



Rise By Sin

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Description: Despite the scars left from a tough childhood, Ava Scott overcame the challenges life had thrown at her and focused on one thing – becoming an FBI agent. It was all she had ever wanted and she was determined nothing would stop that dream.

By the time she graduated, she had everything right on track . Quantico was within her grasp, her FBI dreams now so close she could almost touch them. She was crushing deeply on two guys who showed interest in her just as keenly, and she had the support of her half-brother, who took her in when she most needed him. Life was looking bright and positive.

One night.

One foolish mistake made in the heat of jealousy.

One lapse in judgement was all it took for everything to change.

Her dreams abandoned, Ava fled the city she loved. Determined not to fall apart, she pursued the next best thing to her dream – a career as a detective with the Chicago police department . She built a safe, solitary life for herself, and pushed every day to overcome the demons that haunted her constantly. It wasn't perfect, but it was enough.

Now, a decade after she fled New York, she finds herself pulled back to the past as she goes in search of her brother, who seems to have mysteriously disappeared.

What should be a quick mission with her detective background, is complicated by more life altering events that have left Ava even more broken than she already was. She inadvertently finds herself relying on the help of the two men she never wanted to face ever again. The two men she has been in love with for over a decade. The two men who refuse to let her slip through their fingers ever again. Add in an overbearing head of security from the kink club her brother owns, and she finds herself surrounded by care and protection she is too stubborn and proud to accept.

When the investigation to track down her brother sets them all on the trail of a serial killer, will she be able to let go of her shame and stubbornness enough to rely on the men who are determined to keep

PROLOGUE

AVA

I was officially in a good mood as I stepped onto the street from the subway station and almost skipped towards my brother's club. Okay, so maybe skipping was a stretch for me. I wasn't exactly a sunshine and rainbows type of girl, but I was feeling free and light right then.

That was because I had just officially finished college forever. All assignments were handed in, classes over, and exams completed. In less than a week I would officially graduate with a degree in psychology and I would finally take steps to achieve my ultimate goal – to become an FBI profiler. I had a way to go before I'd achieve that dream, but I was finally on my way.

I'd had plans to go out with a few of my girls to celebrate that night, but as soon as I got home and started searching through my closet, I knew I was going to blow them off in favor of what I really wanted to do to celebrate – go to Temple. It was a club owned by my older brother – Colt.

He owned several businesses across the city, including the club, several restaurants, and his newest venture – an upscale cocktail bar inside a newly built and recently opened luxury hotel downtown.

My brother was a successful business man, despite the fact he was only in his early thirties. Of course, he'd started out with the luxury of a large inheritance left to him by our father, not that I liked to refer to the man as that. Timothy MacMillan had

been the sperm donor who created me in the course the very brief affair he had with my mom, but he had never ever been a father to me. He hadn't wanted me from the day my mom told him she was pregnant with me, and he made that clear enough when he fired her from her role as a receptionist, at one of his fancy ass hotels, and shoved two hundred bucks in her hand as he showed her the door.

He had died of a heart attack when I was five years old, and in that time I had only ever met him when my mom was desperate enough to go to him for cash. On all of those occasions he never once even acknowledged I was there and I had no memory of him even looking at me. I did, however, remember Colt from those times. He was ten years older than me, and several times he had taken my hand and led me off to get a soda, or candy while my mom and his dad stood arguing in hushed tones, usually in the lobby of one of his hotels. Colt had been kind to me then, even when I didn't really understand who he was.

Then, seven years ago, when my mom's crippling depression and bouts of mania led her to take her own life, Colt had come into my life once again. I'd been seventeen at the time and pissed as hell at my mom for her selfish actions. I'd also been traumatized after finding her cold and gray, in our tub, blood stained water surrounding her, and her violently slit wrists sitting on the lip of the tub, blood pouring even still. Yeah, I'd been a real messed up, bitchy, angry teenager then, but Colt had taken me in. I'd had no one else, and when CPS called him, he'd come for me instantly with no hesitation, despite the fact he was only a kid himself.

We'd had a rough road for a few years. I'd been so angry and scarred by what my mother had done, and Colt had no idea what to do with me. We'd fought like cat and dog, and he'd tried everything he could to keep me in line, not that it ever worked. I'd partied hard, drunk even harder, and screwed anyone who showed me even one iota of interest. My wake up call had come just after my nineteenth birthday when I'd woken up in a bed with three guys, all of whom were naked just like I was. I had no idea how I got there, or memory of what had happened, but by the bruises all over my

body and the pain that lanced my every step as I got out of there, it hadn't been anything good.

I'd called my brother that morning as I stumbled down a road I had never seen before, from a house I was terrified to stick around in long enough to find my underwear or shoes. By the time Colt found me I'd been a mess, and I'd cried hysterically the second he wrapped his arms around me. I never told him what happened, and I never remembered myself either, but everything changed that day. I put all of my focus into my studies and centered on one singular thing – my goal to join the FBI and become a criminal profiler.

Now I was one step closer, and that was why I had the little half smile on my face as I walked down the familiar, crowded sidewalks of the hectic city. I was headed to Temple, with a little pep to every step I took, desperately hoping the two guys I most wanted to see that night would be in there and ready to show me a good time.

Temple was no different from any other club in the city from the outside, except it was obviously higher end. It was housed in the basement and ground floor of one of the older buildings in the city, and the entrance was framed with wide stone pillars. The sign over the door was innocuous, just an LED lit board with the word 'Temple' at its center. The club had a very elite clientele and Colt needed no huge signage or advertising to bring people through the doors.

"Hey Denny," I greeted one of the doormen who was stationed outside of the entrance. He gave me a nod but didn't speak otherwise. He just stepped aside, allowing me entry into the open, opulent reception area. Two further guards were posted near the door into the club, and behind a tall marble topped counter stood Jean-Pierre. He was French and had worked at the club for as long as I had been allowed through the doors. His role was something of a concierge. He greeted guests and dealt with checking memberships and identities. He also took care of a lot of the customer care side of things.

“Miss Ava,” he smiled as he stood to greet me. “A pleasure to see you, as always. Are you working, or playing tonight, *ma chérie*? he asked, his adorable French accent showing through.

“Definitely not working,” I told him happily. I had been working behind the bar at the club, part time, for the last few years, in a desperate bid to pay back Colt just a small fraction of all that I owed him for everything he’d done for me. Of course he hated that, and always made sure my wages went right into my bank account, no matter how much I tried to argue. He was always trying to give me money, but I refused. Colt hated that our father left everything to him and nothing to me, but as I told him often, I didn’t want a thing from the old bastard who never even acknowledged me. “I came for a celebratory drink. I finished my last college class today. I graduate next week.”

“Congratulations! Of course you must celebrate!” Jean-Pierre, or ‘JP’ as I had taken to calling him, cheered happily. “Go through. I believe your brother is walking the floor.”

I nodded and smiled gratefully to him, then I headed for the doors into the bar area of the club, one of the security opening it for me with a nod of greeting as I passed him and slipped inside.

Inside the club was alive, as it always was on a Friday evening. In the bar area, which I had stepped into, the hypnotic, sultry music was quieter, and the atmosphere was more relaxed. The room around me was luxurious, but modern and fresh too. The floor beneath my feet was tiled in black and white marble tiles, in a diamond checker board pattern. The walls were white with black detailing around the edges and at the corners. There were mirrors everywhere and hanging down low from the high ceiling was a huge crystal chandelier that sparkled like an enormous diamond in the low, character lighting. The lounge areas scattered around the room, were each set with a low black round table, with comfortable looking, scarlet tub chairs around them.

People were seated around the bar, sipping cocktails and chatting amongst friends.

I bypassed the area all together and walked through another set of double doors, passing another security team member where he was stationed just inside the much larger and livelier room that awaited beyond the bar. The music was louder in this area, and while the floor and vast walls surrounding the cavernous space were just the same as the bar, everything else was very different.

Temple was a very private and exclusive kink club. There were rooms leading off of the main space for all manner of sexual kinks, such as age-play, pet play, medical play, and everything else you could possibly think of. There were several harem rooms that were usually fully booked, and all manner of private fetish rooms too.

I had been fascinated and slightly terrified when I first started working there. I knew something of what to expect from the vast amounts of research I'd done when I found out my brother owned a kink club, but seeing it in real life was a whole other experience. Now when I walked into there though, my skin tingled and my core clenched. Excitement built inside of me instantly and I came alive in a way I just couldn't seem to anywhere else.

I glanced around me as I walked in, slipping off my long wool coat as I went. Underneath I was wearing a skin tight lace dress that stopped just above my knees and had sleeves that covered my long, too thin arms. Underneath the lace was a satin slip that covered the fact I only wore panties beneath, and I had paired it with a towering pair of black heels. Compared to other members walking around the club, and playing at various stations and on platforms, I was extremely over dressed, but baring myself was still the part I struggled with most about all of this, not to mention I had been aware Colt would be working that night and I did not want him seeing me wearing anything less.

I looked all around me again, especially at the bar that ran the entire length of the

back wall, hoping to catch a glimpse of the two men I had come hoping to see. Jack Hilton and Mason Williams.

Jack was the manager at Temple. He kept the place running smoothly while my brother ruled over his ever growing empire. He was British and everything that was sexy and sinful in one deliciously muscled package.

Mason was Colt's best friend and had been since they were teenagers. He was a detective with the NYPD, and when he wasn't working insane hours, he usually spent most of his free time hanging out at the club, usually just drinking and chatting to Jack at the bar. He was tall and broad, his perfectly toned body ripped with muscle. When he looked at me with the sexy flirty smile he wore so well, I melted right before him every damned time.

The two of them were both into the lifestyle and were dominants. They didn't play often, but when I mentioned to Jack that I wanted to try a few scenes, and detailed my interest in submitting, he and Mace had been firm that if I were playing, it needed to be with one of them. Or both of them.

For the last two years I had scened with them a lot, usually on one of the stages that surrounded me and always when Colt wasn't in the building.

I wasn't heavily into pain, so the scenes we planned and talked out together, before enacting them, were usually pretty tame. Some spanking or light flogging. There was always touching and it always ended with me finding my pleasure. We had never had sex, and I had never even allowed them to remove all of my clothing – my own hangups about my body not something I could overcome. But there was magic between the three of us when we played. I was not a submissive person in life, but I could be with Jack and Mason, because I trusted them to abide by my limits and hear my safe word if I ever used it, not that I ever had. I trusted them and we'd had amazing times on the stages around me. The problem was that was all they seemed to

want, while I had these insane feelings building for each of them.

My attention was pulled to the center stage where one of the regular submissives – Chloe – was completely naked and strapped to a St. Andrew's cross. I didn't recognize the dominant who was with her, but he was flogging her back, and she was quietly groaning in enjoyment as he took her higher and higher. The look on her face was one of peace and calm, as she got lost in finding the pleasure she needed. The pleasure her Dom was giving her.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Ava?” I turned quickly from the stage and looked up into my brothers dark green eyes. Even after working at this club for several years, I still felt conscious of him catching me interested in the scenes. That was why I always refused to play if he was in the building. The last thing I wanted was for my brother to see me over a spanking bench with my bare ass in the air.

“Hey,” I greeted. He was dressed impeccably as always, in a charcoal grey suit, with a crisp white shirt, open at the collar, beneath. He looked not a thing like me, with his light brown hair and strong bone structure. He was a little taller than me, but slim.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were going out with Gina and Fran?” he asked.

“I didn’t feel up to it. I thought I’d just hang out here and have a few drinks to celebrate instead,” I shrugged. It wasn’t a lie. I always tried hard not to lie to my brother after that fateful morning when everything changed for me.

“Well, I’m going to take it as a compliment that you’d rather celebrate with me than your friends,” he grinned. “Come on. You finishing college definitely calls for champagne.” He held his arm out and I linked mine around it and followed him to the bar.

“Hey you. What’re you doing here?” Nina asked from behind the bar as Colt helped me to take a seat on one of the high stools. I smiled to my friend who I had worked with for over two years now. I got on with most of the staff at the club, but especially Nina. She was a little older than me, and she had that ‘take no shit’ attitude that I loved and respected.

“We’re celebrating. My brain box kid sister finally finished her college classes today and she’s about to move on to bigger and better things,” Colt announced loudly, making me blush. I was far from a ‘brain box’ and I’d needed to work my ass off to get through my degree.

“Congrats, Ave!” Nina beamed. “Shall I get out the good stuff, boss?” she asked as she looked to Colt.

“Absolutely. Only the best for Bam,” he agreed easily as he looked to me again, this time with something more than just a smile. I saw pride on his face, pride for me, and I wasn’t quite sure what to do with that. I had caused hell for Colt for so long. I found it hard to believe he could look to me with pride and all of the love he always looked to me with. How could he love me so much when I’d blown his neatly ordered life to pieces for the last seven years?

“I told you not to call me that in here,” I said instead. Colt had been calling me ‘Bam’ ever since the first week I came to live with him. I’d been so angry back then, and, in a fit of anger at him when he told me he didn’t want me taking the subway alone, I had tossed my cell across the room. It had smashed into some decorative glass shelves he had in his huge, fancy apartment and all six had smashed along with everything sitting on them, all of it destroyed except for a few books. I’d expected him to lose it with me, the way my mom would have, but instead he’d just laughed and started calling me ‘Bam-Bam’ from *The Flintstones* for the chaos I created. Over time that had shortened to ‘Bam’ and I wasn’t sure Colt would ever stop using it.

“Sorry, but that name’s going nowhere until I’m cold and dead in the ground,” he laughed.

A shudder ran down my back at just the fleeting thought of losing him. Colt was all the family I had left and losing him would leave me lost and so alone. I couldn’t even stand to think about it.

“Don’t say shit like that, Colt,” I told him as the smile dropped from my face and an unreasonable panic filled me. I worked hard to keep my face straight, not wanting him to see my crazy.

“Hey.” He put his hand over mine on top of the bar and squeezed his fingers around mine. “I was kidding, okay? I’m not going anywhere. Neither of us are, right?”

“Right,” I agreed with a nod. Colt didn’t really have any family other than me either. His mom was still alive, but she stopped talking to him the day he chose to take me in. He had chosen me over his own mother and I never forgot that. He hadn’t even known me back then. Apart from the couple of times he entertained me for a few minutes while my mother begged, cried, and screamed at his father, we didn’t know each other at all. But he refused to allow me to go into the system, even though it would only have been for barely a year. He took me in and turned his whole life around all to take care of me – a selfish, ungrateful teenager who hated the world.

Nina, Colt, and I laughed and joked, having fun while Colt and I drained the bottle of fancy champagne way too fast. I kept my eyes open for Jack and Mason, but they weren’t anywhere to be seen. I knew it was likely Mace was working a case if he wasn’t there, but Jack was always around. It was his job to be around. He managed the place.

“Who’re you looking for, boo?” Nina asked me when she caught me glancing behind me again.

“I just thought Jack and Mason might be here. I thought they could celebrate with us,” I explained.

“They’re here. They were showing one of the new subs around. She wanted to play in one of the bondage rooms. They shouldn’t be much longer,” Colt explained easily. My heart lurched, missing a beat, or maybe a few, as pain hit me like a punch to the

chest. Mason, Jack, and I hadn't talked about anything being exclusive. Hell, we weren't even in a relationship, but since we started playing I hadn't seen either of them play or run a scene with any one other than me, and after two years, I had just assumed it was unspoken that we played together or not at all. I'd been such an idiot! Of course they played with other subs when I wasn't around. They were red blooded men, and I hadn't even had sex with them in any of the times we played. Of course they looked else where for what they wanted and needed. It made sense. But that didn't make it hurt any less.

"It's fine," I said, my voice coming out a little croaky. "I'll catch them another time. I'm feeling pretty beat anyway. I might head back home," I told my brother, trying hard not to meet Nina's eyes as she watched me with pity. I had never told her how I felt about Jack and Mason, but she'd seen us together enough to know I felt something for the both of them.

"You sure? I need to sort a few things in my office, but I can give you a ride in about an hour if you can wait?" Colt offered.

"No. I'll just grab a cab. I'm tired and I have to get up early in the morning to meet Gina for yoga. I'll be fine," I assured him. There was no way I was waiting around to see Jack and Mason strutting around with another sub trailing them, or worse, tucked between them the way they did with me after we played. No thank you!

"Fine, but stay out front with security and have them flag a cab for you. I'll be home a little later, okay?" Colt requested and I forced a smile as I nodded.

"I'll see you later," I told him as I reached up to place a kiss on his cheek.

I didn't even pause to put on my coat as I walked through the club, trying to appear calm when all I wanted to do was run and maybe cry.

At the entrance I pulled on my coat, relieved JP wasn't at the desk. I didn't have the energy to play nice right then. I stepped outside and looked to the big guy out front to tell him to get me a cab, but then I heard Jack's voice, his London accent easy to pick out.

"Just take a seat here for me, darlin' and I'll go and get your bag. We'll get you home safe," Jack was saying.

"You did so well, honey. You were..." I didn't even pause to hear what else Mason was going to say in that deep baritone voice that set me alight. I didn't want to hear him using it on another woman. I didn't want to listen to him tell her how amazing she was, or asking her when they could play again.

I charged down the block, not even hearing what the security guy was calling after me. As soon as I was out of sight of the club I broke into a running walk, my heels stopping me from fleeing as fast as I wanted and needed to. I just had to get as far from the club as I could.

I turned the corner and headed down the quieter street. I could see the lights of cars passing further ahead, so I aimed for them, praying I could hail a cab quickly from there. My feet were killing me and the need to cry was overpowering my will to keep my shitttogether. I wasn't a crier. I was good at burying my feelings and hiding any evidence of them with a mask few saw through. But right then I was hurting and the pain wanted an outlet.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

I was almost at the end of the street and to the busy road ahead when I heard a scuffle of feet behind me. I turned, startled, and found a huge figure right behind me. He was taller than me, even at my tall five feet eight height, and with the four inch heels I wore. I cried out in fear and turned to try and run, but I stumbled in the stupid shoes and went down to my ass, never taking my eyes from the figure looming over me. He was dressed all in black, a thick wool hat on his head and a dark scarf covering the bottom of his face.

The ground beneath me was freezing as I dropped my purse and started to slide back away from the figure on my hands and feet.

“Time to repent,” he uttered, his voice low and rough sounding.

“Who the fuck are you?!” I demanded as I slipped off my shoes as inconspicuously as I could, and got ready to jump up and run. I was freezing cold, shaking hard - either because of that or because of the fear, but my mind was clear, the slight buzz from the champagne now gone as adrenaline kicked in. I had to run. I had to get away.

“Your savior,” he said. I shot to my feet as he spoke, ready to run harder and faster than I’d ever run in track in high school, but he was faster. He grabbed my arm and spun me to face him, like I was nothing more than a rag doll. Before I could even try to hit out at him, his fist met my face and the world went black instantly.

CHAPTER 1

AVA

TEN YEARS LATER...

My eyes snapped open as the nightmare receded back into the darkness it had crept from. I didn't jolt awake any longer, and I definitely didn't cry, or scream in terror. There was no more shaking, or sweat covering my body. It had been ten years, and though the nightmares still haunted me and filled me with pain and regret, I lived them too often for them to affect me as they used to.

I reached out to the table that sat behind the old Barker lounge, which I had fallen asleep in, and grabbed for the bottle of vodka that I had left there. It was dark outside the windows of my crappy apartment and the only light in the room was from a dim lamp I left on beside me before I dozed off. My head throbbed and my back tensed with pain as I moved, but I managed to get my hand around the neck of the bottle I wanted and I brought it to my lips without even a thought. The last vestiges of vodka slid into my mouth and down my throat easily, but it wasn't enough.

"Motherfucker!" I hissed as I tossed the bottle at the sofa to my left. It wasn't as satisfying as throwing it at the wall and hearing it shatter, but I'd learned the hard way how much pain it caused to clean that up the next morning.

I struggled to get myself out of the lounge and to my feet cursing up a storm with the pain that ricocheted up my back shoulder and neck with every single movement.

Checking the time on my cell, which sat on the tiny two person dining table between me and the kitchenette, I groaned at the awaiting messages and missed calls from Colt. I knew I needed to call him back, but I didn't have it in me to sound sunny and bright, and I hadn't for a while if I were honest.

My brother didn't know about what had happened. No one but my colleagues at CPD, and my doctors did, and I liked it that way. But it had been almost two years since the incident, and for all of that time I had put my brother off every time he tried to visit,

delaying him from seeing me, with excuses that I was too busy. It wasn't going to work for much longer, and I knew it. It would be time to face the truth with the one person in the world who cared about me very soon, and I dreaded it.

My brother used to be proud of me. I could see it in his face every time he came to visit me after I fled to Chicago almost ten years ago. He was relieved that I got over what happened to me back then, and happy that I had a career I enjoyed with the Chicago Police Department. And he had been right, mostly. Even though it wasn't my dream to work with CPD, I was happy. I had found a life for myself and it was a good life. I found a way to keep going, even if I knew deep down I would never truly overcome what had happened to me before I left New York. What I endured that one night was not something I believed anyone could ever just get over, but I was glad my brother believed that was what I'd done. All I ever wanted was to be worthy of all of the support I'd had from him, and to make him proud.

Now I was a cripple, living in a dump with no money, no job, career, and no prospects. I was an embarrassment and I didn't want him to know me as the woman I had become in the last two years.

"Fuck!" I cursed as I pressed the worries, shame, and embarrassment from my mind and headed for the refrigerator. I pulled out the full bottle of vodka with a loud grunt of pain, then grabbed my pain pills and shuffled back to my lounge. The TV was playing silently in front of me as I unscrewed the liquor bottle and washed down a handful of the pills I'd been told expressly not to mix with alcohol. What did it matter anyway? I didn't want to die, but if I quietly slipped away after an accidental overdose, it wouldn't be the worst thing.

I got as comfortable as I could, which wasn't very, then drowned my pain, memories, and sorrow in the alcohol that I knew would bring unconsciousness soon enough. It was two A.M, so I had three hours left to drink what I wanted. It was a rule I set for myself, a rule that said I only drank alcohol between the hours of five PM and five

AM. I figured if I could spend twelve hours a day not touching a drop, I couldn't become an alcoholic, right?

Yeah, maybe I was kidding myself, but the Vodka I bought every day on my drive home from the gym, was the only thing that ever numbed me enough to find peace in sleep, and I needed it more than I needed anything at that time.

A third of a bottle of Vodka later I was just starting to slip into blissful unconsciousness when I heard the very faint scrape of something against the front door of my shit hole of a studio apartment. I turned to look at the door behind me, and the rusted, old brass handle turned just slightly. Luckily, I knew it was locked, so I had a little time. I eased the bottle of Vodka down to the carpeted floor below me and instead reached for the Glock 19 I always kept close and loaded. I'd been a victim enough. Never again.

Moving as slowly and quietly as I could I got to my feet, all of the vodka I had consumed making me a little unsteady, but adrenaline helped me to move into the kitchenette, just around the corner from the doorway. I clutched my gun between my hands, and wished it was my service weapon, which I was so much more familiar with after eight years of carrying it on me. Of course, that gun had been taken from me the day my Chief arrived at the hospital with the paperwork for my medical retirement. I'd had no say in it. I simply wasn't fit to do the job I loved any longer. My badge and weapon were taken, along with the last threads of my self-respect, and instead I was given a crappy pension that barely covered the rent on this shit hole that I had lived in ever since.

God, I missed my place so much. It was a small two bed house in the outskirts of the city, with a large open back yard and every convenience I could ever need. My cute little car sat in the garage there too, all of it bought for me by Colt the moment I settled in Chicago, but I'd left it behind the day I got out of the hospital. I hadn't wanted Colt to find me there if he came to visit, so I had leased this crumbling room,

and hidden from him for way too long now.

The sound of the front door snicking open almost silently, brought me back to reality and I tensed my core, preying my body would just hold up long enough to keep me alive through whatever the hell this was.

The good thing about living in one room for so long, was that I knew every creak it made, so when the intruder to my home stepped on the creaky board close to where I stood in wait, I knew he was in the perfect place, and I stepped forwards, pressing the gun to the side of his head before he even saw me.

“Drop it and put your hands up,” I told him calmly. When he seemed to start weighing up his options I pressed my gun harder into the side of his bald head. “You move to do anything but what I said and I’m gonna shoot you,” I warned. I moved around him enough to get eyes on my now closed front door. No one else was in my apartment.

Finally Baldy dropped the handgun he’d been holding, to the floor with a muted thud, then he slowly moved his hands to the back of his head.

“Who the fuck are you?” I asked as I kicked his gun behind him into the kitchenette, almost losing my balance in the process, but I didn’t go down and my gun never moved from his head. I’d thank my personal trainer later, grateful for the balance exercises he’d been pushing me to do in the two one hour sessions I could afford with him a week.

“I’m looking for your brother?” he uttered, and I could see the calculating look in his eyes as he tried to work out how to get out of this bind.

“My brother?”

“Colton MacMillan. I was sent to bring him in,” he went on.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“To whom? Who the hell wants my brother?”

No answer came though. Instead Baldy launched his elbow into my right cheek, and pain shot through my whole face as I tried to remain standing. It was the opportunity he needed to knock my gun from his hand, and he swept my legs so I went down hard and fast, crying out in pain as my back hit the floor hard. He leaned in and hit my face again, this time on the left side, and I could instantly taste blood.

“Where is he?” Baldy demanded as he loomed over me. I managed to get my right leg, which was my strongest side, up between us and I thrust my knee straight up into his chin, making him reel back enough for me to roll free. I landed right where I planned to and grabbed my gun which I dropped when I went down. I lifted it and shot in warning right past Baldy’s head, so close I was sure it had grazed his ear.

“Next one won’t miss,” I warned him as I lay half raised, my gun between both hands and pointed right at him where he was frozen a few feet from me. I was breathing heavily and the pain shooting through my back was inexplicable, but I held my ground.

Baldy moved fast, leaping closer to the door for his gun where it sat on the ground, and I didn’t hesitate as I shot him right through his upper shoulder. He cursed as he stumbled, then he got to his feet and fled the apartment, not even taking his gun with him.

“SONOFABITCH!” I roared after him as I collapsed to my back on the ground and allowed a second to get a breath in.

I needed to get up and get the door closed and locked, then I needed to find out what the hell Colt had gotten mixed up in and find a way to keep him safe. Easier said than done with the poor state of my body.

I got to my feet, blocking out the agony that pleaded with me to just remain laying flat on the ground and not move for many hours yet. I grabbed my cell as I passed the table, then slammed the front door closed. My cell shook in my weaker left hand, but I managed to hit my voicemail and started to listen to the several Colt had left for me, starting with the most recent.

“Bam, I get that you’re busy but I really need you to call me back. I have something I needed to talk to you about and it can’t wait.”

That was the most recent, and the others were similar. Had he been trying to call me about this threat? Had he needed my help and I’d just ignored him? The text messages were the same, pleading with me to call him back as soon as I could. Telling me he needed to speak to me urgently. The last one had been over a week ago and the fact I’d heard nothing since terrified me. How had I not even realized he hadn’t called for a whole week? He always called me every few days, even if he just left me a random voice mail. He checked on me constantly, and when he actually needed me I’d been too busy wallowing to even answer a damned phone call!

I moved over to my bed and laid out flat across the middle of it, praying the spasms in the bottom of my back and down both thighs would ease, as I called my brother. It was the middle of the night, but I didn’t care. I had to know he was safe and what was going on.

The fear really set in when he didn’t answer the three calls I made, and I knew something was wrong. My brother always picked up my calls without fail, but he most definitely would not miss me calling in the middle of the night.

“Colt, call me right away. I’m not fucking around. I need to speak with you urgently,” I growled into his voicemail, then I ended the call and forced myself to sit up. I refused just to wait there, hoping he’d call. I had to go to him and find out what the fuck he was mixed up in. There wasn’t much I could do alone, but I could damned well make sure whatever fuck up he was messed up in, got handled.

I pushed through the pain and spasms to get to my feet, crossing the room to the gun that still sat on the carpet. The guy I fought hadn’t been wearing gloves, so I knew I would be able to get prints from it if I needed to. I picked up a discarded envelope I had thrown to the floor earlier that day, some huge brochure about life after CPD – a whole lot of bullshit I’d set light to in the kitchen sink – but the large envelope would serve as an evidence bag for the time being.

One way or another I was going to find out who that fucker was, and what the hell he wanted from my brother. My hiding was over. It was time to go home and face the music.

I cursed myself as the bright, low sun shone in, right through the uncovered windows and woke me well before I was ready. Why didn’t I close the curtains before I crashed?

Knowing I wouldn’t go back to sleep now that I was awake, I sat up and looked around me, feeling disoriented. I’d made the ten hour drive to New York through the night and through half of the next day, but by the time I arrived in the city, I had been too exhausted to start trying to hunt Colt down.

One of the infuriating symptoms of what happened to me was that I was always exhausted, and the night before It had gotten to the point I’d barely been upright by the time I pulled my rust bucket of a car into the under ground lot of the hotel, just

around the block from Temple. The club would have been closed when I arrived anyway, so I knew no one would be there. I could have gone to our apartment across the city, but I just wasn't ready to face that place again. Colt had taken me there after he found me that night, ten years ago. I wasn't sure I could ever bring myself to walk into there ever again now.

Instead I dragged my exhausted and failing body to the lobby of the hotel and actually used the credit card Colt gave to me, and constantly nagged me to use, to rent a room where I could crash and hopefully recoup some energy for a few hours. Maybe a part of me was hoping he'd see the charge and come looking for me. It would save me having to hobble into Temple for all to see my shame.

I tried not to allow my mind to even think about Jack and Mason. It was unlikely they'd be there. Jack would surely have moved onto new pastures by now, and Mason hardly ever went there mid-week, too snowed under with work. But what if they were? What would they think when they saw the person I was now?

"Stop it!" I told myself angrily. If they were there, then screw them and what they thought. I'd been injured in the line of duty, doing my job and saving the life of an innocent. I'd done a good thing, so fuck them if they wanted to judge me for the state that injury had left my body in. I didn't need or want them anyway. I never did.

I reached out for the bag I had all of my medications packed into and started taking a concoction of pain meds, muscle relaxants and whatever else I thought would help me get going again. I had to find Colt. That was all that mattered.

It was around ten minutes before I felt the pain down my back ease enough for me to sit up and stumble to my feet. My left side, which had some weakness after the shooting, was even weaker because I was exhausted. I'd barely slept, tossing and turning for most of the night without the aid of booze to make me sleep.

This was who I was now though. There was no cure. No fixes, quick or slow. I worked out hard to strengthen what remained of my functioning muscles, nerves, and joints, but still every movement caused pain, and every day was filled with exhaustion, medication, and a deep, irreparable sense of loss.

Refusing to focus on anything but getting to Colt and smacking him upside the head for whatever he was up to, I moved to the luxurious bathroom and set the shower running. It had an enormous rainfall shower head and it looked heavenly.

When I was a kid, living with my mom we didn't have luxury. Hell, we barely had food and electricity. My mom suffered with depression and horrendous mood swings, so keeping a job was hard for her, as was functioning day to day. We lived in some shitty places, but I always made do with what I had, and I tried hard to take care of my fragile mom too.

Then she was gone and I went to live with Colt, and with him I was given every single luxury life had to offer. The apartment was always warm and welcoming. There was always food in the kitchen, and hot, luxurious showers were a given. If I ever needed anything, Colt would somehow know, and then I would have it, usually without any fanfare. The item would just appear in my room. Clothes, electronics, books, toiletries, and beauty products. It didn't matter what it was it was all available to me.

My life in Chicago had been somewhere in between. I never went hungry or worried about paying bills, but I didn't take money from my brother any longer either. I lived comfortably on the wages I earned and I was happy.

But everything had changed when I was shot two years before, and now I found myself living a life so much more like the one I lived with my mom – except now I was the depressed one. I was the one who felt lost and unable to cope with life. Living on the meagre pension I was paid was tough and my home was a dive. I had

missed luxury. I had missed hot showers and comfortable beds with bright white, soft sheets.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Stop it!” I told myself again, this time staring at my reflection in the mirror over the vanity. I missed so much though. I missed my life, and my brother, I missed feeling fulfilled and settled. I missed peaceful sleep, and days filled with no pain or bone deep exhaustion. Most of all I missed myself. I wasn’t me anymore. I hadn’t been for ten years, since the night so much was taken from me in a matter of hours. Since then I’d tried hard to plaster over the holes that monster made in me. I’d found armor that kept everyone at arm’s length and I had found a way to live with what happened to me. My job got me through mainly, and I had thrown everything I had left into being the detective I was desperate to be.

Then one night, two years earlier that had been ripped from me too, along with my strength, my independence, my self-respect, and my will to keep fighting.

Now the reflection looking back at me wasn’t the Ava I had been in college – light and free and filled with hope. Nor was she ‘Scott’ as everyone called me at CPD. That tenacious, determined kid who worked her way up to detective in just a few short years, was gone too. Now I was an empty shell filled with nothing but regret, pain, and memories I would happily discard if I knew how.

I was too thin and so pale my skin looked almost translucent in the areas in and around the bruising from that fucker hitting me the night before. My red eyes were circled with dark rings that were heavy and prominent. My hair was lifeless and greasy looking, the once vibrant strawberry blonde now darkened because I never went out into the sun more than I had to any longer. My body was thin too, since I spent all of my timeworking out, drinking, and wallowing. Under my clothes things were even worse, my body a map of all of the regrets in my life, there for me to relive every time I removed my clothing.

I shook my head at myself. I was having a pity party and there wasn't time for it. I had to shower, get dressed and find my brother. I may be useless for most things now, but I refused to let Colt down. He had always been there for me, and I would not fail him at the one time he may need me.

I powered through the shower, refusing to look at any part of myself where I might see the scars. It had been ten years. I needed to get the hell over it all, and I knew it.

Once I was out and dried off I pulled on underwear and a pair of black skinny jeans with a black long sleeved henley. It was hardly in keeping with the dress code at Temple, but it was as much as I was willing to do to fit in. I slid on my black slip on sneakers and scraped my hair into a pony tail on my head. I didn't even own make up any longer, so that was a no go, even if I had wanted to give my self a boost, which I did not. I didn't care what anyone thought, I reminded myself.

I packed up the rest of my belongings into the small backpack I brought with me, and tried calling Colt one last time before I left the room. Of course there was no answer, and there was nothing in reply to the texts I had sent him either. I had a bad feeling I wasn't going to find him at Temple, but since he mainly worked out of his office there, I hoped I could at least find some clues about what was going on, amongst his papers in there.

Opting to walk to the club I pulled on my long, black, wool overcoat and left the hotel via the front entrance. It was bitterly cold outside and dark now that the sun had set. Some snow lingered from the last storm, and it was playing havoc with the black chrome walking stick I used to help support me. It had a handle that I usually pressed my weight onto. But the slippery surface underfoot made that impossible. Add to that how crowded the sidewalk was, and the fight I faced just to get through, and I was shaking with exhaustion by the time I got to the front of Temple.

It wasn't until I was before it, looking at the entrance that hadn't changed one bit

since the last time I ran through it ten years before, that I realized returning there may not be as simple as I'd expected it to be.

Instantly a replay of that night opened in my head, and I saw myself naively fleeing the club because of such ridiculous jealousy, launching myself into the danger of the city late at night, alone and unable to defend myself. I'd been such an idiot.

"Can I help you?" I startled from the memory that had sucked me back in time and looked up at a huge guy who loomed over me. I wasn't short at five feet eight, but this guy had almost a foot on me. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and even through the black jacket he wore I could see how wide his biceps were and the sheer width of his built shoulders.

Still shaken from the memory I tried to step back, away from him, but my left foot slipped out from me on a patch of ice and I went down hard and fast.

"Mother fuck!" I screeched as pain shot through my back in violent spasms. At least I'd managed not to smash my already damaged spine on the ground this time.

"Fuck! Are you alright?" The bruiser of a guy panicked as he knelt on the floor beside me. I took in the neon yellow lanyard around his neck and realized it was a security ID, for the club. I followed that up to a wide neck. His jaw was strong and covered with short stubble. His nose was straight and just slightly too big for his face to make him classically handsome. His eyes, which were scanning me, probably for injuries, were wide, and the color was a light Gray that just verged on blue under the lights from the club. His hair was neat and styled in place, shorter on top and pushed up and to the right just a little on top. It was a chestnut brown that suited his light eyes, complimenting them and softening his intimidating size as he just stayed at my side, awaiting my answer.

"I'm fine," I answered abruptly, pulling my eyes away from his before he lured me in

any further. He may not be classically handsome, but he was still good looking and definitely sex on a stick. It had been a long time for me, and even in the state my body was, I could still dream a little. “You always sneak up on people and scare the shit out of them like that?” I added as I grabbed my stick and started the struggle to get my ass off of the freezing sidewalk and back to my feet.

“I called out to you, but you didn’t answer. It’s like you zoned out. I just wanted to check you were good. Your face?” He nodded to my bruised face as he placed his hand under my right elbow and helped me to get up. “Who did that to you?”

I looked up, hearing some anger in his growled words, and found him watching me with concern, and fire in his eyes.

“Stand down soldier,” I quipped as a smile teased my lips. “I already took care of the dipshit.”

“You did?” he questioned as he looked me over with a raised eyebrow.

“You got something against women who know how to take care of themselves?” I asked defensively.

“Fuck no. I just hate when women need to,” he sighed as his face softened a little. He had looked intimidating when he was pissed, but now his features had softened, and despite his huge size, I found myself seeing something gentle in his eyes. “You’re trouble, huh?” he asked, and a small smile lifted the corners of his mouth, making him even better looking.

“With a capital ‘T’.” I replied with a smile of my own. “Don’t you forget it.”

“Wouldn’t dare,” he told me as he held his hands up before him in surrender. “You a member here?” He nodded to the club behind him.

“Used to be. I moved away. I’m looking for Colton. Is he around?”

“And you are?” he questioned.

“Ava Scott. Colt’s my brother. I need to speak to him. It’s important.”

“Come inside. I’ll call up to the office,” he said as he placed his wide hand at the small of my back, and helped me into the entrance. I would have protested had I not been feeling shaky and unsteady after the first fall.

“So Colt’s here?” I asked hopefully.

“No idea. I only just started my shift,” he shrugged. “Name’s Deacon, by the way. You can call me Deak,” he added with a wink, which I rolled my eyes at, but inside things were stirring that I’d started to believe no longer functioned.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

I watched Deak as he rounded the counter where Jean-Pierre used to stand each evening. He picked up a phone and started dialing a number. The whole time I was fighting not to fidget with the nerves of being back in that place, and the hope that Colt would just answer the call.

“Hey, it’s Deak down at the front entrance. I got a pretty girl down here asking for Colt. Says she’s his sister,” Deak said into the phone and I tensed even more. Please let that be Colt, I pleaded over and over.

“Okay. Manager’s on his way down, says you know him,” Deak said as he set the phone down and looked to me.

“My brother?”

“Jack said he’s not here.”

“Jack?” I questioned as my heart started to pound too hard. “Jack Hilton? He’s still the manager here?”

“He is. He’s also part owner now too,” Deak told me. I had no idea how that had come about, but Colt had never mentioned Mason or Jack to me in the years I’d been gone. Maybe because he suspected there had been something between us and he didn’t want to upset me. Either way I knew nothing about the two of them any longer.

“And should we talk about you calling me a ‘pretty girl?’” I added more firmly as I stared him down, in an attempt to hide my internal panic from him. I hated people seeing my weaknesses.

“Just stating a fact,” Deak said as he held his hands up in surrender again, then circled the desk and headed for the door he was stationed at before. “Boss will be here any minute. Just wait there, okay?”

