barstool with a coffee - not wine, but coffee. 'We're on our way out.' she says cheerfully. 'We?' 'Yes, we. Don't ask me who we is, Ava. You already know.' That means it's Kate and Sam, and I'm not to make a big deal of it. I am, however, slightly envious. 'Where are you going?' 'Sam's taking me to The Manor.' What? Okay, the envy has disintegrated on the spot when I discovered exactly what The Manor represents, she wants to go and socialise there? Bloody hell, I can't believe Sam has agreed to this. Sam is a member which should, but to what level? Judging by the evil looks I was subjected to by the female members on the few occasions I was there, my suspicions tell me there has been a lot of recreational. The thought depresses me, and I'm hankering after some wine even more now. 'And Sam's happy to take you?' I ask as casually as I can, but there's no hiding the shock in my voice. 'Yeah, he's told me what edginess of her tone. Does she still like him as much now? It's clear the fact that he owns The Manor will not be an issue, but she wasn't best pleased when I eventually stopped crying for long enough to tell her about the drunken arsehole I encountered when I came back to make amends with him. He seems fine, but I'm definitely not. What to say? Page 17 I settle for, 'He's fine. His hand is just muscle damage and he insists he's not an alcoholic.' 'I'm glad.' Her sincerity is sweet, and I'm relieved she isn't hurling explicit language down the phone and demanding I walk away. 'Well, he doesn't fall out of bed and wrap his lips around a bottle of vodka, does he?' She laughs. 'No! He just doesn't know when to stop when he does start, apparently. It's still a problem, though, Kate.' 'You'll be fine, Ava.' she assures me. Will I? I'm not so sure. I thought being here with him would start to mend the mess, but it hasn't. I've told him what I want, but he doesn't seem to be all that keen on giving it to me, attempting, instead, to distract me as he knows best. I decide to give him until the morning. If he hasn't talked to me by then, I'll leave. I'll cave into his touch soon if I'm not careful. 'Yeah, listen,' I snap my attention back to Kate. 'I would say have fun tonight, but I'm more inclined to say... keep an open mind.' 'Ava, you don't get more open minded than me. I can't wait! Speak to you tomorrow.' 'Bye,' I hang up and run through my times at The Manor, when I thought it was an innocent hotel. I shake my head at myself some slack because I was completely diverted by a tall, lean framed man with dirty blonde hair and hypnotising green eyes. He was perfect. He still is, if a few pounds lighter and a few issues heavier. I make my way upstairs to change out of my dress, throwing on a pair of cotton shorts and a vest before removing all of the grips from my hair. When I get downstairs, Jesse is still asleep on the sofa. I mess around with the T.V cabinet for a while, but I can't get the damn thing to open and reveal a television, so I slump into the chair and watch Jesse sleeping, his mangled hand draped over his solid chest and rising and falling with his steady breaths. As my thoughts wander naturally to chocolate éclairs, calla lilies and Angels, I drift off to sleep. Chapter 5 'I love you.' I come awake in a daze of darkness and rub my eyes as I sit up in the chair. It takes me a few moments to figure out where I am, but when I begin to focus, I find a handsome, dark blonde man crouched in front of me. 'Hey,' he says softly as he brushes my hair from my face. I gaze around the vast open space to try and grab a hold of my bearings. 'What time is it?' I ask sleepily. He leans in and kisses my forehead. 'Just gone midnight.' Midnight? I'm sleeping for England, and I could drift straight back off again, but I'm properly woken up when the shrill sound of a phone ringtone stabs at the screen. Who would be ringing at this time? 'John,' he greets and looks at the silent air. 'For f**k sake,' Jesse complains. I watch as he yanks his phone from the coffee table and looks at the screen. Who would be ringing at this time? 'John,' he greets are the same and looks at the silent air. 'For f**k sake,' Jesse complains. I watch as he yanks his phone from the coffee table and looks at the screen. Who would be ringing at this time? 'John,' he greets are the same calmly down the phone, 'Why?' He glances at me. 'No, it's fine...yeah...give me half hour.' He hangs up. 'What's the matter?' I ask, fully awake now. He shoves his Converse on and stalks for the door, clearly unhappy. 'Problem at The Manor. I won't be long.' And just like that, he's gone. So, I'm wide awake, it's past midnight and Jesse has just disappeared in the middle of the night. How is he going to drive with one hand? I sit in the chair like a loose part and contemplate what is going on at The Manor of such urgency. Oh no, Kate is there. I run into the kitchen and find my phone to call her, but she doesn't answer. I try repeatedly and with each unanswered call, I get more worried. I should just call Jesse, but he seemed pretty pissed off. I pace up and down, make myself a coffee and sit at the island repeatedly dialing Kate. If my car was here, I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would, especially when there is no way I can. After pacing the penthouse for an hour and calling Kate endlessly, I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would, especially when there is no way I can. After pacing the penthouse for an hour and calling Kate endlessly, I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would, especially when there is no way I can. After pacing the penthouse for an hour and calling Kate endlessly, I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way to The Manor. Or would I? It's easy for me to say I would be on my way I would b give in and go to bed, crawling into the plush, soft sheets of the spare room bed and curling up. 'I love you.' I open my eyes and find Jesse looming over the bed. I'm somewhere between sleep and consciousness and my mouth won't work. What time is it and how long has he been gone? I don't get a chance to ask, though. I'm gathered up into his arms and transported to his room. 'You sleep here.' he whispers, lowering me into his bed. I feel him crawl in behind me, and I'm tugged back against his chest. If I wasn't so contented, I would be asking questions, but I am, so I won't. My head hits the pillow and with Jesse's warmness surrounding me, I'm gone again. 'Morning,' My eyes open and I'm pinned to the mattress under a heady scent of fresh water and mint. My morning brain is desperately trying to convince me to struggle free, but my body is blocking all of the sensible instructions trying to filter through. He sits back on his heels. 