I nodded, but the second Deacon was back outside, I was considering running. I didn’t want to face Jack after all of this time. What if he was married now? What if he had kids? What if he took one look at me and was repulsed? I tried hard to convince myself I didn’t care about any of it, but I did. I had feelings for Jack and Mason and I still felt the sting of their betrayal that night when they had been with that other sub and not me. Part of me, a very irrational and hateful part, blamed them for what happened to me that night that I had foolishly fled the club alone just because I was jealous. But it wasn’t their fault, It was mine. That was the past and I needed to focus on now. I needed to find Colt.

“Ava?” I hadn’t heard Jack walk in from the club, but when I glanced up, there he was, standing over me and looking just as sinful and sexy as he always had. My brain was overloaded just trying to take him in, but then Mason stepped out of the club too and it was just too much. Mason looked almost the same. His neatly cut afro hair was shorter now, standing just a centimeter or so off his head, and he had a neat, short, trimmed beard and moustache which just added to his appeal. He didn’t look any older, but he was definitely even more in shape that he used to be, his wide biceps, ripped chest, and strong shoulders clear to see beneath the close fitting thin, dark green sweater he wore.

Jack was just as I remembered him. His wavy hair hung down to just above his shoulders, the front of it falling down from where he had likely just pushed it back from his face. His bright blue eyes were locked on me and taking me in carefully. He was dressed in tight fitting black jeans, and a white shirt that clung to his lithe, muscular body beneath in all the right ways. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows and I could see his tattoos peeking out beneath both sleeves and up his neck from the open collar. He was covered with tattoos all over his torso, back, arms, and neck, and

when I'd seen him naked I'd always considered him the most spectacular work of art I had ever seen.

"Ava?" Jack repeated as he rubbed at his lightly stubbled chin, then lowered to his haunches before me. "What are you doing here, darlin'? What happened to your face?" he asked as he reached out his right hand and held my chin, moving my face side to side as he took in the bruising, then turned an angry glare to Mason behind him.

Finally sense returned to me as I batted away his hand and glared hard at him.

"Don't touch me!" I growled. "I need to see Colt. Is he here or not?"

"Not," Jack told me with a shake of his head, but he didn't move from where he was crouched before me. "He's away for a fortnight," Jack added.

"Away where? He didn't tell me he was going anywhere."

"He said he was going to Chicago, to spend some time with you. He called and left me a voicemail last week. Asked Jack to handle things here," Mason further explained.

"No," I shook my head as I tried to make my sluggish brain think straight. "He'd have called if he was coming to see me, and he didn't. He hasn't even called me this week."

"Yeah, we thought it was a bit odd that he didn't tell us before he went, but he has been worried about you. We guessed he just decided last minute," Jack shrugged.

"Something's not right. I need to get in his office," I demanded as I grabbed my stick and used it to push myself to my feet. It wasn't until I was standing and I looked to

Jack to let me pass, that I realized both he and Mason were looking to the stick, and my shaky position with confusion.

“What happened?” Mason demanded as he stepped forward and stood at Jack’s side now.

I sighed deeply as I looked between them. I didn’t have time for this. There was no way Colt came to see me and didn’t even call me when he got to my place and discovered it abandoned.

“I got shot, okay? Spinal injury. I’m fucked up and have the mobility of a hundred year old granny, but hey, I retained control of my own bowels and bladder, so that’s a win huh? Least that’s what everyone told me. So lucky. Go me! ” I blurted with a fake cheer.

“Why the fuck wouldn’t Colt tell us that?” Mason asked in a gasp.

“He doesn’t know. No one did until right now. So can we just get over it, and find my fucking brother, please? I plan on kicking his ass when I get my hands on him.”

“Fuck no, Ava,” Jack barked. “You don’t get to charge in here bruised and injured, lay that shit on us and pretend nothing bloody changed. What the fuck? Why haven’t you told Colt? A fucking spinal injury and you didn’t even tell your own brother?”

“You know what? I don’t have time for this. Colt’s in trouble, and now he’s fucking missing. I need to find him!” I snapped as I shoved my way between them and headed for the back of the club where I could get up to the office. The stairs were going to be a bitch, but determination alone would get me up them.

CHAPTER 2

AVA

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“What do you mean Colt’s in trouble?” Mason asked as they both followed behind me.

“He didn’t come to see me. I know him well enough to know that,” I began as I came to the foot of the metal set of stairs that led up to the small office area above. “Last night I got a visit from a guy with a gun.”

“Is that who hurt you?” Jack growled.

“I handled it, and the guy ran off, but he was looking for Colt, and I don’t think he just wanted to catch up with drinks,” I went on, my embarrassment at how awkwardly I climbed the stairs bringing out my snark.

I knew they were both behind me, either shocked or appalled at how far I’d fallen. I was barely a shadow of the woman I had been the last time they saw me. Back then I’d been young and in shape. I’d never have described myself as anything special, but I wasn’t unattractive. I had some curves, and carried a little extra weight, but I was also toned and fit. My hair used to shine, and with a touch of make up I could make a guys head turn. Now, I was a hell of a long way away from that girl as I all but dragged myself up the staircase breathlessly, fighting with everything I had not to stumble or let my legs shake any worse than they already were.

Stairs were one of the hardest obstacles I’d come across since I was shot, but since I lived on the ground floor of my towering apartment building, and never went anywhere but the gym, I hadn’t had to tackle many flights since then.

Now I was positively vibrating as I pushed my body harder and harder to get up

there. I was both embarrassed and ashamed as I moved to place my right leg on a step, then dragged my left leg to follow, with each stair. I was clutching the handrail and using my stick, but even so I was out of breath and feeling the tingling warning of spasms attacking my exhausted legs very soon.

“Ava? Let me help you, babe,” Jack said and I felt his hand start to circle my waist. For the first time in so long I wanted to cave to some kindness. My tough exterior was beginning to wear so thin, and the familiarity of Jack’s unique accent and the feel of his warm hand through my top was so tempting and comfortingly familiar. But I couldn’t. I barely knew Jack or Mason any more, and I was a long way from trusting them with the sliver of a girl who remained under my layers and layers of armor.

“Don’t you dare!” I growled as I twisted away from his touch. “I don’t need fucking help. Just back the fuck off!”

“I only want to help. It’s obvious you’re struggling,” Jack sighed as he backed off enough for me to get away from him.

“I struggle every fucking minute of every day! You gonna be there for all of that too?!” I barked as I half turned around and glared at him hard. I hated the hurt and shock I saw cross his handsome face, but I had to ignore it. He was nothing to me anymore. Neither of them were, I reminded myself. I just needed to check out Colt’s office, then get the hell out of there.

“We will if you let us, Ava. We used to be close once, before you ditched us for bigger, better things. Maybe we can get back to being friends?” Mason said softly, and I couldn’t even bring myself to turn and look at him, already knowing the hurt and concern I would see in his deep, dark brown eyes.

“Ditched you?” I scoffed as I paused but didn’t turn around. “Fuck you, Mace. You have no idea why I left or who I even am now. Screw you and your ‘friends’ bullshit.

I came to help Colt. Nothing more!”

Determination and anger got me up the last quarter of the staircase, and I was relieved when neither of them tried to speak to me again. I knew I shouldn’t be so pissed with them. It wasn’t even that they did anything wrong. I never told them they couldn’t scene with other subs, and it was far from their fault I’d run off into the night when I found out they did. What happened to me that horror filled night was on me, and me alone, and yet I couldn’t hide the anger I felt toward the both of them too.

By the time I hit the top of the stairs, I was so exhausted and in pain that the idea of crossing the small landing to get to Colt’s office made me want to lay down and sob, but Mason and Jack were right behind me and I refused to show any more weakness.

Leaning heavily on my stick and pushing through the pain in my shoulders and back, I moved to the heavy oak door into Colt’s office and tried to open it, but found it locked.

“I swear to God, if one of you doesn’t have the key I’m gonna....”

“Easy tiger. I have the key,” Jack soothed as he bypassed me without touching me, then slid the key into the old school lock, throwing the door open for me.

“You can both go now,” I told them as I turned at the doorway and stared them down. “I can handle this from here.”

“Not a chance,” Mace told me with a shake of his head.

“I agree. If Colt’s in trouble it’s too dangerous for you to be handling it alone,” Jack agreed.

“Oh, you agree, do you? How kind of you,” I said sarcastically. “There is just one

little issue though.” I added as I held my fingers apart just a fraction as I said it, trying to ignore how hard my hand shook as I held it up.

“And what’s that?” Mace asked.

“I don’t want a fucking thing to do with either of you, so fuck off and leave me alone. I don’t need your help to find Colt, nor do I want it!”

“Watch that tone, Ava!” Mace snapped, ever the dom.

“Fuck you, I don’t answer to anyone anymore,” I laughed as I turned my back on them both and walked unsteadily into the office, flicking the lights on as I passed the switch.

I was trying to seem calm and collected, but inside I was a mess. I hadn’t ever submitted to anyone but the two men before me, and the D/s lifestyle had been something I stayed far away from since that fateful night ten years before. I had thought the idea of submission and my desire for domination had been tortured out of me in the hours I was held by a maniac, but just that little barked command from Mason had me feeling needy and coming alive inside in a way I had forgotten I could.

“Why are you so angry with us, love? Surely we should be the ones pissed with you after the way you just cut all ties and walked away from us without a word. Colt’s been tight lipped about you since you left too. Did you tell him not to tell us anything? Were you punishing us for something?” Jack asked.

I turned as I rounded my brothers huge glass desk and collapsed into his chair. I’d hoped to look a little more graceful, but I was barely staying upright and collapse was all I had in me. I’d thought about bringing my wheel chair with me before I left Chicago. Sometimes it was easier to use a chair to get around when a lot of walking

was required, but my vanity had won out and I'd left it behind, not wanting my brother, or anyone I knew to see me in that contraption. Now I regretted it. I didn't even know how I would leave Colt's office, let alone get back to the hotel.

"I simply moved onto bigger, better things. Wasn't that how you put it, Mace?" I asked with a sneer that wasn't real. I was just trying to protect myself, and them.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Yeah? Well it worked out well for you then, huh?” he threw back angrily, and I reeled back like he’d just slapped me across my face.

“Mace!” Jack snapped.

“Get the fuck out, right now!” I raged as I forced myself to stand and pointed to the door. “This office belongs to my brother and you have no right to be in here. Get out, and stay the hell away from me!”

“I think we should all just try and calm down a bit. We’re all worried and emotions are high. Let’s just chill out and talk rather than shouting at each other,” Jack tried to calm things down, but it was too late. I was pissed as hell with Mason for his cutting comment – not that he’d been wrong.

“Fuck that. You two are still the over grown idiots you’ve always been, and the last thing I need is either of you slowing me down. Go back downstairs and play with whatever Barbie doll is down there panting for you both! That’s what you’re good at, right?”

“Ava!” Jack barked, ending my tirade. I collapsed down into the chair again, my chest heaving with each gasping breath I took. It turned out being pissed and jealous was more than I could handle nowadays. Shame, since that seemed to be all I was good at anymore. “Enough! Mace, go to the precinct and trace Colt’s phone. Find out if he really was in Chicago when he left you that voicemail. I’ll stay here with Ava and go through his shit. Call us if you get anything.”

“Fine, but don’t let her out of your sight. I don’t want her charging off alone and

making the whole situation worse,” Mason ordered.

“I’m a fucking detective, asshole! This is what I do!” I roared at him.

“Are you?” That was all he said as he glanced from where I had dropped my walking cane to the floor beside me and back to my face.

“Bastard!” I screamed as I grabbed a paperweight from the desk and threw it at him. It would have hit him square in the chest too if he hadn’t side stepped so fast.

“Mace, stop being a bloody asshole and go find Colt,” Jack sighed.

I didn’t even see Mason leave the office, but I knew he’d gone when the door slammed closed behind him. I had my head lowered, fighting with everything in me not to let his taunting words hurt me. He was right again, after all. I wasn’t a detective anymore. I wasn’t even a cop. I was no one.

“Ignore him, Ava. He’s just mad because you’re hurt and we didn’t even know. He worries about you. We both do since you split. We should have come after you but we knew we had to leave the ball in your court.”

“Whatever. I’ve worked with CPD for years. You think anything he can say is worse than what I’ve already heard?” I tossed back as I lifted my head, my mask of indifference firmly back in place. “Let’s just focus on finding Colt. Do you have any idea what he’s mixed up in?” I asked calmly.

“I have an idea,” Jack said as he leant against the desk right in front of me, resting his butt on the edge and crossing his legs at his ankles before him. “Six months ago we got audited by the I.R.S. Colt wasn’t worried, because everything here, and across his other businesses is legit, but they tied everything up in legal crap, and found a way to freeze all of Colt’s accounts until their investigation was over.”

“Investigation?”

“They linked two of our members with a terrorist group, which was bullshit, by the way, but it was enough to turn the routine audit into an investigation.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“After three months with no access to his accounts Colt started to struggle to balance everything with his other businesses and the new club he’s building downtown. I offered to loan him some money, but instead he offered me an investment opportunity in this place.”

“That’s how you became a part owner,” I concluded, thinking of what Deak had told me before.

“Yeah. I own one quarter of the club and Colt had the money he needed to keep the construction on the new club going. But it wasn’t enough. He needed access to his business accounts to paystaff and keep everything running, and there was no sign of the I.R.S. backing off anytime soon, so Colt mentioned something about borrowing the money he needed. I didn’t know he’d gone through with it, because he never mentioned anything to me, but if he did, it will be a big debt that he owes.”

“Fuck! Who could he have borrowed money from?”

“No idea, but if that guy who turned up at your place works for whoever it is, it can’t be anyone good,” Jack pointed out, and I nodded my agreement.

“You think they could have taken Colt?”

“I don’t think they’d be coming to your place searching for him if they had him. Maybe he’s hiding out somewhere, keeping a low profile? Though that doesn’t make

sense either, since the investigation was dropped last week, and all of Colt's bank accounts released back to him."

"This makes no sense," I groaned as I held my pounding head and tried to think straight.

"No, it doesn't, and it's not like Colt at all. We need to find out who he borrowed money from. They have to know something about what's going on here."

"Yeah," I nodded as I lifted my head and took a deep breath. "You're right, Let's see if there's anything here about the loan."

I needed to sleep, preferably after several pain pills and a bottle of Vodka, but it had to wait. If Colt was mixed up with some low life loan shark, I needed to handle it, and fast. I needed to get him back safe.

JACK

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

I slammed the drawer of the last filing cabinet closed with a sigh. I hadn't found anything except what I already expected to find in Colt's office – paperwork for his many businesses, but mainly for the club we stood in.

"I just don't get this," I said as I turned to face Ava where she still sat behind Colt's desk, pulling out the contents of the drawers and going through the mountain of papers on his desk. "Even if Colt did borrow money, he knows enough people not to have gone to anyone shady. He could have borrowed from any number of his loaded mates."

"Yeah, I've been thinking that too," Ava agreed, and she sounded exhausted. Her voice was quiet and raspy and when I looked at her properly, I saw how pale she really was, and how dark the bags under her eyes were, even when mixed with the bruising on her face.

I hated how defeated and flat she seemed. The Ava I had known before - the Ava who I had fallen in love with from the first moment I met her, for her first shift behind the bar at Temple - she had been filled with life and she smiled constantly. She could be cutting and she always had a come back for any comment thrown at her. She had a strength that I admired and found sexy as fuck.

Ten years later and this version of Ava before me seemed worn down and exhausted. The spark was gone from her eyes, and she hadn't once smiled the way she used to. She'd lost so much weight, all of her delicious curves gone, and she moved around so shakily and unsteadily. She'd said she was shot, and obviously it had caused some lasting damage. Judging by the way she winced with every tiny movement, I assumed she was in pain too. I wanted to do something to help her, but she'd made herself

pretty clear when she told Mace and I to stay away from her. She was definitely pissed with us, which we'd both suspected when she disappeared a decade before with no word, but it was clear to see now. I just wished we knew what the bloody hell we'd done.

"But that guy who broke into my place was definitely a hired thug, and he told me he wanted Colt. Something's going on," she continued as she reached up to rub the back of her neck with a wince of pain.

"Maybe he is just lying low somewhere," I shrugged.

"No," she shook her head vehemently. "Colt wouldn't just run and hide without at least warning the people he cares about. He'd have called me."

"Would you have answered if he did?" I asked bluntly. Colt didn't talk to us about Ava much, but lately he had been worried that she was barely calling him back anymore. I heard him leaving frustrated voicemails for her a few times.

"I checked every message from him. He said he wanted to talk to me, but nothing about any of this, and no mention of him going anywhere." Ava lowered her eyes as she spoke and I knew she was blaming herself for not answering his calls. She was good at that – baming herself for everything. She always had been, though never on this scale.

"We'll find him, Ave," I sighed, feeling shitty for pushing her. It was so obvious she wasn't up to much of anything right then.

"We have to," she whispered shakily, and it killed me. She was terrified, I realised. Terrified she was going to lose the only family she had.

I knew how she felt on some level. I'd known Colt for almost fifteen years. He and

Mace were the closest thing to family I had. I blamed myself too, if I were honest. I should have paid more attention and been there to help Colt more. Maybe then I might have been able to do more to keep him safe.

“Where are you staying?” I asked to change the subject.

“I stayed at a hotel last night, but I’m gonna head to the apartment tonight and see what I can find there,” she told me, and there was something odd about the way she pushed her shoulders back and dropped all emotion from her face as she said it.

“You shouldn’t stay there alone. If whoever wants Colt knew where you live, they obviously know where Colt lives,” I warned her.

“I’ll be fine,” she replied firmly, her bright blue eyes meeting mine in challenge.

“How the hell will you be fine if a bunch of wankers with guns break in thinking you’re Colt?” I growled. I hated the fact she was being so stubborn and putting herself in danger. I got that she’d been a cop for years now, and that she could obviously handle herself before she was shot, but she wasn’t fully able anymore, and the idea of her having to fight anyone off in the state she sat before me in, terrified me.

“I have my gun and I’m not fucking helpless,” she bit back angrily. “Colt’s apartment is secure anyway. It’s unlikely anyone will break in there.”

“I don’t like it. I’d feel better if you came to stay at mine tonight.”

“And I’d like it if you’d just leave me the fuck alone like I asked you to. Looks like neither of us are getting what we want, huh?”

“Ava. I’m worried about you, babe,” I admitted.

“Don’t call me that, or any of your little pet names!” She looked up at me with a hard glare. “And I don’t need your worry either. We’re nothing to each other, Jack. We never were, so stop acting like you have some responsibility for me. I don’t need it. I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.”

“Now you’re talking absolute bollocks and we both know it. I don’t know what has you all pissy and angry right now, but please spare me your bullshit. We were something to each other. Me, you, and Mace – we had something good before you ran off with your fucking knickers in a twist,” I told her. I’d put up with a lot from her, but I refused to listen to her make out the connection we all had before, meant nothing. That was not true. Just because we never had sex, didn’t mean the bond we shared when we played at the club meant nothing. I had been falling for her and so had Mace. We were planning to take things further and ask her on a date to discuss it the week she disappeared on us.

“Fuck you, asshole! You have no idea what happened and why I left!” she cried with a snarl.

“No, you’re right. I don’t because you pissed off without a word or a backward fucking glance and never reached out again!”

“Why would I? We didn’t have a relationship. It wasn’t even exclusive what we did, was it? It meant nothing to either of you, and I felt just the same. I owed you nothing.” She calmed a little, though I suspected that was because she was dead on her feet, rather than her being any less angry.

“What does that mean? Were you with other men?” I asked. She was right that we never set any rules on what we had, and we were certainly never specific about any of it being exclusive, but after the first couple of times the three of us played together, Mace and I had never touched another sub. We didn’t want to. We just wanted Ava.

“It doesn’t matter,” she sighed with a wide yawn. “It’s the past now Jack, and we can never go back. I’m too tired to fight like this anymore. There’s nothing here anyway. I think I’ll call it a night.” She sounded so weak and flat. All I wanted to do was gather her in my arms the way I used to after we did a scene in the club below, and hold her close. I wanted her to look up at me with nothing but peace in her eyes, the way she used to.

“Please just let me take you home with me. I’ve a spare room for you to sleep in. We can go to the apartment together tomorrow and check it out,” I pleaded.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“No, but thanks. I want to go home. I’ll be fine,” she replied in the most civil tone I’d heard from her yet.

“Then at least let me come and stay the night with you. I’ll sleep on a the sofa if it makes you feel better. I just don’t want you there alone, Ava.”

“You’re still a good guy, aren’t you, Jack?” She smiled at me, then grabbed her cane from the floor and started trying to pull herself up.

“Not really,” I shrugged. “But I like to look out for the people I care about.”

“The girl you cared about isn’t here anymore,” she said as she leant heavily on the stick and the desk and hoisted herself up with way too much effort and energy she clearly didn’t have. “You have to let her go and leave me be.”

“That’s never gonna happen now I got you back, love.”

“You didn’t get me back because you never had me in the first place, Jack. Thanks for helping me.” She walked exhaustedly toward me and patted me on my forearm as she passed me, then she was gone.

I knew I should go after her. I knew I should at least see her safely to her car, but I couldn’t. The girl I had spent ten years pining for, and loving, had just blown me off and it fucking hurt.

CHAPTER 3

AVA

There were tears in my eyes as I stumbled and bumbled my way down the stairs. By some miracle I didn't go rolling down them though, and by the time I reached the bottom I had pulled back the useless tears,

It hurt to walk away from Jack after saying the things I said, but none of it was untrue, and even if he did still care for me, he'd be better off not bothering. I had told him the Ava he knew was long gone and I had meant it. The Ava, who was fun, feisty, free, and crushing like a teenager on both him and Mason had started to die that night I ran from the club, and in the decade since she had continued to wither away until all that remained of me was nothing but the empty shell that vaguely resembled the girl Jack once knew.

I had no idea what my future held, but it definitely didn't involve a relationship, and certainly not one that Jack and Mason needed – a D/s relationship. All I could focus on was keeping my failing body going long enough to ensure Colt was safe, and then I'd return home, to the way things were. There was no other life out there for what remained of me.

I was fading as I walked through the back area of the club and finally made it back to the entrance. The stairs had been more than my weak legs could handle, so they were beginning to spasm. My entire being was shaking from sheer exhaustion and the pain down my back was taking my breath from me with each step.

I bypassed the front desk and moved for the door out to the street. I didn't have time to linger. I knew it wouldn't be long before my body just gave out on me if I didn't get sat down soon.

“Hey!” A deep voice called after me as I stepped outside and continued walking. I glanced back and saw Deak - the large security guy from earlier - coming after me.

“Where are you going?”

“None of your business,” I told him as I turned forward and again and just focused on not slipping. If I fell again there would be no getting up this time, not as exhausted as I was.

“It’s late and it’s not safe for you to be walking around alone. At least let me get you a cab,” he said, and I knew he was close behind me from the thud of his heavy boots on the sidewalk.

“I have my car around the corner, and I can handle myself, but thanks.”

“I’ll walk you to your car then.” Before I could even tell him I didn’t need him to, he was at my side, keeping stride with me.

“Aren’t you needed at the club?” I asked, even my voice sounding done for the day, coming out quiet and with a tremble.

“Someone’s covering for me. Did you find your brother?” he asked.

“No. Not yet, but I will.”

“Where is he? I haven’t seen him this week.” Deak asked.

“I don’t know,” I sighed tiredly. I paused, and tried to stretch my legs a little, shifting my weight from one foot to the other to try and ease the spasms in my thighs. Tears filled my eyes again and I swiped at them angrily with my free hand. I didn’t fucking cry! I never cried and this was twice in one damned night,

“Sweetheart...” Deak started to move closer when he saw my watery eyes and I quickly lowered my face as I stepped backwards away from him.

“Don’t! I’m fine,” I told him as I pulled myself together enough to raise my head again.

“It’s been a tough day, I’m guessing?” he asked.

A laugh bubbled out of me and I sniffled as I tried to pul it back together. “Yeah, let’s go with that,” I added as I forced myself to get moving again.

“Is the pain in your back, or your legs?” he asked as he resumed his slow pace at my side.

“What?”

“It’s obvious you’re in pain. I can see it all over your face every time you take a step, so back, or legs?” he repeated.

“Both,” I confessed, too tired to think of any wise remarks to throw back. “I was shot in the back. One bullet left me with a spinal injury, so my back hurts, my legs hurt. Everything fucking hurts, but it’s nothing new.”

“You were shot?” Deak gasped.

“I was a cop, so I really can take care of myself. You don’t have to keep walking with me.”

“Fine, but I’m gonna do it anyway.”

“Why?” I growled and I turned and looked up into his emerald-green eyes. We were under a street light and they seemed to sparkle under it. “You don’t know me. Do you walk every girl who leaves the club alone to her car?”

“I try to. Like I said, it’s not that safe around here. I take my job seriously.”

“So this is just you doing your job?” I asked incredulously. Maybe it was because my job had made me cynical, or maybe it was because I gave up hoping for there to be good in people a long time ago, but either way I was shocked he’d go to such lengths to protect women he barely knew.

“Partly, but it’s also because Colt is a friend, and he would hate to think of you out on these streets alone. If he were at the club, would he really have let you leave alone this late at night?”

“He’s not here though, so what does that matter?” I sighed.

“He’s not, but I am and until he comes back to take care of you, I want to look out for you, okay?”

“I don’t need a damned babysitter!” I snapped.

“Good, because I’d make a shit babysitter. I’m shit with kids,” he stated so matter of fact it made me smile just a fraction.

“You’re friends with my brother?” I asked, changing the subject and accepting he wasn’t going to just leave me.

“Yeah. I’ve known him from the club for years. When I had a change of circumstances a few years ago, he helped me out and gave me the job at the club. I owe him,” Deacon explained.

“A change of circumstances?” I questioned. I was pushing, but that had been such an odd way to phrase it.

“I was training and competing as a strongman. I’d just qualified for World’s Strongest Man and I was at the top of my game. I was engaged and things were perfect, but during a training session I collapsed and got rushed into the hospital. Tests were done and it turned out my heart’s fucked up from all of the training, and the strain it caused. Long story short, I can no longer compete and I had to lose a lot of my body mass to make my heart safer. My fiancé left me too. She wanted to marry a celebrity, not a security guard,” he explained. He kept his voice flat as he spoke, but

I could see the hurt and feel his loss from the expressions on his face. He had lost something he loved – his dream. I got that.

“I’m sorry,” I uttered as I studied him again. He was ripped with muscle everywhere I could see, and I had to wonder how much bigger he’d been before. He already completely dwarfed me.

“It’s all good. I’ve moved on, and I have your brother to thank for that.”

“He’s a good person. I owe him a lot too,” I told him honestly. God, I missed Colt so much. I hated myself for keeping him away from me for so long. What if I never got him back?

“What’s going on? Maybe I can help you track him down?” Deak asked.

“Did he say anything to you about borrowing some money?” I asked.

“I knew he was having a hard time because of that bullshit investigation. Has something happened to him?” Deak sounded worried now, and I realized he truly must care about Colt to worry so much.

“I hope not,” I replied. “But maybe. He left voicemails for Jack and Mason last week saying he was coming to stay with me for awhile, but he never showed, then, last night, someone broke into my apartment and said they were looking for Colt, and this guy wasn’t a concerned citizen.”

“He do that to your face?” Deak asked. He moved his hand as though he was going to touch my face, but dropped it just as quickly.

“He was the one who ran off like a scared little bitch in the end,” I assured him.

“So what’s your next move? I’m guessing you searched Colt’s office?”

“Yeah. Nothing there. I’m going to his apartment to check his office there, and I’ll stay there tonight. Mason is filing a missing person’s report too.”

“You’re going to Colt’s place alone?”

“Yes.”

“No. You’re not,” he dictated with a grimace..

“Excuse me?” I snapped as I paused again and turned to face him.

“Look, I get it. You’re feisty and you don’t like help, but I also see how much pain you’re in, and how exhausted you are. Trust me, I know a shit ton about injuries and pain after a decade of training and competing.”

“It’s nothing new. I was in pain and exhausted when I fought off the intruder last night. I’m tougher than I look,” I told him.

“I see that too, but can you honestly say you’ll be safe if you get to Colt’s place and there are armed men waiting there for you. Are you up to that right now?” he pushed.

“I’d survive. I always do,” I shrugged.

“You’d survive a lot better if you weren’t alone. Just let me come with you and make sure the place is secure for the night, okay? You know I’m safe. I’m sure you know how many checks your brother does on the security staff who work at Temple.”

He was right. Colt vetted all the club staff, but none more so than the security staff. His first priority was always the safety of the people who came to Temple, particularly the subs who came there alone and put their trust in Colt and the people who worked for him to keep them safe.

“Yeah, okay. Just until I get inside and check the place out,” I acquiesced.

“Good. Now, where’s your car, because I don’t think you’re gonna make it much further, sweetheart,” he said as he nodded down to where my stick was shaking violently in my hold.

“I’ll make it,” I told him resolutely. Maybe stubborn determination was all that was keeping me going right then, but I would make damn sure I made it to my car, and through whatever came next in order to get to Colt.

My anxiety steadily rose higher and higher as I drove roads that were suddenly so familiar to me once again, even after ten years away. The closer I got to Colt’s apartment, the harder my heart pounded and the more and more sweaty my hands became on my steering wheel. It used to be my apartment too. It used to be home. Now it was just an apartment filled with the dark, haunting memories of the aftermath of my attack ten years before.

“I can carry you up there if you need me to?” Deak spoke up after what had been way too long a time of me sat in my now stopped car in the underground parking lot below the apartment building. I was freaking out inside. I honestly didn’t know if I could bring myself to walk back into that apartment and open myself up to all of the fear and pain I had worked so hard to lock away for so long.

“No,” I shook my head as I turned to him and forced myself to get it together. I wasn’t the terrified kid I’d been ten years ago. I’d been through so much and seen so much worse since then. I could do this. “I’m good. We should move.”

I didn’t even give him a chance to reply, opened the driver’s side door and turning to get myself out. My entire body was shaking hard as I got to my feet and grabbed my

stick from where I'd pushed it behind me into the back seat. My back was in spasm the second I got upright and I couldn't atop the gasp of agony that slipped from me.

"Ava?" Deacon raced around the car and stood at my side in an instant, his hands held out like he wanted to grab me, but dare not.

"I...I'm okay," I panted. "J...Just give me a...a second."

"You know there's only you and I here right now. No one else will ever know if you just take my hand and let me help just the tiniest bit," he sighed as he held his hand out to me and stared me down.

"I don't..." I began, but he but me off.

"...need help. I know. I heard you when you spouted that bull earlier, but you're doing a terrible job of selling it now, Ava. Just let me take some of the strain while we get you upstairs, please. It's killing me to watch you struggle. I swear I'll never tell a soul you gave in just this once."

I looked up into his eyes and saw he genuinely looked worried. The fisted hand at his side showed how hard he was holding back from just grabbing me like he clearly wanted to and the temptation to give in just won out. I didn't have anything left inside of me to keep up my armor any longer, and my mask of indifference was long gone, taken by the pain rippling through me. I was kidding no one and I knew it.

"Fine," I sighed as I placed my shaky hand in his much larger one. "But only because I don't want you to nag anymore," I added with a bravado I couldn't hold on to.

"Whatever it takes," he shrugged with the hint of a smile as he led me away from the car and then wrapped his free arm around my back gently. I knew I should protest, but the relief of him taking so much of my weight as he practically carried me, was

too great to turn down right then.

“You’re shaking so hard. Do you have meds to help with he pain?” Deacon asked as we moved slowly towards the elevators.

“Yeah,” I laughed dryly. “A whole damned pharmacy in my back pack, but they’re not much use. I just need to get some sleep and I’ll be good to go again.”

“That’s all the doctors can do for you? Fucking drugs?” He almost growled the words and when I glanced up at him he looked pissed.

“Physio helps, especially when I was doing it every day, but my insurance wouldn’t cover the cost once I was walking again. I have a few sessions a week, but money’s tight since I was medically retired with my bullshit pension.”

“Fucking assholes. This world if full of them,” he sighed.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Amen to that,” I joked as we stepped into the elevator and I hit the button for the top floor, trying hard not to freak out at the memories that were easily finding their way back to me.

“What the hell am I doing? We have to take you to the emergency room, Ava,” Colt panicked. He held me in his arms and I couldn’t stop shaking. I could feel blood pouring down my naked back beneath the blanket I was wrapped in, and my head was pounding hard.

“No! Colt...pl-please. I can’t. No strangers....no one t-touching me....please,” I whimpered as I looked up at him through the one eye that wasn’t too swollen to see out of.

“I need to call Mace. He’ll know what to do. He can catch the guy who did this to you.”

“NO!” I cried desperately as I grabbed a fist full of his shirt collar and looked up at him pleadingly. “No one c-can know. I...I d-don’t want to be a victim Colt. Please....no one can know a-about this. Please...” Tears flowed down my cheeks, causing the cuts to sting savagely, but I didn’t drop my gaze from Colt. I needed him to understand. I needed him to promise no one but he and I would ever know what a stupid, naïve, little fool I had been that night.

“Ava? You hear me, honey?” I looked up with a start, pulled back from the past that had dragged me under so far, so fast, and found Deak crouched so his eyes were level with mine.

“Sorry,” I whispered as I took a deep breath and tried to gather myself.

“You’re crying,” he said as he swiped my wet cheek with his thumb.

“Oh fuck.” I swiped angrily at my face to get rid of the tears and looked up at him with a grimace. “Ignore that. I’m okay. Just tired. Sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“You’re in pain and exhausted. I think a few tears are allowed, but don’t worry, I won’t tell a soul about that either,” he winked at me, then before I could even react he had me lifted from my fight and in his arms like he was going to carry me across the damned threshold.

“Deacon!” I cried in shock. “Put me down now!”

“Why? Am I hurting you?” he asked as he paused just outside of the elevator on the top floor of the apartment building. I tried hard to focus only on him and not the hallway around us, terrified of the memories that could come back if I did look around me.

“I don’t need you to fucking carry me. I can walk. I said you could help me, not treat me like some weak damsel in distress,” I hissed.

“Why is a damsel in distress weak? You think it’s weak to need help sometimes?” he asked as his eyes remained locked on mine.

“No, but I don’t need help, and I’m certainly not in distress. I can cope just fine by myself,” I threw back. I tried to struggle from his arms, but he was just so huge. My fight wasn’t getting me anyway, and I’d never felt so small as I did there in his arms. I was far from a petite woman, but compared to him I felt it for the first time in my entire life.

“Ava, stop fighting and tell me if I’m hurting you,” he said flatly. I let out a loud huff of annoyance and glared up at him.

“No, you’re not,” I snapped.

“Good. Then sit still and just let me carry you for this last few steps, yeah?”

“You’re just lucky my gun is in my backpack,” I growled as I realized I had left the bag in the damn car. Fat lot of use my gun and meds would be there.

“Noted. I’ll check you’re unarmed before I ever attempt this again,” He told me with a grin on his handsome, but smug face. Asshole.

“Don’t you ever dare attempt this shit again. The only reason I’m not kicking your ass right now is because it’s been a really long, shitty few hours,” I warned, but it was hardly intimidating when my words were trembling and sounded weak even to me.

“I think you’re the most stubborn woman I’ve ever met,” Deak chuckled as he moved down the hall and stopped before the door of Colt’s place.

“There’s a keypad...” I started to tell him, but he obviously already knew because he typed a code into the pad beside the door, then pressed his thumb to the access pad.

“I crash here sometimes,” he explained as the door beeped and released. Deak pushed it open and stepped inside.

“You’re closer friends than you made out,” I questioned with surprise. In the years I had lived with Colt the only guys he ever had over to our place were Jack and Mason, and that was a rarity. He tended to socialize at the clubs and restaurants he owned and I really knew little of his personal life, if I were honest.

“The alarm’s not set,” Deak told me, capturing my attention as I lifted my head and looked around the darkened living space we had entered.

We both went silent as I indicated for him to drop me back to my feet. I was glad when he did as I asked without argument. He silently closed the door behind him, then I waved a hand towards the kitchen, indicating he should move off to the right, while I went to the left and headed for the bedrooms and Colt’s office. Deacon looked like he wanted to argue, but he stopped himself when I pulled a small knife from my boot and gripped it in my right hand tightly.

All of my anxiety about being back in that place, pain throughout my body, and sheer exhaustion faded and adrenaline took over as I propped my stick against the door, then pressed my back to the wall and started moving stealthily through the apartment. My police training kicked in automatically and I moved through the living room, clearing the space around me as I limped my way through the space and headed for the hallway.

The fact the entire apartment was completely silent was a sign that no one was in there, but that didn’t stop me from worrying who could have already been in there, and it didn’t ease my terror every time I opened a door and looked into each room, that I’d find Colt laid cold and dead before me.

The last door was the master bathroom and as I placed my hand on the cool metal of the handle images of my mother, laid in the bathtub, surrounded by blood stained water played through my mind uncontrollably. I could smell the metallic scent of her blood as it pooled on the yellowing tiles below.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

My heart raced even faster and my grip on the knife almost slipped as my hands soaked with sweat. I couldn't face it again. I couldn't face finding Colt the way I had found my mom.

Knowing that no matter what, I had to get it together and face reality – whatever that may be, I pushed down the metal handle and threw the bathroom door open. It was dark inside the bathroom, but there was enough light coming through the small window to see the entire space and take in the fact it was empty.

I hadn't even realized I'd been holding my breath until I gasped in some much needed oxygen, and stumbled back against the wall behind me.

All of my pain and exhaustion hit me at once and I slid down until my ass hit the marble tiles of the bathroom floor.

"Anything?" I swiped a tear from my cheek discreetly as I looked up at Deacon. He was in the doorway, his arm above his head holding onto the door frame as he awaited my reply.

"All clear," I told him, my voice a quiet rasp. "You?"

"Nothing. The place is just as tidy as it always is," he replied, and I nodded.

"Colt's n-not here." I wasn't sure if the last part was for Deak, or me assuring myself once again that Colt was not laid dead anywhere.

"We'll find him. He'll be alright," he told me confidently.

“I have to,” I whispered in a moment of weakness. I had been such a bitch to push Colt the way I had for so long, over the last couple of years. Now I might have lost him forever and he probably thought I didn’t give two fucks about him. I had been such a selfish, self-absorbed excuse for a sister and I hated myself for it.

“Come on. Let me help you settle somewhere more comfortable, then I’ll go to the car and get your bag for you, okay?” Deak said as he held a hand out to me. I didn’t even have it in me to try and argue with him. He was a complete stranger to me, but he seemed to want to help and for once I didn’t want to turn that help away.

CHAPTER 4

AVA

I start the next morning just like every other – with a huge handful of pills, and the desperate hope that they’ll ease my pain enough to give me at least a low-pain start to my day.

I give them ten minutes to kick in as I just lie still, then I begin the arduous task of making my uncooperative and broken body get me out of bed. I’m relieved my pain is a lot less than the night before as I get to my feet and don’t feel any spasms down my back, or cramping in my thighs. Thankfully, the bottle of Vodka I’d picked up before leaving home and stashed in my backpack, had been enough to knock me out for around five hours, which I knew would be enough sleep to get me going that day. It likely wouldn’t be enough to get me through the day, but that was a later problem and right now I had enough now problems.

As I rifled through my bag for a clean set of clothes and toiletries, I already knew there was no way I could shower in the attached bathroom off to my right. The shower in there was over the luxurious spa tub Colt had installed for me when I was teenager. I had loved it before. Taking a soak in that enormous tub with it’s

massaging jets had been my happy place after a stressful day, but now it was just another obstacle I could never overcome, no matter how hard I trained and did physio. It was just an early morning reminder of how very far I had fallen – one I truly didn't need right then.

Angrily sweeping up my clothes and washbag I tucked them under one arm and stormed from my room. I was so frustrated with myself. I'd been back in the city for just over twenty-four hours and I was already allowing cracks to show in the armor I had spent the better part of a year constructing. Deacon had carried me the night before, for fuck's sake! I had cried and fallen in front of him and shown so much of my broken, just the thought of it made me ill. I didn't need pity! And I never again wanted anyone to see me as some weak victim in need of help, or worse, as such easy prey to do with as they wished.

Now I was wallowing in self fucking pity and I hated it. It was such a useless waste of energy to feel sorry for myself when I was stuck the way I was!

I walked into Colt's bedroom and moved through to his adjoining shower room, slamming my hand over the control to get the thing started, then cranking the heat as high as I could.

Being back there was a huge challenge to the emotions and memories I had thought I had a tight rein on for so long. That shower, right there before it, where I stood, it had been where Colt brought me that fateful night ten years before. The tattered remains of my clothes had been sticking to the deep wounds beneath as the blood dried, and Colt had so carefully dampened them and peeled them away so I could climb into that very shower and wash away my shame and terror. When I had crumbled after stepping out of that shower, my body almost in as much pain as my tortured thoughts, Colt had raced back into the shower room and held my towel wrapped body right there on that very spot. He'd held me protectively and just let me cry, then when the exhaustion became too much he had carried me to my bed, tucked me in, and laid at

my side all night.

The memories were right there, waiting to drag me right back to that night. I could smell the blood, feel the stiffness in every movement from the blood smeared and dried across my skin. The pain was so real too, and the fear. It was all right there, as close and horrifying as it had been that night ten years before.

I turned and slammed my hands down hard on the cold marble vanity. I didn't have time to go back there and I sure as shit didn't have time to fall apart. Colt needed me, maybe as much as I had needed him that night and I wasn't going to let him down again. I had been a shitty sister to him ever since that night. I was determined to find him and prove I could do better.

I rushed through a shower, fighting like hell to push back the flashbacks that were weighing down heavily on me. I was already feeling tired by the time I stepped out, but I forged on and pulled on a pair of jeans which were too damned big on me after the amount of weight I'd lost since I last wore them. Since they were all I'd brought and my other pair were dirty from the day before, I just shrugged it off, rolled the top once and pulled over my oversized CPD sweatshirt. I was so beyond caring about my appearance anyway, I reminded myself as I braided my wet hair, and stepped into my ankle boots. I didn't even look in the mirror before ditching my wet towel and yesterday's clothes in the hamper near the door. I was decent, and that was all I had in me.

I go back to my room to grab my meds, which I shoved into my backpack, and the empty vodka bottle. If Colt magically came home the last thing I wanted him finding was my empties lying all over.

Halfway down the hall to the living area I froze as the sound of low male voices reached me. No one should be in the apartment, I realized. Deacon assured me he was leaving after he helped me to bed. My heart raced at the thought it could be Colt, but

if it was, then who was with him? Instinctively, I slipped my arms into the straps of my backpack, leaving my hands free, and had my hand around the hilt of the knife hidden in my boot when deep laugh echoed around me. A laugh I knew all too damned well. Mason.

I released the knife and charged down the hallway as much as I could with my limping gait and the clicking of my stick against the shiny wooden floor.

“What the fuck is this?” I demanded as I entered the open plan living area and found Deacon and Jack kicking back on the sofa, and Mason propped against the wall between the huge windows that overlooked the city below, looking as though he belonged there. And if I found myself admiring how good he looked in his charcoal slacks with a matching vest that fit him like it was made for him, and the rolled up sleeves over his muscled forearms, of the crisp white collared shirt he wore underneath, then that was just my police training. Take in and retain every detail of every one you meet is what I’d been taught.

“Hey Ava, How are you feeling?” Deacon asked as he turned to look over the back of the sofa at me.

“Don’t you fucking ‘hey’ me. What the fuck are you doing here? You said you’d leave? And how the hell did they get in?” I demanded as I moved my glare from Deak and over to Mason and Jack.

“I couldn’t leave you. The alarm system had been disarmed, Ava. Someone has been in this place and they could have come back,” Deacon sighed.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“And we let ourselves in. You really think Colt didn’t give me access to his place?” Mason told me smugly. He and Jack were both looking way too hard at me and I felt so stupidly uncomfortable under their scrutiny. I shouldn’t care what they think. They’re nothing to me, I reminded myself.

Turning my attention back to Deacon I took a deep breath and tried to rein in my anger. It wasn’t like I could blame the poor guy too much for thinking I was vulnerable after the shit he’d seen from me the night before.

“Look, I appreciate you looking out for me, but you don’t need to. I do just fine at taking care of myself,” I told him more calmly.

“Yeah, it looks like it too,” Mason sneered and when I turned to him with rage, I realized what he was smirking at. I still held the empty and sizeable bottle of vodka in my hand. “Thirsty were you?” he asked as he finally lifted his gaze and met mine.

“Fuck you Mason!” I snapped as I moved past the three of them into the kitchen to throw the bottle into the trash. Seeing a coffee pod machine on the counter, with a rack of pods beside it, I set to work making myself coffee, filling the small tank with water and fighting not to meet the eyes of any of the men I could feel watching my every move.

“Did you actually do what was asked of you last night and file a report that Colt’s missing?” I growled as I started looking through the cabinets for a cup.

“Yes, and I ran a trace on his cell too, but it’s either turned off, or out of range,” Mason answered after a deep sigh.

“What was the last location and when?” I dared to look up, but I only glanced at him for a moment before reaching for the higher cabinets above me. Just the small movement had me jolting as a pain ran up my back and I tried hard to keep it contained.

“The day he left Jack and I voicemails, eight days ago, two blocks from Temple,” Mason replied.

I forced myself to straighten up and reach for the next cabinet, refusing to lose face in front of these assholes, and also in desperate need of coffee, but I’d barely moved before I felt a wall of heat right at my back.

“I’ve got it , love,” Jack whispered so close to my ear I could feel the warmth of his breath against my skin, then he was reaching over me, his strong body pressing against mine as he easily opened the cabinet and pulled down a mug, which he handed to me.

All I wanted was to turn into his front and press my face against his chest the way I used to be able to. I wanted to feel the strength of his perfectly muscled arms wrap around me and remind me I wasn’t alone in my fucked up existence. I could already smell his sandal wood aftershave that he always wore and it felt dangerously familiar. Would he hold me if I turned into him? Would he give me the comfort I so desperately needed, even if just for a moment? I actually turned, my body moving without my mind’s full agreement. Jack looked so good in snug fitting black jeans, paired perfectly with a black shirt, the buttons at the top unbuttoned so I could see the contrast between bare skin at one side of his neck, and the dark ink of the tattoo that I knew ran up his side from his hip, all the way up to his neck. His wild, dark hair hung wavily around his face as always and his blue eyes were locked right on my face as he too seemed to take me in.

That was what jolted me back to reality. While I was seeing the sexy as sin man I had

crushed on for so many years, I knew he was seeing a shriveled, wrinkled, pale and weak version of the girl he had once known and I was ashamed and embarrassed.

“I don’t need your fucking help,” I hissed as I ripped the mug from his hand and moved as far from him as I could to the coffee machine.

I caught sight of Jack sighing deeply as he ran his tattooed hand through his hair in frustration. The fact I had to scold myself silently for finding even that sexy was a clear sign that it had been way too long since I got laid.

“So Colt hasn’t tuned his cell on for eight days,” I spoke up, getting back to what really mattered. “That’s not good. That thing is practically fucking glued to his hand. Something’s not right.”

“Yeah, I agree, and I’m definitely concerned. I want to go to Temple this morning and access the surveillance footage for that day,” Mason agreed.

“I can help you with that,” Deacon offered.

“Me,” I corrected as I rounded the large kitchen island and set my already exhausted body into one of the stools there. “You can help me do that. I already told you guys I don’t need your help, nor do I want it,” I told Mason and Jack flatly as I briefly glanced between them, unable to look longer. They had the same effect they’d had on me all those years ago, and I had to maintain a distance to stop myself from weakening,

“Ave...” Jack tried, but Mace cut him off.

“No choice I’m afraid, wildcat. This is my investigation now. You want to find Colt, you work with me,” he said smugly, and when I glared at him, the smile on his face made me want to junk punch the asshole.

“Does it really matter, as long as we find Colt?” Deacon said, clearly trying to calm the situation.

“Deak’s right,” Jack agreed. “Whatever happened between us needs to take back seat now, until we find Colt and get him home. Surely we can all just find a way to work together?”

“Don’t look at me. She’s the one who seems to have the problem. Got a stick up her ass about some imagined slight you and are supposed to have done over a decade ago. Maybe if she had the guts to just come out and fucking say it, we could just clear the air, but oh no! She’d rather stew over it and drown herself in fucking liquor!” Mason blew up, the whole time his enraged glare locked right on me as he pointed an accusing finger.

I didn’t even know where to start biting back. Mainly because he wasn’t wrong. Their slight against me was pretty much imagined, wasn’t it? They had every right to play with that other sub that night, and they sure as fuck weren’t in any way to blame for what happened afterwards. That rested squarely on my idiotic shoulders and I knew it. Maybe a fucked up part inside of me had blamed them for it all, and still did, but I knew that part was wrong.

No, what really pissed me off about them was that they were still the men I had always been in love with, even for the years that we’d been apart. They were still strong, handsome, sexy, and as caring and good as they’d always been. I, on the other hand wasn’t even a fraction of the girl I’d been back then, and I was ashamed and embarrassed about that, ashamed and embarrassed of myself. I didn’t want them close to me, because I didn’t want them to see how far I had fallen and how fucked up I was, both inside and outside. I hated the fact just seeing them for such a brief time, had brought back the feelings I had worked so hard to crush. I still loved them both, and that fucking hurt, because I couldn’t have them. I wasn’t good enough for them and I never would be.

“You’ve become a real asshole, Mace,” I tried to throw back, but it was lame and I knew it, my voice wobbling as emotion hit me hard. Refusing to let them see any more I set down my coffee, grabbed my stick and left the room as fast as I could. Tears were trickling down my cheeks as I reached Colt’s home office, but I didn’t stop to swipe them away in case any of them had followed me. Instead I just slipped inside and slammed the door closed behind me.

It hurt too much being back there. There was so much of my past there, good and bad, and it all fucking tore at me. I couldn’t be there. I had to find Colt and get the hell away before it broke down the armor and walls I had worked so hard to build around myself, completely.

“Ava? Can I come in?” Jack called as he knocked on the door seconds after I slammed it shut. I still stood behind it, my hand gripping the doorknob like it was the only thing keeping me together.

“No,” I replied as I forced myself to take a breath. “I need to look through everything here. Tell Mase and Deacon to go to Temple and check the footage. We’ll meet at the club tonight at seven to go over what we have,” I went on more calmly.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Yeah, okay,” he agreed. “I could help you...”

“No,” I stopped him, knowing what he was going to say. “I’m good. Go to the club too and speak to the staff. See if anyone saw Colt leave that night, and find out if there’s any gossip going around about where he could be. I’ll be there later.”

“I wish you’d just talk to me, love. We used to be able to talk about anything, you, me, and Mason. What happened?” he sighed.

“We grew up, Jack.” I didn’t wait for him to reply. Instead I turned the lock on the door knob, then moved away from the door and over to Colt’s desk, swiping the drying tears from my face as I went. It was no use crying over what was lost. I had a job to do, and that had to be my focus. I’d find Colt, get him home and then get the hell out of there.

Two hours later I had been through every scrap of paper, date book, contract, and file in Colt’s office, and I had two leads. One was a contract for the money Colt had borrowed. It looked formal and legal, not like something anyone who would send the gunman to the my apartment would have put together, but who knew? Maybe even loan sharks dealt with paperwork nowadays? The loan was through a financial investment company called ‘Kilner Investments’ and when I’d googled it the company website seemed fancy and definitely on the up and up. The name on the contract was G. Neaverson, so I needed to track him down and speak with him.

The other lead was in Colt’s personal date book. He always kept two. One for

business, which was always crammed with meetings, functions, fundraisers, and tons more business shit I wouldn't do if my life depended on it. The other was just his personal commitments like lunches with me when I used to live there with him, or poker night with the guys. There was never anything much in it because Colt was mainly all business, no play. But his date book for this year had two initials beside one P.M. every single Wednesday through March and April, then the initials started to show up more and more often. Then two months ago they just stopped. The initials were K.M and I couldn't think of a single associate of Colt's I'd ever met whose name began with 'K' though I also realized it was likely a woman since he'd been meeting her so often. Either way I needed to find out, since Colt had never mentioned a girlfriend, or anyone new in his social life in the few times we'd spoken in the last year.

Everything else I found just seemed like the usual – contracts for suppliers for the bars and restaurants, employee contracts and that kind of boring, standard business owner crap.

I couldn't find anything to clue me into who the initials could have been for, which was frustrating. I knew I'd need to ask Jack and Mason if they knew anything, since they were the most likely people Colt would confide in about his love life, or maybe Deacon, since they seemed close too.

I placed the contract and date book into my back pack after taking another dose of pain meds. I checked my gun was still where I left it in the zipped side pocket, loaded and ready if I needed it. I'd be screwed if I did, since I didn't have a concealed carry permit for New York, but I'd handle that if it came to it. I didn't feel safe enough in the city without my weapon. I might bullshit that I could handle myself, but I knew as well as anyone I spouted that lie to, that I was at a serious disadvantage with my injury and the effects that made me as steady as a beachball in the damned wind. My gun and my knife were my only reassurance.

After making sure I returned everything to the drawers and cabinets just the way I'd found it – just the way my cray OCD brother liked and needed it to be – I unlocked the door and left the office as quietly as I could. I was pretty sure the guys had all cleared out like I told them to, since the place had seemed silent for a while now, but I still peaked around the corner into the living room before I stepped into it. Thankfully, it was empty, except for a paper bag on the coffee table right in the center. I moved towards it squinting to read the note attached to the top.

Don't forget to eat before you head out.

Call me if you need anything at all. Our deal still stands.

Deak x

His cell number was scrawled at the bottom of the little sticky note and I found myself smiling at his thoughtfulness. How long had it been since anyone cared whether I ate or not? And whose fault is that? Colt would care, I told myself, but I had pushed him away.

I pulled the note from the bag and typed Deacon's number into my contacts, then put the note in my pocket and dove into the flaky pastries I found inside. They were filled with fruit and before I had reached my car in the underground lot, I'd polished off all three. I would need to find out where he bought them from, because they had been the greatest thing I'd eaten in years.

I was a little breathless as I sat in the driver's seat of my car and threw my stick into the back, but the pain was manageable for now, so I knew I had to keep going while I could. But before I started the car I pulled out my cell and brought up Deacon's name. I debated for a moment, but I wanted to thank him for his kindness.

AVA - Gonna need the name of your pastry supplier.

I think I'm an addict already. It's Ava BTW.

DEACON – Don't worry. I'll hook you up. ;) You good?

AVA – Yep. Thanks for breakfast. C U later.

DEACON – Stay safe and call if you need me.

I decided not to tell him where I was headed, since he seemed to be in cahoots with Jack and Mason and the last thing I wanted was the turning up. I needed a clear head to find Colt and I sure as heck didn't have that when either of them were close. I told myself I should also keep my distance from Deak too, since I seemed to be crushing on him like I crushed on Jeff Groves – the linebacker in my high school football team when I was fifteen years old, but I couldn't. Her had been good to me, and I liked him. He made me feel calmer when he was close and as much as I denied it, I liked the way he'd taken care of me the previous night. If I was going to survive being back in that city, I was going to need a friend, and it couldn't be Jack or Mason, no matter how much I wanted it to be.

CHAPTER 5

AVA

Kilner Investment takes up the top ten floors of a high rise in the buzzing financial district of the city. By the time I stand outside that modern, glass covered monstrosity I'm already royally pissed after having to ride the subway and walk way too far to get to it, in the freezing fucking cold in nothing but jeans and my shitty, short leather jacket. I was half frozen and moving even more stiffly than usual since the cold did not agree with my weak muscles and aching legs.

I used to love the buzz and hustle of this insane city when I was younger. When Colt

moved me there from the quiet life I'd been living before, it was like this whole other, amazing, exciting world and I adored it. Even when I left I'd gone to Chicago because I needed the thrill of a hectic city around me. I never felt more alive than when I was walking the packed sidewalks, taking in the smells of the food and the city around me. Sure it had its drawbacks, but they were never enough to take that thrill away from me. I had been a true city girl. Even after the attack and with the anxiety and issues I dealt with as a result.

Then I was shot and the packed sidewalks were nothing but a damned inconvenience to me as I tried to hobble my way past people to get where I needed to go. The noise I used to love, hurt my head now and I hated the fact all of my happiness had been stripped away. It was just another constant reminder that I was no longer the person I used to be.

So yeah, I was pissed as I walked into the polished entry way and made my way to the elevators. I didn't even want to think about the epic battle I faced just to get back to where I had left my car in the parking lot of one of Colt's restaurants on the outskirts of the city, knowing I'd never get parked any closer.

I stepped into the elevator and instantly cringed at the music playing overhead. It was something classical, not that I knew anything more than that, but I did know it was making my already throbbing head hurt more. Four people followed me in and I just managed to lean around a suited figure to hit the button for the twentieth floor before three more piled in, instantly making me feel uneasy in such a crowded and compact space. It wasn't that I was claustrophobic, but I just felt uneasy when strangers were so close to me, especially in a contained space I could barely move enough to protect myself within.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

I was relieved when I stepped out on the reception floor of the company I was ther for and finally felt able to breathe.

“Ava, is it? You’re Colt MacMillan’s sister aren’t you?” I spun at the voice and came face to face with the suit I’d needed to lean around to hit the button in the elevator. He was older than me, and closer to Colt’s age. His hair was brown and greying at his temples, and his suit looked tailored and expensive. I studied his face hard, knowing it was familiar, but unable to place him.

“I am. I’m sorry. You look familiar but...”

“Oh it’s fine. We only met once at some charity function you attended with your brother years ago, but you’ve barely changed, while I became an old man,” he chuckled. “I’m Gibb Neaverson. Colt and I went to college together once upon a time. Is he with you?” Gibb looked behind me like he expected Colt to be there, and I wished with everything in me that he was.

“No. It was you I was looking for though, I think,” I told him with a forced smile. “Do you mind if we talk briefly?”

“Of course. Come to my office. Can I get you anything? Coffee or water?” he offered as he led the way deeper into the building and behind the reception area. He seemed kind and friendly – the kind of guy Colt usually befriended. Surely this guy and this company hadn’t sent that thug to my apartment for Colt? That made no sense, but if it wasn’t about the money, then who was that guy? And whet on earth did he want with my brother?

I shook my head politely as Gibb ushered me into a huge corner office and indicated for me to sit on one of two winged back leather chairs that sat before his huge, antique looking desk.

“Thanks,” I uttered as I looked around the office. It was just as expected. Panoramic windows on two sides overlooking the hectic city, shelves filled with books and filing cabinets. A computer sat on his desk beside framed photos, a stack of files and a pot over filled with pens and pencils.

“So, tell me what I can do for you, my dear? Have I missed a message from Colt?” Gibb asked lightheartedly as he sat back in his luxurious office chair behind the desk.

“I...I found this in Colt’s office,” I said as I unzipped my backpack and pulled the contract I found from it. “You, or at least your company loaned him a lot of money?”

Gibb leant forward to take the contract, barely looking it over before he looked to me.

“What’s going on. Is Colt alright?” he asked, genuinely looking concerned.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out. Can you tell me when you last saw my brother?”

“We had lunch last Tuesday. Colt wanted to thank me for setting this up. We ate at the French place just around the corner.”

“So you did loan him the money he needed?”

“Yes. The I.R.S. froze his assets because of some contrived investigation. He came to me for advice and I helped him get the money he needed to keep everything running until he got his assets back, which he did last week. That was why we went to lunch. He repaid everything he borrowed and just wanted to thank me, not that it was necessary,” Gibb explained, and my stomach sank. If the guy at my place didn’t want

Colt for money, what the fuck did he want him for? “Is Colt in some trouble?”

“I don’t know,” I sighed as I gave in and rubbed at my aching neck tiredly. I was too worried to worry about how I came across any more. “He’s missing. He called Mason to say he was coming to visit me in Chicago, but he never arrived and we had no plans. Now he’s just gone. You’re sure he hasn’t contacted you?”

“No. I haven’t spoken with him since last week, which now I say it, isn’t like him. He usually texts me at least once a week, even if it’s just about football. Have you spoken to the police?”

“Yes, he’s been reported missing, but they have no leads yet,” I answered. My stomach was churning violently at the realization that I had no idea what or who Colt was involved with. Was he dead already? Was I too fucking late?

“Are you alright. Can I get you some water?” Gibb asked.

“No, thank you. I’m fine. Do you know if Colt had a girlfriend?” I asked as I forced myself to just breathe.

“No, not that he mentioned to me. As far as I know, it’s been years since Colt dated,” he told me.

“Do you know of anyone in his life with he initial K.M?” I pushed rather desperately.

Gibb took several moments to think about my question, which I was grateful for, since it gave me time to take enough breaths to stop my mind from spiraling to the darkest places about what had become of Colt.

“We were pretty close with a Karen in College, but her surname was Bloom. She could have married since though? Last I heard she was working in tech, but I don’t

have any more details. His head chef at Garretts is called Kevin? I met him last time we were there, but other than that I can't think of anyone else," he shrugged as he looked to me with a mix of sympathy and concern.

I grabbed a pen from my bag and scrawled what he'd told me on the palm of my hand shakily. It was likely nothing, but I'd look into it anyway.

"Thanks. You've been really helpful," I told him as I got to my feet and almost fell right back down again. Why the fuck was I shaking so badly now?

"Please call me if there's anything I can do. Colt is one of my closest friends. I'll do all I can to help find him," Gibb said as he rounded the desk and handed me his business card. "And please tell him to let me know he's safe when you do find him," he added as he placed a hand over my forearm and looked to me with conviction. I admired his confidence that Colt was safe somewhere, but I wasn't feeling it right then and I definitely didn't want to be touched.

"I will," I assured him, my words wobbly. "Thanks again." I barely got the last words out as I rushed from the office as much as I could and straight through the door that led to the stairwell. There was no way I could get down twenty floors, but I just needed some space because I knew I was coming apart at the seams.

I was barely thinking as I all but fell down the first set of concrete steps to get away from the office above. I was hort of breath and crying by the time I reached the next set and colla[sed down onto the top step. I slammed my metal stick to the cold floor at my side and buried my face in my hands.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

Right there, in that moment I wasn't any of the things I pretended to be. I was strong, or brave or fucking capable! I was scared and alone, and the only person I wanted to reach out to – the one person who I ever allowed to see me at my worst like that, was gone.

I was angry with myself for hiding from him. I had wanted nothing more than him at my side since I woke in that hospital after being shot. I had needed him more than words could say for the year since, but I hadn't reached out. I hadn't even allowed myself to admit it. I'd become bitter and hidden from the one person who was still alive to care about me because I'd been ashamed of what a let down I was. I had ignored him as much as I could and pushed him away when I should have been pulling him close and leaning on him like I knew he'd have let me do. Now he was missing and I really was alone and it was all my own stupid fault.

I don't know how long I'd been sitting there when I heard the door above me creak open. I hurried to swipe the tears from my face with one hand as I struggled to get up awkwardly so whoever it was could get past me, but I had to have been sat there a while since my legs were so stiff they did not want to communicate.

“Easy love. It's just me. You can sit back down.” Jack's voice washed over me like a soothing balm and for a moment I sighed, relieved that he was there, then reality hit me as I caught sight of him jumping down the stairs two at a time to get to me, landing perfectly at my side, looking just as sexy as he had that morning in all black.

“What are you...how?” I squeaked as I leant heavily against the wall to my right side.

“Gibb was worried about you. He's been keeping an eye on you down here since you

left his office. He called me,” Jack explained. Ge was subdued for him as he looked me over and I knew I had to look quite a sight.

“You know Gibb? Did you know he leant Colt that money?” I demanded. Had he lied to me?

“I know Gibb because he comes to poker night at Colt’s sometimes. I had no idea he leant Colt the money though,” Jack explained, holding his hands out between us like he would if I were a feral animal he tried to fend off. “What happened? What did he tell you?”

“Nothing much,” I shrugged as I swiped at my still watery eyes again. “Colt already paid back what he owed, so the guy who came to my place had nothing to do with that.”

“You’re crying. What happened?”

I let out a frustrated puff of air as I slid down the wall until my ass hit the cold stair once again. What the hell was I even doing there? Now Mace knew Colt was missing, surely it was better to leave him to investigate. I was in no shape, which I was only willing to admit to myself, and being back there was pulling me to pieces.

“I don’t understand why you even care so much, Jack,” I whispered weakly. “It’s been so long. Shouldn’t you be married with kids by now?”

“Shouldn’t you?” he asked as he sat on the step beside me and bumped our arms until I looked up at him and saw the playful smile dance across his face.

“That was never in the cards for me. I decided that a long time ago, but you...you could have any woman you wanted. You and whichever supermodel you chose could have had the most perfect children by now, surely?”

“It wasn’t in the cards for me either, Ave, not after you ran away from me and Mace.”

“What?” I turned and stared at him. “What the hell are you talking about? What have I got to do with your future, or Mace’s?”

“You were our bloody future, Ava!” he growled as he lowered his head and pushed his hands through his hair. “We wanted you. Didn’t you see that? Didn’t you feel the bond between us? Didn’t you want us too, for fuck’s sake? How could you do that? How could you just walk away from us and take everything we built?”

“Everything we built?” I scoffed. “We scened together. Was it amazing? Fuvck yes it was and I felt the bond between us, but we were never more than that. Neither of you ever even tried to see me outside of the club.”

“We were waiting. You were in college and so focused on getting to Quantico and fulfilling your dream. We didn’t want to mess it up for you, so decided to wait until you finished college before we made it clear what we wanted. To be honest I was pretty sure you already knew though.”

I sat there stunned int silence for several moments. I hadn’t known. I mean, I knew I was falling in love with them – both of them, but I never thought my feelings were returned.

“No,” I shook my head. “That night....you and Mace...you...” They were with that other sub. I could still hear Jack’s voice in my head telling her how good she’d done. If they were in love with me, they wouldn’t have done that, would they? I know I would never have allowed any man, let alone another male dom to touch me. It would have felt so wrong wit the feelings I had for the two of them back then. “We don’t have time for this!” I snapped as I shook it all from my head and forced myself to get to y feet. It was the past, and even though Jack had just told me what I had always wanted to hear, it wasn’t real. They loved me then. They would never love me now.

They couldn't.

"Ava I'm telling you I love you. Mason loves you. We have always loved you for all of these years," Jack almost pleaded. "Just tell me what you think happened that last night. Colt told us you were at the club. Did someone hurt you?" he demanded, and instantly a flashback of a darkly masked face loomed before me.

"Will you atone, sinner?"

All I can smell is a mix of my own blood and the musty dark space around me. The whip cracks against the floor so close I swear I feel the air move against my bound right hand and I cry out in terror.

"Ava!" My eyes snap open and Jack is before me, his hands wrapped around both of my forearms holding me tightly as I shake so hard we can both see it. "Jesus love. Where'd you just go?" he gasped as he stared into my glassy eyes.

"Jesus fuck!" I gasped as I pulled from his hold and leant heavily against the wall as I caught my breath. I leant against it and turned to face Jack again when I felt I had control, and felt guilty at the panic that I saw in his beautiful sky blue eyes. "Sorry. I'm s-so fucked up. You have no idea," I tried to reassure him.

"What was that?" he asked. Good question, I thought to myself. It had been years since I last had a flashback like the one's I'd experienced in the last two days. I had learned a long time ago to take back control, but now they were hitting me like a bulldozer before I could do a damned thing to stop them. "Talk to me, Ave. I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine." I told him firmly as I forced myself to pull away from the wall and reached down for my stick. "Worry about Colt. He's the one who needs it right now."

“Ava...”

“No Jack!” I looked up at him with resolve and determination. “I’m not the woman you knew before. Can’t you see that? Whatever could have been between any of us before can’t ever happen now, and I don’t want to talk about it again. I just want to find Colt and get him home safely, okay? Nothing else matters. Don’t waste your energy worrying about me. I don’t need your help or your pity!”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

I'd love to say I ended that with a terrific storming exit, but instead I was forced to settle for clumsily making my way up the stairs above me, very slowly and messily. It took forever before I reached the floor I'd left a while ago, and went right to the elevator, bypassing Gibb who stood a small distance away looking worried. When I stepped inside the metal box Jack wasn't behind me and I had no idea if I was relieved or disappointed, but I was way too tired to pull apart that realization. I'm falling apart and I know it, but I don't know how to stop it other than to leave and go back to my sad and lonely existence, and that I can't do until Colt is safe.

CHAPTER 6

AVA

"Fucking mother fuck!" I hissed angrily at my reflection watching me from the mirror in my car. I had made it back across the city on the subway and back to my car, thankfully without any more breakdowns of the emotional or physical kind. My back ached terribly and my head was thumping angrily, but none of the physical pain compared to the tempest ripping at my emotions. I was a mess, hence me swearing at myself in the tiny mirror. I had broken my one rule.

I'd been sat in my car around the corner from Temple for the last hour. I was, in fact, parked down the very deserted and run down back street I had been grabbed from that awful night as I fled the club, filled with young emotions and feeling heartbroken.

"Stupid little fool," I hissed angrily, and I wasn't wrong. I had been a fool back then. Two men I wasn't even in a relationship with played with another sub and I fell to pieces and endangered myself. If only I'd known what true fear felt like back then,

maybe I'd have made better choices.

I rose the almost empty vodka bottle to my twisted reflection, then drank down every drop that remained. It was the only way I knew to get through being not only with Mason and Jack that night, but also being in Temple itself. I was terrified the sound of one whip, or once scream from another woman and I would end up a rocking nervous breakdown in the corner, as I had so many times in the beginning after it happened.

I tossed the empty bottle into the back foot well of my car and checked the time on my cell phone. 5 P.M. I had some time before I had to face the music. I'd need the time between then and Mason and Jack arriving to strengthen my resolve and try to acclimatize myself to the noises and activities in the club around me. I needed to do anything I could to stop Mason and Jack seeing through my fears and working out I was even more fucked up than they had already realized. Hell – Deacon too. I liked and respected him. I didn't want him to witness me freak out either.

All I really wanted was to go home and hide away again, but I couldn't and I knew it. I needed to see Jack and Mace to find out if they had any leads I could work with to find Colt.

I could feel the buzz of the vodka, but nothing like I used to when I first started drinking, and when I stepped out of my car I stood as steady as I ever did considering my injury. Yeah, I thought as I swung my back pack over my shoulder. I was definitely going to need more drinks before the guys arrived at Temple. I'd already decided to leave my car at the club for the night. I was a mess, but not one who would endanger others by driving after drinking. My money was dwindling fast, but I'd used my credit card from Colt to pay for a ride back to the apartment, just this once.

I slammed the door of the car closed, and before I even turned to walk away from it a huge impact smashed into me from behind until I was slammed into the side of the

car and held there between the weight behind me. The pungent odour of sweat clued me in that it was a person, and by the cold metal at the back of my neck, they held a gun on me.

“Where’s the gun?” a deep voice rumbled close to my ear. I tried to glance behind me, but the gun was pressed harder against my neck. It was dark out and the quiet street I’d chosen to park in was deserted around me.

“What fucking gun?” I bit back angrily. My options of slipping were nil considering my actual physical abilities and how hard he held that gun on me and it pissed me off.

“From your apartment. Give it to me now.”

Fuck. I had completely forgotten about the gun I picked up. I was so damned dumb! Why hadn’t I handed that off to Mason? We’d have prints back on it by now and a very promising lead. Instead I’d kept the damned thing in the bottom of my back pack and forgotten all about it. What kind of detective did that make me? That’s probably why they put you out to pasture, idiot, I reminded myself.

“I gave it to the cops. Tell me where my brother is and maybe I can get it back,” I told him as calmly as I could.

“If that’s true, I have no use for you then,” he sneered, like he was delighted with my reply. I knew he was going to shoot me, so those impossible options became all I had.

Ducking as fast and low as I could I felt the bullet he’d just fired graze the side of my head, but I didn’t have time to think about it as I moved around him just enough that when I stood I could smash my metal stick down across the back of his head like I was taking a baseball swing. The hit was hard and he stumbled back, losing the grip on his gun as he seemed to lose consciousness for a split second.

That was all I needed to pull the knife from my boot and I held it out before me as a warning.

“Who do you work for?” I gasped. “What the fuck do you want with Colt?”

I had stupidly underestimated the sheer size of the masked man stood before me. In a second he was upright and racing towards me. I braced myself to go at him with the knife, but he was faster – which wasn't hard nowadays – and he knocked my knife from my hand and slammed one of his own deep into my shoulder. The pain was inexplicable as I dropped to the ground and fought to keep breathing. It wasn't the first time I'd been stabbed. It had happened in the early days of my career when I was a patrol officer, but that had been shallow and nothing compared to the pain I felt now.

I was helpless to do anything but watch on as the masked man scooped up his own gun, then tipped out the contents of the back pack I'd dropped somewhere in the scuffle. He grabbed the envelope with the gun and glanced inside, then took off with it tucked into the pocket of the dark jacket he wore.

“FUCK!” I roared as I sat there, blood pouring from my shoulder as I berated myself for forgetting about the huge fucking lead I'd been carrying around this whole freaking time! I was tempted to grab my knife from where it sat on the snow covered ground beside me and stab myself in the other shoulder for being such a useless asshole.

Knowing I had to move I tried to make myself stand, but getting up from the ground was hard enough for me, without blood loss and the fact I was freezing my ass off to consider.

Admitting defeat I moved slowly and made a grab for my cell which had fallen from the shallow pocket of my leather jacket in the scuffle. It sat close to me in the snow

and I just about got my finger tips on it as I cursed up a storm from the pain the movement caused.

“Hey,” Deacon greeted almost the second I’d hit his contact.

“Hi,” I gasped. “Where are you?”

“Just got to the club. I’m not working tonight, so I figured I’d get some paperwork done while...”

“Deak, gotta stop you there, bud. Can you...shit!” I hissed as a spasm raced up my back and caused me to jolt, only making my shoulder flare in agony. “I need you to come outside. I’m around the side of the club...on the shitty back road. I need some help.”

“What’s wrong. Are you....” I didn’t even listen to what he was calling down the line, instead ending the call and throwing my cell back to the snow. I reached for my shoulder and felt around the knife to try and figure out how bad the wound was. I wasn’t too worried until I reached to the back, with a loud groan of pain, and felt the tip of the knife poking out. It had gone right fucking through me! That sonofabitch was dead if I ever laid eyes on him again.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“AVA!” I looked up and found Deacon at the end of the snow covered street, staring at me with utter horror. His face almost made me laugh out loud, but even I knew that would be inappropriate.

“Calm down, big guy,” I tried to ease him as he raced to me and dropped to his knees at my side. “It’s not as bad as it looks. I just...can you help me get to my feet?” I held a hand out to him and he just stared at it like it was a snake that might bite him.

“Your feet? You need EMT’s. I...I have to call 9-1-1,” he stuttered as he fell back onto his ass and pulled his cell from his pocket. Clearly he hadn’t dealt with anything on this scale before. Or maybe it was the blood. Would a tough guy like him really be freaking out at the sight of blood though?

“No,” I lunged forward and snatched his cell from his hand before he even saw it coming. “No 9-1-1. No hospital. Just get me to my feet and help me into the club,” I panted hard through the pain I’d caused with my movement, but it was worth it. There was no way in hell I was going to any hospital.

“You’re bleeding a fucking lot. I don’t think it’s a good idea to move you,” he worried.

“Well, either you help me, or I do it myself. Either way I’m getting up and I’m getting to the club. I’ll bet it would be a fuck ton less painful if you help me though.”

“You are one insane, stubborn pain in my ass, woman,” Deak growled. He got to his feet, then I was airborne, in his arms and moving towards the club. My head started to swim, likely from the blood loss, and I had to clench my teeth not to cry out at the

pain of being moved.

“Deak! What the fuck?” I wasn’t even aware I had closed my eyes until a male voice yelling caused me to jolt back to awareness. Deacon was rushing through the entrance of the club and the security who had been manning the entrance was the voice I had heard.

“Find Jack and tell him to get to Colt’s office right the fuck now!” Deak barked.

“Calm, big guy,” I tried to say, but the words sounded slurred even to me. Maybe slurring at him wasn’t the best way to calm him, I realized.

“I should have called 9-1-1! Why didn’t I call 9-1-1?” Deak uttered to himself, sounding like he was truly freaking out.

“No!” I said as clearly and firmly as I could. There was no way I could handle being back in a hospital, not after the amount of time I’d been forced to spend in one after I was shot. Just the idea of it had my anxiety rearing up hard and fast.

Next thing I knew we were in Col’s office and Deacon was laying me down on the leather sofa that sat in the corner near the window.

“Ava!” I turned my head and just made out Jack at the door of the office, stood stock still, staring at me. I couldn’t make out his face, but I knew it was him. “What in fuck happened?” he growled and then he was moving to me. He dropped to his knees before me and I felt reassured that he was there.

I didn’t know much about Jack’s life before he came to the US from England, but I knew enough to be sure he hadn’t been quite as clean cut and honest in his past as he was by the time Colt hired him. He had definitely seen and dealt with some bad shit in his life and as a result I had never seen him panic under pressure. He was clear

headed no matter what came and having him close was a huge reassurance when I knew I was rapidly losing blood and consciousness.

“I don’t know. She called me and I found her like this, around the corner from the club. She wouldn’t let me call EMT’s. I should have called them, right? I should call them,” Deak panicked.

“No...no hospital, Jack. Promise me!” I had to push the words out hard to make them heard.

“Be reasonable, love. There’s a huge fucking knife through your bloody shoulder. I don’t think some antiseptic and a bloody plaster will fix that up,” Jack told me as he sat back on his heels and met my eyes.

“The doctor...Lewis....you have his number. You c-can call him,” I ground out.

“How in the world would you know about Lewis then?” Jack asked as he looked a little taken aback.

“Colt...he...he called him once...th-that night. Please J-Jack. Please...no hospital.” My words were weak and whispered and I was having to fight like hell to remain as conscious as I was. I felt nauseous and the room around me spun so hard I dare not open my eyes any longer, but I needed Jack to agree. I could not ever wake up in another fucking hospital ever again.

“What night, darlin’? Was Colt hurt?” Jack pushed.

“N-not Colt. Me...the a...attack...my b-back. Colt w-was scared. I t-told him n...” I don’t even know how much more I got out, but at some point darkness descended and the pain, panic, and anger all disappeared right along with the rest of the world.

MASON

“I want forensics all over this. It links to my missing persons, so if there’s anything here I want to know,” I told the patrol officers I had called in to guard the crime scene around the corner from Temple.

I was still reeling from arriving at the club in response to Jack’s demand I get my ass there fast, and finding Ava unconscious and covered in blood.

I had no idea why my girl was so terrified of going to the hospital, but there was no way I could avoid calling in what had happened. It obviously all linked back to Colt and any forensic evidence we could pick up there could lead us right to him. It was a lead I desperately needed, since I had shit so far on what happened to my best friend since we were fucking kids. I was truly starting to worry wherever he was, we were going to be too late.

Colt was more like my brother. He was all of the family I had left in the world and there was nothing I wouldn’t do for him, just as I knew he felt about me too. We’d had each other’s backs since we were tiny fucking kids and that would never change. Losing him was not an option for me, and not only because it would mean I would lose him, but also because I knew losing him would kill Ava, and she most definitely was not strong enough to deal with that in the state she was now.

I’d done some digging on the system at work, and found the piece of shit that had shot her. She’d been investigating the kidnapping of two nine year old girls. They’d been missing for over a week when her and her partner got a lead that took them to a warehouse outside of the city. Screams from the girls when they heard the car approach had Ava and her partner going in and not waiting for back up. The partner, and older guy who Ava had been working with for three years was shot first. Ava was shot as she tried to go to her partner. Three in the back. She still managed to get a hold of her gun and taking out the perp before she lost consciousness, likely stopping him

from fleeing with the girls before the cavalry arrived, but she was injured so badly her career was over.