'I need to do this.' he whispers, clasping my hand and pulling me into a sitting position. He takes the hem of my vest and slowly pulls it up over my head before leaning into me and kissing the middle of my chest, running his tongue in a light, flicking circle up to my throat. I'm tense. He pulls back. 'Lace,' he says softly as he removes my bra. I battle between my body's desperate need for him and my mind's strong need to talk. I want to clear the air before I'm dragged back onto Central Jesse Cloud Nine where I lose all cognitive reasoning. 'Jesse, we need to talk.' I say quietly as he kisses my throat and works his way to my ear. Every nerve is buzzing, pleading with me to shut up and accept him. Page 18 'I need you.' he whispers, finding my mouth and plunging his tongue in. 'Jesse, please.' My voice is a breathy whisper. 'Baby, I do my talking this way.' He grips the nape of my neck and pulls me further into him. 'Let me show you.' My body wins. I blank out my screaming conscience and surrender to him like the slave that I am. He wraps his arm around my lower back and eases me back down to the bed, sealing our mouths on the way, my entire being jumping to life as his hot, wet tongue slips gently between my lips and glides slowly around my mouth. We're in gentle Jesse mode, and as if he knows it, this is the best place to take me right now. His slow, steady breaths tell me he is in complete control as he rests on his forearm and uses his good hand to run his fingertip from my hipbone, all the way up to my breast, a steady wave of tingles traveling up my body in time with his touch, leaving my breath shallow and erratic. He finishes by tracing the edges of my nipple wistfully to match the gentle motions of our tongues. I hold on to his shoulders, feeling all of the misplaced emotions flooding back into me under his gentle touch, his attentive mouth and his hard body flanking me. My fear was completely justified; I'm lost in him again. I whimper as he pulls his lips away from mine and sits back on his heels before he uses his good hand to drag my shorts down my legs, taking my underwear with them. 'You need reminding.' he says, looking down at me. 'This is not the conventional way.' 'It's how I do things, Ava.' He throws my shorts and knickers to the side and pulls me up, sealing our mouths. 'We need to make friends.' I can't fight him anymore. I hook my fingers in the waistband of his boxers and press my lips further to his as I push them down his thighs. He lets out a long moan, easing me back down onto the bed, causing me to lose my grip of his shorts, so I place my foot into the band and extend my leg to take them the rest of the way. He's leaning half on me, half off, his hard, lean body spreading the length of me as he claims my mouth, pushing his body further into mine. Weaving my fingers through his hair, I relish the friction of his long stubble against my face. It's too long to be sharp or coarse, so it feels more like a soft brush is being glided across my face. He separates our mouths and buries his face in my hair as he cups me between my thighs and draws his palm up the centre of my body, slowly over my stomach and then gradually up between my br**sts, finishing against my throat. 'I've missed you, baby,' he murmurs against my neck. 'I've missed you so much.' 'I've missed you, too.' I hold his head to me. I feel completely cocooned in strength, but I'm aware that it's me who's playing the carer at the moment. I'm feeling overwhelmed too - completely overwhelmed with intense feelings for this troubled man. He moves himself so he's cradled between my thighs, and I soon feel the wet, slippery head of his morning erection pushing against me. My mind is a jumble of mixed thoughts, but then he rests on his elbows and gazes down at me, like I'm the only thing that exists in his world. Our eyes are fused and saying more than words ever could. I move my hands from the back of his head so my palms are on either side of his handsome face. 'Thank you for coming back to me,' he says softly as I stare up into his eyes, drowning in them, emotion flooding my entire being. I smooth my thumb across his moist lips and slide it into his mouth, withdrawing slowly and resting the tip on his eyes, drowning in them, emotion flooding my entire being. I smooth my thumb across his moist lips and slide it into his eyes, drowning in them, emotion flooding my entire being. bottom lip. He plants a light kiss on the end and smiles down at me as he lifts his hips while maintaining our eye contact, my pelvis shifting to meet him. I sigh in pure, unapologetic pleasure as he slowly, unhurriedly and reverently slides deep inside of me. I close my eyes and slip my hands to the back of his head as he fills me completely. He holds still, beating and kicking inside me. His change in breathing to quick, fast bursts of breath is a familiar trait. He's struggling to maintain control. 'Look at me,' he demands between pants, and I force my eyes open and gasp a little when I feel him jerk inside me. 'I love you.' he whispers, his voice cracking. I inhale sharply at the words I've desperately needed to hear for so long, but does he think that's what I want to hear? Does he think that want to hear? Does he th haven't. You were hijacking my phone and trying to control me.' I retort. He circles his hips into me, drawing a collective moan from both of us. 'Ava, I've never felt like this before.' He withdraws and pushes deep and high. I try to rein in my scattered thoughts, but a moan escapes. 'I've been surrounded by naked women with no respect for themselves all of my life.' He places his hands over mine, pinning my wrists on either side of my head. Thrust. 'Jesse!' 'You're mine, and mine alone, baby. Just for my eyes, just for my eyes, just for my pleasure. Just mine. Do you understand me?' He withdraws and slowly plunges back in. Page 19 'What about you? Are you just mine?' I ask, shifting my hips up to capture the delightful penetration. 'Just yours, Ava. Tell me you love me.' What?' I cry, when he hits me with a hard drive. 'You heard me.' he says softly. 'Don't make me f**k it out of you, baby.' I'm stunned. I'm melting beneath him, crippled by pleasure and now he's demanding I tell him that I love him? I do, but should I confess under duress? It's completely as I expected, preventing me from drinking, insisting on me wearing delicate lace instead of harsh leather. But what about the sex? 