It made me feel physically sick to think of all she must have been through since that day. Surgeries and physio. According to the quick search I did online she probably had to learn to walk all over again, and was lucky to have been able to do that. Worse still she'd been through ever minute of it completely alone because she hadn't even told her own brother what had happened to her.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

It pissed me off too that she'd done that. Didn't she know how much Colt loved her? Didn't she realize there was nothing he wouldn't do for her? Didn't she realize how much Jack and I had cared for her before she ran from us? Didn't she feel for us the way we felt for her? We would have gone to her too had we known. Jack and I would have been right there with her and Colt every step of the fucking way and she had denied us that. She had suffered alone and it made no fucking sense!

It did maybe explain why she didn't want to go to the hospital though. She was likely stuck in one of those shit hole places for months after the shooting. That was why Jack had called in a favor from one of his contacts that hailed from darker times in his life – a doctor who was willing to treat Ava under the table. The fact he was there attending to her was the only thing that had made me able to leave her side to make sure the crime scene was being taken care of. I just hoped I'd be able to take care of the fact Ava hadn't been taken to the hospital for treatment in my report.

At the nod of agreement from the patrol officers to my request I left the scene in their hands and walked as fast as I could back to the club, slamming past the security at the door and leaping up the stairs to the office three and four at a time, just needing to see for myself how Ava was doing.

"How is she?" I demanded the second I walked into the room and locked eyes with Jack. He and Deacon were stood close to the sofa where Ava still lay, the doctor knelt beside her and leant over the stab wound. The knife was out and laid on a tray on the floor beside him.

"The knife's out and I've stopped the bleeding. It hit some nerves, so this arm is going to be weak and painful for a while, but it didn't hit anything vital," The doc

explained. I was pretty sure he was stitching her up, which was a good sign.

“Did you figure out what happened?” Deacon asked.

“She fought. There’s definitely prints from a scuffle in the snow. I think whoever it was, was looking for something. Her backpack had been tipped out onto the sidewalk,” I explained.

“Of course she fought. She wouldn’t go down without a fight, but she’s not as strong as she thinks she is, Mace. We need to do a much better job of protecting her. Whoever has, or is looking for Colt, is clearly a threat to her,” Jack told me as he stood looking anxious, his heavily tattooed arms folded over his chest.

We had been friends for so long that I knew every nuance of his body language by now. It was why we worked together so well when we did a scene at the club. It was why what we had with Ava was so perfect before she fled. She was made for us, and I was happy to spend the rest of my life sharing her with Jack. It had been the plan over a decade ago and that plan had never changed for either of us, but it obviously had for her.

“I know. You’re right,” I nodded.

“That might mean you have to stop being such an asshole to her,” Deak added.

“I know that too.” I didn’t even know why I was being the way I was with her. We used to have banter between us before, but it was always just fun and playful. Since she came back I had been a complete shit with her and I knew it. It just hurt that after all of these years she came back, but didn’t want us. We had been waiting so long, neither Jack nor I ever really moving on or even seriously considering another relationship with anyone else, always in the ever lasting hope that one day we would get her back. Now we finally had her and she was pushing us away. More than that,

she seemed to hate us and I had no idea why. It hurt. It hurt so fucking much and I was pretty sure my asshole comments to her were because of that pain I felt inside.

“Doc, Ava knew your name. She told me you treated her before for Colt. When was that?” Jack asked thoughtfully. I turned to him with question and he held up a finger to halt my questions. “She said it was the night she was attacked?”

My entire body went cold and my heart started to pound at those words. Ava had been attacked? What did that mean and why the hell didn’t Jack and I know about that either?

“Yes, that’s right,” the doc replied as he worked away to stitch the front of Ava’s shoulder. “I still see images of her injuries that night. They were some of the most barbaric I’ve seen in my career. Did they ever capture that mad man?”

“I’m not sure,” Jack uttered, now looking as pale and unsure as I was feeling. “Her injuries?”

“Some of them were so deep. I warned Colt the scarring would be extensive and suggested they seek the advice of a plastic surgeon if they bothered her. The ones on her back would have been hard to work with, but that brand on her stomach, it could have been easily removed eventually.” The doctor went on like he had no idea just how much he was spilling to us. He obviously thought we knew all about the attack, which we did not. Why would Colt have kept this from us?”

“When?” I asked, my voice barely coming out it was so hoarse. I coughed to clear my tight throat and tried again. “When was this?”

“Oh, it had to be at least a decade, maybe longer. Colt told me she’d moved to Chicago last time I spoke with him. Probably for the best after what she went through here.”

“I...I need to check something,” I hadn’t even finished talking before I was out of the room and crossing the hall to the bathroom there. I locked the door behind me and leaned heavily on the sink as I tried and failed to make myself breathe.

This was why she left. Some monster had hurt and tortured her and she had run. Why wouldn’t she? She had to be terrified after what she went through, and since she came back I had done nothing but throw barbs at her about running away. She told us, she said we had no idea what she had been through and she was fucking right. We hadn’t know and we had just let her go, cursing her for leaving without so much as a word. Why didn’t we go after her? Why did we let her slip away from us at the time when she had to need us the most?

It all started to make sense to me then. We barely saw Colt for the two weeks before she left. He was never at the club and whenever I called him he said he was too busy. Then after she left he was constantly travelling to Chicago to see her, almost every week. This explained why he was so worried about her back then. It explains his behavior for that whole time around her leaving and for the year afterwards. But I didn’t understand why he wouldn’t tell me. We told each other everything. Why wouldn’t he have told me what happened to his little sister? I could have helped. I would have.

My girl – the woman I had loved for so many years – had been attacked. She had been branded! What the fuck did that even mean? Like cattle were branded. And the doctor said the scarring was extensive. What the fuck had been done to her and when? Why weren’t one of us with her, protecting her and keeping her safe? How did any of us let this happen to the woman we all cared so much for?

“Mace?” Jack knocked gently on the door. I took a deep breath and tried to get myself together. I was panting hard, my whole chest moving with every breath as anger and confusion warred within me. I had to unclench my balled fist just to unlock and open the door.

“Why would Colt keep this from us?” I growled the second Jack appeared in the doorway. “That’s why she left. She had to. She was too afraid to be here anymore. We didn’t....we should have g-gone after her, man,” I gasped as I pushed every word through my tight throat. Tears were in my eyes and it felt foreign. I couldn’t even remember the last time I cried.

“It’s too late for that now, bud. We fucked up, but we can’t go back,” he sighs. “We need to speak to her. It’s time she told useverything once and for all, and I’m not taking no for an answer. I don’t know why Colt wouldn’t tell us what happened, but I’m guessing it’s because Ava begged him not to. His first instinct when Ava was attacked would be to call you, I’m sure of that.”

“I need to know what happened. I need to make damned sure whoever hurt her is behind bars where he belongs,” I snapped angrily. Not even God would be able to help that fucker if he wasn’t already locked up, because all I could think about was ending him if I ever got my hands on him, and Jack was having equal murderous thoughts judging by the tense set of his jaw and his clenched fists.

“Wherever that bastard is, it won’t stop me from making sure he gets everything he has owing to him and then some,” Jack hissed. Yep, definitely murderous, and I knew every word he spoke to be truth. Jack may be pretty laid back and esy going on the surface, but I had seen him lose his temper before and it was downright terrifying. Add to that the contacts he seemed to have and I was pretty sure there was nowhere and no one he couldn’t get to if he was determined.

“Guys, she’s waking up,” Deacon called as he popped his head out of the office door. Jack nodded and Deak disappeared back inside again.

“We’ll handle this, but right now we have to focus on keeping her safe. That’s the priority,” I told him more calmly.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Yeah, but she’s gonna have to let us in to do that, and I have a feeling that might be a lot easier said than done, mate,” Jack sighed as he pushed his hand back through his hair, clearly worried and stressed.

“You’re right,” I nodded. “That’s why it’s good for both of us that you’re so God-damned charming then, isn’t it?”

“Me? You’re the one who needs to mend fences. Good luck getting her to forgive how much of a complete asshole you’ve been since she got back here.” With that Jack turned his back on me and strode into the office again.

“Fucker!” I cursed as I followed right behind him. I hated when he was right.

CHAPTER 7

AVA

Opening my eyes was painful and I groaned as I tried to move my head. Why did that feel so hard to do? My head felt like it was made of lead and my neck ached painfully. My vision seemed to clear, and yet all I could see before me was a concrete wall, the light around me dim.

Panic consumed me as I snapped my head up all of the way, ignoring the pain and looked around me frantically. The walls surrounding me were all concrete and there were no windows in sight. The space was small, with only one door off to my right. My hands were bound together at my wrists and pulled above me as I hung from the ceiling by chains. My body was shivering violently and when I looked down I

realized every scrap of my clothing was gone and I was completely naked.

I started to scream as loud as I could for help, while also shaking the restraints above me, praying they'd come loose.

My brain was a frazzled mess of panic which I tried hard to think straight through. What the fuck had happened? I remembered being at the club, then fleeing when I found out about Jack and Mace being with the other sub. I'd run from the club to escape them, and then nothing. What had happened to me and who had done this?

It took a while for me to force myself to calm down, stop screaming and struggling so I could just breathe. I needed to try and think clearly. Blind panic wasn't getting me anywhere. I had to think smart and find a way to get free.

Then I heard it. Heavy footsteps approaching the door. Seconds later there was a rattling of what I guessed was it being unlocked, then it swung open, smashing violently into the wall behind and making me startle in fear, but I forced myself to look past the tall figure silhouetted in the light. I needed to work out where I was, and from what I could see outside the door, it was some kind of underground space, the wall behind whoever stood in the doorway covered with pipes of varying sizes. That meant I was likely still in the city.

"Who are you? What the fuck do you want?" I snapped as I turned my focus to the man now stepping closer to me. He was dressed in black jeans and a black, turtle neck sweater, his hands covered with black leather gloves. He wore some kind of plastic mask over his face. The whole thing was black and had holes for his eyes and a slit where his mouth was. My best guess was it was some kids Halloween mask that this sick fuck had painted black.

His eyes were focused on me as he got closer, but he didn't speak a word, and my panic ratcheted up as I resumed my attempts to rip my hands free of the ropes above.

“Money? Is that it?” I gasped as I tried to keep my eyes on him as I also moved frantically to get free. “My brother...he’s rich. H-he’ll pay you what you want. Just...you have to just call him.”

He was right before me now, so close I could smell the hint of aniseed on his breath as he spoke, and the strong scent of disinfectant that seemed to be coming from his body. He shook his head at me as he lifted his hand, showing me for the first time what he held in it. A knife.

“HELP!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, my fear so great I thought I might die of a heart attack before this fucker even got his chance to end me himself, my heart pounding that hard.

I froze and remained perfectly still as he trailed the knife down the side of my face, not daring to move an inch for fear he would turn the blade on my skin, instead of the flat he was now outlining my profile with.

“You’re a sinner,” he whispered as he started into my eyes. His were dark, the irises so dark brown they almost appeared completely black in the darkness surrounding us. “You must atone,” he told me, his whispered words raspy and almost broken, as though there was a problem with his throat. “And to do that, you must be punished!”

Before I could even react he lunged back a step and slashed the knife he held, deeply across both of my thighs, deep. The pain was unlike anything I had ever known and I screamed in agony as I felt the warmth of blood running down my legs way too fast.

I ripped myself from the nightmare and slammed my eyes open as I gasped deeply for breath. I used to scream a lot when those nightmares hit at first, but over the years that had stopped, though the nightmares hadn’t.

“Ava?” The deep voice startled me and I forced myself to sit up fast, instinctively

reaching with my right hand for the gun I always kept at hand. I cried out when pain shot through my shoulder and down my arm, and panicked at my inability to reach out enough for my weapon. “Easy, sweetheart. Don’t move this arm.” Hands gripped my wrist and tried to move it back to my side, and I struggled against it until my eyes looked up and met a pair I recognized.

“Deacon? What the fuck?” I gasped, breathless from the lingering nightmare and the adrenaline that was flooding me from my panic.

“What’s wrong?” I looked up and found Jack coming closer, followed closely by Mason. I turned to the right and saw Colt’s huge desk, reminding me I lay on the sofa in his office.

“She woke up swinging and moved her arm too fast. She’s okay,” Deak explained calmly, his eyes locking with mine as he told them I was okay, trying to reassure me too.

It came back to me then, how I’d gotten there and why my shoulder was throbbing with a sonofabitch. I’d been stabbed by that asshole who had been laid in wait for me to get out of my car.

“The gun,” I gasped as I looked to Mason.

“What gun?” he asked as he came closer and dropped to his haunches before me. Deak placed my hand back onto the sofa at my side, squeezing my hand reassuringly before he rose to his full height and backed up.

“I had a gun. I was so stupid. I should have given it to you, but I forgot about the fucking thing!” I snapped, still irate with myself for my stupidity. I needed to ease up on the vodka and the pain pills so I could think clearly. If I couldn’t do that then there was no way I’d find my brother. I was such a fuck up.

“Just take a breath love, and maybe lie back down. You lost a lot of blood, so just take it easy, yeah?” Jack suggested as he appeared above Mason and looked to me with concern. I hated that. I hated people pitying me.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“I’m good,” I told him as I pushed my heavy legs from the sofa and swung around so I sat up. A wave of dizziness washed over me but I pushed through it.

“Jack’s right. You need to rest and drink some water,” Mason added as he grabbed my waist, steadying me unnecessarily.

“I said I’m good,” I growled as I slapped at his hands until he released me. “We need to find the guy who stabbed me. He could know where Colt is, or at least who the fuck is chasing him down.”

“Tell me what happened? What the fuck were you doing parking there anyway? It has no lighting. Talk about making it fucking easy for them,” Mason barked at me.

Yeah, he wasn’t wrong and I knew it hadn’t been my best decision, but no way I was admitting to that. Nor was I explaining that I had figured it was a good spot to hide while I drank enough vodka to see me through the evening before I faced him and Jack.

“That bastard jumped me from behind when I got out of my car. He wanted the gun. We scuffled, but he was fast and he got me good in the shoulder. I went down and he got what he wanted.”

“The gun?” Jack questioned and I nodded.

“What gun?” Mason was clearly getting impatient, and was likely pissed about me shoving away his hands when he tried to help me.

“The perp who broke into my place, he dropped his gun before he ran off like a little girl. I grabbed it and bagged it, hoping we’d get prints off it, but I fucking forgot all about it.”

“You forgot?” Mason repeated skeptically.

“It’s my meds. They’re too strong. I find it hard to focus sometimes,” I admitted.

“And it’s nothing to do with the bottles of vodka you drink at every opportunity?” Mason asked with raised eyebrows. I glared at him hard. “I found the bottle in your car, baby. It was empty. Are you drunk right now?”

“Fuck you!” I hissed.

“We’re not judging you, Ave. You’ve been through a lot, clearly, and you’re still trying to deal with it. We all get that, but turning to drink isn’t the way to handle it and you know it,” Jack intervened.

“Been through a lot?” I scoffed. “You have no idea, Jack, so keep your fucking opinions to yourself!”

“The doc told us, Ava,” Mason said, his tone much more mellow this time, and when I looked to him with horror, I could see he knew. They all fucking knew. “That’s why you left, right? Some psycho attacked you. That’s why Colt got you away so quickly?”

“The doc had no fucking right!” I raged as I forced myself to get to my feet, pushing myself up with my one and only fullyfunctioning limb. My legs were shaky beneath me, but thankfully the pain in my back was minimal.

“We know now, love. Might as well just tell us everything,” Jack said softly. Mason

was on his feet and hovering close to me, his hands at his side, clearly poised to catch me if he needed to.

“What? Didn’t the doctor tell you all of my fucking business while he was here?” I snapped. I was so angry. That doctor had betrayed me, and broken some oath I was sure. I had never wanted them to know my greatest shame. Not back then, and certainly not now when I was even less of a person.

“It wasn’t his fault. He thought we knew,” Deacon spoke up.

“Why didn’t you just come to us? Why would you keep this from us and run? We loved you Ava. We would have been by your side,” Mason demanded, and I could feel the mix of anger and hurt in his words.

“Loved me?” I laughed dryly as I stumbled to my right and looked around for my stick. I was going to need it to lean on if I was going to make the escape I was desperate to.

“Don’t do that. Don’t pretend you didn’t feel it back then.” Jack moved in my direction as he spoke and I turned on him, filled with bitterness and misplaced rage.

“Of course I fucking felt it!” I yelled so loud I was left gasping. “I wanted you more than I had ever wanted anything, but you guys...you broke my fucking heart!”

“What?” Jack froze several feet before me, looking genuinely confused.

“What are you talking about?” Mason demanded.

“That night...Colt told me,” I uttered as the hurt I had felt of those years ago came back and felt just as blinding as it had all those years before. I had loved them. I’d already imagined my future with the two of them a hundred times over, but that night

I had felt so betrayed. “What does it even matter!” I cried as I pulled myself together. “It was a decade ago. Why are we even dragging all of this up? We need to focus on finding my brother!”

“It matters because we still bloody well love you, Ava Scott. We never stopped and we’re not letting you go again,” Jack announced.

“Tell us what Colt told you. Tell us what you think we did,” Mason pleaded as he stepped up to Jack’s side so they were both right before me, waiting so eagerly to hear the answer to his question.

“He...he told me you were with another sub, okay? God, that sounds pathetic now, but I thought...we never agreed, but I just thought we were kind of exclusive, and it hurt when I realized we weren’t. I was just a kid and I...I felt betrayed. Then I heard you with her. I was waiting for a ride and I heard you walking her out, telling her how well she’d done. How could you do that if you really did love me? I know we weren’t in a relationship but I...I thought...” I couldn’t even finish that sentence. I knew how sad and petty I sounded. It had been so long ago and we had all grown up a lot since then, yet I was still whining about it like some heart broken idiot in junior high.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Jack uttered as he pushed his hands through his hair and turned away from me. “Please love, please tell me that isn’t why you walked away from us? Please tell me we haven’t missed out on a fucking decade together because of that bloody night?”

“Was that the night? Was that the night you were hurt?” Mason was forcing the words out, his jaw so tense and tight it barely moved as he stared blindly at me.

“Was it?” Jack demanded as he ripped his hands from his hair in what looked like a painful move, and turned to face me once again. “Was that the night that fucker hurt you?”

“What does it matter now?”

“Tell us, Ava, right now! Tell us!” Mason barked as he stepped even closer to me and pinned me with his eyes.

“Yes!” I cried. “That was the night, okay? It was my own stupid fault. I ran from the club because I heard you with her, and I freaked out. I was such an idiot and I ran right into his hands, okay? It was my fault! Is that what you want me to say?” I demanded as I fell back against the wall behind me, exhausted and wrung out. My shoulder hurt like hell, but not as much as my heart. Brining back the past was breaking me in ways I didn’t even know I was whole enough to be broken again. “I was a naïve, idiotic, fool and I ran right into his evil twisted hands,” I admitted weakly. I couldn’t even hold myself up anymore. I slid down the wall and landed in a heap, closing my eyes and banging my head back against the wall in shame and frustration.

This was a conversation I never wanted to have with Jack and Mason. Now Deacon was witnessing it all too, as I failed to even hold my own body up any longer. I had never felt weaker and more broken as I did in that moment. I hated never hated myself as much as I did right then.

“FUCK!” I startled at the roar that came from Mason, then looked up alarmed as a huge thud alerted me to the fact he’d just smashed his fist through the wall near the door to the office.

“Mason!” I gasped. “Just stop, you idiot!”

I was relieved when Deacon rushed over and grabbed Mason drawn back fist before he could hit the wall again.

“It was our fault,” Jack uttered quietly, but I heard him. I looked up to where he still stood above me and hated the guilt I saw all over his handsome face. His tattooed hands were pushed into his hair again and I worried he was going to tear it out with how hard he was pulling.

“Jack! Enough!” I cried. “It wasn’t your fault, so cut that shit out. I was a stupid kid who should have known better. It was my fault. Everything that happened was my fault.”

“Look, I think we all just need to take a breath, okay? Ava needs water and Mason needs ice for his hand. How about we take care of those things and just all calm down,” Deacon suggested.

“No. What we need to do is forget about all this bullshit from the past and focus on finding my brother,” I sighed tiredly. “The past is done, guys. Yes we loved each other once but so much has changed. We need to lay that to rest. Right now Colt needs us and finding him is why we’re all here, isn’t it?”

“The past is far from done, darlin,’ but I agree maybe we can leave the rest of this discussion until we find Colt. He’s obviously got himself into some deep shit and we need to find him fast,” Jack agreed, much to my relief, though he looked reluctant to do so.

“Did you find anything on the guy who jumped me?” I asked as I looked to Mason, desperate for him to just drop everything and return to the investigation. I knew I wasn’t strong enough to face the past and that was the true reason I pushed dso hard to justleave it all behind. Maybe if I could find Colt and male sure he was safe, I could then slip away from them all again before more questions arose.

I loved them. I had loved them for so many years and that was why I’d never dated seriously since I ran. Well that and the issues I had grom the attack. I had wanted a future with them for so many years, and deep inside I still did, If I were honest with myself, but that ship had sailed long ago. I was a wreck now, a shell of who I used to be, empty and lost inside. I wasn’t good enough for them a decade before and I sure as shit wasn’t now. I wasn’t even sure I wanted a future for myself anymore and that was the truth. I didn’t think I could stand to live with the broken body I had been left with. What future could I even have when every day was nothing but pain and a struggle just to remain upright?

“Forensics swept the scene and found some prints on your car. I don’t know if they get any hits back yet,” Mason said.

“Forensics? You called it in?” I cried. “What the fuck, Mace? I had my gun in my backpack and no fucking permit to carry it! The last thing I need is to get hauled in on gun charges.”

“You mean this gun?” He pulled my Glock from the small of his back, under his jacket and held it up. “I checked the scene before I called it in. Grant me with some intelligence.”

“Thank fuck.” I reached for my gun, but Mason returned it to the small of his back as he shook his head.

“You’re not getting it back, Ava. Your right arm is weak after being stabbed. The last thing any of us need is you trying to fire it with your left,” he scoffed.

“You’re not leaving our sides again after this,” Deak added and when I turned to where he now sat behind Colt’s desk he rose his eyebrows as if daring me to challenge him.

“Fuck that. I don’t need a babysitter,” I hissed.

“Yeah love, you do. I’m not pussy footing around this anymore. Your mobility is shit and you just lost use of your right arm. Clearly whoever has, or is after Colt is coming for you, so Deak’s right. You stay with one of us at all times until this is over from now on,” Jack agreed and I recognized his ‘Dom’ voice and the authority in it. Shame that no longer worked on me, though it did have a pulsing thrumming between my thighs I had thought impossible since the shooting.

“Fine. Whatever,” I shrugged. I didn’t have the energy to argue, and it wasn’t like Jack was wrong. It was absolutely not his ‘dom voice that had made me give in though. No way.

“I found something in Colt’s personal date book. He was meeting up with someone regularly, once a week. No name though. Just initials. K.M. That mean anything to any of you?” I asked.

“No. Maybe a girlfriend he was keeping quiet?” Mason suggested as Jack nodded his agreement.

“Most likely. Apart from poker nights with us and a few other guys, I know bugger

all about what Colt does with his private life,” Jack added.

“He doesn’t have one. Apart from poker night, all he ever does is work,” Mason chimed in. “He didn’t say anything to me about dating anyone. I’ll request his cell phone records. Maybe that can help us find this mysterious date.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“I found out Colt borrowed the money from an old college buddy too. It all seemed legit. He paid the whole amount back last week, so that’s not why these thugs are trying to track him down,” I explained.

“What the fuck has he gotten himself mixed up in?” Deacon questioned, and I nodded. What indeed?

“I’ll make a call to issue a subpoena for the cell records. It might be all we have to go on right now,” Mason sighed, then he left the room.

“Where is he, Jack?” I whispered as our eyes met. Tears were pushing to be let free but I blinked them back. Tears weren’t going to bring him back, or ease my terror that it was already too late and my brother was dead.

“We’ll find him,” Jack assured me, but I knew him too well to miss the worry that darted across his face before he could hide it. “Come on. Let’s make you more comfortable. Can you run down and grab some bottles of water, Deak?”

I didn’t protest when Jack lowered himself down and slid his hands under my ass and thighs. I should have, but I was exhausted and in a ton of pain. There was nothing I could do in that moment to continue the search for Colt, so I just gave in and held onto his shoulder with my good arm as he carried me over to the sofa.

“You feeling alright?” he asked with a smile as he lowered me down so I lay across the small leather sofa.

“I’ve had worse,” I shrugged as I worked hard not to breathe in how perfect his

smelled so close to me.

“Just wonderin’ because you allowed me to pick you up without biting my head off,” he chuckled.

“I don’t bite you head off,” I defended myself. “I just....I got used to doing things for myself. I don’t need help.”

“Just because you don’t need it, doesn’t mean you can’t accept it when things get tough,” he told me.

“I’m tired Jack,” I sighed, brushing off his words. They sounded pretty, but there was no way I could get used to these guys make things easier. It would only mean everything was a hundred times harder when I found myself all alone again.

“Then rest, love. We’ll head to my gaff soon. Mason is staying there with us.”

“You gaff? I don’t know that one,” I said with a smile. I knew many of Jack’s British idioms, but that was a new one.

“My apartment. It’s the biggest and I have a spare room for you.”

“Why don’t we just stay at Colt’s place? It has room for all of us and then some,” I suggested, feeling much safer being with the both of them if it were more neutral territory. Jack’s place was going to be all him and I knew I’d find it hard to think straight surrounded by all of that.

“It’s not safe, and you know it. Don’t worry. My place is clean. I’m a well trained bachelor these days. I had to learn to clean up after myself,” he chuckled. “Just lay down and rest. We’ll wake you if we hear anything.”

The soft way he was watching me, the gentle hint of a smile on his face, emphasizing those perfect cheek bones and making his eyes sparkle, it was beautiful and filled me with so much longing for what could have been once upon a time. He pushed his hand through his hair to get it out of his face and I marveled at his tattoos against his golden skin. He was beautiful and so perfect. Mason was too. They always had been and I'd been such an idiot to let them slip through my fingers when I did. I should have told them how I felt the day I realized. Maybe then everything would be different. Useless fucking wishes won't get you anywhere now, you idiot! I reminded myself.

"I'm so sorry, Jack," I whispered in a moment of emotion that felt so foreign to me. "For everything. I should have come to you guys back then, but I was ashamed and scared."

"You had nothing to be ashamed about. It wasn't your fault, Ave. None of it was your fault. It was ours. We fucked up and we need to explain that to you, but not now. Let's just leave it all for now, okay. Just try to rest. Everything's going to work out. You'll see," he soothed as he crouched down before me and ran a hand through my hair softly.

His optimism that everything would work out seemed misplaced, but I pushed that thought away and clung to his voice as I closed my eyes and gave in to the pull of exhaustion. The feel of him carding his hand through my hair as I drifted off felt like home and I never wanted it to end.

CHAPTER 8

AVA

It had been a rough night. Sleep had been hard to find without my meds, which the police had taken as evidence from the scene of stabbing, and without the aid of my

alcoholic friend – vodka. I'd tossed and turned in the spare room of Jack's sizable and very modern apartment until some time in the early hours of the morning, when exhaustion had consumed me and pulled me under.

I opened my eyes and instantly groaned at tight pain that was throbbing across my lower back. I had cramp in my right leg, likely because I was laid on it and my wounded shoulder, which I also lay on, was throbbing angrily.

"Ava? You okay, baby?" I turned my head and groaned again when I found Mason sitting there on a chair he'd clearly brought in from the dining table. "Are you in pain?"

"What are you doing there?" I groaned as I took in the fact he was wearing nothing but his white undershirt and very snug, black boxer shorts. His hair was perfectly in place and he didn't look even remotely tired, despite the fact I knew he hadn't slept up. Neither him nor Jack had, the both of them fussing over me for hours when we first arrived there late the night before, and realized I couldn't sleep.

"You woke up crying out in your sleep a couple of hours ago. You were trying to fight and we had to stop you from ripping your stitches. We didn't want to leave you after that," he explained as he leaned closer and ran his huge hand over my wild hair, pulling the wild strands from my face. I knew I should push him away but the rush of pleasure that shot through me at such a simple touch felt like an unexpected calm in the storm of pain I was lost in. "How are you feeling?"

"Fucking peachy!" I snapped as I forced myself to pull away from his touch and sit up. "How do you look like? Were you styling your fucking hair in the night?"

"You think I look good, baby girl?" he asked with wicked, but sexy as hell cocky smile. Jesus, he really was every bit as spectacular as he had been since I first met him when I was seventeen years old. His body was so built and wide, he'd always

had the ability to make me feel positively petite beside him. If anything he was even bigger now, his heavily muscled shoulders stretching the fabric of the undershirt he wore. When he smiled fully you saw the perfection of his white, straight teeth, and his dark eyes seemed to sparkle with the cock sureness I knew he was filled with on the surface. Underneath though, I also knew he had a huge heart. He could be gentle and so caring. He had held me so many times after our scenes, providing aftercare as required, but he was always so gentle and concerned about me. I had known then, just as I felt now too, that there was nothing I could ask of him he wouldn't do for me. At heart he was a good, loyal man with a heart of gold. He always had been.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Stop calling me that!” I told him as I gave myself a shake. They were getting under my skin, both he and Jack. And Deacon too if I was fully honest with myself. I couldn’t let that happen. I had no idea why any of them would even be interested in the crumbled remains of who I used to be that remained, but even if they were, it could never happen.

“Why? You are my baby girl. You always have been, and no matter how hard you work to push me away, you always will be.”

Fuck. Those words hurt. A part of me wished he’d go back to the way he treated me when I first arrived there again. I wanted him to hate me and go back to throwing his barbs at me. It was easier than hearing me everything I ever wanted and being forced to push it all away.

“Just give it up, Mace. Please, just let it go, before we all get hurt even more than we already are,” I pleaded as I locked my eyes with his.

“No,” he said flatly, then he rose to his feet and back away a few steps. “Your meds are on the nightstand beside you and your walking stick is beside you. I had someone bring it all from evidence this morning. Come out when you’re ready. I got Colt’s cell phone records.” That was it. He didn’t say another word as he turned and strode from the room. Did that ‘no’ mean he wasn’t giving up? Stubborn asshole! Didn’t he see how much it hurt every time they gave me stupid hope for things I knew I could never have?

I felt tired and way too fucking weak as I walked out of the bedroom I'd woken in and followed the long hall out into a wide, open living space. Jack's place was a loft apartment with a double height ceiling in this section. The windows overlooking the city were enormous and wide, allowing the early morning sun light to filter in, almost blinding me. The fact I hurt so much physically and felt unsteady on my shaky legs seemed to be sucking away the bravado I usually hid behind and I felt uncomfortably vulnerable as I walked past a comfortable looking lounge area and towards the kitchen where Jack looked to be cooking.

"Morning Ave. Grab a seat. I was just making some bacon for sarnies. That okay?"

"Sarnies," I repeated with an honest smile. "I'd forgotten that word."

"Do you remember any of the words I taught you?" he asked as he abandoned the pan of bacon and moved to the coffee machine behind him.

"Some." I nodded as I sat down awkwardly on one of the stools at the counter. "Sorry about last night," I went on, needing to change the subject to something that wouldn't take either of us back to the past. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Don't be worrying about me. I'll be fine. How are you feeling?" He leaned over the counter and handed me a steaming cup of coffee, black – just the way I liked it, then he returned to the bacon, but his eyes stayed on me, obviously awaiting an answer.

"I've been better," I shrugged. "Where's Mace?"

"Just having a quick shower and getting dressed. He won't be long."

I nodded as I fidgeted nervously with the hot mug between my hands. I just needed Mason to show me the phone records so I'd have something other to focus on other than how good Jack looked in his low slung blue jeans and the slim fit white t-shirt

that molded to his lean but muscular body like it was made for him. I was almost drooling at the dark tattoos that ran up both of his arms in full sleeves, and the way they, along with the others that peeked out of the collar of his t-shirt and up his neck, contrasted so magically against the bright white fabric.

“Please try not to look so skittish, love. I know it’s been years since you last saw us, but surely you’re not scared of me or Mason?” he said, startling me so badly I jumped violently.

“Of course I’m not scared of you. What the fuck are you talking about?” I snapped as I tried to pull myself together. It was true – I knew neither of them would ever hurt me physically. The fear I had around the both of them was of the emotional kind. I knew they weren’t trying to hurt me, but they were, every time they were kind or told me they wanted me. With every word there tore at pieces of me I was barely managing to hold together as it was.

“See?” Jack said as he waved to me after seeing how hard I had jumped at the sound of his voice. “And you’re shaking too. Did we do something to scare you?”

“No. You could never! I just...I’m tired Jack, and I’m in pain. I’m always in pain. Like I keep telling you, I’m not the girl you knew before, not anymore,” I added honestly. It was the truth and I really needed him to fucking hear it.

“I get that you’re not the same woman I fell for ten years ago, Ave. I’m not the same bloke I was back then either. A lot has changed over the years and we’ve all got older and wiser, but none of that – none of what you’ve been through or the ways you’ve changed take anything away from the way I feel for you. You might not think you’re still the Ava I knew, but I see you, love. Push me away as much as you need to, but I fucking see you under all of the bollocks you spout, just trying to hide and protect yourself.”

“I’ve been back two days, Jack. You haven’t even seen who I’ve become since you last knew me, and I don’t want you to either,” I dismissed him, even though his words had made my heart flutter in my chest. I couldn’t get swept up in the fairytale crap he and Mason were offering though. I was no princess, and even if I was, no prince charming would ever be strong and brave enough to face my level of fucked up.

“Jees Ava, spin us a new one, for fucks sake. I’m sick of hearing this bull about how you’re not who you used to be. We don’t give two fucks who you are now. We loved you a decade ago. We’ve loved you every day since then and we still love you now. Just accept that and get on the same page, for all of our sakes,” Mason lectured as he walked into the kitchen, obviously hearing what Jack and I had been saying.

I turned to look at him with a glare, but when I saw him I forgot what I was even mad about. Fuck, he looked good. He was wearing a navy three piece suit, the vest fitted to his broad frame perfectly over the crisp white shirt he wore. He strode right over to me and slipped his matching jacket over the back of the stool beside the one I sat in, then he leaned in and kissed my temple before I could even pull myself together enough to protest. He had that smug, but oh-so-sexy smirk on his face and I loved the way his short beard and moustache brushed against my skin as he placed that kiss. He even smelled amazing and some soft part of me that still remained despite everything – a part I had buried deep inside – longed for him to just lift me into his arms and cradle me against his vast chest, making me feel safe and protected just the way he always could before.

“He’s right. We’re not letting you walk away from us this time, so whatever plan you have to find Colt and disappear, you might as well forget right now. Wherever you run, we will come for you, love. We were idiots not chasing you before. We’re not making that mistake again,” Jack said, pulling me back to reality.

Mason had already walked away and now stood beside Jack, adding creamer to the

coffee Jack must have made for him.

“”You hear us, baby? You’re ours,” he said firmly as he lifted his cup to his lips and took a long sip while his eyes locked on mine, daring me to argue.

“No,” I whispered weakly. I didn’t want to argue. I wanted to be theirs. I had always longed to be theirs, but it could never work. I had to end this whole thing once and for all. “No,” I said more firmly as I sat up straighter and looked between them. “I know I keep saying I’ve changed, but I really have. It’s not just my injury, though that’s enough to put any sane man off wanting to be with me.” I gave them a pointed stare.

“We’ve never been sane and you know it,” Jack chuckled.

“And your injury means shit to us. Whatever comes, whatever we have to do to be there for you and take care of you, we’ll do. You know that,” Mason added, almost breaking me with his gentle words, all smugness gone from his face now.

“You can’t say that without understanding what it would mean. I have days where I literally can’t get out of bed because of the pain. A lot of the time I use a wheelchair back home, and I have the balance of a new born fucking deer on ice!” I cried.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Not hearing anything we can’t handle there, Ave,” Jack shrugged.

“Fuck!” I growled. It was like talking to a God damned wall! “Just, let’s put that aside for now. Even if you could handle all of that – which I doubt you could in the long term – but even if you could, I know you guys. I know what your tastes are. I know you need to dominate a woman in the bedroom and I...I can’t...I could never...”

“Dirty Whore! Atone! Atone and pray for your evil soul!” I could feel the pain ripping through my back as that monster lashed me again and again. I could hear my own screams of pain, so far away and disjointed from me that I couldn’t process how they were coming from me.

“AVA!” Mason’s panicked yell pulled me from the flashback and I opened my eyes to find him before me, clutching the top of my arms and looking panicked in a way I had never seen him before. “Look at me, right now! Stay with me!” he commanded as I gasped for breath and tried to reorient myself. I had no idea where the flashback had come from, but it terrified me. It had been years since those memories of horror had affected me like that just had. I’d been through counselling, taken pills and done everything required of me to overcome that one night of hell, and now it seemed it was coming right back again.

“Let’s get you to the sofa, love,” Jack said as he appeared at my side and wrapped his arms around my waist to lift me down from the stool I still sat in. That movement seemed to give me the shake I needed and I gasped in a huge breath. I was shaking hard and I could feel a layer of sweat on my brow.

“Don’t!” I cried as I took a step back away from both of their grips, holding my arms out to warn them away from me. “Just don’t...please. I...I’m okay. Just d-don’t touch me.”

My shaky legs threatened to buckle underneath me and I reached for the counter and slammed my hand down on it for support in a panic I was going to end up on my ass.

“Okay. We’ll stay back here. Just take some slower breaths though, yeah? We’re gonna have to touch you if you pass out on us,” Mason told me as he and Jack both stood back like they were trying to corner a wild animal.

“I’m good,” I gasped. “I just...I need a minute.” I turned and took in another deep breath, pleading with my legs to keep me upright as I started to move slowly across the room towards the hallway.

“At least let me help you, love. You’re trembling,” Jack pleaded as he hurried towards me, but left a clear gap between us.

“I’m good,” I repeated. If I tried to say anything more I knew I was going to fucking cry and I didn’t want them to see that.

“Ave...”

“Jesus Jack! Just give me a fucking minute!” I snapped, not daring to turn and look at him. I tried to move faster, just desperate to get away before the tears came, but once again my body betrayed me as I caught my foot clumsily on the leg of a side table and went down hard, landing on my side with a cry of pain.

I heard Jack and Mason both cursing as they raced over to me and dropped down to their knees at either side of me, meanwhile all I could do was lay there, pain pulsing up my back like electric shocks from the small impact.

“Christ, love. That’s why I wanted to help you!” Jack said as he leaned in close to my face and studied what was no doubt a mask of the pain I could feel.

“Where are you hurt?” Mason asked from where he knelt behind me, and I could feel his hand just ghosting over my lower back, like he dare not touch me fully.

It was the final straw. I lifted my hands to my face in an attempt to cover it as I just broke and the tears started. I was embarrassed. So fucking embarrassed and I hated myself and my useless body so fucking much! The familiar thought that I didn’t even know why I was working so hard to keep going any more flashed through my thoughts and more than ever, I felt the need for all of the pain and struggle to just stop. I couldn’t do this anymore.

“Ave, are you hurt? Can I pick you up?” Mason asked calmly.

“Please, love. You’re breaking my bloody heart. Tell us we can pick you up and just hold you,” Jack pleaded.

I knew I shouldn’t give in. If I felt the comfort of the both of them around me, I would only feel more empty, hollow, and lost when I no longer had them, but I was just too weak to deny myself. I had been fighting so hard to be strong. I had barely even spoken to my own brother in over a year to try and protect him, and where had that gotten us? Colt was in danger and I was a complete and utter wreck. Why was I even trying to hard to be strong when it was obvious to anyone who glanced at me that I was anything but?

I nodded slowly. The tears were still flowing and I was sobbing hard. I hadn’t meant to allow it to happen, but the flood gates were open and I had no idea how to close them again.