'Ava, answer me.' He pushes high and grinds firmly, a sweat breaking out across his brow. 'Don't hold out on me.' His words hit me like a lightning bolt. Hold out? He's tried to f**k a love confession out of me before - in the en-suite last Saturday when he rammed into me repeatedly, demanding I say it. I thought he was looking for reassurance that I wasn't leaving. I was wrong. How did he know? There's another perfect grind and my internal muscles start to spasm, tremors inching their way into the epicentre of my nerve endings. My legs stiffen. 'How did you know?' I cry, throwing my head back in despair, both mentally and physically. 'Damn it, Ava, look at me.' He hits me with a full, hard strike, and I drag my eyes open on an angry yell. 'I love you too!' I scream the words that are literally punched out of me. He stops his movements completely, our breaths rushed and frantic as he holds my hands in place and looks down at me. 'I love you so f**king much. I didn't think it was possible.' His words penetrate me deeply, the intensity of our joining having my heart kicking into a higher gear as he looks down at me, tears pricking the backs of his eyes. He smiles faintly and slowly withdraws himself. 'Now, we make love.' he says quietly, rocking gently back into me and capturing my lips in a slow, sensual kiss, full of meaning. He releases his hold of me and my hands fly to his back, slipping across his damp skin. His tactic has changed completely. Slowly and leisurely, he drives in and out of me, pushing me up towards complete rapture as I clasp at his damp back, holding as tight as can. Sex with Jesse has always been beyond compare, but this moment holds a significant power that I never thought possible. He loves me. I struggle to keep my emotions in check when he pulls back and holds his face to mine, nose to mose, eyes full of sentiment. I'm coming apart. The consistency of his controlled, deep thrusts has me shuddering and tensing around him as my core convulses and grips his shaft on each and every plunge. The sheen of sweat across his brow and his frown line deep with concentration tells me he's tipping the edge too. Tilting my hips up on a thrust, I moan as he fills me to my absolute limit, the feel of his rhythmic, meticulous tempo having me wanting to squeeze my eyes shut, but I can't drag them away from his. 'Together.' he says, his hot breath spreading across my face. 'Yes,' I gasp, feeling him expand and throb in preparation for his release. 'Christ, Ava.' A rush of air escapes his lips and his body goes rigid, but he doesn't remove his eyes from mine. My back arches on reflex when the spiraling rush of pleasure reaches its climax and sends me tumbling in his hold. I close my eyes to blink back the tears that have developed as my orgasm begins to recede slowly and lazily with his continued even strokes. 'Eyes,' he commands softy, and I obey, opening my eyes again. He moans deeply and I tighten all of my muscles at my core to grip him and extract his release from him. How is he keeping his head up and his eyes open? I can see the battle he's having with his instincts to hammer into me and throw his head up and his eyes open? I can see the battle he's having with his instincts to hammer into me and throw his head up and his eyes open? I can see the battle he's having with his instincts to hammer into me and throw his head up and his eyes open? I can see the battle he's having with his instincts to hammer into me and throw his head up and his eyes open? I can see the battle he's having with his instincts to hammer into me and throw his head up and his eyes open? I can see the battle he's having with his instincts to hammer into me and throw his head up and his eyes open? I can see the battle he's having with his instincts to hammer into me and throw his head up and his eyes open? 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I say quietly as he looks down at me, his cheeks puff out and he pushes himself into me, long and hard, holding himself there, my muscles obliging his throbbing erection and continuing with their slow, easy constrictions as he pours into me. 'I love you.' I say quietly as he looks down at me, his cheeks puff out and he pushes himself into me, and hard, holding himself there, my muscles obliging his throbbing erection and continuing with their slow, easy constrictions as he pours into me. 'I love you.' I say quietly as he looks down at me, his cheeks puff out and he pushes himself into me, and hard, holding himself into me, and hard the table, and he didn't technically f**k that one out of me. He rests his lips on mine. 'I know you do, baby.' 'How did you know?' I ask. I know I've never told him. I've screamed it in my head a thousand times, but I have never told him. I've screamed it in my head a thousand times, but I have never actually voiced it. 'You told me when you were drunk,' He smiles, 'After I showed you how to dance.' I do a quick run through of the night when I got ridiculously drunk and relented to his persistent pursuing again. I remember admitting it to myself, but I certainly don't remember blurting it to myself, but I certainly don't remember much after Jesse escorted me from the bar. I was in a state. That's his fault too. 'I don't remember.' I admit. I feel bloody stupid. 'I know you don't,' He grinds his hips. I sigh. 'It was so f**king frustrating.' It all comes flooding back. He really was trying to f**k a love confession out of me. He watches me as I figure it out, and his mouth forms an O on a small smile. 'You knew all along.' I say quietly. Page 20 Drunken confessions. I had beaten myself up about it for days and days, and he knew all along? Why didn't he say something? Why didn't he just talk to me instead of trying to f**k it out of me? So much could have been so very different. His smile disappears and is replaced with a stoic expression. 'You were drunk. I wanted to hear the words when you were of sound mind. Women get drunk all the time and confess their undying love to me.' 'Do they?' I blurt. He almost laughs. 'Yes, they do.' He drops his eyes, 'I wasn't sure if you still did after...' His teeth start a vicious workout on his bottom lip, 'Well, after I had my little meltdown? Women tell him they love him? What women and how many are there? I screw my face up in my own private disgust. I'm extremely uncomfortable with how resentful I'm feeling about any other woman having him. I need to put these thoughts right out of my mind and fast. No good could come of me knowing. 'I love you.' I reinforce my words, almost grinding them out, like I'm telling all of those women who claim to love him too. I feel his whole body relax over me before he continues slowly circling deep inside me. Pulling him down onto me, I wrap my entire body around him. I feel like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders, but then it occurs to me; I'm in love with a man and I have no clue how old he is. 'How old are you, Jesse?' He pulls his face up and I can see the cogs of his mind start revolving. I know he's thinking whether or not he should just tell me his real age and stop with his silly diversion. 'I can't remember.' He frowns. Oh, I might be able to play this to my advantage. I think we may have got to thirty-ish. 'We were at thirty three.' I prompt. He smirks at me. 'We should start again. 'No!' I pull his face down and rub my nose across his rough cheek. 'We got to thirty three.' 'You're a rubbish liar, baby.' he laughs, nuzzling into my face. 'I like this game. I think we should start again. I'm eighteen!' I exclaim. 'Don't play games with me, Ava.' 'Why won't you just tell me how old you are?' I ask exasperated. It really doesn't matter to me. He's forty, maximum. 'I'm thirty one.' I sag beneath him dramatically. He does remember. 'How old are you?' 'I just told you, I'm thirty one.' I moan. 'If you ask me anything in the future, I won't answer - not truthfully, anyway.' I threaten. His semblance of a smirk falls away immediately. 'I already know everything I need to know about you. I know how I feel and nothing you could tell me will make me feel any difference to the way I feel about him. I'm just curious, that's all. I wish he would just give up the ghost. I'm already distracted by him and his challenging ways and we still haven't really talked, but I do feel so much better, not empty and hollow anymore. 'You said before that I might run a mile if I know.' I remind him. 'I'm not going anywhere.' He laughs. 'No, you're not.' He sounds very confident. 'Ava, you've found out the worst about me and not run a mile. Well, you did, but you came back.' He kisses my forehead. 'Do you honestly think I'm bothered about my age?' 'Then why won't you tell me?' I ask exasperated. 'Because I like this game.' He resumes nuzzling into my neck. I heave a sigh and increase my squeeze around his warm, sweat dampened shoulders and my thighs around his tight hips. 'I don't.' I grumble, burrowing my face into his neck and breathing him into me. I exhale in contentment and trace my fingers across his firm back. We lay silent and completely immersed in each other for the longest time, but when I feel his body shaking, it diverts my thoughts to what lies ahead for us. His shaking body is a reminder of the hardest challenge of all. 'Are you okay?' I ask nervously. What should I do? He squeezes me tight. 'Yeah, what time is it?' That's a point. What time is it?' That's a point. What should I do? He squeezes me tight. 'Yeah, what time is it?' That's a point. What should I do? He squeezes me tight. 'Yeah, what time is it?' That's a point. What should I do? He squeezes me tight. 'Yeah, what time is it?' I hap it is it.' I hap it is it?' I hap it is it.' I hap it is it?' I hap it is it.' I hap it is it.' I hap it is it.' I ha seconds.' He grumbles and lifts himself slightly to slip out of me and then heaves his body off of mine, rolling onto his back. I jump up to go and find my phone, discovering it's nine o'clock and Dan hasn't called. That's a relief, but I do have twelve missed calls from Jesse. Huh? I walk back into the bedroom and find him sat up against the headboard, brazenly naked and unashamed. I look down at myself. Oh, so am I. 'I've got twelve missed calls from you.' I say in confusion, holding my phone up to him. A disapproving look jumps up on his face. 'I couldn't find you. I thought you had left. I had a hundred heart attacks in ten minutes, Ava. Why were you in the other bedroom?' He fires the words for being a bit apprehensive.' His affronted look falls away instantly and is replaced with one of regret. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of it.' 'Right,' I sigh. 'Come here.' He pats the mattress and I walk over to slide in beside him. We lay on our sides facing each other, our heads resting on our bent forearms. 'You'll never see that man again.' I hope I don't, but I'm doubtful of his confidence. One drink and I could be faced with the menacing brute, who I really don't like very much. 'Will you never drink again?' I ask nervously. Now is as good a time as any to get the information I need. 'No.' He places his fingertip on my hipbone and circles lightly. I shiver. 'Never?' He pauses mid-circle. 'Never, and it is a support of the information I need. 'No.' He places his fingertip on my hipbone and circles lightly. I shiver. 'Never?' He pauses mid-circle. 'Never, and it is a support of the information I need. 'No.' He places his fingertip on my hipbone and circles lightly. I shiver. 'Never?' He pauses mid-circle. 'Never, and it is a support of the information I need. 'No.' He places his fingertip on my hipbone and circles lightly. I shiver. 'Never?' He pauses mid-circle. 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'I will never hurt you.' 'You said that before.' I remind him. Yes, he said he wouldn't hurt me intentionally or physically, is appalling to me. Completely are cropping up in his mind. 'I can't tell you how serious I am.' Oh my God. He is completely serious. His face is straight, his jaw clenched. That's absolutely unreasonable. 'You can't control everything.' I say on a furrowed brow. 'Where you're concerned, I'll try my best, Ava. I already told you, I've waited too long for you. You're my little piece of heaven. Nothing will rob you from me. Nothing.' He presses his lips to mine to seal his declaration. 'As long as I have you, I have purpose and reason. That is why I won't be drinking and that is why I won't be know the worst of him so what harm can it do? He looks down at my hand on his scar and sighs. 'Inquisitive this morning, aren't you?' 'Yes,' I confirm. I am. 'I already told you, I don't like talking about it.' 'You're holding back on me.' I accuse, and he rolls onto his back on a heavy sigh and rests his forearm across his face. Oh no, he's not evading this I straddle his hips and pull his arm away. 'Why won't you tell me about your scar?' 'Because, Ava, it's in my past where I want it to stay. I don't want anything affecting my future.' 'It won't. It's doesn't matter what you tell me. I'll still love you.' Does he not understand that? I frown when he smirks. 'I know.' he says too confidently. He's pretty c**k raises his eyebrows, 'Is there?' 