“Do I need to be careful with your back?” Mason asked and I hated that he seemed to

be losing the calm I needed him to maintain right then.

“No,” I whispered shakily. “I w-won’t break,” I promised him. I was so relieved when I felt him slide his hands under me, then I was in his arms as he stood, pressed against his chest and surrounded by his strength. If anything it just made me sob harder as I grabbed onto the edge of his vest and fisted it tightly in my hands. It had been so long since I felt as secure as I did with Mason and Jack. I knew I was safe with them.

The guys were talking between them, but I couldn’t hear anything, then we were moving through the apartment. I was just relieved when Mason sat, but kept me where I was, hidden against his chest, sobbing against what was likely a designer suit, but unable to stop myself.

“Let it out now. We’re here. We’ve got you,” Jack soothed and I could feel the heat of his body at my side, his hand running gently up and down my back.

“You guys...you h-have to stop,” I sniffled as I lifted my head and forced myself to find some control. I couldn’t do as Jack said and let it all out. If I did I would never stop.

“Stop what, baby?” Mason asked as he pulled me back enough so our eyes met.

“This. Being kind. Making m-me hope. I c-can’t hope anymore! Don’t you see that! Don’t you see how br-broken I already am!” I cried breathlessly.” I don’t want to hope anymore. I don’t want to try! I just...I want to find Colt...then I just want it all t-to stop. I can’t do this anymore!” I was desperate for them to hear me and understand as the truth poured from me.

“What do you mean you want it all to stop?” Jack demanded as he looked to me with shock.

“I can’t be this person!” I snapped bitterly. “Look at me. Really look at me. I’m broken. My body is broken. The pain....it’s a-all the time and that...it w-won’t change. I can’t live like this. I have no future like this. I just...I can’t. I tried....I really did try, but I c-can’t...not anymore,” The fight had left me by the end of my rant and the last words were squeaked through my tightening throat.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“You hav a future, Ava. You have us, and Colt. We’re gonna find him and then all of us are going to get you the best fucking doctors there are. We’ll find a way to make things better. We’ll work out how to make the pain better,” Mason spoke with determination.

“He’s right. There’s no fucking way we’re going to let you just give up. Jesus Christ, I feel sick just hearing you say that,” Jack agreed.

“I’ve tried,” I sighed as I pulled back more ridiculous tears. “I’ve seen doctors – several of them. I’ve tried all kinds of drugs and I had physio. I’ve trained until I almost passed out and it makes no difference. The pain is always there. My mobility never improves either. I don’t sleep, barely eat and the side effects of the drugs only add to everything. Why the fuck do you think I’ve been drinking. Blacking out stone cold drunk is the only release I ever get.”

“We know you’ve tried, baby, but you were alone then. You didn’t even allow Colt in. Now you’ll have us. We’ll help you through this. We can deal with these problems, can’t we?” Mason asked me as he cradled me even tighter against his chest.

“I’m not what you need anymore. That attack...what that bastard did to me...I can’t....I’m not like that anymore,” I whispered, my voice filled with shame at what I have to admit. “The scenes we used to...to do. I’d freak out if we tried to do that now. I’d completely lose it and go into meltdown. Hell, I think one restraint around my wrist w-would...” I had to pause as my breathing got away from me and I found myself gasping at just the idea of them restraining me. “See! I c-can’t even think about it!” I cried in a gasp.

“Easy love. Just breathe, okay? Just slow down and breathe for us. We don’t have to talk about any of this right now. You’re safe. Everything’s okay,” Jack tried to soothe as he crowded in closer so I was surrounded by the both of them, and it helped. I gasped in deeper and deeper breaths until I found some calm once again.

“I’m sorry,” I said more calmly as I forced myself to sit up and pull away from Mason’s arms, though I still sat in his lap. “I don’t know why I lost it like that. I guess I haven’t slept much lately.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Ava. You know you can fall apart with us any time. We’re always here for you, no matter what. No matter how much time has passed between us, that never changed,” Mason promised as he traced his finger over my cheek and pushed some loose strands of hair from my face behind my ear.

“He’s right. We’re always here for you. Tell us what you need right now. Anything. Let us help make things easier,” Jack requested and when I looked round to him there was a desperation in his face that I couldn’t ignore.

“I just need to find Colt,” I told them both. “Alive. He’s all the family I have left I’ve been such a bitch to him this last year. I need to get him back so I can make it better. I just....I need him back.”

“I don’t believe that’s true. Colt never stops talking about you. He loves you, Ave. He was just worried about you because he’d barely heard from you lately,” Jack tried to reassure me, but it didn’t ease my guilt.

“Why don’t we go and get some breakfast while we look over those cell records, okay? Maybe we’ll find a lead there,” Mason suggested and I nodded eagerly, grateful for anything that meant we could move on from my insane meltdown. I had told them everything I never wanted them to know, and yet I couldn’t regret it. Maybe knowing everything would make them see there was no sunny future laid out

ahead for the three of us.

“What did you hurt when you feel, and don’t lie to me. I know every single expression on that face of yours and you know it. You’re in a lot of pain right now,” Jack said firmly and I knew he was right. They both knew every intricacy of my face from the times we played together at the club. It was why we always worked so well together. They always knew exactly what I was thinking and feeling when we scened, sometimes before even I did.

“It’s just my back. I didn’t hurt it, but it got jolted. It’s fine though. I’m used to it,” I confessed.

“Tell us how it feels,” Mason urged.

“It’s just some tingling in my lower back where I’ve lost sensation and some shooting pain. It’s nerve damage. It will settle down eventually.” I left out that the ‘after’ meant after a handful of pills and a large bottle of vodka I could hopefully slup out to buy at some point that day.

“Do you have pain pills?” Jack asked.

“Yeah, but I already took them this morning. I’m really okay though Jack. I can handle this,” I tried to reassure him.

“You said you usually use a wheelchair at home. Why didn’t you bring it here? Should you even be on your feet like you have been?” Mason fussed.

“Guys, I’m good. I should have brought my chair in hindsight, but I didn’t want you guys or Colt to see me like that. It’s bad enough you all seeing me as weak and unsteady as I am,” I sighed.

“You’ve never for one second in your life been weak, Ava Scott,” Jack said softly as he ran his hand gently down over my hair. “No more trying to hide from us, okay? We can’t help if we don’t know what’s going on.”

“I don’t need you to help. I can manage pretty well on my own. It’s been working for me so far anyway. I just need you to help me find Colt,” I reminded them.

“We’ll do that. We’ll help you find Colt, but in exchange we want you to let us in, and allow us to help you while you’re here. That means being honest with us both about when you’re struggling or in pain. It means eating and sleeping properly and it means no more drinking,” Mason spoke up, using his very demanding ‘Dom’ voice that sent a shudder of excitement through me, despite my belief I could never be submissive ever again.

“You’re not my dad, Mason,” I snapped at him, annoyed.

“No, I’m not,” he agreed. When I turned to slide away from him he wrapped one arm around my waist, pulling me tight against his front and caught my chin with his other, pinching it hard enough to lift my face until our eyes met. “I am, however, a man who loves and cares about you far more than you seem to fucking realize and I will not sit back and allow you to hurt yourself any longer. Do you understand me? It’s not up for debate. You will allow Jack and I to take care of and protect you until this whole mess with Colt is cleared up and we get him back home.”

“I don’t take orders any more, Mason,” I hissed as I ripped my chin free from his grasp and fought to get free of the strong arm he had banded around me.

“You will if you want to be a part of the investigation into Colt’s disappearance,” he threw back and when I turned to glare at him his square jaw was set with determination.

“Screw you. You can’t stop me from looking for Colt!” I cursed.

“No, I can’t, but I can keep you out of my investigation, and I don’t think you’ll get far without my resources now, will you?” he taunted. I knew he was right. I needed the cell records I knew he already had if there was any hope of me getting a new lead to follow. Right then I had nothing else to go on and no idea where else to look.

“Jack. Tell him he can’t blackmail into doing what he wants,” I pleaded as I turned to face him.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Sorry love. While I might not agree with the blackmail, I do think you need to let us look out for you while you’re here. I’m worried about you. You’re pale and so bloody thin. Just let us do this. Just let us be here for you. It doesn’t have to mean anything more than that if you’re not ready.”

“Why are you being such assholes?” I groaned as I lowered my head and rubbed at my aching head tiredly. They were wearing me down and I knew it. They were offering something I had wanted for months now. A break. A reprieve from fighting every second of every day just to be okay, every moment of that alone and afraid. I wanted that, I was just too proud and embarrassed to take it.

“We might be assholes, but we’re the overbearing, protective, dedicated assholes you fell for over a decade ago. You knew what you were getting into then and we haven’t changed since. Yes we’re bossy and demanding, but we protect and look after those we care about fiercely. And Ava, we care more than you can know for you, baby girl,” Mason told me flatly.

“You know this, love. You know who we are. Did you really think when you came back here, that you’d have a chance of just pushing us away when you clearly need someone so badly right now?” Jack added. “Did you really believe after we both told you what you have meant to us for so long, that we wouldn’t do everything in our power to look out for you and to win you back?”

A loud growl of annoyance ripped from me as I once again tried to move from Mason’s lap and his hold. I needed to get away from them before I either gave in completely, or pulled my gun from the back of Mason’s pants and shot him.

“Mason let me the fuck go!” I growled. Luckily for hm he released his arms from around me and I threw myself from his lap, just catching myself and standing up straight.

“You teo are driving me insane!” I gasped breathlessly as I turned to glare at them both where they still sat on the bed. “You haven’t seen me for over a decade! You know nothing about me of my life. Since I came back I’ve spent like a handful of hours with you max! You can’t keep saying you love me and want to be with me because you don’t even know who I am!” I cried as I waved my arms at them animatedly.

“You don’t know who we are either any more. Does that eman you haven’t thought about being with ius for the last ten years?” Jack asked. “Can you honestly tell me you feel nothing for wither of us anymore?”

“No! I can’t. Of course I still have feelings for you, but you...you’re both who you were the last time I was with you. You barely even look any different and I see who you both are. I know you’re still the guys I fell in love with the first night I walked into Temple and saw you both in all black, looking sexy as hell in that crazy, terrifying place I had no real understanding of.

“But I have changed, a fucking lot! I was attacked! By some cray who followed me from temple and decided I was a sinner for even being in there. I...I barely survived that, then I moved to a new city, alone and traumatized. I worked as a CPD detective for years. I’ve seen things...so many fucking horrific things. Then I was shot! I lost my job, my career and everything that made me, me. I left my home and I have barely been surviving in a shithole of an apartment, just so I could hide from the one member of my family I still have! I’m angry and bitter. I don’t laugh anymore. I don’t look for the good anywhere anymore because I don’t even think there is any! You have no idea how messed up I am, so you can’t keep saying you love me, okay! You just can’t! It hurts, and it will hurt even more when you realize I’m right eventually

and walk away from me.” I was exhausted and so raw when I was done. I stumbled backwards until I hit a dresser, then I grabbed it to steady myself. I was so close to breaking down, but I couldn’t. I refused to give in to my need for comfort any more. Comfort only ever ended with me hurting. There was a reason I had chosen to face the rest of my life alone. It was less painful that way.

“Ava,” Mason started, but I cut him off.

“No! It’s enough, okay? I can’t do this anymore right now. Can we just...the phone records please. I need to find my brother. I...I just need Colt right now,” I admitted shakily, refusing to turn and look at either of them. I knew I’d break if I saw either of their faces.

CHAPTER 9

AVA

“Hey,” I greeted as I pulled open the door of the huge black truck that pulled up outside of Jack’s apartment building.

“Hey sweetheart,” Deacon greeted. He was dressed in jeans and a thick puffer coat that just made his enormous frame seem even bigger and definitely larger than life. He was also wearing a green beanie that perfectly suited his coloring and I couldn’t help but take several seconds to appreciate just how attractive the man was as he sat smiling brightly at me.

“Remember what we said. Call Mason if anything seems off,” Jack piped up as he wrapped his hands around my hips and lifted me clean off of the ground and into the truck.

“Fuck me Jack! I can get myself in a damned car!” I snapped as I glared at him.

“Hey men,” Deak greeted and Jack gave him a nod.

“Keep her very close. She’ll tell you she’s fine but she’s barely slept or eaten and she fell this morning,” Jack lectured like I wasn’t even sat right there between them. “I don’t even know why we’re letting you go and do this,” he added as he looked to me with disapproval.

“Letting me? Fuck you Jack. I’m thirty four years old and you are not my damned keeper. Who the hell do you think you are?” I growled.

“Okay, time to go I think,” Deacon spoke up. “Don’t worry. We’ll be fine,” he added as he looked to Jack. I wasn’t even sure if Jack heard the whole thing as I grabbed the door handle and slammed the door closed hard.

“Asshole!” I slammed my flat hand against the s=dashboard in anger as it flooded through me.

“I’m thinking he could have handled that better,” Deak agreed as he slowly pulled away from the curb, leaving Jack stood watching us with a scowl on his face.

“I am so sick of them treating me like I’m some cripple they need to take care of! I know I’m a mess, but I have managed alone for a long time and the last thing I need is them thinking they get to overtake the scraps that remain of my life!”

It had been one hell of a long morning as we went through Colt’s cell records and looked into each number individually. The guys hadn’t mentioned any of the relationship crap again, but they had fussed over me constantly, watching how much I ate and telling me I needed to drink more water. When I’d insisted on chasing down one of the leads we got from the cell records they’d both tried to stamp their foot down and stop me to the point where I’d lost it and called Deacon to come and get me. I had to get away from them before I did something very drastic to one set or

even both sets of their balls.

“They care about you,” Deacon suggested and I turned to him with a glare.

“They’re being complete assholes. I’m not helpless and them trying to treat me like I am is just fucking with my head,” I sighed as I calmed some.

“Anyway, thanks for picking me up. While those guys are insane, I think they may be right about me not heading out alone until I have full use of both arms again,” I joked dryly. My shoulder still hurt like hell, but I’d tossed the sling the doctor had given me. I could handle a little pain, but that thing had been annoying the shit out of.

“Yeah. Gotta to agree with them on that. And it’s no problem. I’m not working until Saturday now,” he assured me. “Where are we going?”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Into the city. Colt was making regular calls to a restaurant called Da Pietro, like very regular and I want to know why,” I explained.

“I know that place They make the best pasta. I’ve been a few times. Once with Colt actually.”

“Really? Did he speak to anyone there?” I asked excitedly.

“I don’t think so. Not past being polite anyway. How often was he calling there?” Deak asked.

“Most days. Sometimes twice. It definitely feels weird,” I shrugged. “Maybe we can grab something to eat while we’re there at least.”

“You know you’re welcome to stay at my place tonight if those guys are driving you crazy. It’s not as fancy as Jack’s loft, but have a spare room and I can grill a decent steak,” he offered.

“I might just take you up on that offer. Thanks Deak.” Anything to get away from the craziness that awaited me back at Jack’s.

It was strange how safe I felt with Deacon. I barely even knew the guy, and he was certainly an intimidating figure, standing as tall and broad as he did. If he wanted to he could take me down easily in the state I was, but I had no fear of him since the moment I met him. I just knew he was a good guy, and more than that, he just had this ability to make me feel safe.

He was doing just that as we walked the few blocks from where Deak had parked to the restaurant. He was at my side, and he made no attempt to touch me in anyway, but he seemed to have this ability to just surround me so that everyone who was rushing down the sidewalk, took a wide berth around the both of us. It was a relief, since I was already flagging, my legs exhausted by the walk and starting to cramp already.

A sigh of relief slipped from me when I glanced ahead and saw the sign for the restaurant Deacon had been leading me to. I honestly didn't know how much walking power I had left with the pain I was in.

"What's the play? Are you going in there asking questions, or do you have something more subtle planned?" Deacon asked as we neared the entrance. I looked the place over as we passed the huge open windows. It was modern and tasteful, the signage simple, but classy. Inside it looked modern with high backed booths down one side and closely set up table covered in white linen throughout the space. It was still early, so the place was empty except for the staff bustling around to set up.

"Subtle's not really my style," I replied with a smile.

"Now that I can believe," he chuckled as we pushed through the door of the restaurant and stepped inside. I could already smell the amazing aromas of herbs and fresh bread baking the second we stepped inside. There was quiet background music playing and I instantly loved the place. It had been so long since I did something as simple as eat in a restaurant and standing there I realized how much I'd missed it.

"Sorry, we're not open for another hour," A young waitress told us as she looked up from where she was setting cutlery on the tables.

"We're not here to eat. I just wanted to ask a few questions," I spoke up.

"Are you cops?" she asked as she studied the both of us with some doubt.

“Yeah,” I lied. “Is there a manager around we could speak with?”

“The manager’s not here yet, but the owner’s in the back. Should I get him?” she asked as she looked around rather nervously.

“You can show us to his office,” I told her as I walked further into the place as steadily as I could. It hard to pull off the confidence I used to be so good at faking as a detective when you couldn’t walk without the aid of a stick and were shaking like you’d swallowed a vibration plate, but the girl didn’t argue as she moved in front of us and simply led us into the back.

She walked to the end of a short hallway and knocked on a closed door before sticking her head around it as she opened it.

“Mr. Morton? There are some cops out here to talk to you,” she told him nervously. When she stepped back and opened the door for us I walked in, grateful to Deacon for allowing me to take the lead. I was pretty sure neither Jack nor Mason would have done the same had they been with me.

The office was impeccably neat and smelled strongly of cleaning products. There were filing cabinets across the back wall and a large antique looking desk straight ahead, behind which sat a guy who was obviously the owner of the restaurant. He was wearing a perfectly pressed shirt which was plain baby blue, but at the cuffs, which he had rolled up, there was a colorful, flower patterned fabric, just peeking out. The same fabric circled the inside of the collar too, and on his wrist was a tasteful, but simple silver watch. He was in his late thirties, or maybe early forties, with a thick head of sandy blonde hair that looked a little unruly as it flopped slightly into his eyes. He was clean shaven and definitely good looking if you were into the clean cut image.

“Mr. Morton. Thanks for seeing us I’m...”

“Bam,” he cut in, shocking the shit out of me. Colt was the only person who had ever called me that, and I had asked him to never tell anyone else, embarrassed for the reason he’d given me that name and not wanting it to stick. But it had stuck for Colt and he still called it me to that day...or at least he had the last time we spoke.

“H-how did you know that?” I gasped as I looked from him to Deacon with confusion and some concern. I felt Deacon move closer to me, pressing himself against my back as his hand wrapped around my right hip protectively. I was too taken aback by what had happened to care. In fact the support felt reassuring.

“I’ve seen your pictures at the apartment, and Colt...he talks about you al of the time.”

“Who are you?” I questioned suspiciously. “Do you know where Colt is?”

“He...he’s supposed to be with you. He called me, said he was coming to visit you last week. Is he alright?”

“Your name,” Deak reminded him, sounding rather intimidating even with just those two words.

“Sorry. I’m Ky. Kylan Morton,” the poor guy stuttered as he eyed Deacon warily. “Can one of you tell me where Colt is? Is he safe?” I could see the worry written all over Ky’s face as he asked about my brother, and then there were his initials. K.M.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“You and Colt are dating,” I said as it all seemed to make sense suddenly. I had never know my brother to ever have a date, or ever seen him bring a girl home. I had always just thought he was trying to shelter me, but maybe...

“Yeah,” Ky nodded as he seemed to slump deeper in his chair. “He was supposed to tell you everything when he saw you, but I’m guessing...”

“I haven’t seen him. He was never coming to see me in Chicago. Something’s happened and he’s missing,” I explained.

“Missing? For how long?” Ky jumped up from his chair and leaned over the desk closer to me.

“Over a week now. He left Jack and Mason voice mails too, telling them he was coming to see me, but he never called me or turned up. You haven’t heard from him?” I asked with desperate hope.

“No,” Ky shook his head. “But I didn’t expect to. He told me he wanted to tell you everything so we could be open about our relationship, but he’s been hiding who he is for so long, I assumed he’d struggle to tell you. I didn’t think he’d risk calling me and being found out.”

“He’s in some kind of trouble. Some men have come after me looking for Colt. One came to my apartment in Chicago, then the other night there was another near Colt’s club. Do you have any idea why anyone would be looking for him?”

“Were you hurt?” he asked with alarm.

“I’m good. I was a cop. I can handle myself,” I told him with a confidence I didn’t feel even a little.

“Colt was looking into something,” Ky said almost reluctantly. “But I...if he’s missing, he wouldn’t want me to get you mixed up in it all too,” he went on as he looked to me with concern.

“I’m already mixed up in it. Whoever Colt has pissed off is coming for me too now. The only way to stop this is for me to know what the hell he got himself into and stop it.”

“Mason. Colt said I should talk to Mason if anything happened to him. I...I told him not to get involved!” he cried as his distress rose. He collapsed back into his chair and buried his face in his hands. “I told him to just hand it over to the cops and stay out of it. Why couldn’t he damn well listen to me for once?” There were tears as he looked to me pleadingly. “Please tell me he isn’t dead.”

“I hope not,” I pushed out past the lump in my throat. “But finding him fast is the best chance he has, and I can’t do that without knowing everything.”

“Mason is working with us to find Colt. He’ll know whatever you can tell us,” Deacon asked.

“Colt lost an employee just a few weeks before we got together. Helen. She worked behind the bar at Temple. She left work one night, then just disappeared. The cops looked into it and launched a search for her, but they found nothing except an email she sent to her sister saying she was heading off on holiday for a few weeks, sent the day after she disappeared.”

“I remember. They found Helen’s body at the side of the highway two weeks after she disappeared. She was naked and unrecognizable. Colt stepped up security straight

away, making sure all his employees left in pairs at all times after that. They never found whoever had killed her.”

“That’s right. Colt was so cut up about it. He’d known Helen well, and she’d been so young. Then a month after we got together another of his employees quit with just a text to him. Lee. He was one of the club monitors. Colt tried to contact him to see if there was anything he could do to change his mind and he couldn’t find him. Lee had just disappeared from the face of the earth. That didn’t sit right with Colt so he started looking into other disappearances.”

“Why? Why didn’t he just talk to the police?” I asked.

“He said they wouldn’t do anything without some evidence. Anyway, he found more disappearances all across the city, and every single one of them either worked or frequented a kink club. There were several others from Temple, mainly customers who Colt had simply not known, or thought moved on to another club. He found over fifteen disappearances and Helen was the only body that ever turned up,” Ky explained.

“Fuck!” I whispered as I took in everything he’d said. It was just like my brother dive into something thinking he was helping, only to end up in way too deep.

“Colt thought it was sex trafficking. He started looking into this Irish family that he said were involved in the skin trade. He never told me any names. He said he wanted to keep me out of it, but he had this huge file with everything he found so far. Did you find it?” Ky asked.

“No, but we need to. Any idea where he kept it?” I asked.

“I only saw it once, at his apartment. My guess is he kept it there somewhere.”

“Someone broke into his place. That’s probably what they were looking for,” Deak suggested and I nodded my agreement.

“You have to find him,” Ky sniffled as he reached across the table and grabbed my hand. “We’re engaged. He proposed to me a few weeks ago. That’s why he wanted to tell you. He said he could never get married without you standing beside him.”

“He’s such an idiot!” I uttered. “He could have told me anytime. Like I care if he’s gay! He’s my brother. I’d love him no matter what.”

“He knows that too. It’s just his dad...your dad too...he was an asshole -as I’m sure you know- and he had Colt terrified to admit who he really was, even years after the old bastard died.”

“I’m going to do everything I can to find him,” I promised as I turned my hand under Ky’s and gave him a squeeze. “And when I do I’m going to kick his ass for being so fucking stupid,” I added with an emotional smile.

We exchanged numbers with Ky and I had to promise several times that I’d let him know if I found anything about Colt, but by the time we left I could see how hard Ky was fighting to hold back tears. He seemed as terrified as me that he had lost Colt, and I knew in that moment how much this stranger had to mean to my brother, and how much my brother meant to him. Colt had finally found true happiness for himself and I’d be damned if I was going to allow him to lose out on that. Not if there was one single thing I could do to stop it. There wasn’t a single person I knew on Earth who deserved happiness as much as my brother did.

“You’re tired,” Deacon said as we neared the parking lot where he’d parked his truck. It wasn’t a question. That would have been pointless since the fact I was stumbling with every step, out of breath, and visibly shaking was a dead giveaway that I was running on empty.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“I’m okay. It was just a long walk and my legs...the muscles in them get fatigued so quickly now,” I tried to explain, even though it pained me to do so. I would never get over feeling shame about how weak and frail my body had become.

“Hey.” He stepped in front of me, forcing me to stop and placed his finger under my chin, lifting my head from where I had lowered it until I was looking way up into his face. “Stop whatever you’re thinking. You were shot in the spine and you’re back on your feet and walking, fighting. The only thing you should feel about that is pride at how strong you are.”

“Yeah. Really strong,” I scoffed as I held my trembling hand out between us.

“You’re strong,” he told me as he wrapped his huge hand around mine and just held it between us. “Toughest, and most stubborn damn woman I ever met,” he added with a smile.

“Whatever you say, big guy,” I dismissed him with a dramatic roll of my eyes. “Come on. Let’s get to your truck. I want to go back to Colt’s place.”

“What for?” Deak asked as he kept a hold of my hand between us and started walking at my side again. I knew I should shake off his hold, but I didn’t want to. It felt good, and even though I knew I was playing a dangerous game with my emotions, I just wanted to soak up a little more of his soothing comfort before I shook my self back to sense again.

“I want to look for that file Ky mentioned. Colt would have hidden it, I know he would, and I have an idea where it could be,” I explained,

When I stumbled again Deacon let go of my hand and rushed to wrap his arm around me, steadying me. Again I said nothing as we continued walking and he just kept his arm there, taking some of my weight from my exhausted legs so easily it astonished me.

I had no idea what I was doing. Hadn't I just told the two guys I'd been in love with for years that I could never have a relationship? And now here I was allowing Deacon to touch me and see my weakness. I was ogling him every time I glanced up at him, taken aback each and every time by how handsome he was, especially when he smiled at me. I knew I had to stop all of it, but I just didn't want to. How long had it been since I had anyone other than Colt care about me? Since I felt anything for a man at all, let alone the pulsing between my legs that I felt any time Jack, Mace, or Deak were around me. I just wanted to hold onto those things for a little longer, and if I hurt even more when it was over? Well at least I had given myself just a little peace to remember in the darkest moments.

CHAPTER 10

AVA

It was a relief to hear the security system at Colt's apartment start beeping the second I opened the door and walked in. It meant the place had remained secure since I was last there and no one else had been there looking for his file, if that was even what they'd been searching for.

Deacon followed me in and as I typed in the alarm code he closed and locked the door behind us.

"At least it's secure," I told him as I leant against the wall for a moment. I needed to lie down for a while and get some rest. I knew I was pushing myself way too hard, but I had to find Colt, and nothing, not even my own fucked up body, was going to

slow me down.

“How about we sit for a while? I can make some coffee and we could order some food for lunch?” Deacon suggested, again with his gentle suggestion, rather than trying to bulldoze me like Jack and Mason.

“I am definitely not saying no to food right now. Can you order something? I just want to check one place in Colt’s room. If the file’s not there I’ll search properly after we eat.”

“Sure,” he agreed easily. “You sure you don’t need any help?”

“No. It’s in the bottom of his closet. I can handle that,” I assured him and he just nodded before leaving me to head for the kitchen.

I took a deep breath and started down the hall to Colt’s room. A part of me was terrified of finding the file my brother had put together, because I had a hunch that scared the crap out of me. Ky had said all of the people who went missing had been linked to kink clubs across the city. And I had been coming from Temple the night that psycho motherfucker grabbed me. The fact Colt had been so obsessed with it all just added to the sick feeling I had in my gut. What if that monster hadn’t stopped with me? What if he had taken all of these missing people and tried to make them atone, just as he had done to me? Just the thought of it made my stomach churn violently. It sixteen people had been tortured, killed, and disappeared because of me, I didn’t know how I would ever live with myself. I had been too ashamed and scared to call the cops on the night I managed to escape and save myself. I had buried what happened and never uttered a word about it to anyone other than Colt. I had let that monster go and now...

I walked right into Colt’s huge closet, which was more like a dressing room really. I dropped my stick against the wall as I dropped awkwardly to my knees.

In the center of the space there was a leather covered bench, and once, not long after I moved in with Colt, I had walked in on him sliding it across the floor way too easily. At the time I hadn't thought much about it, but when Ky mentioned the file, my memory flitted back to that day and my detective brain pieced something together.

One hard push on the bench had it sliding back with a gentle hiss of some kind of runner mechanism, and there below it was a hatch in the floor.

I pulled up the hatch and wasn't surprised to find a digital safe in the floor beneath. Colt had always been obsessed with security. The key pad lit up as I hit the green button and I froze for a moment trying to work out what the key code could be. I tried Colt's birthday, but the loud double beep was a sure sign that was wrong. The safe had obviously been there before I came into Colt's life, so I doubted the code would have anything to do with me, but I couldn't think of anything else, and the code for the security system on the apartment was my birthday, so I tried it anyway.

A mix of relief and trepidation ran through me as the screen flashed green, then the safe unlocked with a click of the lock releasing.

"Fuck Colt," I uttered as I opened the heavy metal door and looked into the deep box below. Inside there was just one leather zip case. I had to lie down flat on my front to reach in and grab the thing, and getting up from that position proved difficult with how exhausted I was, but I managed and then I was staring at the innocuous looking zip folder that sat in my lap.

I took a huge breath in and then forced myself to unzip the leather case. I was pretty sure I'd never be ready for what I was about to see, so it was best to just rip off the band aid.

The second it opened pages and pages poured from it, the thing packed way too full with everything Colt had compiled in his insane investigation he'd had no fucking

right to get himself mixed up in!

I tipped the case onto the floor and started to spread the pages out all across the floor space of the closet. There were a lot of printouts about a crime family in the city – The Owen's – likely the Irish family Ky told us Colt had suspected of being mixed up in the skin trade. There were news reports about a RICO case against them that had made it to court, but been thrown out eventually on lack of evidence after a key witness went missing.

There were also pictures of men and women who had gone missing, and as far as I could see, the oldest one was just a year after I was attacked. Police had investigated after missing person reports were filed, but from what Colt had gathered, it seemed like there was no trace of the people who were gone, or any evidence of what happened to them. Most weren't ever even reported as missing formally. It was just like they had all walked out on their entire lives and disappeared. The fact messages, E-mails, and phone calls had been made to loved ones or friends in each case only added the lack of interest from the police in the cases that were reported.

I found what I was truly looking for near the bottom of the huge pile of papers. Colt had gotten his hands on the police file for Helen Waters – the young woman who had worked for Colt at Temple, and whose body had been found near the highway.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

As soon as I opened it up and flicked to the crime scene pictures I knew I had been right. This girl – Helen - she had marks all over her body, and they were chillingly familiar to the scars that covered my own. Then I saw it in the next image – the word that was still emblazoned in my own skin. That brand that he had scarred me with for life – the brand. SINNER. It was at the small of Helen's back and as soon as I saw it my stomach revolted as bile rose up my throat. I tossed the file aside and scrambled to get to my feet. I stumbled across Colt's room and fell to the ground in the bathroom, just getting over the toilet before I lost the meagre contents of my stomach. I couldn't stop the retching that came after, again and again as tears filled my eyes, as the horror of what I had done consumed me.

“Ava?” I heard Deacon's heavy footfalls coming closer, then he was there, dropping to the tiles behind me and pulling my wild hair back from my face as the retching went on and on despite nothing else coming up. “Fuck! What's wrong?” he asked, panicked, but I couldn't stop to try and answer him. I could barely even breathe, and my eyes were tearing up so badly I could barely see either.

Just when I was sure it was never going to stop my taut stomach muscles seemed to finally relent and the heaving stopped. I was still fighting hard to get a breath in and I didn't even think about how gross I had to be when I slumped back exhaustedly against Deacon.

“Just breathe now, sweetheart. Deep breaths,” he said gently as he pulled me back so I was leaning heavily into his front, then he banded an arm around me, stopping me from just slumping forwards.

“Mason,” I panted as I forced myself to look up at him. “Call Mason...please.” I had

hidden from what happened to me for too long. While Mace and Jack knew something they didn't know it all. Now the time had come. I knew I had to come clean. I had to tell Mason about what Colt had stumbled into because of me, and worst of all I had to tell him about all of the missing people who's blood was likely all on my hands.

"Mace, it's Deacon. Ava needs to soeak to you, but she's not in a good way. I'm gonna put you on speaker," Deak said quickly, then I could hear Mason.

"What the fuck do you mean she's not in a good way?" he demanded.

"Mace," I gasped breathlessly. "I...I need you to come. Colt's. We're at Colt's. I n-need you to take my statement and h-help me. I th-think I know who has him a-and it's bad...it's s-so bad."

"Ava? What the fuck? What happened? Are you okay? Deacon? Is she fucking alright?" Mason yelled down the phone.

"She's exhausted, but I've got her. Just get here man, as soon as you can," Deacon replied.

The realization hit me then at what I'd just said. I knew who had my brother. That monster likely had him. He could be torturing him as I sat there doing fucking nothing! He could have killed him and gotten rid of him already. It had been over a week!

I pushed Deacon's arm from around my waist as I started to move. I had to get up and get myself together. I had to work the file Colt had put together and find this motherfucker. It was likely I was already too late, but there was no way in hell I was giving up until I knew for sure. Colt was alive until I found conclusive proof otherwise.

“Ava? Where are you going?” Deacon asked as I struggled to get to my feet. “I have to go, Mace.” He ended the call and then he was standing beside me where I clutched the edge of the vanity, just trying to get my head stop spinning long enough to get back to the file in Colt’s closet. “Sweetheart?” I felt Deacon wrap himself around me, then his enormous hands were gripping my hips and holding me steady against him. “Where are you going? You need to rest.”

“Colt,” I whispered. I felt too exhausted to even get the word out any longer. “I have to find him. Time’s running out.”

That reminder was all I needed to have me struggling out of Deacon’s embrace, but he wasn’t letting me go.

“Ava, just hold up for a minute, okay?” he gasped as he stilled my fight easily and turned me so I faced him. “Tell me what happened? Tell me why time is running out.”

“I found it...Colt’s file. I knew...I should have known sooner, but I...I know now. I know who has my brother.”

“Who?” he pushed as he reached for my hips again when I started to sway unsteadily.

“Him!” I cried as I flailed for the hem of the t-shirt I wore and ripped it up. “The man who did this. A psycho took Colt and time...there isn’t enough time!” I panted.

Deacon looked at the brand on the left side of my torso with utter horror. It was scarred over now, but the word was still clear to read. SINNER. That was exactly what that sick sonofabitch who took me and tortured me had branded me that night.

“Jesus Ava. That’s what happened...what that fucker did the night you were attacked?” he gasped.

“That’s why we have to find Colt. If that bastard has my brother then he’s being tortured just like I was, and I was only there one night. Colt...Colt’s been gone for over a week, Deacon! A week! He could be...it might be t-too late already!”

I was losing it. No, it was too late. I’d already lost it. The terror of what my brother could be going through, or worse, the very real fear it was already too late, mixed with the guilt I felt of Helen’s death, along with who knew how many more? All because I’d been too ashamed and afraid to go to the police. It had crashed down the walls I had spent so many years carefully erecting to protect myself. There was no more false bravado. No more making myself seem strong. That was all gone and I just felt lost and every bit as broken as I knew I’d always been.

“Mason is coming, okay? You need to try and calm down before he comes, otherwise you won’t be able to work with him to figure anything out. Why don’t I carry you to the living room and get you settled on the sofa, okay? Then I’ll bring the file to you so you can show Mason. Will that work?” Deacon offered.

I wanted to argue with him, but even as crazed as I felt I realized there was no way I was making it back around the corner to Colt’s room without ending up on my ass, and likely falling to pieces as a result. And he was definitely right that I needed to calm down before Mason arrived. He was going to lose it if he saw me mid meltdown as I was right then, and I could not risk him cutting me out of the investigation.

“Okay. Thanks,” I whispered with a sniffle. Deacon just nodded, then swept me up into his arms.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked as he readjusted me in his arms. I knew it had to be awkward to pick me up. I was far from small at five feet nine, but he managed it so easily that he almost made me feel petite.

“No. I’m good,” I replied with a weak smile. “I’m really sorry you keep seeing me

like this. I swear I don't usually lose my shit like this. You just always seem to be closest when it happens since I came back here."

"Like I told you that first night we met, I'm here for you whatever you need, honey. If that's someone to be near when you want to lose your shit, I'm good with that. I like you Ava. You're tough and smart and you don't take shit from anyone. It's a breath of fresh air, sweetheart," he told me gently as we moved to the living room.

"I like you too Deacon, and I'm really fucking grateful you were the one to peel me off that sidewalk the first night outside Temple," I told him as I looped my arms around his neck, knowing it was a bad idea, but just wanting to be closer to him.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

A tension built between us as Deacon just stopped and locked his eyes with mine. It wasn't a bad tension, it was good, like sparks were flying between us in some bullshit romcom. Then I found myself moving closer to him. Just one kiss. I already knew he would be the most amazing kisser, and I wanted that. I wanted to remember what it felt like to feel young and free. I wanted the thrill of romance and kisses that set you alight and made you feel alive, even if just for a few moments.

The crash of the front door of the apartment being thrown open violently stopped everything and Deak and I pulled apart like we'd been shocked with electricity.

"Jesus Ava! Are you alright? What the bloody hell happened?" Jack demanded as he came barreling into the apartment looking panicked and panting like he'd run all of the way there.

Deak and I shared one more heat filled glance as he lowered me down to the sofa so I was laid across it, then Jack was there, his arm planting on the back of the sofa as he leaned over me and looked me over with worry.

"She's okay, Jack. She's not hurt," Deacon assured him as I tried to calm my racing heart and catch my breath. "Where's Mason?"

"He was at a crime scene. He had to wait for someone to come and take over so he sent me. He won't be far behind me," Jack explained as he dropped to a crouch at my side and smoothed some hair out of my face. "What happened, love? You're shaking?"

"I'll get the file," Deacon said as he left the room.

“What file? Did you find something?”

“I think I know who has Colt, Jack. I think it was the fucker who hurt me,” I told him shakily.

MASON

“What the fuck was Colt thinking?” I growled, struggling to keep my voice down when I was so pissed with my idiotic best friend. “Why wouldn’t he just bring this to me?”

I’d been at Colt’s place for over an hour and Ava had been passed out on the sofa the whole time, Deacon and Jack having convinced her to take some of her pain meds, which had knocked her out. Jack had told me how upset and exhausted she’d been when he arrived and I was seriously worried about her. I knew how strong she was - how strong she had always been. She had been through so much and yet she never stopped pushing to keep going. It was a huge part of what I had loved about her when I first met her, and it was still a huge part of why I still loved her. But physically her own body was working against her. She was shaky all of the time, and I had seen the struggle she faced just to walk, let alone tackle obstacles like stairs. The stab wound to her shoulder had just made things even harder, and I was at the point where I felt the need to stamp my foot down and stop her from working the investigation to find Colt. I needed her to be safe and as healthy as she could be.

The problem was I knew her pretty well, and I was pretty damned sure if I tried to do that, she’d just ignore me and go it alone behind my back, and that was an even more terrifying prospect, especially when the Owen crime family could be mixed up in it all.

“I have no idea. He never said a thing about all of this to me. I knew he was upset about Helen, of course. We all were. She was a sweet girl, but Colt never said

anything about this,” Jack said as he waved a hand towards the papers I had spread out on the floor around me.