'I'm not going to tell you anything if you ask me.' I sulk. 'You already said that.' He sits up and seals our lips, my arms mechanically wrapping around him, but then I think of something else. 'Did you ever find out how the gates came to be open and the front door too?' I try my hardest to sound casual. 'What?' he pulls away from me, looking perplexed. 'When I came to The Manor on Sunday, the gates opened without me pressing the intercom and the front door was ajar.' I know it was her. 'Oh. The gates malfunctioned, apparently. Sarah had it sorted out.' He pushes his lips to mine again. 'That's very convenient. Did the manual front door malfunction too?' I ask, my sarcasm potent. I bet she had it sorted, and I can't believe he bought that feeble explanation. I know what happened. The tramp intercepted my message, relishing the thought of me turning up unannounced and discovering The Manor's offerings. Page 22 'Sarcasm doesn't suit you, lady.' He gives me a very scornful look, but I don't care. That woman is a deceitful tramp. Oh, I feel full of determination all of a sudden, but slightly sympathetic for Jesse. He actually thinks she's a friend? Should I share my verdict? 'What would that look like? I can hardly introduce Jesse to Dan. That's a disaster waiting to happen, what with Dan's older brother protectiveness and Jesse's trampling tendencies. How am I going to play this? 'Well, there's just one thing I have...' Jesse's phone starts ringing, halting my announcement. 'For f**k sake,' he curses, lifting me from his lap and placing me on the bed. He gets up and answers his phone before walking out of the bedroom. 'John?' He sounds a little impatient. I lay on the bed, running through all of the ways I can break it to him that I really must go and meet Dan. He'll understand. 'I've got to go to The Manor.' he says sharply, stalking back into the room and heading for the bathroom. Again? I haven't even asked him what dragged him there last night, and I notice Kate hasn't called me back. 'Is everything okay?' I ask. He looks pissed. 'It will be, get ready.' What? Oh no! I am not going to that place! I've still got to wrap my head around it all. He can't make me go. I hear the shower turn on and I jump up to go and explain my reluctance, walking into the bathroom and finding him in the shower already. He smiles knowingly and gestures for me to join him. I walk in and grab the sponge and shower gel, but he takes them from me and loads up the sponge himself before turning me around and beginning to wash me down. I stand quietly, searching my brain for a way to approach this, as he works the sponge slowly across my body Surely he won't have a hissy fit over my unwillingness. 'Jesse?' He kisses my shoulder blade. 'Ava?' 'I really don't want to come.' I blurt, and then scold myself for not being a little more tactful. He pauses with his swirling circles for a few moments before he continues. 'Can I ask why?' He can't be so thick-skinned he has to ask that question. It should be perfectly obvious why I don't want to go. And anyway, I never really wanted to go before I knew what went on there, but that was because of a certain acid tongued, pouty lipped beast. Now, she doesn't bother me so much, although we still haven't discussed her little involvement in Jesse's life. It's yet another subject up for discussion. 'Can you just give me some time to get used to it?' I ask apprehensively, while mentally begging for him to understand and be reasonable. He sighs and wraps his forearm around the tops of my shoulders, pulling me back to him. 'I understand,' He does? He kisses my temple. 'You're not going to avoid it forever, are you? I still want my new bedroom designs. I'm in shock at his reasonableness. No questions, no trampling or sense f**k - just an okay? Have we turned a corner? This is good, and as for the new extension? I hadn't given it a thought, but he's right. I can't avoid the place forever. 'No. Anyway, I'll have to come to oversee the works once we finalise the designs.' 'Good,' 'What's going on at The Manor?' He releases my shoulders and starts washing my hair with his men's shampoo. 'The police turned up last night.' he says, totally detached. I tense all over. 'Why?' 'It's just some idiot playing games. The police rang John this morning to arrange a few interviews. I can't get out of it.' He turns me around and places me under the spray to rinse my hair. 'I'm sorry.' 'It's fine,' I assure him. I won't tell him why it's fine. I can meet Dan without worrying about a Jesse style trample. 'Kate was at The Manor last night.' The concern in my voice is obvious. 'I know,' His eyebrows rise. 'It was quite a surprise.' 'Was she okay?' 'Yes, she was fine,' He kisses my nose and slaps my bum. 'Out you get.' I jump out of the shower, set about drying myself and use Jesse's toothbrush after he's finished with it, being too lazy to cross the landing and retrieve my own. I walk into the bedroom to find him ready, looking delicious in some worn jeans and a simple white t-shirt. He's still quite overgrown, though. 'I'm going,' He smothers my face with kisses. 'Have lace on when I get home.' He winks and leaves. I waste no time. I grab my phone immediately to call Dan, and we arrange to meet at Almundo's, a little coffee house in Covent Garden. I run across the landing and dress in record time, calling down to Clive to order me a cab between drying my hair and pinning it up. I'm super excited. Chapter When I walk into Almundo's, I scan my eyes across the masses of people having their Sunday morning brunch and spot him sat in the corner with his face in the Sunday paper. He looks so well, all tanned and dazzling. I fly across the café and all but dive on him. 'Whoa!' he laughs. 'Pleased to see me, kid?' He wraps his arms around me, and I fall apart all over him. I'm so happy to see him and all of the built up stress and emotion of the last few weeks just spills out of me...again. 'Hey, stop that.' he scolds me. Page 23 'I'm sorry.' I peel myself away from his body and sit beside him. He takes my hand in his. 'Get rid of those tears, right now.' He smiles. 'This will be the best thing that ever happened to you. You're well shot.' Oh, he thinks I'm in a state over Matt? Should I let him carry on thinking that? The alternative is explaining a whole lot of other shit, and I can't do that. I would be here for months. I wipe my eyes. 'I know. It's been a shitty few weeks. I'm fine, really.' 'Forget about him and get on with your life. You've got a lot to catch up with.' He rubs my arm affectionately. 'What about this other bloke who Matt's been whining on about?' Damn, I was hoping to avoid all questions relating to Jesse's involvement - wishful thinking, obviously. 'His name is Jesse. It's nothing. He's just a friend.' 'Just a friend?' He eyes me suspiciously as my hand reaches up to find a stray tendril from my up-do. 'Just a friend.' I shake my head. 'Kate had a spat with Matt and thought she would shut him up with a few stretched truths.' 'So, there is an element of truth in it then?' He raises his eyebrows. 'No,' I need to change the subject. 'How are Mum and Dad?' He gives me a warning look. 'Threatening to pay a visit to London and sort you out. Mum mentioned a strange man answering your phone last week. I suspect he might be the stretched truth?' Okay, my attempts at diversion have failed miserably. 'Yeah, okay. I'm just saying, be careful, Ava.' I sag and consider exactly what my parents will make of Jesse. Without even The Manor and his small drink issue, they still won't be happy. He is obviously older than me, he might be stinking rich, but that won't cut any cloth with Mum and Dad, and the fact that he likes a trample every now and again will not help matters. It's near on impossible to hide my frustration when he's being challenging Mind you, his quick acceptance of my reluctance to go with him this morning might be the breakthrough I've been waiting for. We order coffee, water and pastries and chat about Dan's job, Australia and his future prospects. He's doing well. His friend is expanding the surf school business and wants Dan to partner him. I'm pleased for him, but quietly disappointed for my own selfish reasons. He won't be coming home anytime soon. 'How's Kate?' he asks, while picking at the corners of his pastry. He's blatantly feigning disinterest. I should refrain from mentioning Sam. I can't imagine Dan would appreciate such information. I abruptly remember I've not taken my pill and start rummaging through my bag. 'She's still Kate.' I say casually, feeling incredibly uncomfortable talking about her with Dan. It doesn't feel right anymore. I locate my pill packet and pop one out before taking it with some water, watching over my glass as Dan drops into deep thought. I need to snap him out of that immediately. 'What about you? Are there any female interests?' I ask on an arched brow, swapping my water for coffee. 'No,' He smirks, 'Nothing permanent, anyway.' Oh, I can imagine. I'm about to lecture him on being a player when my mobile starts dancing around the table and Temper Trap's Sweet Disposition blares from the ringer. I smile. Is he trying to be funny? And while I'm grateful he has changed the track assigned to his number, I really do need to have a word about his telephone manners. It's just gone one o'clock. I thought he would be longer than this, but maybe he's still at The Manor and just checking in on me. 'Hey, I love that track!' Dan exclaims. 'Let it ring.' He starts singing along to it. I laugh. 'I just need to take this. I leave the table with my phone and Dan with a furrowed brow. I know he's going to be suspicious that I'm removing myself from his presence to take this call. I'll say it was Kate. I walk out into the sunshine. 'Hey.' I say cheerfully. 'Where the f**k are you?' he bellows down the phone. I pull it away to save my eardrums. Oh, overreaction. 'I'm with my brother, calm down.' 'Calm down?' he yells. 'I get home and you've ran out!' 'Stop f**king shouting!' Is this really necessary? The man is impossible. I never said I was going to be waiting around for him. Jesus Christ, I'm hurling towards the ground after being abruptly tossed off of Central Jesse Cloud Nine. 'Watch your f**king mouth.' he yells. I look up to the sky in despair. 'I've not ran out. I've come to meet my brother. He's back from Australia.' I state calmly. 'I was supposed to see him yesterday, but I got a little caught up elsewhere.' I didn't aim for sarcasm, but it comes naturally. 'I apologise for inconveniencing you.' he hisses. 'Excuse me?' I'm stunned by his hostility. 'How long will you be?' His tone hasn't changed; he still sounds like a pig. I might just go to Kate's now. I'm not prepared to have strips ripped off me for seeing my brother. 'I said I would spend the day with him.' 'Day!' he shouts. 'Why didn't you tell me?' Why? Because I knew he would trample it! 'Your phone interrupted me and you were sidetracked with problems at The Manor.' I spit. Page 24 It goes quiet down the phone, but I can still hear his laboured breathing. I can imagine he's been running around his penthouse in a frenzy searching every room. Oh hell, this is going to be hard work. That corner I thought we had turned has just been trampled. 'Where are you?' His voice has softened slightly, but he's clearly still unhappy about my undisclosed outing. 'I'm at a café.' 'Where?' There is not a chance in hell I'm telling him that. He'll turn up, I know it, and then I will be left explaining to Dan who he is and where he came from. 'It doesn't matter where. I'll be back at yours later.' 'Come back to me, Ava.' It's definitely a demand. I drop my shoulders. 'I will.' A silence spreads between us and I'm very abruptly reminded of the small part of Jesse that sends me crazy. Did I really wish this back? 'Ava?' 'I'm here.' 'I love you.' he says softly, but it's strained. I know he wants to rant and probably haul me back to Lusso, but he can't do that if he can't locate me. 'I know you do, Jesse.' I hang up and exhale an exhausted breath. I'm beginning to wish I didn't know about Jesse's alcohol issue - the issue that everyone else seems to be brushing off as no consequence, whatsoever. I, on the other hand, am now worrying myself stupid that I will push him to have another gorging session. I've always been an advocate of knowledge is power, but at the moment I'm favouring ignorance is bliss. Then, I could just hang up and think he's an unreasonable control freak and be content to let him stew. But now I know, I've hung up and I'm worried that I've just dangled the proverbial bottle of vodka under his nose. 'Is everything okay?' I turn and see Dan approaching with my bag over his shoulder. I give a small smile. 'Fine.' 'I settled the bill. Here.' He hands me my bag. 'Thanks.' 'Are you all right?' He frowns. No, I'm bloody not. The stretching my patience. 'Yeah, fine.' I plaster on a cheery face. 'So, what do you want to do?' 'Tussauds?' he asks with a big smile. I return his smile. 