“Ava was sure whoever murdered Helen was the guy who attacked her all those years ago,” Deacon said. He’d been quiet since I walked in and he’d barely moved from the armchair closest to Ava. I was beginning to think he was under Ava’s spell, just as Jack and I had been ensnared so long ago. “She...she showed me how she knew,” he went on as he looked between Jack and I, his face set with tension. “She showed me that...” he pointed to one of the crime scene images from Helen’s murder. It was a close up of a word that had been burned into her skin. “...on her stomach. That exact word. That murdering psycho...he branded her with that word, just like he did Helen.”

“What? Ava...she...she has that, on her skin?” Jack uttered and when I looked over to where he was sat on the floor before our girl, his back leant against the front of the sofa she lay on, he looked like he was going to throw up.

Deacon just nodded, like he couldn’t even bring himself to speak anymore about it, and I got it. Just the idea of anyone hurting Ava that way had me wanting to forget everything I stood for as a detective. It had me wanting to hunt this fucker down and inflict every injury he put on Ava’s perfect skin before I sliced his fucking throat.

“So whoever hurt Ava, killed Helen. We know that now, but the others are different. There’s no bodies. I think Colt could have been onto something with the sex trafficking angle on them,” I surmised, just needing to focus on something other than the rage and blood thirst pumping through my veins.

“So it could be the traffickers who have Colt, or they might not even have him. Maybe he did just disappear when he realized they were coming for him, to protect us all from it all,” Deacon mused.

“It’s a theory,” I nodded. “It would explain why he left those weird voicemails. He didn’t want us to worry, but it doesn’t explain why he wouldn’t just come to me with all of this.”

“He was protecting Ava,” Jack spoke up. “He didn’t want to break the promise he made to her that night, not to tell us what happened to her. He didn’t want to betray her trust. Maybe that’s why he was trying so hard to get in contact with her. Maybe he knew he was getting in too bloody deep and wanted her permission to talk to you about what he found.”

“Either way this is bad,” I admitted as I glanced to Ava to make sure she was still out. “Either a psycho murderer grabbed him for getting too close, or the Owens have him, or are searching for him. If he’s not dead already, he will be soon.” Just that thought shook me. Colt had been a part of my life for as long as I could remember. He was family to me. Losing him would mean me losing a part of myself.

“We’re running out of time,” Deacon uttered.

“Huh?”

“That’s what she said to me,” Deacon explained as he turned to Jack. “Ava, she said we’re running out of time. She knows how bad this is. That’s why she was so distraught.”

“She’s smart, and from what I’ve heard about her she was a really fucking good detective. She knows,” I agreed.

“We have to do whatever it takes to get him back if there’s any chance, Mace. If she loses Colt it will fucking end her,” Jack said emotionally, keeping his voice low. We all looked to where she was sleeping. She seemed peaceful for the moment, but all three of us knew that was simply because of the drugs. Since the moment she walked

into Temple a few days before I had seen nothing but pain and suffering from her. She tried like hell to hide it, but I knew her every micro expression from the countless times we had scened together at the club when we were younger. Jack did too. We saw her pain and her constant struggle beneath her smart ass remarks and mask of indifference.

She had been through hell and it was plain to see in her eyes every time she looked at me. She was barely holding on as things stood. Losing Colt would be that final push over the edge and into the abyss and I was pretty sure we all knew it.

“We don’t let that happen,” I announced stubbornly. “I’ll do everything I can to get Colt back, but if I can’t...if it’s too fucking late then we do whatever it takes to get her through it and we don’t let her give up. We’re not losing her again, Jack.”

“Just fucking find him, Mason. I know you guys have history with her, and I know she has feelings for both of you, but you need to know I’m not walking away from her without a fight either.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“You barely even know her,” Jack accused.

“I know enough to know I have feelings for her, and I think she returns those too. I want to see where things can go between us at least,” Deacon went on.

“She’s ours,” I growled, a possessiveness I had never known rushing over me as I turned to Deacon with so much anger. He was a big fucker, but I’d be faster. I could take him down if I needed to.

“You sure about that? All you guys seem to do is piss her off,” Deacon taunted with the hint of a smug fucking grin on his face.

“Fuck you! You know nothing about what we have with Ava. She’s been ours since the first day she agreed to scene with us and she’s still ours now. She’ll always be ours, so back the fuck off!” I snapped.

“That why she keeps shoving the both of you away, but almost kissed me earlier?” The smug smile was fully in place on Deacon’s face now and I couldn’t hold in my anger any more as I rose to my feet, ready to smash his face in.

“Mace!” Jack grabbed my arm as he jumped to his feet and pulled me back. “Don’t do this. We know what we have with Ava. If he thinks he can come between us, then let him fucking try. She’ll always choose us in the end,” he told me. I knew he was trying to sound calm, but I heard the edge of anger in his tone. He was pissed too, he was just more level headed than me.

“Fuck me!” Ava groaned and when we all turned to look at her she was awake and

glaring up at us. “Why don’t you all just fight to the death? Last one breathing can throw me over their shoulder and carry me off to their cave,” she spat bitterly.

“Ava...” I tried,, but she sent me a glare that stopped whatever I was about to say to excuse our behavior instantly.

“You’re such fucking idiots,” she growled as she struggled to push herself up and swung her legs off of the sofa so she sat. “My brother is either in the hands of a murderer or the mob, and you three are here having a fucking dick measuring contest over a woman who has told you repeatedly she can’t ever have a relationship!”

“That’s bollocks love and you know it,” Jack told her as he dropped down to sit at her side.

“Mother fuck!” She roared at the top of her voice as she looked to the ceiling like she was praying for something. “One more fucking word about anything other than finding my brother and I swear to God I will shoot all three of you in the kneecaps.”

“Fine,” I huffed. “Most likely candidates to have Colt are the Owen’s. They’ll want to know what he knows and who he told, so they’ll keep him alive for a while if they found him.”

“Okay. That means they didn’t have him three days ago when they came to my place looking for him. We start there,” Ava nodded. She left out that starting there was easier because the alternative didn’t bear thinking about – that the psychosadisticmurderer had taken Colt, but I saw it in the worry in her eyes, and I fucking felt exactly the same way.

Ava struggled to stand up, then seemed to pause for a second to steady herself, before crossing the room to where her walking aid was propped in the corner. I could see her shaking from across the room, but I also saw the determination in her eyes.

“What are you doing, sweetheart? You should eat. I ordered subs earlier. They’re in the refrigerator,” Deacon spoke first. Brave man. Still a complete asshole though.

“I’m getting Colt back,” She told him without even turning to look at him.

“How?” Jack asked.

“Mace. You know where I can find the head of this Itish family?” She asked as she paused and turned to me.

“You’re not talking to the head of the Owen fucking crime family, Ava,” I told her flat.

“Fine,” she nodded, then she turned and walked off down the hall towards the bedrooms.

“Fine?” I repeated as I looked to Jack with utter shock. Did I just win that argument? It couldn’t be that easy.

“No,” Jack said as he got to his feet. “It’s never that easy, mate.” He wasn’t wrong. Apart from when we all played together and she had been submissive for Jack and I, I was pretty sure Ava had never listened to a damned word I told her without a serious argument first.

All three of us followed Ava down the hall and into Colt’s office, where we found her sat behind his desk with his laptop open.

“What are you up to, trouble?” Jack asked.

“I have full access to Colt’s bank accounts. He made sure I could access everything from the day I turned eighteen. If this Owen family has Colt I’m going to buy him

back,” she said firmly.

“Jesus. It’s not that easy baby and you know it. They won’t just let Colt go if he has information about their operations,” I sighed.

“Money talks, Mace, and Colt has a shit load of it from what I’m seeing in his accounts. Also, if they don’t agree to that, there’s always the threat of two cops already knowing plenty more about their operation that can be handed off to the FBI,” she said nonchalantly.

“You’re going to get yourself killed,” I told her as I tried to stare her down, but she just glared right back.

“So be it,” she shrugged like she didn’t give a shit, and the terrifying thing was that I was pretty sure she really didn’t give a shit.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Maybe we should all just think about this,” Deacon suggested, but Ava wasn’t even listening. She slammed Colt’s laptop shut and tucked it under her arm as she struggled to her feet again. Then she was charging right past us all and into her bedroom across the hall. We all just stood watching her wordlessly as she opened the top draw of her night stand and pulled out a .38.

“Where the fuck did you get that?” I demanded.

“Colt bought it for me. He taught me to shoot it too. He wanted me to be able to protect myself if I ever needed to. It was too big to carry around, so I always kept it in my nightstand, with...” she dipped down a little and ferreted about in the drawer again, then pulled out three cartridges for the weapon. “...ammo.”

I stood frozen and unable to speak as she slammed a cartridge into the gun and checked the safety, then slid it into the top of her jeans, at the small of her back.

The other ammo she put into a messenger bag she pulled from under the bed, along with Colt’s laptop.

“I’ll need Colt’s file. Can you grab it for me please, Jack, but leave out anything to do with Helen’s murder,” she asked, and she was so calm it unnerved me. Did she really want to die, because what she had planned was definitely a suicide mission?

“You are not fucking doing this Ava!” I barked as reality finally hit me.

“Try and stop me, asshole!” Oh this woman was going to be the death of me! Even if she did stir my cock with how fucking sexy she looked when she was pissed with me.

CHAPTER 11

AVA

My hand was trembling so badly I almost dropped my cell phone before I got it to my ear. I was reaching out to someone I once considered a part of my cop family, who I had pushed away as soon as I was injured and hadn't spoken to in almost two years. Was he even going to take my call or just slam the phone down the second he knew it was me?

"Homicide," he answered . I'd needed to call his desk phone, since I had long since lost his cell number in my frenzy to push every single part of my old life far away.

"Oz? It...it's Scott...uh, Ava Scott," I said feeling pretty vulnerable and likely sounding nothing like the cocky bitch he was used to me being.

"Scott? Shit! Where have you been? I tried to call you like a million times but your cell was disconnected?"

"Yeah, I know. I kinda went off the rails for a while there," I admitted as I turned my back on the three guys who stood watching me with confusion and annoyance. "Sorry. I guess I was kinda fucked up after the shooting and everything."

"Forget it. How are you? You good?" he asked. Oz, or Richie Osbourne, as he was called fully, was about a decade older than me, and he was part of the homicide division I worked as a detective in for over five years. He was a person I considered a close friend, along with several other members of our team, including my partner who had been killed the night I was shot. We'd all been tight until I'd been handed my medical retirement and shoved away from all of them and my career – the one and only focus in my already messed up life.

“Been better,” I hedged. “Listen, I’m in New York looking for my brother. He got himself into some shit and he’s missing.”

“You want me to come out there. I have some days I can take, help you work the case,” he offered instantly.

“Appreciate the offer, but I’m working with a guy I know from NYPD. I just need some information if you’re good with helping?”

“You know I am, but how come you can’t get it from NYPD?”

“Oh, you know me. I may have stepped on some toes over here,” I lied, sort of. I had pissed Mason off, which was the reason I needed Oz’s help, so it wasn’t a total lie.

“Winning hearts and minds as always over there, huh Scott?” he laughed.

“Always,” I found myself laughing too. “Can you get me a list of regular haunts for a crime family out here, Name’s Owen. Irish mob is my best guess. They should be in the system since they’re on the FBI’s radar,” I explained.

“What the fuck are you getting into, Ava? You sure you don’t need back up? You know we’ve always got your back.”

“I know and I appreciate it, Oz, but I’m good. I can handle this. Can you just get me the info and email it to me?”

“Yeah, okay, but I want you to call me when you get back to the city. It’s been too long since we met up, and we’ve all been worried about you,” he told me, sounding so honest and concerned I actually teared up. I never should have pushed them away and I was starting to realize that.

“Fine,” I agreed as I pulled back my tears. “I’ll call, but you can put your fucking worry away. I don’t need it. I’m good. I’m always good,” I lied.

“Just be fucking careful. This Owen family looks like bad news.”

“Always am. Thanks, Oz.” I hung up and swiped at my damp eyes. Maybe I would actually call him when I got back to Chicago. Once I knew Colt was safe of course. Maybe I’d even move back to my place again. If Colt was alive, maybe I could find a way to piece some parts of myself back together again. If he was alive.

“Who was that?” Jack asked as I turned back to face the three of them. They looked pretty comical stood in a line side by side, just staring at me looking bewildered. Apart from Mace. He was most definitely pissed with me. I knew the look well, and as always it sent a shudder of excitement straight to my core. He looked even sexier when he was mad.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“A friend,” I answered as I grabbed my old bag that I once used for college classes and threw the strap over my head so it sat across my body.

“Ava love, what the fuck are you doing? You can’t walk into a room of criminals and just offer them money. They’ll probably just shoot you and get the money anyway,” Jack told me.

“He’s right. You’re being insane. Just stop and think for a fucking second,” Mason added.

“I’ve thought, Mace, and you know what I decided?” I asked him bitterly.

“That you want to die, because that’s all that’s gonna happen if you do this!” he barked at me.

“I decided that I am not going to let Colt fucking die. Any of you try to follow me or stop me and I’ll shoot you. You think I’m bluffing then just try me!” I growled before pushing past all of them and exiting my room as steadily as I could. I was still shaky because I was tired, and amped up because of what I knew I was about to do. Was it a sensible decision? Probably not. But I had found that criminals could be reasonable people where money was involved, and I was banking on them not being willing to shoot a disabled women on sight. I had to at least try. I knew Colt would do it for me if he had to. I knew my brother would do anything for me.

I moved to the living room and rolled my eyes when I saw all the papers from Colt’s file still spread across the floor.

“Thanks for the help, Jack,” I told him sarcastically as I struggled to drop to my knees, then started gathering everything up, except for the file on Helen and the pages Colt had printed from the news stories on her murder.

“If you’re doing this, then I’m coming with you. You’re not going alone,” Mason said and I knew they were all behind me now, likely still stood in their line trying to intimidate me into acquiescing to their demands. How little they knew me!

“Yeah, It’ll end really well for the both of us if I walk in there with a cop,” I scoffed.

“You’re a cop!” Deak cried and when I glanced around to him I could see the worry on his face.

“I’m a very obviously disabled woman who I’m sure they’ll take pity on and not shoot immediately. That’s my play and I’m sticking with it. That’s why I have to go in alone,” I told them all calmly.

“I could bring in some back up...”

“Mason, no. One sniff of the cops anywhere near this and I will end up dead. Please, just stop underestimating me and let me do this. Either they have Colt and I’ll get him back, or they don’t and at least we’ll know where to focus next,” I told him as I picked up the file on Helen’s death and slammed it on the table at my side. “That’s why you need to start looking into this,” I added as I looked to Mason again.

“Do you have any description from when he....from back then?” he asked carefully.

“Tall. I’d guess around 6’2”. He was slim, not an ounce of fat on him, but definitely toned and muscled. He wore all black and a mask. It was like a kids Halloween mask that he’d painted black. His hair was like a crew cut back then. Dark brown. His eyes were brown too. That’s about all I have,” I told him matter-of-factly. I couldn’t allow

my mind to go back to that night. I didn't have time for any more of the flashbacks that seemed to have returned to me.

"Location?"

"I don't know exactly. I was barely conscious when I ran, and my head was a mess. I was still in the city. Thinking about it since I think it might have been near the subway. It was definitely underground. Colt told me he collected me from a diner I stumbled into on the upper east side. A waitress setting up for the day let me in and gave me her cell to call him, but I think I was running for a while before that. It's not much, but I was really fucked up at the time," I told him as I again fought not to think back to that nightmare I had survived.

"You ran? You got away?" Deacon asked.

"Yeah. I played dead. He must have thought I passed out and he released the cuffs and let me down to the ground. I'd been taking those self defense classes ready for Quantico, and when I took him by surprise I got him down long enough to run." I explained. Just saying Quantico was a hurtful reminder of the dream I had once held of joining the FBI. That night had ruined everything for me.

"Jesus fuck, Ave. Why didn't you bloody tell us what happened? Why didn't you let us be there for you?" Jack gasped as he came closer and wrapped his arm around me from behind. I pressed my face into his bicep for just a moment, needing the comfort.

"I should have. I should have told the cops too, but I was ashamed and scared and I just wanted to pretend it never even happened. Now Helen's blood and that of who knows how many others is on my hands," I confessed tiredly.

"That's not true, Ava," Deacon said right as Mace spoke too,

“Don’t be ridiculous, baby.”

“Just look into it Mace, okay? Please. If the Owen’s don’t have my brother, then this psycho does and we need a lead to follow to get him back,” I pleaded as I looked up into Mason’s dark eyes. He and Deak had moved even closer too and were stood right behind where Jack still held me.

“Okay, I’ll get on it, but Jack and Deak are going with you. You can go in alone, but if you do get Colt out of there, you might need help with him, so they need to be close, okay?” Mason said, cutting off my argument before I could even make it.

“You can follow me in Deak’s truck, but you need to stay a block away, and I’ll call you if I need you. Deal?” I bargained. Mace and Jack shared a look then nodded. Knowing it was the only way I was going to get out of the apartment without them arguing further, I took it.

Oz had sent me three known locations of businesses owned and operated by the Owen family. The first had been a strip club, which had been pretty empty considering the time of day it was. I had walked in and asked around, but the staff were tight lipped about anything to do with their employers. I sat and sipped a club soda as I surveyed the place for a while, then left, pretty sure the bosses weren’t there at that time. Everything was just too relaxed and quiet. It didn’t feel right.

As I driven away from the seedy looking club on the outskirts of the city, I had seen Deacon and Jack following one car behind me, and I had to admit, I did feel comforted to know they were close. It made no sense, since I already knew if things didn’t go as I hoped, I could be dead and disappeared before Deak and Jack even knew anything was wrong, but I was just glad I wasn’t completely alone.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

The second location was an Irish bar deeper in the city, and the second I pulled open the creaky wood door by its huge, bronzed handle and stepped inside, I knew I was in the right place. The bar, which ran the length of the place, was quiet, but seated at three of the tall stools before it were three solid, built guys, all wearing dark clothes and clearly concealing weapons under their jackets.

There were two tables with a few patrons watching the game on the big screen up front, and drinking beers. One guy even had a famous pint of Guinness in front of him, so I bypassed them quietly as the three watch dogs all monitored my every step. As I got closer I realized the guy closest to me was the one who had ambushed me beside my car, and stabbed me in the fucking shoulder, which still hurt like a bitch, by the way!

“Hey asshole,” I greeted him with an over the top grin on my face. “Pleasure to see you again so soon,” I quipped.

“What the fuck are you doing here you crazy bitch?” he hissed as he stared me down coldly.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t come to tattle on you. Just want to see your boss,” I told him with a shrug.

“He’s not here. Turn around and walk out right now, while you still can,” he warned as he rose to his full height and walked closer so he towered over me, trying to intimidate me.

“Well, that would seem kind of rude when your boss has gone to such pains to try and

get my attention, wouldn't it? Why don't you just run ahead and tell him I'm here, and that I have an offer for him?" I said in the most saccharine sweet voice I could muster, never once dropping the smile, which I'm sure looked slightly unhinged, from my face.

"You've got a fucking screw loose lady," he sneered. "Wait here." He turned and walked away from me, headed through a door marked 'Private' at the very back of the bar.

A few moments later he returned and barked at me to follow him, then led me through the door he'd just burst back out of. Behind it was a short corridor with several closed doors off of each side. We stopped at the last door on the right and my guide barely had it open before he was shoving me inside so hard I barely remained upright.

My heart started to pound way too fast as I fought to regain my balance and straighten up, leaning heavily against my stick as a pain shot up my back, likely from the awkward way I had twisted slightly as I fell forwards.

I took in a subtle breath to try and refocus myself, then looked up and found a large antique looking desk before me. I stood in a small windowless room that was obviously used as an office. Behind the desk sat a greying, balding man, dressed in a burgundy sweater that stretched slightly over the paunch he clearly had behind the desk. He was staring at me with nothing but annoyance. This had to be John Owen – the head of the family. He was in his sixties I guessed. His face was pitted and a scar bisected his left eyebrow. He might be older, but he was intimidating as hell as he just sat watching me and not saying a word.

"Real charmer you got working for you there," I said as I threw a thumb over my shoulder towards the door. I had to take back some control before I allowed him to truly rattle me. I had faced men like him before and I wouldn't falter this time just

because I wasn't physically as strong as I had been before.

"What do you want Miss Scott? Or should I call you detective Scott?" Owen asked as he settled back into his chair and folded his arms over his chest.

"Not a detective anymore," I clarified. "Turns out all getting injured in the line of duty gets you is the boot and a pathetic excuse for a disability pension."

"Fine. Get to the point Miss Scott. I'm a busy man," he sighed.

"A little rude when I'm saving you time by coming here. Now you can cross off the task of tracking me down, right? That's why you sent two separate guys after me? You wanted to speak with me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he told me flatly.

"Cut the shit. The guy who just showed me in here is the guy who ambushed me outside Temple. I know it's you who sent guys after me, apparently looking for my brother, Colt. I want to know why, and more importantly, I want him back." I dropped all politeness and playfulness from my tone as I dropped into one of the leather armchairs in front of his desk and made full eye contact.

"Your brother has been digging into my business and I want to know why," Owen admitted after a momentary pause.

"Do you have him?" I asked, trying to keep the tremble from my voice.

"And if I do?"

"Colt doesn't know anything about your business. He was worried about some employees who disappeared from his club. He started looking into it and came to the

conclusion that people trafficking seemed likely. He has nothing on you, your business, or your family. I can show you the file he built, but all you'll find in it is articles printed from local press about old RICO cases and trials involving your family. My brother is a very intelligent man, but a detective he is not," I told him honestly.

"My family have no dealings in the skin trade," he denied easily.

"Look, I'm not a cop anymore. I don't really care what your family does or doesn't have dealings in. I just want to get my brother back home. If you have him, I'll pay you to release him. I'm sure you're aware Colt has several very successful businesses, as well as family money. I have access to it."

"What leads you to believe I have your brother?"

"You sent men out looking for him and he's missing. Seems pretty cut and dry to me," I clarified.

"I merely wanted a conversation with Colt to find out why he was sniffing around my clubs and businesses. That's why I was looking for him, but as yet, he's proved pretty elusive. I have no idea where he scurried off to, but I can assure you, Miss Scott, I do not have your brother, despite my best efforts."

It was hard not to let my panic and anxiety rear up as I saw the honesty in his eyes as he spoke. I had interviewed enough criminals in my time to be able to read the, pretty well, and in that moment I was believing Owen's frustration that he didn't in fact have my brother.

But if he didn't have Colt, then that meant... Fuck! I couldn't even allow myself to think about Colt being in the hands of that psycho murderer, and yet I was going to have to. I was going to have to because I believed John Owen. I saw the annoyance in

his face that Colt had eluded him, as he put it. I was good at reading people after everything I had been through, and I was almost sure this criminal did not have my brother.

“Good,” I nodded as I clasped my hands together to still the trembling that had begun. “And I assume your search and antics to find him will end now too. Colt is no threat to you or your dealings. Nor am I. All I care about is finding my brother,” I told him honestly.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Very well, but I’ll warn you now – I catch either of you sniffing around any of my businesses again and I won’t be so lenient. I don’t tolerate people fucking with what I’ve spent my life working to build.”

I just nodded. I was terrified if I opened my mouth again I’d scream, or start sobbing, or any other number of reactions to my terror for Colt that was stirring within. I had to get out of there, and fast.

I didn’t even hear what else Owen was saying to me as I got to my feet, grabbed my stick, and stumbled a little as I exited the office. I felt violently nauseous and my hands would not stop shaking.

I don’t even remember walking through the bar. All I know is that when I got outside I moved to a side alley then lost the full contents of my stomach. Images of that night I endured were playing through my mind one after another, speeding past. The torture and the terror were a living thing inside me. Colt had been missing for over a week. Was he already dead? That monster had planned to kill me after that one night. Was that his ritual? One night of trying to make his victims atone, and then kill them? I retched again at just that thought. I could not lose Colt. He was all I had.

Luckily, I had left Colt’s car parked close by, so I stumbled over to it, well out of sight of the Irish bar, thankfully. Once I was inside I started the car and just sped out of there, knowing I was going to cry if I didn’t do something.

As we had planned before hand, I bypassed Deacon’s truck where it was parked a street away, so they knew I was out and could follow me from there. It had been the plan in case I needed to check out the last place on the list, but I didn’t need to do that

now.

I wasn't even thinking about where I was going as I raced out of the city and onto the highway. I just needed to keep driving. But even the driving wasn't enough to keep me from slipping into the break down that seemed intent on swallowing me whole.

Somehow I managed to see through the tears filling my eyes enough to pull off at the next exit, and as soon as I could I pulled the car onto the verge at the side of the road and shut off the engine.

My chest was so tight I couldn't seem to get a full breath in and I could feel a numbness spreading through my feet. Tears were falling and it was more than my hands that shook as I threw open the driver's door and dropped out of the car, just needing to feel the cold air on my too hot skin.

The thin covering of snow on the ground sent a jolt through my body and I sat up and pushed back until my back was against the body of the car.

I was too late, was all that I could think over and over again. Colt had been calling me, desperate to see me and I had ignored him. I had been wallowing in my self-pity and weakness, and I had let him down. If I'd just answered one of his calls or texts, if I'd just called him back once, he could still be here now. He might have told me everything and I would have come. I knew I'd have come if I'd worried about what he was getting himself into. I could have saved him.

When a hand dropped down onto my shoulder I reacted without a second of thought and hit out, shoving the person back as I forced myself to my feet.

"Ava! It's me, love. Just me and Deak. You're okay!" Jack called before I could take off running or start fighting – one or the other. I paused and looked around me again, a little less frantic this time and realized Jack was standing to my side, and Deacon

was close behind him.

“Shit!” I gasped, still panting way too hard to just breathe. “S-sorry,” I told him as I slammed my hand over my eyes and lowered my head. I was losing it.

“What happened? Are you alright?” Jack asked as he moved around me until he was right before me, so close I could feel the brush of his soft wool coat against my hand. “Tell us, love. Tell us what happened?” I knew Jack was worried, but his badgering was too much when I was trying so hard to just to hold myself together enough to remain upright.

I dropped my hand from my face and looked up into his face, His bright blue eyes were sparkling in the low sun light and I hated the look of pity and worry on his face. It was the only looks I ever got anymore and I hated it so fucking much. Those looks werewhy I had hidden everything! They were why I cut Colt out and why I hid from the world.

“Just back the fuck off!” I snapped as I pressed both hands to his hard chest and shoved him. He stumbled back a step, but immediately stepped towards me again.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he told me and I saw the resolve in his face He was watching me, daring me to argue with him. “Tell me what happened.”

“No! Fuck you, Jack!” I cried as I tried to push him again, only he was ready for me this time, and he didn’t even stumble back one single step.

“Tell me,” he ordered again as he moved even closer. I could feel his front pressing into me now, the heat of his breath on my neck as he watched me intently and just waited for me to obey.

“Screw you! He’s dead!” I spat angrily. “Is that what you want to hear! Colt’s dead!

He's dead! He's fucking dead!" The words turned to screams as I tried hard to push Jack away from me, but he didn't move. He didn't even try to stop me.

"HE'S DEAD!" I screamed as my shoves at his chest turned to hits and weak punches. I couldn't stop. Tears blinded me as I just screamed and hit again and again, my fists landing pathetically against his hard chest each and every time. So much rage poured from me. Rage with myself mainly for failing Colt in the one time in all the years he'd been there for me, that he had actually needed me. But I was mad at Colt too. Didn't he know how much I needed him? Didn't he know how much I loved him and that I didn't know what my life was without always knowing he was there when I most needed him? How dare he get mixed up in something so dangerous and get himself killed! Then I was just mad and disgusted with myself again as I realized how selfish and self-centered those thoughts were.

My voice was almost hoarse and my fists aching when Jack wrapped himself around me so tightly I couldn't hit him anymore. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me so tight into his body that I could feel his rapid heartbeat.

The heat of his body and the strength I knew he supported me with was my undoing and my screams turned to sobs as I just literally crumpled against him and sobbed desperate howling sobs into his coat. All fight left me and my exhausted body gave in. Jack scooped me up when my legs gave out and supported my bottom with one arm as he continued to press me against his chest with the other.

I could hear Jack talking to me soothingly, but I was too far gone to make out the words. Eventually I ran out of energy to even sob anymore. Then it was just tears and the odd sniffle as the same heartbreaking thoughts continued to play on a loop through my frazzled mind. And then one very clear one that screamed at me over the others. If Colt was gone, then what was I even fighting to live for anymore? Why was I even trying? I hadn't wanted to let him down before when things got so dark I had considered just ending it all, but if he was gone then I couldn't let him down

anymore, could I?

CHAPTER 12

DEACON

“How could she be so sure?” I asked. We were all at Jack’s place and I was once again pacing up and down nervously, worried sick about Ava and Colt too. “There’s no way any of the Owen family just openly admitted to an ex-cop that they murdered her brother,” I added.

“Like I said, we don’t know, mate. She was completely distraught and the only thing she said...well screamed actually, was that he was dead. She was losing it. She only calmed down because she crashed, too exhausted to carry on,” Jack sighed from where he was perched on the edge of his sofa, nervously running his hands through his wild hair.

“What the fuck are we going to do if he is dead? You saw her today, Jack. I don’t think she’ll survive if Colt really is gone. I don’t even think she’ll want to try to,” Deacon said, and I could hear the fear in his words. It was the same fear running through my own panicked mind again and again. Ava hadn’t cared one iota about her own safety earlier, before she set off to walk into the office of a known criminal. After everything she’d been through she was on the edge and we all knew it. Losing Colt was that final push and we knew that too.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:52 am

“Whatever we have to. Mason was right earlier – we are not losing her again,” Jack replied determinedly.

“Did you find anything on the psycho who killed that girl and hurt Ava?” Deacon asked.

“I got the files on the murder of Helen Waters and I brought them for Ava to look over, but I don’t think there’s anything there. Homicide worked that investigation for months and they got no real leads.”

“So if this psycho does have Colt, we have no way of finding him?” Jack met my eyes as he spoke, and I saw the fear all over his face too. Colt was either dead or in deep shit, and we had no leads to get him back before it was too late, if it wasn’t too late already.

“We have Ava. She saw this guy and she survived. That’s more than the detectives who worked Helen’s case had.” I was trying to sound positive and hopeful, but even I knew from what Ava had told me earlier about her attack, that she had very little we could work with.

“I should check on her,” Jack said with a deep sigh.

Ava was fast asleep in the room at Jack’s that she had stayed in already. Jack had explained she hadn’t even stirred as he carried her into his place and pulled off her shoes and jeans, just trying to make her more comfortable. I knew she had to have been exhausted. She’d had one hell of a day, and we didn’t even know what she’d discovered yet. At all of that the frailty of her body and I was amazed she had

lasted as long as she had.

I found myself following Jack down the hall and stopping in the doorway as he crept silently into her room. The room was lit by a small lamp beside the bed, so I could just make out the tiny bundle in the center of the King bed. She was still fast asleep and breathing steadily, a heavy blanket wrapped around her.

She looked so young laid there. It blew my mind how much she thought she had changed. Yes, she was a little older – we all were – but she was still every bit as beautiful as she had always been. Her face was slimmer and she looked tired, but her eyes were still that perfect shade of azure blue, and they came to life when she was angry. I remembered the way those eyes would sparkle with mischief when she smiled and laughed when she was younger. I remembered the way they would widen in excitement and joy when Jack and I dominated her and finally allowed her the freedom she desperately needed to just let go of all of the control she clung to so hard in every single aspect of her life except the hours she spent with us. I hated how pale and thin she looked, but only because it terrified me. I wanted to see the color in her cheeks that had been there a decade earlier. I wanted to run my hand over the luscious curves she once had and know she was healthy and happy, as she had been back then.

She stirred slightly as Jack tucked the blanket tighter around her and I fixated on the slight pout of her perfect pink lips. I wanted to kiss her so she would remember who she belonged to. I wanted to gather her in my arms and protect her from every single thing that had ever hurt her. I wanted her to believe me when I told her I would never ever allow anything or anyone to hurt her ever again.

“She’s alright, Mace. Let’s allow her to sleep, okay?” Jack told me as he approached me. I nodded and stepped back from the door so he could exit and close the door quietly behind us.

“I love her Jack. I love her so fucking much. She’s not running from us again. I won’t

let her,” I told him as we stopped outside her room and looked to each other.

“I know. I love her too. We’re going to be here for her this time, whatever comes. We’re going to show her that we’re hers and that’s never going to change.”

“And Colt?”

“We do everything we can to get him back, and if we can’t...well then we cross that bridge when we get to it,” he sighed as he clamed a hand on my shoulder hard, then walked past me, back to the living room.

“Just don’t be fucking dead Colt, please,” I uttered into the ether. Ava needed him more than she would ever be willing to admit, and I did too if I were honest. Jack was right. I had to focus on doing everything I could to bring him back to her, and to all of us.

AVA

I had no idea how long I had been asleep, but I did know I’d woken myself up screaming out for Colt. My sleep had been plagued with my usual nightmares, but this time, in each and every one of them Colt had appeared and I had been unable to save him.

The door was thrown open and the lights over head snapped on, almost blinding me before I could even get my bearings.

I glanced up, blinking rapidly as the bright light burned at my eyes and saw Mason hurrying towards me in nothing but a pair of checkered PJ pants.

“Jesus fuck!” I hissed. ”Turn the damned light off. I need my fucking retinas to see!” I lowered my head again as I threw an arm over my eyes dramatically.

“Shit! Sorry,” Mace said. I sighed with relief as the bright light flicked off again. I dropped my arm and opened my eyes, looking around me as my vision adjusted the dim light coming from the slightly ajar bathroom door.

“Are you okay? I heard you cry out?” he asked and I felt the bed dip on my right side as he settled his weight down on the edge.

“Just a nightmare,” I brushed him off as I tried to calm my rapid breathing and hide my shaking hands under the blanket I was wrapped in. “I’m good. We’re at Jack’s?”

“Yeah. His place is the biggest and none of us wanted to leave you after...well after what happened.”

“After I lost it, you mean?” I scoffed.

“Did you get hurt? Jack checked you over for injuries, but he couldn’t see anything? What the fuck happened when you met Owens?” he demanded, but his tone was gentler than it had been with me previously since I came back.

“No I wasn’t fucking hurt!” I snapped as I pushed myself up to sitting and leaned back against the headboard. I was feeling shaky and my pain was at a definite nine out of ten. I knew it was the result of a sleep filled with my tossing and turning and fighting the attackers in my nightmares. “And what do you mean Jack checked me over?” I pulled back the blanket and studied my clothes, which had changed from earlier. I was now in an oversized T-shirt I assumed was Jack’s and my legs were bare. “Did you get a good look at me while I was unconscious too?” I growled and I wrapped the blanket even tighter around me, mortified any of them had seen the emaciated, scarred wreckage that remained of my body.

“Ava, enough! You know we’d never treat you that way. We were just worried and you were unconscious. Jack was the only one in here, and he just looked for injuries,

then changed you into something more comfortable. You used to trust us implicitly. When did that change?" he asked, and even in the dim light I could see the disappointment on his face.

"I was a naive idiot back then. Things have changed," I shrugged, faking an indifference I really didn't feel. I hated that I had hurt Mason with my sharp words. I'd thrown them at him because I felt weak and vulnerable and I didn't want him to see that side of me any more than he already had.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“Things may have changed, but I haven’t. Jack hasn’t. We’re still the guys you knew before and no matter what you can always trust us to respect and protect you, no matter how hard you push us away,” he told me firmly.

I lowered my head and focused on the herringbone pattern of the thick wool blanket as guilt filled me. I knew what he was telling me already. I had known it the moment I saw he and Jack in the club again for the first time in over a decade. They were good, honest, and trustworthy men. I hated that Mason now doubted that I felt that way, and Jack too in all likelihood. I hated that I had been such a bitch to them, but they couldn’t get close. Losing them again would destroy me and I was barely clinging on as it was.

They had told me they wanted me – that they loved me supposedly – but they couldn’t know that. They didn’t even know me. Allowing them back into my heart was a risk I couldn’t take – not when I knew how likely was to all end in tears.

But that didn’t mean I had to keep on being the bitch that the last decade of my life had hardened me into. I did trust them, and right then, when I had no clue if my brother was alive or dead, I needed them more than ever.

“I know that,” I whispered, but I didn’t lift my eyes back up to Mason again. I didn’t want to see the hurt on his features again. “I Trust you guys, okay? I’m sorry I s-said that. I didn’t mean it,” I admitted.

“Look at me, baby,” he urged as he covered my blanket covered knee with his huge hand. I took a breath and then lifted my head until my eyes met his. “I get it, you know?”

“Get what?”

“This need you have to protect yourself. This compulsion to be strong and not show anyone a single chink of weakness. After everything you’ve been through I understand that you feel the need to protect yourself and I respect the hell out of it too. You’re so damned tough. You always have been. That was why we started playing together. Do you remember? Me, you, and Jack? You said you wanted to just let go sometimes. You said you wanted to not be the one in control of everything for a little while. You trusted us to protect you while you did that. You trusted us to always catch you when you let go, and you gave in to our dominance, knowing we’d never exploit it or hurt you.”

“I can’t do that anymore, Mason. That monster...he hurt me so badly and I...even being in the club almost made me lose my shit,” I tried to explain, even just the thought of being bound or restrained making my breathing speed up instantly. There was no way I could ever go back to the scenes I used to be a part of with Mason and Jack. Back then I had adored being restrained and at their mercy as they sensually flogged my back, ass, and thighs. I had been able to find so much pleasure and release in the expertly given pain Mason and Jack could dole out, and they had known my every expression, never pushing me past what I could tolerate. I had flown with the two of them controlling my every move and impulse, many times. Now just the thought of any of that terrified me after the torture that monster had inflicted on me that night.

“Easy. Just breathe for me, Ava. You’re okay. You’re here with me and I’m not going to let anything happen to you, am I?” Mason was right beside me before I even felt him move. He cupped my face between his hands and locked his eyes on mine. I didn’t realize how much I was panicking until that second. My breathing was short and panicked and I was shaking head to toe as a sweat broke out over my entire body.

“Look at me, baby,” Mason said softly when I tried to move my eyes from his. “Say

my name for me.”

“Mason,” I gasped in little more than a whisper.

“That’s right. Keep looking at me and slow that breathing down.”

“I’m okay,” I lied as I tried to move from his grip, but he wasn’t letting me go.

“Just stop. No moving. Just stay right there until I say,” he ordered in a slightly firmer tone, and my body automatically responded to it as I relaxed back as much as I could and stopped struggling.

“That’s right. There’s my good girl,” he soothed as he moved one of his hands from the left side of my face and slipped it down to my wrist where he seemed to be feeling for my pulse. He used to do that after we finished a scene. Jack would wrap my in a blanket and cradle me against his chest as Mason gave me small sips of water and kept a close watch on me, taking my pulse every few minutes to monitor the come down from the high they’d taken me to.

As he held my wrist, there in that moment, I found a familiar comfort in it and I wished Jack was there too, holding me tight and close to his warm and strong body, making me feel safe and completely at peace in only the way he and Mace could.

Just the memory of that small amount of peace I had known all of those years ago was enough to have me slowing down my mind and my breathing.

“Tis is what I was getting to, baby. This is what you need. I know you’re different now, and experiences have changed what you want and need sexually, but this...” Mason said as he smoothed his fingers over my slightly sweaty forehead and looked deep into my eyes. “...this peace you find when you give up just a little control, you still need this. Jack and I can give you this, without any of the things that scare you

now. We don't need any of that either. All we need is this – you surrendering some of that stubborn independence and allowing us to take care of you. Trusting us to keep you safe while you allow yourself to let go of all of that control you cling so hard to. Don't you want that Ava? You must be so tired of fighting to be strong all of the time.”

“I am,” I whimpered as tears filled my eyes and poured rapidly down my cheeks. I was exhausted if I were honest and so very alone. I wanted what he was offering so desperately.