'Absolutely, let's go.' He holds his arm up for me to link and off we go. I've lost count of the amount of times we've roamed the halls of Madam Tussaud's. It's tradition. There is not one waxwork that we haven't got a photo with. We've snuck around the place, entered restricted zones and done whatever it took to get the photographs we needed to keep our scrapbook up-to-date. Childish, but it's our thing. We but I could hardly ask for water - Dan would have asked why. Besides, once I got the first glass down, the second was easier. I hug Dan tight as we say our goodbyes at the tube. 'When are you going back?' I ask. 'Not for a few weeks. I'm going up to Manchester tomorrow to catch up with some university friends, but I'm back in London next Sunday so I'll see you again before I leave, okay?' I release him from my squeeze. 'Okay.' I smile. He's worried. He strides off and leaves me wishing he could stay forever. I've never needed him so much. As I enter the foyer of Lusso, Clive is on the telephone. I walk straight past his desk on my way to the lift. I really don't feel like chatting. 'Thank you, goodbye. Ava!' he shouts after me, and I stop and roll my eyes before turning to face him. 'Yes?' He shoves the phone into its cradle and hurries towards me. 'A lady stopped by. I tried calling up to Mr Ward, but he didn't answer. I'm afraid I couldn't let her up. Mature woman.' 'A lady?' I ask. He's got my attention now. 'Yes, nice woman with blonde wavy hair. She said it was urgent, but of course, you know the rules.' He raises his eyebrows. Oh yes, I know the rules and for once I'm relieved he has stuck to the rules. Blonde, wavy hair? Not Sarah, surely. 'How mature?' He shrugs. 'Mid-forties.' Okay. I don't like Sarah but she definitely doesn't look like she's in her forties. 'What time was this, Clive?' He looks at his watch. 'Only half an hour ago.' 'Did she give her name?' He frowns. 'No, she didn't. I met her at the gate. She was expecting to go straight up to the penthouse, but when I wouldn't let her through and said I would have to call Mr Ward, she started getting a bit vague with me.' 'No worries, Clive. Thanks.' I pivot and carry on towards the elevators. I board the lift and punch in the code. A lady? And a vague lady who thought she could march up to the penthouse unannounced? The elevators doors open and I step out to find Jesse's front door open. Does this man have no regard for home security? Granted, he has a twenty four hour concierge downstairs to monitor the comings and goings, and a team of security, but a bit of common sense wouldn't go a miss. I shut the door behind me and instantly feel on my guard. The sound system is playing. It's not as ear piercing as last time, but it's the track playing that has me on edge. It's the same one I walked in to last Sunday when I found Jesse drunk. Page 25 Angel. I run through the penthouse, leaving the music on. Finding Jesse is more important than turning off the tormenting song which reminds me of that awful day. I head straight for the terrace, but he's not there. I dump my bag and take the stairs two at a time and bolt into the bedroom. Nothing. Where is he? Panic starts to flood me, but then I hear the shower running. I fly into the bathroom and come to an abrupt stop when I see Jesse sat on the floor of the shower running. I fly into the bathroom and come to an abrupt stop when I see Jesse sat on the floor of the shower running. I fly into the bathroom and come to an abrupt stop when I see Jesse sat on the floor of the shower running. I fly into the bathroom and come to an abrupt stop when I see Jesse sat on the floor of the shower running. I fly into the bathroom and come to an abrupt stop when I see Jesse sat on the floor of the shower running. I fly into the bathroom and come to an abrupt stop when I see Jesse sat on the floor of the shower running. 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I exhale a long breath of relief, mixed with a little exasperation, before walking straight into the shower fully clothed and settling myself in his lap, wrapping my arms and legs around his soaking body. He has done this before. He runs circles around the Royal Parks to distract himself...from me. 'Three.' 'That's too much.' I scold him. We're talking twenty miles here. It's not a quick jog around the park to alleviate some stress. His body is not strong enough for this at the moment. 'I freaked out when you weren't here.' 'I kind of got that.' I say with only a light dash of sarcasm. He shifts his hands to my hips and tweaks my hipbone. I jerk. 'You should have told me.' he says sternly. Perhaps I should have, but he probably would've trampled it, and he can't be running a marathon every time we're apart. 'I was always coming back,' I assure him. 'I can't be joined at your hip.' He exhales on a long breath and snuggles deeper into the crook of my neck. 'I wish you bloody could be.' he grumbles. 'You've had a clinging to my body, my hair sopping wet, and just let him hold me. It can't be like this every time we're apart, I'll never settle. We most certainly haven't turned a corner, and I'm sorely disappointed. What happens now? 'I hate this song.' I say quietly, after we've sat in a tight clinch for an age. 'I love it. Reminds me of you.' 'It reminds me of a man I'm sorely disappointed. What happens now? 'I hate this song.' I have it. Reminds me of you.' 'It reminds me of a man I'm sorely disappointed. What happens now? 'I hate this song.' I ha don't like.' I never want to hear it again. 'I'm sorry.' He nips at my neck, drawing his tongue up the length to my jawbone. 'My arse is dead.' he mumbles. It's the longest shower I've ever had. 'I'm sorry.' I cry. 'I need to feed you!' 'Yes, you do. And I want my Ava, stripped naked and laying on our bed so I can binge on her.' He stands himself up with me wrapped around his body, and with little effort, considering his injured hand and depleted body. My Ava? That's fine. Our bed? I will file that away for now. 'I'm all for that, but I need to feed my man.' I've already caused him to run himself into the ground with no fuel in his body. I'm not going to be the cause of him starving to death as well. 'Food now, loving later.' 'Loving now, food later.' he challenges as he walks us out of the shower and positions me on the vanity unit. 'I'm feeding you. End of.' I inform him sternly. I mean it. 'Where's your bandage?' I ask. 'End of, ah?' He picks a bath sheet up from the pile on the shelf and starts rubbing the wetness from my hair with his good hand. It could do with a shampoo and condition. 'It was getting in my way.' He brushes off my worry. I start to shiver, my clinging dress rubbing on the goose bumps that are engulfing me. Jesse drapes the towel around my back and uses the corners to pull me into him, kissing me hard on the lips. I catch him wince. 