“I know you are,” he whispered. “It's okay to come to Jack and me when you need to just let go. It's okay to let us take control for a little while. It doesn't have to be anything more than allowing us to hold you right now. We love you. All we want is to protect and care for you as much as you'll allow us to.” I closed my eyes and gave into what my mind and body had been trying to tell me for so long now. I was running on empty and I couldn't keep doing that for much longer. I needed what Mason was so willing to give and I had to take it.

“W-will you just hold me? Please?” I sniffled.

“Always, baby girl.” Mason stood and walked around the bed so he could climb in at my other side. He slid under the blanket and grabbed my waist, pulling me close until I was laid half on top of him. I tried not to make a sound as pain shot up my already throbbing back at the movement, but the pain was severe and a squeak escaped me. “Ava?” Mason had frozen any movement as he awaited my response.

“I'm okay,” I gasped.

“You're in pain.”

“It'll stop,” I told him urgently. “Please just don't move. Please Mason.” I wrapped

my arm across his waist and clung to him tightly as more tears flowed. "I need this. I need you more than I need anything else right now."

"Sshh," he soothed as he gently ran his hand through my untamed hair. I knew he could hear my desperate whimpers as I clung to him with everything I had. I needed him right where he was. I needed to feel his bare skin beneath me and to hear his heart beat under my ear. I needed to know I wasn't alone. "I'm staying right here, Ava. I'm going to hold you and you're going to go back to sleep for me, okay? You need to rest."

"Colt," I pushed out through a tight throat as I finally acknowledged what I had been trying so hard not to since the second I opened my eyes. "Owen...he doesn't have him. He never had him. He does," I uttered tearfully. "We-we're gonna be too late, Mace. That sick monster is g-going to....to k-kill him. I've already lost him," I said as my body started to shake with sobs once again.

"No. I know Colt. If there's any way he can hold on, he will, and we are going to work like hell to find him. If there's any chance we can get him back, then we're never going to stop trying. You hear me, baby? I'm not giving up on him and you won't either. We keep searching and hoping until there is proof that it's fruitless, okay?" he told me firmly.

"Yeah, okay," I agreed shakily. He was right. Colt was tough and resourceful. I was failing him all over again by giving up on him. I had to do everything possible to hunt him down until I had proof that he was gone. "Until we have proof," I added with a single nod. My eyes were heavy and the exhaustion was pulling me under fast as my body gave up on me once again.

“Mace?”

“Yeah baby?”

“I l-love you. Always have. I wish things were different.” I wasn’t even sure the words had come out as my eyes closed, but then I heard his reply.

“I love you too. I’m going to make everything okay for us all. I promise.”

CHAPTER 13

AVA

“Hey,” I greeted as I walked into the living room and found Mason, Jack, and Deacon all up already. Jack was at the stove cooking something and Deak looked to be making coffee. Mason sat at the counter looking intently at his laptop, but he stopped and turned to me when I spoke.

I hadn’t gotten dressed. As soon as I had opened my eyes I knew I wasn’t going to have a good day health wise. My back was already aching angrily before I even sat up and the second I moved my legs, my right thigh had gone into an agonizing spasm. My head pounded too, but I knew that was likely the result of my meltdown the day before, and during the night with Mason.

So getting dressed had been a no-no. Getting showered and dressed was an impossibility. I hadn’t even tried to take my pills yet because my hands were shaking so hard I knew I had no chance of even opening the bottles, let alone holding the

pills. My body was exhausted and it was determined to prove it to me that morning apparently.

“Morning love. Are you alright?” Jack asked, and he was already rounding the counter and moving towards me. It wasn’t like he even needed to ask. I was sure from the heavy way I leant against my stick and the violent shaking of my body that I was far from alright.

I knew how pathetic I had to look as I stood there, just barely. All I wore was the oversized t-shirt Jack had changed me into the day before. My skin was so pale, and my bare legs which they could all now see were pale, way too thin, and covered in dark mottled bruises of varying ages from the countless times I stumbled into objects, or fell over completely. I hated showing them myself in that state, but I’d had little choice that morning. Just getting to where I stood was a miracle in the state my body was. I had thought about just locking the bedroom door and hiding from them all for the day, but Mason’s words from the night before had resonated with me, and I had opted to push through my shame and embarrassment to instead put my trust in him and Jack. Deak too, since he was there and seeing me at such a low point.

“Bad day,” I shakily told Jack, even my voice sounding weak and lame. He was before me now and he wrapped his arm around my back instantly, taking some of my weight and helping me to maintain my balance.

“Bad day?” Deak questioned, and when I turned from Jack, I found he was close to me too now.

“My injury. I have good days and bad days with the pain and other symptoms,” I clarified. “This is definitely a bad day.” I ground my teeth together as the spasms in my thigh got even worse, and the pain started to shoot up the center of my back. I’d have collapsed to the floor if Jack hadn’t been there to keep me upright. “Sorry,” I gasped as I looked to him with embarrassment.

“You’ve been pushing too hard, Haven’t you? This last couple of days is finally taking it’s toll,” Mason said from where he still sat at the counter facing me.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I think so. I don’t th-think it’s been this bad before.” My body was jumping slightly with every stab of pain up my back, and the pain took my breath away.

“Tell us what we can do to make it better, sweetheart,” Deak asked as he came closer and ran his enormous hand down my wild hair soothingly.

“I n-need my meds....but I...I might need some help.” I couldn’t even look any of them in the eye as I said those horrifying words. How hard could it be to take some pills, and yet I needed help to do it!

“I’ll grab them,” Deak said as he hurried off towards my room.

“Where’s the pain coming from?” Jack asked me as he carefully lifted me up into his arms bridal style and moved to sit on the sofa with me on his lap. I sighed at the relief of not trying to stand any longer.

“My right thigh...it’s in spasm and my back...shooting pain up m-my back,” I stuttered out between hisses of and gasps of agony.

I closed my eyes to try and focus myself so I could get it together somewhat, but moments later they shot open in shock as I felt strong hands wrapping around my right thigh and applying pressure. I was surprised to find Mason on his knees before me. He’d thrown off the charcoal vest from his three piece suit and rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt.

“Mason...”

“Sshh baby. Just lean into Jack and try to relax for us. Tell me if I’m hurting you, okay?”

“You’re really not,” I sighed as the spasm seemed to ease off almost instantly as he massaged my leg with force, but not so much that it hurt me. It was just what I needed and his slightly rough hands against my skin was the distraction I needed from everything else going on. Damn, those hands felt so good and I was getting turned on with every single movement of them. Just the sight of his dark skin against my pale white, and the sheer size of them against my skinny thigh was enough to have me wishing I could press my thighs together to ease the ache. Add in the blessed relief he was giving me from the pain and I was a mess.

“Is that helping, Ave?” Jack asked and I just nodded as I pressed my face into his chest and tried to relax against him as Mason had told me to.

I had forgotten how easily I could fall into submission with the two of them. Just the authority Mason could push into his voice, even while still sounding gentle as he had that morning, had always instantly made me feel able to let go and stop thinking. When I gave in to Jack and Mason I was able to feel free of worry and control. All I had to do was follow their instructions, always knowing I was safe with them. Of course I always held the ultimate control with my safe word. Mine had always been ‘pickles’ and Mace, Jack and I had all agreed that if that word ever came from my mouth everything would stop. I had never needed to use it with them, but I had never doubted they would stop everything if I ever needed to.

Laid there in Jack’s arms, doing as Mason had gently directed me to was very different from the scene we used to do together a decade before, but it was still giving me what I had craved all those years ago – the ability to just stop thinking and simply be. It gave me the safety to finally just let go for once, and I had needed that for so, so long.

In the decade we'd been apart I'd had sex. I wasn't a nun. I'd even had a few brief relationships, but they had never been anything close to the dynamic Mason, Jack and I had once shared – not that we'd ever had full sex in our sessions together. Without them, and with my demons haunting me, sex had always just been sex since I left New York. It scratched an itch most of the time, but it never gave me what I had in that moment. It never gave me the peace and safety I had from Mason's gentle commands.

After the attack and hell I had endured in that one night I had told myself I would never ever need submission in my life again. That monster had made me realise that I always needed to be in control at all times. Letting go and trusting in others as fully as I would need to, to submit was never an option. But with Jack and Mace it was, and I realized as I lay there that I needed it. I needed to have the ability to just let go, and Jack and Mason were the only two guys I trusted enough to give me it.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“Okay honey. I have your pills. Can you tell me what you need to take?” Deacon asked as he came ack into the room and dropped to the floor beside Mason, in front of me. I smiled at him gratefully and realized I was coming to trust him too. It was so unlike me, especially since I barely knew him, but he had been so good to me since the moment I met him, and there was an honesty and goodness that him that was impossible to miss. Sure, on first appearance his sheer size and width made him look intimidating as hell, but under all of that was a gentle man who I was coming to like very much, no matter how much I tried to tell myself I shouldn’t.

The three of them were all watching and listening intently as I told Deacon what I needed to take. There were so many pills it was a miracle that I didn’t rattle when I moved after taking them, and again I felt ashamed that I needed so many drugs just to function.

“When you’re feeling up to it I want you to go through all of your drugs with me, okay darlin’?” Jack spoke up. I loved the way he called me ‘darlin’ with his thick London accent. He wasn’t posh British like you heard in Downton Abbey or any of those other fancy English shows I secretly loved to watch. Jack had told me he was from the East of London, and apparently that was where his accent came from. I hadn’t heard another like it before, but I loved every word he uttered. It was all him and it made me feel all warm inside just to hear it.

“Why?”

“I want to make some notes so we’ll know what tablets you need on days like this one. I want to make sure we have all the information we need to look after you,” he explained.

“I won’t be here that long, Jack.”

“Yes, you will,” Mason told me flatly. “You’re home now, and we’re not letting you leave us again.”

“Mace...” I sighed, but was cut off.

“Let’s not talk about this now,” Jack intervened. “Priority number one is taking care of Ave. Two is finding Colt. The rest can wait, right?”

I nodded my agreement, as did Mace, but I could tell the subject was far from dropped. Mason was so determined that we were going to make everything work and live happily ever after, but I didn’t understand why he didn’t see how impossible that was. Surely the state I woke in that morning was proof enough for him that my life could never be normal.

I sighed deeply, pushing my confusion to the back of my mind. It could wait. Jack was right about that. Finding Colt had to be my first priority.

“The Owen’s were looking for Colt because he’d been poking into their operation. Apparently he’d been to a few of their clubs, asking questions they didn’t like. They were hunting him down to see what he knew, but they never found him. Owens was pissed about that, so I believe they never found Colt,” I explained.

“Did they put hands on you?” Mason almost growled, now looking even more pissed.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle. The point is, they don’t have Colt, so now we need to find the fucker who hurt me and fast. He has to be the one who grabbed Colt. Maybe he thought Colt was on to him, or maybe it was just random and he saw Colt at the club, but I’m sure he has him.” I forced myself to push back my own flashbacks and just breathe. I refused to allow my past to overtake me again. I had allowed it to

happen too many times since I returned to the city and it needed to stop. I needed to get back control of my own mind.

“So where do we start?” Deacon asked from where he had moved to sit in an armchair after helping me take my meds. Jack was still holding me in his lap, but I was sat up against him now, my back resting against his front, and Mason was still massaging my thigh. Thankfully, my pain seemed to be easing slightly, at least enough to allow me to think clearly and breathe.

“Mace, you said the last ping from Colt’s cell was near Temple, right?” I questioned.

“Yeah. According to call logs he called and left Jack and I voicemails, then made one more call before his cell was shut off. That the last signal we have.”

“The other missing people made calls, sent emails, and left voicemails too. I think this guy forces his victims to do that so people won’t look for them,” I explained.

“That makes sense,” Jack agreed as Mason nodded.

“I also think he likely grabs his victims after they leave the clubs. It makes sense. It’s usually late and dark. That’s when he grabbed me,” I went on.

“Time to repent,” The deep scratchy voice reverberated through my head as I once again saw myself on the cold, damp concrete, terrified and trying to escape the monster who had jumped out at me.

“Love?” Jack’s voice ripped me from the horror of the past and back to reality. I looked up at him and tried to hide my slightly panicked breathing.

“I’m okay,” I reassured him when I saw he was watching me with concern.

“Ava, I can deal with this investigation. You don’t need to put yourself through it, sweetheart,” Mason told me as he moved his hands from my thigh and cupped my face with them instead. “You’re exhausted and dealing with this is only going to bring back more horrid memories for you. You don’t have to do this. I can find Colt and the fucker who took him. I will find them,” he told me.

“I know you can,” I assured him as I wrapped my shaking hand around his wide wrist and looked right into his beautiful deep dark eyes. “But I have to do this Mason. I have to do everything I can to find my brother and you know it.”

“I do,” he nodded. “I was just hoping.”

“I can handle this, Mace. I’m a mess and you’re right it’s going to bring up some dark shit for me, but I can deal with it.”

“We’re going to be with you every single step of the way,” Jack promised me as he held me even tighter.

“That includes me. I’m going nowhere, sweetheart,” Deak added. I looked over to him and smiled gratefully, knowing how lucky I was that they all were there for me. I didn’t, however, miss the way Mason stared daggers at Deacon when he thought I wasn’t looking.

“So you want to gather surveillance footage from the club cameras? Is that where you were going with your idea?” Mason asked, and I was glad to get back to what mattered.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“Yes. I know most clubs won’t have the footage anymore. Some of these disappearances were years ago, but I know Temple keeps footage for two years, so we should have it from the time Helen, Lee, and Colt went missing. If I saw this guy, I’m sure I’d recognize him,” I explained.

“I can start going through out membership lists. If this guy was watching his victims before he grabbed them, maybe he came into the club?” Jack suggested. “We do basic background checkson all members but I know a bloke who might be able to dig a little deeper.”

“Do it Jack,” Mason agreed with a nod. “I’ll call the station and have some colleagues start trying to track down footage from other clubs.”

“I need to call Ky and update him, not that we have any good news,” I sighed deeply.

“Ky?” Mason questioned.

“K.M. The initials in Colt’s diary. I figured it out. Ky, or Kylan Morton is Colt’s fiancé. He was planning to come out to me. That’s why he was calling me. He wanted to bring his relationship out int the open.”

“Are you sure he don’t have anything to do with this? When did you even meet him?”

“I’m sure, Mace. He was completely devastated to find out Colt was missing. He loves him, that much was clear.”

“Why the bloody hell would Colt think he needed to hide the fact he was dating a guy

from us? Surely he must know we wouldn't care?" Jack asked.

"His asshole Dad. That bastard would have made damn sure Colt felt unable to be honest about his sexuality. He was such an asshole, always trying to shape Colt into what he wanted him to be," Mason answered.

"Exactly," I agreed. "The man was a monster and tyrant. The kindest thing he ever did for Colt and I was to die pretty young." I hissed. I hated even thinking about the asshole who fathered me. I would never think of him as my actual father. "Anyway, we have work to do. Jack, can you get the membership lists up and we'll start picking out applications we think need looking into deeper?"

"I've got it all on my laptop at the club. I'll need to go and pick it up."

"You do that and can you get the surveillance footage from Templetoo? I'll call in and get some officers working on gathering the footage we need from the other clubs."

"Can't you get membership lists from those clubs too, so we could cross reference who has membership at them all?" Deacon suggested.

"We'd need a warrant for that," I told him. "It's better for Colt if we keep this investigation on the down low."

"If we turn this into a big, official investigation the press will quickly get wind of it. If the guy sees we're looking for him and panics, then he could kill Colt and run. We have to keep this quiet," Mason added and I shuddered at just the words he spoke about Colt being killed. I had to believe he was still alive. It was the only way I could keep functioning.

"Yeah, okay. I get that. I can go with Jack and get the surveillance footage though. I know the system better," Deak offered and Mason nodded.

“Let’s get moving then. Mace, you need to make Ava something to eat before she does anything though. Can you handle that?” Jack asked with a small chuckle.

“Ava can make herself something to eat,” I retorted as I glared up at Jack.

“No you don’t. You’re resting today, no arguments. You can help Jack when he gets back, just so long as you can d it from the sofa. You have to let your body rest,” Mason said firmly. “And yes, Jack. I’m quite capable of making something for breakfast,” he added as he looked over my head menacingly.

“Just asking. You can’t blame me! Last time you were here you broke my bloody toaster,” Jack defended.

“It was old as shit and you know it!” Mason threw back, making me laugh out loud.

“Fine.” Jack stood and placed me down in the warm seat he’d just vacated, wrapping a blanket tightly around me which he pulled from the back of the sofa. “Rest. Let Mason take care of you. I’ll be back soon.”

“Just be careful. Owens said he’d back off, but we still don’t know what this psycho sonofabitch is capable of,” I warned as I covered his hand where it rested on my hip.

“You know I can look after myself, love, plus I’ll have the big guy with me,” He said as he nodded to where Deacon now stood beside him. “We’ll be fine.” He leaned in and plated a gentle kiss on my cheek. The smell of his aftershave wrapped around me and I found myself grabbing the collar of his navy shirt without thinking. I pulled him back down and chastely kissed his lips. I couldn’t have stopped myself if I’d have tried to. Jack was only shocked for a second before he leaned even closer and kissed me back, again just a peck, but we were both smiling when he stood up and backed away a few steps. “Be good,” he told me playfully as he pointed a finger at me.

“You know me,” I told him with a shrug.

“She’ll be good,” Mason said as he appeared at Jack’s side and stared me down. I had no idea what I was doing playing with them as I was. I knew it couldn’t last, but it felt so good while I could have it. Have them. Even knowing I’d be hurt when it ended, I couldn’t hold back from the way I felt for them.

Then Deacon crouched before me and I found myself taking in every single inch of his handsome face. His dark hair was shining in the light coming through the windows and when he smiled softly for me, I almost melted there and then. He was devastatingly good looking, and he was also kind, patient and understanding. He made me feel safe the way Jack and Mason did, and I knew he shouldn’t after knowing him a matter of days, but he really did. Getting involved with him was a terrible idea, especially when I was already so caught up in Mace and Jack, but I couldn’t seem to stop the way my heart lurched every time he was close. I had feelings for him and I knew it. In just days I was falling for him.

“They’re right. Just try to rest, okay? Can I get you anything when I’m out?” he asked softly.

“I’m all good,” I told him. “Just watch your backs, okay? I can’t lose anyone else.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“I already told you honey, I’m not going anywhere.” He leaned into kiss my lips and I lifted to meet him halfway. I knew the other guys were watching, but I needed that. I needed to feel what it was like to kiss Deacon. Sadly, he kept it short with just a couple of pecks, but even that was enough to have me clamping my thighs together as need rushed over me.

“So this is a thing now?” Mason demanded as Deak pulled back and rose to his full height.

“Mace...” Jack tried.

“I don’t know what it is, Mason!” I cried, hating seeing the anger, and worse – hurt - on his face. “I don’t know what any of this is between any of us. All I know is that I feel safe with all of you. I have feelings for all of you. You all make me feel like things aren’t as terrifying and overwhelming as they really are right now, and I need that! I know how selfish that makes me, especially when I have no idea what I can offer the three of you in the future, but right now I need all of you!”

“I don’t care what you can offer me in the future, Ava. Right now I have feelings for you too, sweetheart. Really strong fucking feelings. I’m all in, and if you need all of us, then that doesn’t bother me, as long as I get to be with you too,” Deacon told me earnestly.

“Mason and I feel exactly the same, love. Just ignore Mason. He’s being a jealous wanker, but he will get over himself eventually,” Jack told me, glaring at Mason with every word he spoke. “If you want to see where things go with Deak then that’s fine, as long as you know Mason and I aren’t going anywhere.”

“I shouldn’t be seeing where anything goes with any of you!” I snapped as I sat up and lowered my legs to the floor. I wanted to stand and start pacing, but there was no way I had the strength or energy that morning. “I’m sorry. I don’t even know what I’m doing!” I buried my face in my hands and rested my elbows on my knees.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Deacon told me and I felt the sofa dip as he sat beside me and wrapped his arm around me.

“I do! I’m using all of you I have nothing to offer you after all of this is over. We’ve been through this. I’m a mess. You all can do so much better. I just...I was scared and so...so exhausted. It felt good to just give in to the way you each make me feel. It felt good to just stop fighting fucking everything for once. I’m so sorry. God, I’m such an asshole!”

“Jesus, love. Just take breath. You’re not an asshole,” Jack laughed as I felt him crouch before me, both of his warm hands landing on my bare knees. “I don’t understand how the bloody hell you ever convinced yourself you’re not good enough for us, but it’s crap, Ave. You’re beautiful and so damn strong and feisty. Everything I loved about you a decade ago is still right here in front of me. I know you have an injury, and yes, I get that it makes life difficult for you, but it will never change the way I feel about you. We can have a life together. We can have a future. Your thirty-four years old. You have to stop talking like there’s nothing left ahead for you.”

“He’s right. Your injury doesn’t change a damn thing for me either. I have loved you for over a decade Ava, and that will never change, even if you succeed in running from us again. There’s no one else on this earth for me except you. You have to start understanding that we mean what we’re telling you. You have to stop seeing all of the negative and believe what Jack said – that we can all have an amazing future if you’ll just look forwards instead of back,” Mason added. When I finally lifted my head I found him stood behind Jack with his arms folded over his chest. He was staring at me like I was a challenge he would never allow himself to fail.

“But you and Jack... you need more than I can offer you anymore. I could never be wh...”

“No!” Mason cut me off firmly. “No more of this. Jack and I don’t need to inflict a little pain like we used to at the club. We did that because it was what you needed at the time, but for the both of us our dominant sides are just about control, not about pain. I know you can’t do that anymore, sweetheart. I know your scars aren’t just the ones that we can see, but you can still submit for me, and for Jack too, I’m sure. You already have, several times.”

“We don’t need clubs or the scenes, Ava. Mason is right. If you can allow me to have some control, especially in the bedroom, that’s all I need. That and you. Not only do I know you can give me that, love. I think you need it. I think you need to be able to let go of the tight grip you have on everything sometimes, and just let us take over, don’t you?” Jack asked, and I was nodding before I even thought through what that admittance meant.

“Sometimes,” I added in little more than a whisper. “But my body. There’ll be days when I won’t even be capable of having sex. I don’t think there’s even a chance I could have kids in this amazing future you seem to planning for all of us. I don’t think I’d be able to carry them. Fuck guys, I can’t even drag myself out of bed half the time. You can all do much, much better than me, and that’s not me feeling sorry for myself. It’s just the truth.”

“There is no better than you. Not for me,” Mason told me.

“Me either. I agree with Mason. You’re mine, and even if I can never have you, I’ll never give up hope, and I will never settle down with anyone other than you. Mace and I will just have to grow old together,” he joked, making me smile.

“Ava. I know we barely know each other and this is all new, so I won’t make any of

the forever promises these two assholes are making, but I want to have the chance to get to know you, and if these two have to be a part of that, then I'm good with it too. Your injury, and nothing else you just said puts me off in any way. I just want to have a chance with you, sweetheart."

"You fucking guys and your sweet words," I sniffled as I swiped the tears from my eyes. I needed to get it together. I had barely cried in a decade before I returned to that city. Now I couldn't seem to stop.

"We don't have to decide anything here and now. Just say you'll stop trying to push away and see how things go, okay? Let us be here for you and take care of you. Let us show you how amazing, beautiful, and sexy we all think you are. Just give us a chance?" Jack almost pleaded.

"Fine," I sighed. "I'll stop trying to push you away, as long as you all promise to stop looking at me with rose tinted glasses and actually start considering what a future with me would really be like. Trust me, it will not be a cake walk. My medical issues are only the tip of the iceberg. I never lied or exaggerated every single time I told you I am completely messed up." They all looked to me with varying looks of annoyance, but when I stared them down they eventually gave nods. I just hoped they were listening to me because I didn't want to get into a relationship with any of them only to be abandoned down the line when my issues became too much. I couldn't go through that.

CHAPTER 14

JACK

I yawned as I hit send on the email I had just composed. It was filled with the applications of club members Ava and I had spent all afternoon picking out as files that needed diving deeper into. They were all men, most of whom had given the

absolute bare minimum of information on their forms. They were agreed between late twenties to late forties, since that was the most Ava could narrow the age down from what she had seen of the bastard who took her.

If there was anything to be found there Johnny – a tech guy I had worked with in my old life back home in good old blighty – would find it.

“Is she out?” Mason asked as he walked in and glanced down at where Ava had fallen asleep on the sofa over an hour before. She had been exhausted, but I hadn’t pushed her to go to bed as I wanted to. I had just allowed her to drop off where she sat, then repositioned her across the sofa so she would be more comfortable.

The dom in me was driving me to take a firm hand with her, which she clearly needed. She had barely eaten a thing all day and the only way she’d kept her eyes open was because she’d been plying herself with coffee. She was pushing too hard and we all knew it, but I was scared if I went too hard I’d push her away and I couldn’t risk that. She’d agreed to try with us, and that was something I wasn’t going to take lightly.

“Finally. I don’t think she had anything left in her,” I sighed. “I should have taken her to her room hours ago, but I’m scared to push too hard. Do we even know what her triggers are? I don’t want to scare her, or give her reason to hate me again.” I rose to my feet and followed Mace into the kitchen. He started making coffee and I handed him my mug, in desperate need of a caffeine injection.

“I think her triggers are linked to pain. That fucker tortured her. The scars on her back are definitely from a whip, but I’ve seen smaller scars too, that I think were from a cat and nine tails. I don’t think she’ll ever be into the kind of pain she craved before, and mentioning the idea definitely sets her off,” he explained. “But I’ve given her gentle commands and she seems to follow them easily enough. I think she craves us taking over on a basic level right now. I think she needs it after a decade of trying to

control and micro manage every single aspect of her life. It's okay to push her a little," he told me.

"Okay," I nodded. "I've done some research on spinal injury specialists too. I think I found one she should see. Maybe there's more that can be done to ease her pain levels/" I suggested.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“I agree. I doubt that she got the best treatment with the shitty health insurance the police department offer, but I don’t think we should suggest it right now. The only thing she’s willing to focus on is Colt, and she is right. If that psycho has him, time is running out, if it hasn’t already,” Mace explained. I saw the worry and panic in his face, even though he was trying to hide it. To me Colt was one of my best buds, but Mason he was abrother, and losing him would devastate Mace almost as much as it would Ava.

“Did you find anything?” I asked. Mason had been in my office all afternoon, going through the surveillance footage his colleagues had gathered so far.

“I picked out the footage from the days before each disappearance, but I need Ava to sit with me as we watch it. She said she’d recognize him if she saw him so I’m hoping she was right and she picks him out fast.

“I watched the footage from Temple. It shows Colt leaving the night he left us the voicemails, but the cameras lose him just after he exits the club and I don’t see anyone following him. I’m just hoping Ava can spot him in the footage of the inside of the club on one of the day leading up to it.”

“She asked me to wake her when you were ready to start watching, but there’s no way I am. She needs to sleep,” I told him.

“I know, man, and I agree. Let her sleep. Did you send the applications to your contact?”

“Yeah. He said he’ll get back to me as soon as he has anything,” I replied.

“Good. Let’s hope me finds something. We should try to get some sleep too. The second Ava wakes she’s gonna want to get into that surveillance footage, no matter the time,” he pointed out.

“I’ll move her into the bed in the spare room,” I said as I flicked off the coffee maker, the both of us abandoning the coffee Mason had already started making.

“Where’s Deacon?”

“He had a shift at the club and he needed to draw up schedules for next week for the security team too. He said he’s sleep at his place tonight but wanted us to call if there was any update,” I explained. “He’s a good guy, Mace, and he really does seem to care about Ava,” I added when I saw the tense set of his jaw at even the mention of Deak.

“I don’t question any of that, but he barely knows Ava. He doesn’t have the right to come here and try to snatch her out from underneath us.”

“He’s not doing that and you know it. We’re not exactly in the relationship we want to be in with Ave. She’s fighting it, so he didn’t steal her, plus he was clear today. He’s willing to be a part of a relationship between the four of us if that’s what she needs and wants. I think I can be good with that if it does turn out to be what she needs,” I shrugged. I knew Deacon better than Mace, having worked with him at the club since he started running security, and even before that when he simply played at the club. He was a good man. I knew Colt was closer with him, and if Colt liked him, it was usually a good sign. Colt was an excellent judge of character.

“I don’t want to have to share her with anyone else. It always just clicked with the you, me, and her. It was like the first time we took her through that first scene and made her come apart and fucking fly so easily, it was just meant to be, you know? I’d never have even considering sharing a woman, but the three of us, it was undeniable.

We never should have waited for her to graduate before we told her how we felt. Everything could have been so different.”

“I know. I’ll regret that choice for the rest of my life, but at the time we both thought it was the right thing to do. She had big dreams and we didn’t want to fuck them up for her by distracting her at a key time. And I agree too that we were all meant to be. She’s ours Mason, but she has feelings for Deacon too and I don’t see how we can stop her from pursuing those. She’s had so much choice taken from her in her life. We can’t do anything to take any more of it.”

“You’re right,” Mason nodded. “But that doesn’t mean I like it.”

“Just try not to kill the guy. Play nice. Ava loves to play like she’s tough, but I see how much it breaks her when she thinks she’s upsetting one of us. We have to find a way to be okay with the possibility of Deacon being a part of our lives,” I pointed out.

“Why do you always have to be right?” He growled, but with a twinkle of humor in his eyes.

“Trust me pal, it’s hard bloody work,” I joked as I mocked wiping my brow down with the back of my hand.

“Fuck you, asshole!” he laughed as he gave me a shove. “I might head over to the my gym for a few hours. You good here?” I knew he was trying to find a way to deal with his anger at the idea of including Deacon in our relationship with her. I was too if I were honest, but I’d do whatever Ava needed as long as I got to have her as mine. I would rather have one third of her attention than live the rest of my life in mourning for her as I had for the last decade.

“Of course. Go do what you need to do. I’ll ring you if we need you back here,” I

assured him.

“I’ll keep my cell on me just in case,” he agreed as he grabbed his suit jacket from the back of one of the stools at the kitchen counter and shrugged it on, then he was gone.

I knew it would take time for him to deal with the anger and jealousy he felt about Ava having feelings for Deak too, but I also knew he would get there. Like me, he would soon realize he’d do whatever it took to have Ava in his life.

AVA

I had no idea what time it was when I awoke, but the room was dark, no light peeking around the slatted blinds at the window, so I knew it was early.

I sat up, surprised by how much better I felt, and how little pain I was in. I had some pain in my lower back and thighs, but it was minimal and it had been a long time since I awoke and was able to move as easily I did. It was a miracle after the nightmare day my body had dragged me through the day before, and I was not going to waste it.

Moving slowly and carefully so as not to exacerbate or set any other pain off I swiveled to sit on the edge of the bed and set to work pouring out the pills I needed to take, then threw them back with a sip from the water bottle sitting on the nightstand. I knew I was at Jack’s, but I had no memory of falling asleep or getting to bed in his guest room. I guessed one of the guys had carried me in there after I dozed off.

I was actually smiling when I stepped out of the shower a short while later. It had been the easiest shower I had in months and I still wasn’t feeling any pain. Maybe the day of rest the previous day had helped. There was also the fact I hadn’t been drinking for over twenty four hours, which I was sure probably helped allow my pills to function more accurately too. That thought made me realize how soundly I had

slept all night without alcohol to lull me there. It had been well over a year since that last happened, and I knew why. It was the guys – Jack, Mason, and Deacon. Knowing they were with me, and that they would protect me made me feel safe, not that I was going to tell them that. Jack and Mace already seemed to think they could charge in and rule my life as they pleased. I'd be pissed if I hadn't sort of given the permission to do just that the night before, when I admitted that I needed to be able to let go of control sometimes.

I sighed as I rubbed the towel through my freshly washed hair. I had no idea what was going on with me and the three of them, but I was in a tangle of thoughts that vacillated between scolding myself for leading them on and allowing any of it to happen, and basking in their attention, never wanting it to end. After so many years of fighting to be independent and never need anyone, not even my brother who fought like hell to take care of me, it felt freeing to just give in and let go. The issue was it also made me feel weak. Add to that my injury, which already made me weak, and the demons that never seemed far from invading my thoughts, and I hated the need I seemed to have to lean on Jack and Mace. Deacon too, if I were honest with myself.

I scoffed at myself at that thought though. Maybe trying to be independent and cutting everyone from my life, even Colt, had made me feel like I was stronger than I was, but it had all been a lie to myself and I knew it. I hadn't been stronger. I'd been hanging on by thin threads. I had been depressed and so alone. A few more months in the direction I was headed I'd have either been a full blown alcoholic, or have just ended all of my misery, drowning in the darkness once and for all.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

No. My self-induced isolation and fake strength hadn't really gotten me anywhere except alone and deep in misery. It had also been the cause of Colt getting himself in way too deep in all of the shit going on. It was the reason I now fear with every single breath I took, that I would never ever see my brother again. It was the cause of whatever hell he had endured and continued to endure.

I had to get him back. Maybe if I could save Colt and bring him home, then I would try to start again, and be less stupid and stubborn about it for once. If I could bring him home. If I couldn't? We'll then I was pretty sure I would never be able to live with the guilt I carried for cutting him from my life selfishly when he needed me most. I would never be able to live with the fact the monster who killed him still walked the streets because of my stupid fucking pride and fears. I cared for Deacon a lot, especially considering how little I knew him, and I loved Mason and Jack just as deeply as I had a decade before and every day since, but if my brother was gone then I already knew that love likely wouldn't be enough to make me keep living. Losing Colt would be final shove, casting me off of the cliff I had barely made myself hang on to for the last couple of years.

A knock at the closed door pulled me from my confused thoughts. I was still sat in a plain set of black panties and bra, rubbing at my hair in the hope I could get it dry enough to just tie back. Pulling out a hair dryer and hair products wasn't really my thing since the shooting. In fact, I really didn't care that much about my appearance at all any more. I didn't even own make up beyond a ChapStick.

"It's just me, love. Are you up?" Jack called through the door.

"Yeah, I'm up." I called back.

“Can I come in?” he asked with the hint of a chuckle. I looked down at my pale, thin frame and sighed deeply. On top of the ‘SIINER’ brand on my stomach, I also had the scar of a brutal bite mark on my left breast, and my back was a crisscrossed mess of scars from the multiple whips, canes, floggers and who knew what else I had been tortured with that night so long ago. Some of the scars curved around my sides too.

Before that night I used to find so much pleasure in the pain some of those items brought me when I played with Jack and Mason. We never used whips or anything that inflicted too much pain, but I’d enjoyed being flogged just enough to leave marks and give me the bite of pain that I needed to let go and just fly under Jack and Mace’s expert control. They never pushed me past what I could take and they had taken me to heights I never thought it possible to reach so many times that I longed for my next scene with them the second I left their arms after they slowly brought me back down to reality during aftercare. I had felt like we were made for each other back then. I was able to submit enough to their dominance that they both got what they needed and I always got what I needed from them, completely trusting them to protect me at all times. I had longed to tell them how I felt about them and for us all to take things further. I wanted to play with them outside of the club. I wanted to know what it would feel like when they fucked me. I had already known I wanted everything with them, even if a menage relationship would be a tricky thing to navigate. Then everything changed.

“Ave?”

“Yeah, sorry. You can come in,” I called back, realizing I’d zoned out. Maybe Jack seeing my body in the light of day would make him believe me when I told him I wasn’t the woman he remembered any longer. Maybe the scars would force him to believe me.

He opened the door just a little and popped his head in, looking over at me and then averting his eyes, which was incredibly out of character for him. He’d always been

the first to remove my clothes when we played together, always telling me he hated when I hid any part of myself from him.

“Sorry. I didn’t realize. Do you want me to wait outside?” he asked, his gaze now locked on the wall to the left.

“It’s not like you haven’t seen it before,” I scoffed. “I mean...most of it anyway.” Insecurity hit me as I realized he was likely being awkward because he didn’t want to see my scars. Maybe he wouldn’t be quite so eager for me to be without clothes as he used to be now I was damaged. “It’s fine if you need to wait in the hall or whatever. I won’t be long,” I added hurriedly as I dropped the towel in my lap and rearranged it to try and cover the brand on my stomach.

“I don’t need to wait in the hall, Ava. I just don’t want you to be uncomfortable,” he sighed as he glanced my way and focused on where I was awkwardly holding the towel over my front.

“It’s fine. I didn’t think about my scars. I get it. You don’t have to start backtracking,” I told him, trying to put up the guard I had stupidly allowed to drop the day before. “Just go and do something, would you? I’ll be out soon. You don’t have to check up on me like some toddler.”

“I’m coming in,” Jack said firmly, and before I could even argue he was in the room and slamming the door closed behind him.

“You’re gonna wake the whole damned building!” I snapped as I got to my feet and tried to move for my backpack, which held my last clean outfit. I wanted to get covered up as soon as possible. I had no idea why I had thought allowing him in was a good idea, but I suddenly felt way too vulnerable.

“Ava, stop.” Jack said. It wasn’t sharp and even firm, but I knew his dom voice when

I heard it, even after all of these years.

I wanted to ignore him, but my body had other ideas, clearly desperate for some control from him.

“I need to get dressed,” I argued, but I was frozen in place just a few feet from him now, the small towel from my hair clutched against my front.

“You’re not going anywhere until you explain to me what just happened,” he told me as he stopped so close I could feel the smooth cotton of his untucked white Oxford shirt brushing against my side. He placed his hand at the small of my back, then slid it up over my raised and puckered scars until he reached the nape of my neck.

“N-nothing happened,” I stuttered as I tried hard not to show how good his touch felt on my naked skin.

“Don’t lie to me, love. You know we doesn’t lie to each other,” he warned as he gently squeezed my nape in his large hand. “You invited me in, then when I hesitated for a moment, I lost you. Why?”

“Why did you hesitate?” I threw back as I forced myself to look up into his eyes.

“Remember who’s in control, Ava. I ask the questions. Stop trying to hide and tell me what just happened,” he pushed, and I saw the fire in his eyes. He craved being in control. It was what he needed - likely the result of his unstable childhood. I loved all sides of him. The caring, protective side he’d shown me since I arrived back in the city had been what I needed, but this – dom Jack – this was my favorite and the one I saw in my dreams. This was the side of him I would always need when I felt like things were beginning to spiral for me.

I sighed and tried to move away from him, thinking it would be easier to tell him the

truth if we weren't so close, but he wasn't going to allow that, and I wasn't going to fight his dominance. Quite the contrary – I needed it right then, and it was turning me on no end. I hadn't had sex for over two years, and I was pretty sure I had never had really good sex. Jack, Mason, and Deacon seemed to have relit my libido and then some.

“No love, no more running,” Jack said as he wrapped his free arm around my back and pulled me right into his front, holding me as close to his body as he could. He smelled and looked amazing, and I had no idea how. It was barely six A.M. for Christ's sake! Jack moved his hand from the nape of my neck and placed his finger under my chin, lifting my face until I was gazing up at him, just as he wanted me to. “No more hiding from us either. You can be as snarky and defensive as you need to be with others, but not with Mace and I. We know you too well, and we see right through it. Now, tell me what happened and why you tried to push me away again. You told us you'd stop doing that,” he reminded me with a questioning lift of his eyebrow.

“I've been taking care of myself for a really long time Jack, and that snark, as you called it, is what kept me safe. Just because I know you guys see through it, doesn't mean I can just drop it. It's a part of me now. My armor,” I tried to explain.

“You don't need armor now. You have us,” he told me as he moved his hand from under my chin and cupped my right cheek instead. I pressed into his touch and gave a weak nod. I knew they believed that, and I did too if I were honest, but that didn't mean I would drop everything that I had used for so long to try and protect myself. Having them at my back was everything, but it would never make me stop taking care of myself too.

“It was my scars,” I admitted, changing the subject. “When you looked in at me, then looked away, I thought it was because you couldn't face my scars. I mean... I get it if you feel that way. Who'd want to look at me in this state?” I laughed, but it fell

flat.