'Yes, end of. My man is rubbing off on me.' 'Your man wants to rub onto you.' he whispers, pushing his groin into my thigh and taking my mouth gently. 'Please, let me feed you.' he whispers, pushing his groin into my thigh and taking my mouth gently. 'Please, let me feed you.' he whispers, pushing his groin into my thigh and taking my mouth gently. 'Please, let me feed you.' he whispers, pushing his groin into my thigh and taking my mouth gently. 'Please, let me feed you.' he whispers, pushing his groin into my thigh and taking my mouth gently. 'Please, let me feed you.' he whispers, pushing his groin into my thigh and taking my mouth gently. 'Please, let me feed you.' he whispers, pushing his groin into my thigh and taking my mouth gently. 'Please, let me feed you.' he whispers, pushing his groin into my thigh and taking my mouth gently. 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I'm then thrown up over his shoulder and carried out of the bathroom. Page 26 'I like hoofing you about.' he declares, chucking me onto the middle of the bed. 'Where's your stuff?' 'In the spare room.' I say, recovering from my flight. He makes a point of demonstrating his disgust with an audible grumble before he stalks out of the room and returns moments later with all of my stuff spread between his good hand, under his arms and in his mouth. He dumps a point of demonstrating his disgust with an audible grumble before he stalks out of the room and returns moments later with all of my stuff?' In the spare room.' I say, recovering from my flight. He makes a point of demonstrating his disgust with an audible grumble before he stalks out of the room and returns moments later with all of my stuff?' In the spare room and returns moments later with all of my stuff?' In the spare room and returns moments later with all of my stuff?' 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In the spare room and returns moments later with all of my stuff w it all on the bed. 'There.' I reach into my bag and retrieve some clean knickers and my oversized, black sweatshirt, but my comfortable cotton knickers are soon snatched out of my hand. I frown as I watch him riffle through my bag and pull out a pair of lace replacements. He hands them to me. 'Always in lace.' He nods in approval to his own demand and I comply without hesitation or complaint, putting the lace knickers on, and then my oversized jumper. I watch as Jesse ditches the wet shorts and swaps them for a blue jersey pair. I can see new definition in his back and arms as his muscles roll and flex when he pulls them up. I sit and admire from my position on the bed before he picks me up again and carries me down to the kitchen. First, I turn the music off on a little shudder, then I stand in front of the fridge scanning the shelves. 'What do you want?' Maybe some eggs, he could probably use the protein. 'I don't mind, I'll have what you're having.' He comes up from behind and reaches past me to grab a jar of peanut butter, dropping his lips to my neck. 'Put that back!' I make a grab for the jar, but he evades me and beats a hasty retreat to the barstool, shoves the jar under his arm to unscrew the cap before dipping his finger in to scoop a dollop out. He smirks at me as he slides his finger into his mouth and forms an O with his lips as he pulls it out. 'You're a child.' I settle on chicken fillets, grabbing them from the fridge. I've already eaten, but I'm going to have to tuck some more away if it means he will because of the way you eat peanut butter? he asks over his finger dip jars and as I'm being kept in the dark over your age, I assume that you are over ten.' I fire a disgusted look at him as I find the tinfoil and wrap the chicken up with some Parma ham, then put them in an oven dish. 'Don't knock it until you've tried it. Here.' He thrusts his peanut butter 'Pass.' I say, putting the chicken in the oven. He shrugs and then licks it off himself. I get some sugar snap peas and new potatoes from the fridge and load them into the worktop, I watch him on a small smile. 'Enjoying that?' He pauses mid-scoop and looks up at me. 'I can eat the stuff until I feel sick.' Another finger goes in. 'Do you feel sick.' 'No, not yet.' 'No, I'm asking you?' I fight to prevent a grin. He doesn't. He smirks and slowly screws the lid back on. 'Why, baby, are you nagging me?' 'No, I'm asking you a question.' I correct him. I don't ever want to be a nag. He starts chewing his bottom lip, watching me carefully, his eyes dancing. I shiver from top to toe. I know that look. 'I like your sweatshirt,' he says quietly, running his eyes down my front to my bare legs. It's oversized and it covers my bum. It's hardly sexy. 'I like black on you.' he adds. 'You do?' 'I do.' he asserts quietly. He's going to distract me again. I need to get some proper food in him and we need to discuss the fact that it is Monday tomorrow and I'm going to have to go home and to work. After his sly stunt of depositing a stupidly over-the-top advance payment into Roccoo Union's bank account, I'm concerned that he'll maintain his previous unreasonable request to have me working at The Manor all day everyday. 'It's Monday tomorrow.' I say positively. I don't know why I choose that tone. Positive as opposed to what? 'And?' He folds his arms over his chest. What do I say? Would it be too much to ask him to be reasonable about my requirement to tend to other clients? He has openly admitted he doesn't like sharing me, socially or professionally. I drum my fingers on the worktop next to me. 'And nothing, I was just wondering what you might have planned?' I see a fleeting look of panic sweeps over his stubbled face, and I'm instantly worried that tomorrow is going to be a trauma. 'What have you got planned?' he asks. I look at him like he's a dumb arse. 'Work.' I answer, watching as he starts chewing his bottom lip and those bloody cogs start turning again. There is no way he's going to convince me not to work. 'Don't even think about it. I've important meetings to keep.' I warn, before he has a chance to spit out what I know he is thinking. 'Just one day?' He pouts at me playfully, but I know he is deadly serious. I'm bracing myself for a countdown or a sense f**k. 'No, you must have lots to catch up on at The Manor.' I affirm assertively. He does have a business to run and he's been unconscious for a whole working week. John can't be expected to run things forever. 'I suppose so.' he grumbles.

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