“Me. I want to look at you at all times, but especially when you’re showing me your beautiful, sexy as hell body. I don’t want to hear you talking like that again, do you understand? You’re perfect the way you are. Those scars just prove everything you’ve survived and remind me how lucky I am to have a bloody warrior as my woman.”

“A broken warrior maybe,” I scoffed.

“I told you I didn’t want to hear that crap anymore,” Jack hissed as he stared me down.

“It’s the truth Jack. I am broken, mind and body. It’s no use any of us denying that, because it’s a fight I have to deal with daily, and you will too if you really want to be with me.”

“Then it’s a fight we’ll all face together – You, me, and Mace. Deacon too if you want. No matter what comes, we’ll deal with it together, but now more doubting the way I feel about you. No more talk about your scars. I want you to see yourself the way I do. I want you to know how sexy and perfect you are, but we can work on it. For now, tell me how you’re feeling?”

“Better. Actually, I feel pretty good this morning. Better than I have in months. I guess I did need the rest.”

“You did. You pushed yourself way too hard. That’s not going to happen again, is it?” He asked with another raise of his eyebrow.

“I have to find Colt. I don’t have time to give in to my pathetic body!”

“We will all find Colt, darlin’ but you can’t keep pushing yourself to the point of losing consciousness. You have to take care of yourself and you have to let us help. When we do find Colt, he’s going to need you,” he pointed out.

“I have to be a part of finding him, Jack. I let him down so many times, but I won’t do it again. I have to do everything I can,” I argued as tears filled my eyes.

Jack wrapped his arms around me and I rested my head on his shoulder as the tears silently fell. I had my arms wrapped so tightly around him, but I needed that. I needed something solid to hold on to so I wouldn’t fall apart again.

“You’ve never let him down, Ave, but I know you need to be a part of getting him back and Mace and I would never stop you from doing that. We just want you to let us take care of you though. We’re not finding Colt at the cost of your health. He wouldn’t want that and you know it.”

I swiped at the tears covering my cheeks, then lifted my head to meet Jack’s eyes. He was looking down at me with concern, but he forced the hint of a smile when my eyes met his.

“I’m so scared,” I admitted as I locked my hands behind his neck and pressed my body against his. “S-scared we’ll be too late. I just...I don’t know what I’ll do if....” God, I couldn’t even say it. It hurt too much.

“Sshh, love. He’s a smart bloke. If there’s any way he can get away he will. There’s still time for us to find him. You have to cling to that hope.”

CHAPTER 15

AVA

Jack placed his hands under my thighs and lifted me until I was eye level with him. I’d have loved to wrap my legs around his hips, but stiff limbs wouldn’t allow me to do that. Instead I wrapped my arms tighter around him and pushed my chest against his, just needing his warmth and strength to comfort me.

Jack opened his mouth to say something to me, but he never got the chance as I slammed my mouth over his and kissed him with all of the emotion and need that was coursing through me. He started to kiss me back and I pushed my hands into his wild hair and pulled him even tighter against me as the kiss turned even more desperate. I wouldn't allow myself to think about whether I should be doing it, or if it was the right thing to do. All I could concentrate was my need to feel and I knew he could give me that.

As I grabbed his hair tighter and tighter, desperate to be closer, and closer still with every second that passed, I found myself grinding my center against his shirt, the friction caused by my panties against his shirt buttons enough to light a fire in my core.

My arms, which I was using to move my body against his became tired way too quickly and I pulled back from the kiss and looked at him pleadingly as a small squeak of desperation slipped from me.

"Please Jack," I pleaded.

"Tell me what you need, love."

"To feel. Make me feel, Jack, please. I don't....I can't think anymore. I can't," I gasped, almost begging as I pressed into his arms as close as humanly possible. I knew I had to be hurting him with how tight I gripped his shoulders now, but I was too scared to let go. I didn't want to fall apart again. I wanted him to make me feel something other than fear and loneliness.

"You sure?" he questioned as he pulled back and studied my face.

"Yes. I'm emotional Jack, but I know what I want. What I need. Please," I uttered as I pressed my lips against his again and kissed him in pecks again and again. I could taste

my tears between us, but thankfully they were stopping as my desire took over all rational thought.

“I’ve got you. I’ll make you feel, love,” he soothed as he wrapped his arm around my back, supporting me easily as he leaned down and lay me in the middle of the bed. “Triggers?” he questioned softly as he stood up again and started unbuttoning his shirt.

“Restraints,” I answered easily. Being tied up was not an option for me after that night. “No pain either. I...I don’t know what else,” I floundered. I hadn’t had anything other than a quickie since the last time I was with Mace and Jack in Temple years before. I had no idea what he had planned, so I didn’t know what could set off my fear response and anxiety.

“Okay. We’re not going to do anything like that any way. For now there’s no scene. No safe words. You tell me to stop instantly if anything makes you feel even slightly uncomfortable or worried, you hear me?” I nodded nervously. I had wanted this so desperately, but now I was feeling anxious. What if I lost it the second he was over me and he never wanted to try again? What if I ruined everything I had wanted for so many years. “You know how this works, Ava. I want to hear words,” he told me firmly.

“Y-yes. I understand,” I spoke, my voice slightly trembling.

“Good,” he nodded as he pulled his shirt open and slipped it off of his shoulders. The bright white revealed a perfect contrast of bronzed skin and tight muscle underneath. I gaped as I took him in. Jack had always been toned, but he had bulked up in the years we’d been apart and he had very clearly defined muscles now. His firm and very distinct six pack led up to tight, tattoo covered pecs, and his shoulders were wide and sculpted to perfection. Even his neck was more corded than it had been before. His tattoos covered most of his upper half, a mixture of script and images that he had

once told him all had different, but significant meaning to him. A huge dragon intertwined the images and rose up over his right shoulder and up onto the side of his neck. He was a work of art I could study for endless hours. His slightly wild and wavy blonde hair hung around his handsome face and those blue eyes seemed to shine even brighter in the light coming through the blinds. He was watching me closely as he undid the belt on his black jeans and dropped them down to the floor. “Your injuries? I don’t want to hurt you,” he said as he stood before me in a tight pair of Black boxer briefs, some name I didn’t recognize circling the elastic waist band. I had no doubt it was some fancy designer label. Jack was obsessive about looking good, even down to his underwear. But he never did it in a vain way. Her just seemed to like nice, expensive things. The fact he could wear the crap out of anything he bought didn’t seem to register with him.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“I can’t curl my back much, and my legs aren’t strong, but as long as you don’t twist me like a pretzel I think we’ll be alright,” I told him with a roll of my eyes.

“Keep rolling your eyes like that and I’ll remind you what orgasm denial is,” he warned as he stared me down with his hands on his hips. Just seeing him stood there, and hearing him in control was enough to ease some of my earlier nerves. It was Jack. I knew, no matter what – even if I did start to freak out – he would always take care of me.

“Keep standing there just looking at me and I’ll show you everything I learned about getting myself off in the last ten years,” I taunted.

Jack growled as he lowered down onto the bed and prowled over me like a jungle cat ready to pounce. He rest his weight over me on his right hand and slid his left down my body, cupping my mound possessively over my panties.

“You don’t touch this pussy anymore, love. It’s ours now. You only come when Mace and I allow you to. Understood?” he asked, his face so close to mine I could feel his breath on my lips.

I was already breathing faster at just the feel of his huge hand right where I wanted his touch so much I could barely think straight.

“Please Jack,” I squeaked as I looked at him pleadingly.

“Tell me you understand, Ava,” he pushed.

“I understand,” I uttered. “Please” Just touch me...please!”

“No topping from the bottom, naughty girl,” Jack told me as he removed his hand from my center and instead placed it on the other side of my head as he just stared at me.

“No!” I cried.

“Tell me who’s in charge now, Ava. Show me you remember how this works and maybe, just maybe I’ll give you what you seem to need so badly,” he taunted.

“You!” I whined. “You’re in charge, Jack. Please, I’ll do what you say. I’ll be good.”

“Easy love. You’re always my good girl,” he soothed as he ran his hand over my body as he leaned in to kiss down my neck. “Reach up and put your hands on the pillow for me,” he whispered between kisses. I gulped at the command, worried for a second he’d try to bind my hands, but then I reminded myself I’d told him about restraints and as able to do as he bade. I grabbed the edge of the pillow further up the bed to help me keep my hands in place.

“Color?” Jack asked as he stopped kissing my neck and instead kissed my lips while also looking at my expression. While I always had a safe word when we all played together at Temple, we also used the stop light system occasionally. Jack or Mace would ask for a color, and I would answer with green, orange, or Red. Red would stop everything instantly, in the same way as my safe word would. Orange meant I needed things to slow down, or maybe I was feeling a little unsure. Green meant everything was good. We had rarely needed to use it, because Mason and Jack always made sure to watch me closely and knew before I could utter a word if anything ever worried me. I knew Jack was using it then because he’d seen the slight wobble in my face when he’d asked me to raise my hands, and knowing he saw that slight unsureness in me only reassured me that he had me.

“Green. I’m okay, Jack,” I told him a little breathlessly.

“Good girl. Keep your hands there for me. If you move them you’ll have to wait longer to come,” he warned, but there was playful smile on his face that made everything less tense.

“Yes Jack,” I agreed as I looked to him with a smile on my face.

“So beautiful when you submit for me,” he told me as he started to move down my body slowly, kissing a trail as he went.

I wasn’t so sure the meagre acquiescence I had given him counted as true submission compared to what I used to give, but I still felt warm inside at his praise. I definitely had a praise kink and I had no idea where it came from. All I did know was that when Mason and Jack used to tell me I was a ‘good girl’ or praise me during or after a session, it turned me on and made me feel all warm and content inside. The guys were aware of this and had often praised me because of it. Calling me their ‘good girl’ was always a sure fire way to have me running my thighs together in desperation, and it seemed that hadn’t changed.

It wasn’t until Jack was almost face to face with my pussy that the panic set in as realization struck me. I slammed my thighs tight together and lowered my hands as I pushed up onto one elbow in panic.

“Jack,” I gasped. He instantly looked up to me, then lifted up so he sat, stopping everything as he studied me.

“What is it, Ava? Do we need to stop?” he asked gently as he tuned enough to crawl up the bed to me. In a matter of seconds I found myself wrapped in his arms, my back pressed to his front as he held me tight. “Deep breath for me,” he urged and I knew he thought I was panicking, and I was, but not the way he assumed.

“I’m okay,” I told him. My breaths were a little short, but that was because of the need he’d built in me, not because I was losing it.

“When you feel ready, I want you to tell me what happened, but take your time. I’m here. I’ve got you.”

I was cursing myself for panicking for such a stupid reason and stopping everything, especially knowing I would have to explain why to Jack. It was mortifying, but I also couldn’t deny how good it felt to just be in his arms as he gave me the care he was obliged to as a dom. After care was a huge part of D/s play, and I had always loved it. Coming back down from the nirvana Jack and Mace could always take me to, to find myself curled up in one of their arms as the other fussed over me, wrapping a blanket around me and giving me sips of water – it was heaven. I think sometimes I had missed that more in the decade I spent alone, than the peace and perfection I felt at their hands when we played. I never felt like Jack and Mason gave after care because they were obliged to. The love and care they showed me meant so much more than an obligation. It had always been plain to see and feel, just as it was right then as Jack held me so protectively.

“Ava? Do you want me to cover you up, or get some water, darlin’?” he offered.

“No.” I took a deep breath, then lifted my head so I was looking at him upside down.

“You...you d-didn’t trigger me. I’m okay.”

“The truth, remember? Always the truth. I saw panic on your face,” he reprimanded gently.

“God, this is so embarrassing,” I groaned as I lowered my head and covered my face.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

Jack slid out from under me, laying me down flat so he could lean up over me, laid on his side facing me, his head propped on his elbow.

“Nothing between us is embarrassing. When we played together communication and honesty were everything. Now, things between us are different. Your ours now, and taking care of you means even more, if that’s possible. Honesty and communication will be even more important on both sides. Don’t you agree?” he asked.

Fine!” I sighed dramatically. “If you’re gonna go and get all serious on me.”

“Tell me, Ava. I never want to scare you,” he commanded.

“I was more worried about scaring you,” I uttered more to myself.

“Scaring me? What the bloody hell are you talking about?” he asked with a confused smirk. God, he was even better lucking when he smiled.

“Fuck!” I hissed as I turned so I lay on my side facing him. He was right about honesty, but did we really have to be this open?! “You saw me when I arrived here, right? I’m a mess.”

“You’re not...”

“Jack.” I cut him off. “I am. I have barely spoken to another person outside of the odd call with Colt in almost two years. I was living in a dive, and drinking myself to sleep every night. I cut off everyone in my life and only ever ventured out the bare minimum of groceries and my supply of vodka. Going to the drug store to replenish

my meds was getting to be too much interaction for me to deal with, to the point I was considering not even refilling the prescriptions any more. I was a mess. Still am.”

“I have to think of you living like that. I wish you’d reached out to me and Mason. Even if you’d just told Colt,” he sighed as he laid down and pulled me so I half lay on him.

“I should have been honest with Colt. I know that now, but I can’t change that,” I sighed as I snuggled into him and wrapped an arm across his waist. “Anyway, the point is, taking care of myself wasn’t exactly a priority. I haven’t had sex since before the shooting. Applying makeup, and even brushing my hair seemed pointless to me. At first personal care was pretty impossible too. Physio gave me enough flexibility to start shaving my legs, which was good because hair there itches like a motherfucker, but I...I haven’t taken the time to even try shaving other areas...you know, below the waist,” I admitted. I was sure my face was beet red with the confession and I was so embarrassed to be admitting to such a personal issue.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Please don’t tell me that’s why you stopped me getting a taste I’ve waited far too fucking long to get,” he groaned loudly.

“Seriously Jack. Did you see it down there? I haven’t looked lately but I’m pretty sure it looks like sasquatch is hibernating between my damned legs!” I cried.

“Lay back and get your hand back on that pillow,” he growled as he rose up and moved so he was over me again. “I’m getting that taste of you, Ava, you insane bloody woman.”

“You cannot put your face down there, Jack. At least let me visit a damned beauty salon to get it looking slightly less wild!” I cried as I grabbed his shoulders in an attempt to stop him.

“Lay down, hands on the pillow and do not move, or else I’ll show you a whole new level of denial,” he told me, but there was a smirk on his face that had me lying back with a huff and returning my hands to the pillow.

“Just don’t blame me if you’re coughing up furballs for the next week,” I told him dryly.

“No more talking unless you need to tell me to stop, Ava.”

I started to let out a huff again, but stopped as Jack pushed my legs open and dove into my center like he really had been waiting a decade to do so.

“Jack!” I cried in shock.

“After this you, me, and Mace are going to have a talk about new punishments in the bedroom. I think some light spanking might make you focus a little better,” he said as he glared up at me playfully. I was surprised how those words made my heart beat speed up and my core pulse. Maybe I could handle them spanking me. Maybe I wanted them to too.

When I glanced down I could see him watching me, a smirk on his face and those watchful beautiful eyes filled with heat. He peeled down my panties, then tossed them behind him.

A cry of shock and delight burst from me and he dove right back in, toying with my clit as he pushed a finger deep inside me too. He wasn’t going easy, and in just seconds I was already on the brink of an orgasm – something I hadn’t had without the aid of my own hand since the last time I was with him and Mason.

I wanted to cry out again, but I tried to submit to Jack’s demand that I don’t speak as he ate at me like a man possessed. It was perfection and too much all at once. I tried

to push my legs closed as sensation overwhelmed me, but Jack just wrapped his strong arms around my thighs and pushed them, holding me open and at his mercy.

“Jack!” I almost yelled as heat crept up my spine and felt like it was setting me on fire all over.

“Come for me, love,” Jack uttered, the words vibrating against my center.

“Yes!” I gasped as my orgasm consumed me, setting alight every nerve ending in my body. My back arched off of the bed. Jack slowed his ministrations but didn’t stop, licking over every inch of me as I fell back against the bed again and tried to breathe through my gasping. My eyes were closed and I still felt as if I were floating, as Jack started to move up the bed. He laid beside me and pulled me onto his chest again, wrapping his huge arm tight around me.

“Color?” he asked as he ran his hand up and down the top of my arm softly.

“Green,” I mumbled happily. “So Green.The HulkGreen.”

“The Hulk?” he laughed.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“Yeah,” I sighed. “You just fullyHulk-ed me.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, I think.”

“You totally should,” I laughed as I opened my eyes and looked up at him. I felt a little spacey, but in the most amazing way. “Do you want to...” I nodded down to where his huge erection was straining against the front of his boxers. I had seen him naked when we did some scenes in private rooms at the club, but we’d never had sex, not outside of my dreams anyway.

“Not now. That took a lot out of you. I can see you look tired,” he said affectionately as he stroked a hand through my almost dry hair. “I want you to try and rest. It’s still early.”

“Why were you dressed then? Do you always get up that early?” I questioned.

“I was going to head over to my gym, then I heard you moving around. I only meant to check on you.”

“Well I’m definitely all good now, so if you still want to go to the gym, you should.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere right now. I’m right where I want to be,” he told me as he held me even closer and flicked the edge of the comforter over me so I was covered. “Rest now. I’ll wake you in a couple of hours.”

“I love you Jack,” I admitted as I moved my head up to see his face above me. “I think I loved you since the first time you held me after our first session together. I’m

sorry I ran from you.”

“You’re here now, and That’ all that matters. I’m never letting you run again,” he promised as he laid a kiss on the top of my head. I snuggled into him and hoped like hell I never felt the need to run again, because right there, I felt like I was right where I was supposed to be too.

CHAPTER 16

AVA

The distant murmur of voices talking awoke me and I pushed up to sitting, no memory of even falling back to sleep. If it weren’t for the fact the bed was badly rumped and I lay in nothing but my bra under the comforter, I would have worried my whole experience with Jack had been some amazing, elaborate dream.

I grabbed my phone from the nightstand to check the time, then cursed up a storm when I saw it was after midday. I was instantly angry with myself for wasting so much time when I should have been working to find Colt.

“Selfish asshole,” I uttered to myself angrily as I threw back the comforter and swung out of bed. My pain was still at minimal kevels, but there was some numbness down my right leg, which wasn’t unusual. Because the signals from my brain were all messed up, and my nerves were affected I often got numbness in all of my limbs, and in my hands and feet too. It was a symptom of my injury I had learned to handle.

I slammed my feet to the cold wood floor and shot up, determined to throw something on and get the hell out there to speak with Mason and see what he had for us to work with. Colt was running out of time with every second that passed and I’d just wasted a whole morning fooling around with Jack andsleeping. I couldn’t have hated myself any more in that moment. It wasn’t possible.

I pulled on some clean underwear, then a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt I wasn't even sure was mine. It had just been folded up on the chair in the corner of the room, but it was clearly too big for me.

"Mason, tell me you have the surveillance footage," I called before I even hobbled into the living area of Jack's apartment.

By the time I walked in he, Jack and Deacon were all on their feet and moving towards me. Jack gave me a bright smile and a wink, which only made me feel worse. I knew if the situation were reversed and Colt were searching for me, he would barely have even slept, let alone stopped to take some time for an orgasm.

"Good morning to you too, sweetheart," Deak said sarcastically and I glared at him instantly.

"It's not morning though, is it? It's after-fucking-noon and I haven't done a damned thing to find Colt so far. Why the hell didn't one of you get me the fuck up?" I barked.

"You needed to catch up on some sleep, Ave, and you know it. We already talked about this," Jack sighed exhaustedly.

"I decide when I do and do not need sleep, not you!"

"Okay, timeout!" Mace called as he stepped closer to me. "You're up now and I have all of the surveillance footage lined up for the relevant dates, all ready for you to view. How about we skip the attitude and you can get to work?" He kept his tone gentle, but I knew from the way he was looking at me that his words weren't a request.

"Fine," I agreed as I avoided looking up at any of them. I knew I was being a bitch. I

wasn't even truly pissed with any of them. I was just irate with myself and needing to vent. I knew I needed to rein it in, but I was so used to being pissy to hide my true emotions. It wasn't going to be easy to stop.

Mason set me up in a large armchair close to the fancy electric fire that looked like it was crackling away way too realistically. I had the laptop on my lap and Mason had very helpfully lined up the hours of footage I would need to scroll through from various clubs across the city. While I didn't know the face of the monster who took me, I would never forget the shape of his frame as he circled my hanging body, screaming at me to atone over and over again between tearing me to pieces. I was sure I would recognize him if he were on any of the footage.

The guys obviously sensed my need for space because they all retreated after Deacon brought me a sandwich he had made for me and a huge mug of coffee, black – just the way I liked it.

I distantly heard Mason leave to head into work, a new case demanding his attention. Jack was working at the kitchen counter, I presumed dealing with the running of Temple. Deacon seemed to be working too where he sat opposite me with his own laptop open, but he regularly stopped and offered me drinks and snacks through out the afternoon, giving me the distinct sense he was really just keeping a wary eye on me, likely at the behest of the other two.

It was starting to get dark by the time I finally found something. My eyes were scratchy and dry and it had been a struggle just to keep them open for the last hour, the repetitive footage lulling me into sleep.

“Here!” I cried as I looked up, shocked to find Mason was back, and Jack was in the kitchen cooking. I had zoned out so much for the last few hours I hadn't even been aware of any of them.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“You found something?” Mason asked as he approached and perched on the arm of the chair I sat in.

“It’s date three days before Colt disappeared,” I explained as I reset the footage to where I had seen that psycho murderer stroll in Temple like he owned the damned place. I played the footage from the entrance as Jack and Deacon joined us, leaning in so they could watch too. “That’s him!” I declared as a tall, slim man, dressed in all black and keeping his head lowered just enough to avoid the camera getting his face, showed his membership card to the young woman behind the reception desk. They all watched in silence as he strolled into the club like he had definitely been there many times before.

“Jack?” Mace spoke first.

“I don’t recognize him. Do we get a view of his face?” Jack asked.

“Not on this camera. It’s like he knows it’s there, but maybe on the ones inside the club?” I relied as I started flicking through the files of footage for other angles in Temple at that time.

“How can you be so sure that’s him, Ava?” Deak questioned.

“I’m sure. I’d never forget the way he carries himself. That’s him,” I explained with certainty.

“The dates line up too. Three days before Colt disappeared. He was probably stalking Colt, waiting for the right time to grab him,” Mason added, and I nodded in

agreement. My heart was pounding way too hard. Yes, the footage gave us something to work with, but it was also ultimate from that the religious nut who stole a piece of me, definitely had Colt too. What was Colt going through if he was still alive? Even if we were in time to save him, could he ever be whole after enduring days and days of what destroyed me in a matter of hours?

I played the footage from all the cameras in Temple for that entire night, the guys all surrounding me and watching closely too. The guy moved through the club, extremely watchful of everything going on. Then he sat at the bar and ordered a drink. He waited there, sipping what looked like a club soda until Colt appeared behind the bar. Not once in all of that time did he show his face to any of the cameras and it became obvious he knew where they all were very quickly. After he spotted Colt he followed him through the club and back to the entrance. When Colt ran up to his office, the guy left the club and disappeared from sight of the exterior cameras.

“Fuck!” I roared as the last video ended and we had nothing but images of that fucker’s back.

“It’s something, Ava. I can have officers canvas the neighborhood for more surveillance footage. Maybe we can get the license plate of this bastards car,” Mason said as he rubbed a gentle hand down over my wild and very messy hair. I hadn’t done a thing with it after waking up for the second time, not that I cared.

“He’s right. There’s no way that fucker hid his face from every camera in the area. We can find out who he is now,” Deacon agreed.

“I’ll make some calls and line up some uniforms to start canvassing all around Temple in the morning,” Mason said as he leaned into the kiss the top of my head, then slipped away to the kitchen to make his call.

“I’ll finish making dinner. We all need to eat,” Jack volunteered. I nodded, then

looked back to the image on the screen of that fucker shrouded by shadows just down the street from Temple. I didn't care how fucked up my body was. If I ever got near that monster I was going to rip him apart with my bare hands!

"Ava?" I looked up and found Deacon stood before me. He took the laptop from me, closed it, and set it on the coffee table. "Enough work for now, okay? Why don't you go and change into something comfortable before we can eat, then you can get comfortable on the sofa afterwards," he suggested. He was dressed in dark wash jeans that clung to him in all the right places, and a tight black tee that showed every line of his perfectly defined, massively sculpted body. He smiled softly as I stared at him in awe, and it lit up his handsome face even more if that were possible. I had zero idea why he would even want to get to know me. He could have any woman he wanted. I was sure women chased him wherever he went, especially if he flashed them that sexy as hell smile.

"I need to call Kylan again. He was so upset yesterday when I spoke to him," I told him as I ripped my attention back to reality, where it needed to be until Colt was safe. "At least today I can tell him we have something to work with."

"I can call him for you?" he offered.

"No. I should. When Colt comes home and marries him, he'll be my brother too. I need to be there for him right now."

I stood up and groaned when pain started to radiate out through both of my thighs. I had been sat for too long and my body was not happy.

"What's wrong, darlin'?" Jack asked as he looked up fast.

"Just my legs. I need to move around," I sighed as I placed a hand on Deacon's forearm and tried to maintain my balance. "Stupid injury. I walk and push too far and

I get pain. I sit and don't move at all and I get fucking pain too. I guess there's no winning for me."

"D you want some pain meds?" Deak offered as he wrapped his arm around my back so I could lean into him more, which helped.

"No. It's not that bad. Can you just walk me to my room? I'm stiff and off balance," I admitted.

"I've got you," he told me with a smile that eased my embarrassment a little, but I still hated how much help I knew I needed. I had been independent for as long as I could remember. My mom had worked countless jobs to try and keep a roof over our heads when she was able, and when she wasn't depression would keep her hidden away in her bed for days and sometimes weeks at a time, so I basically brought myself up. Then she died, and Colt stepped up. He tried hard to take care of me, and over time I learned I could rely on him and gave in some, but ultimately I remained independent.

Then that monster tried to destroy me, and maybe he did in some ways. That was why for the last decade I had fought like hell not to rely on or fully trust anyone but myself and Colt. I had been stubborn and snarky, keeping everyone out of my way and my life as much as possible. Even my police family who I worked with every damned day for a huge part of that time, had never had my full trust. I kept them out of my private life completely and I never asked for help from any of them, no matter how tough things got.

For the last two years, ever since I was shot I had known I could no longer do everything alone. The bad days were simply too much of a struggle to manage alone, but still I had refused to give in, to my own massive detriment. I could have called Colt and told him everything, knowing he's have been there for me instantly, but I hadn't. I hadn't reached out to anyone because I was ashamed. Now these guys were

making me give in and ask for the help I needed, but it didn't ease the embarrassment I felt, and the terrifying knowledge inside of me that I was weak. I never wanted to be that way, but this time I wasn't sure there was much I could do to overcome it. And there goes another part of myself that's been ripped away, I thought broken heartedly. I honestly wasn't sure there was very much of who I once was left at all at that point.

"Ava?" Kylan answered before the first ring had even finished.

"It's not bad news," I told him instantly, knowing what he feared most – me calling to tell him Volt was dead.

"Oh God. I'm sorry....I just.... I need him back. I really love him. As soon as my call rings my heart beats out of my chest," I could hear tears in his words and his voice was trembling. Sorry. I should shut up," he added with a snuffle.

"You don't need to shut up. I know exactly how you feel, Ky. I need him back too, more than I can say, but I do have some thing positive to tell you this time."

“Tell me.”

“I searched through surveillance footage at Temple around the time Colt disappeared and I found the fucker who has him. He doesn’t show his face, but Mason is getting more footage from building surrounding the club and we’re hoping we’ll get an image of the guys car,” I explained.

“How did you know it’s him?” Ky asked. I hadn’t told him how we knew who had Colt and had killed Helen. I hadn’t wanted to tell him. He was a virtual stranger to me, and telling Jack, Mace, and Deacon had been hard enough.

“Did Colt ever tell you why I moved to Chicago?”

“He told me something happened, but he wouldn’t give me details. He said he made a promise to you and I respected that,” Ky explained, and tears instantly filled my eyes at knowing Colt had kept my secret, even from a man he was very obviously deeply in love with.

“I was attacked,” I admitted with a sniffle. “I was grabbed close to Temple and knocked out. When I woke up I was...ch-chained up to the ceiling. The man who took me was some kind of religious nut. He thought I was a sinner and told me I had to atone. He...fuck.” I paused and took a deep breath.

“It was him, wasn’t it? The man who took you, killed Helen. I know she was branded with the word ‘sinner’ and tortured. I saw the news reports.”

“Yeah,” I whispered. “It was him. I managed to escape and call Colt. He came for

me, but I was so ashamed. I made him promise not to call the cops or tell a soul what happened. Now that monster has Colt and it's all my fucking fault!"

"No. Don't do that. Colt would never allow you to blame yourself and I won't either. Whatever had happened is all because of that monster who hurt you and took Colt. Any blame lies squarely at his feet. He's a sick bastard."

"Yeah, he is," I agreed.

"Have you been getting enough rest? I know how important it is to find Colt. Believe me it's all I want, but you have to look after yourself too."

"I'm fine, Kylan. Please don't worry about me. I'm a fuck ton stronger than I look," I assured him. "How about you? Are you sleeping?"

"Not really. I've just been trying to throw myself into the restaurants, but I can barely think straight. Are you sure there isn't anything I can do to help the search for him? I need to do something!" he insisted.

"Maybe you could look at the footage I found. The guy never shows his face, but he's still distinctive. I doubt he ever made himself known to Colt, but it's worth you looking in case you recognize him."

"Yes! Anything. I'll do anything I can. If you need resources or to hire a private investigator, anything like that, come to me. I have restaurants across the country and money isn't an issue. I'd give everything I have it would bring Colt home."

"I appreciate that, but we're good. Mason and I are working the investigation and Jack knows a guy who can get us any info we need online. Why don't you come over here? You can look at the footage I have and meet the guys too," I suggested.

“Yes, of course. Send me the address and I’ll be right there. Thank you Ava, for keeping me in the loop. I know Colt never talked about me, but we really are in love. He means everything to me.”

“I know,” I assured him. And I did know. I could feel how much Colt meant to Kylan in just the few short interactions we had. I was just so annoyed with my brother for not trusting me with the truth. How could he ever think I’d think less of him. Or even care that he loved a man instead of a woman. It made no odds to me, and I hated that he’d had that doubt.

Kylan arrived just as Jack was laying out the lasagna he had made for dinner on the dining table, along with salad and garlic bread he’s made from scratch. Jack had already let him into the building when the buzzer sounded, so now he was knocking on the door of the apartment.

“Guys!” I barked when I saw he and Mason looking to each other with question. They weren’t happy when I told them Ky was coming over, the both of them cautious about us allowing any stranger close – especially to me – with everything that was going on. They’d only relented because Deacon had assured him the guy was no threat to me when they were all with me. And he was right. While Kylan was handsome and model worthy with his trim, toned body, he was nowhere near as built, muscled, or aggressive and I knew Jack and Mason could become when required. Hell, I was pretty sure I could take Kylan down with my martial arts skills if it came to it, not that I had any fear he truly was a threat. His devastation as Colt being gone was real and soul destroying to witness.

Finally Jack relented first and moved to open the apartment door as Mason moved closer to me, placing himself between me and the entrance.

“You must be Kylan,” Jack greeted. Not the friendliest, but it wasn’t a growl or a threat at least.

“I am, and I’m guessing you’re Jack. You manage Temple, right?”

“I do. Come in. This is Mason,” Jack said as they both walked inside and Jack indicated where Mason stood looking seriously menacing.

“Right, yeah,” Kylan stuttered as he seemed to wilt before Mason nervously, and who could blame him?

“Quit it, asshole!” I snapped as I stood and slapped Mason on the back hard. I rounded his immovable frame and smiled at Kylan as I approached him. “Ignore him. He’s being insane and over the top. Thanks for coming,” I said as I took his hand in mine and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“I’m glad to be here. I know I can’t do much, but at least I can feel like I’m helping,” he sighed. He looked exhausted. His hair was wild and clearly hadn’t been styled in days. He was wearing navy sweats, a worn pair of sneakers and hoody that was too big on him. I was pretty sure the hoody was Colt’s, as it looked familiar from the last time I saw my brother in Chicago, almost two and a half years ago. Ky was pale and his eyes were red and swollen as he released my hand and nervously crossed his arms over his chest, his car keys still in his hand.

“Come and meet Deacon. He may look intimidating, but he’s way less of an asshole than the other two,” I told him as I pulled him to where Deacon stood in the kitchen. He’d been getting water for with dinner, but had pause and was just watching us.

“We met briefly at my restaurant. Colt has mentioned you often,” he added as he looked to Deacon, who stood a good five inches taller than Ky. “You attend his poker nights at the apartment I believe.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“That’s me. I’m sure Colt loves telling you how he robs me blind every time we play,” Deak chuckled as he gave Ky a friendly smile.

“He is a bit of a cheat. Last time we went away together we ended up playing gin rummy and I know he was cheating,” Ky laughed.

“Are you hungry? We were just about to eat,” I offered.

“Oh, I don’t want to impose. I can come back later if this is a bad time,” he floundered as he dared a quick glance to Jack and Mason. They were obviously making him nervous and it was pissing me off. I glared at the both of them, but especially Jack. I expected this kind of bullshit from Mason. He was an overprotective cave man, but Jack knew better. This man was my brother’s fiancé and they were treating him like he was a criminal.

“No imposition. Grab a seat, mate. I’ll get another plate,” Jack said, his tone a little easier going now.

I made sure to sit Kylan between Deacon and I at the table, not wanting him caught anywhere near Mason until the asshole pulled himself together.

It’s silent as Jack fills our plates with huge servings of his lasagna. I add some salad and cover it with enough dressing to make it actually taste of something. Kylan is still nervous as he picks up his cutlery and dive into the lasagna.

“So, you and Colt are engaged?” Jack questions.

“Yeah. He proposed to me at the restaurant where we had our first date. He hired the whole place and filled it with candles and fancy boxes of chocolate,” he recounted with a dreamy smile.

“Chocolate?” I laughed, confused.

“I’m not a flower kind of guy. It’s become a running joke between us. I once Told Colt to buy me chocolate instead of flowers that will just wither and die, and he took it very literally. Every time I came to his place he’d leave little boxes of chocolate with my name on them anywhere he’d usually have flowers brought in by his cleaner. He even got us chocolate buttonholes when we went to my sister’s wedding together a few months ago. They made a mess of our suits, but it made us happy. It’s kind of our thing now,” he chuckled, but there was so much sadness in his eyes. It made my chest physically hurt. “When he proposed he said he put chocolate everywhere he thought he should have put red roses. I still have a ton of boxes at home that he promised to help me eat. He...he n-never breaks his promises.” The last words came out shaky and whispered as a single tear slid down his cheek. Before he could get his hand to his cheek to swipe it away I was leaning over and wrapping my arms around his waist.

“No he doesn’t, and he won’t break this one either,” I tried to soothe him.

“I’m sorry. I’m not normally like this but I haven’t slept much since...well, since Ava told me.”

“I get it. I’ve been a complete crazy lady since I arrived here and found out Colt was gone. These guys can attest to that,” I laughed, trying to lighten the mood.

“You mean so much to him, Ava. He loves you. No matter what we find, you have to hold on to that. He would have done anything for you. He was so proud of you,” Ky told me and I just felt even shittier about myself hearing those words said out loud.

“I let him down,” I admitted. “I’ve been lying to him and avoiding him for two years. I avoided his calls and stopped him visiting, then when he actually needed me for once, I couldn’t even pick up the damned phone when he called. All the times he was there for me, and the one damned time he needed help I failed him!”

“Ava, don’t. You know none of that is true and Colt would be pissed as fuck if he heard you say that bullshit,” Mason scolded.

I didn’t say anything else, instead turning my attention to moving the food on my plate around, but that didn’t mean I didn’t mean every word I had said. It didn’t stop my stomach from churning, or the little I had eaten from threatening to come back up because of the guilt I felt inside.

The guys all started to talk around me, Mason questioning Kylan like he was sat in the interrogation room at the police precinct with him. He clearly wanted to know if Kylan was with Colt for his money, but Ky soon cleared that up when he explained he owned five restaurants across the country and was currently trying to open his first in Europe too. Mason seemed to soften somewhat as the meal went on, and Deacon and Jack were being perfectly civil. I had known it wouldn’t take long for them to see the good in Kylan, just as I had.

“Ava, you haven’t eaten much, love? Do you want me to make you something else?” Jack asked, pulling me from where I had been staring down at my plate for way too long, drowning in my own guilt and fear I would never see Colt again.

“I’m not hungry,” I shrugged as I looked up at him. “Sorry. It was good. I just can’t,” I added.

“Why don’t you go to your room and get into bed? You look exhausted. I can show Kylan the footage from Temple,” Deacon suggested. I looked up to Kylan, feeling bad that I had checked out on him when I was the one who asked him to come over.

“Is that good with you?”

“Of course it is. Deacon’s right, you look exhausted, sweet girl,” he replied as he studied me hard. “Is this what you’ve been keeping from Colt? Are you sick?” he asked as he studied me closer.

“Not sick. I got shot on the job, in the back, almost two years ago. My spine was damaged and I...things are difficult. I get tired easily and I’m in pain most of the time. I should have told him, but I was embarrassed. I didn’t want him to see me this way.”

“You should have told him Ava. He’s going to hate knowing what you’ve suffered alone when you didn’t need to,” Ky sighed as he took my hand in his and squeezed it.

“I know. I think we both have a lot to discuss if....I mean, when, when he comes home,” I said tiredly.

“Go and get some sleep. I’ll call you to check in tomorrow afternoon, okay?” he told me with a sad smile, and I nodded. I liked him a lot, and I’d happily accept him as my brother in law when Colt got his ass in gear and married him. And even if the worst happened – if Colt never came back to me, I’d still do all I could to be there for this good, kind man, just as I knew Colt would want me to be. At least for as long as I could hold on with the guilt I knew would come, consuming me until I knew I would ultimately give up.

CHAPTER 17

AVA

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

To say I wasn't exactly proud of my behavior was a sever understatement when at two A.M. the next morning I found myself quietly rifling through Jack's kitchen in search of alcohol, preferably vodka. But I needed it.

I hadn't slept a wink since I slipped into my room earlier that evening, unable to with the thoughts that were eating at me. Fears of losing Colt, and the surety that he would never have been taken at all had I just answered his fucking phone calls. Add to that my confusion over what the hell I was doing with the guys, and my own self loathing at every single part of me, body and soul, and I was spiraling. The desire to just drink until I felt numb had been all consuming, I had waited until long after I heard Jack go to his room, and Mason got to the other guest room before I slipped out of bed and pleaded with my legs to just cooperate enough to get me what I needed most.

For the most part they were holding me up for now, but my pain was back, and my legs were shaking in a way that assured me I better search and get to bed fast if I didn't want to end up on the floor. My head was pounding, a tension headache radiating from my back and I was seriously taking more pain meds, even though it would mean me taking way more than had been prescribed. I had done it before and lived to tell the tale, but I knew from experience I'd regret it the next morning when I woke with what felt like the world's most intense hangover.

Finally I found a full bottle of scotch in the top corner cabinet and pulled it down with so much relief it made me feel ashamed. Had my life really come to this? Had alcohol really become that much of a crutch for me?

I didn't have the strength or energy to get back to my room. I didn't have the will power to wait either if I were honest with myself, so I slid down to the floor and half

sat / half collapsed into a sitting position against the cabinet. I twisted the cap off of the bottle and took a huge drink, just desperate for something to numb all of my pain – the physical and the mental. My darkness was fighting like hell to push me down deep into the depths that filled me, and I felt like I was being ripped right open.

I coughed as the scotch hit my throat and fought to stifle it, not wanting to wake the guys. But scotch wasn't really my drink and the burn of it going down took me by surprise as I slammed my hand over my mouth to stifle the noise. The burn was making my eyes water too, but none of it deterred me from throwing back another large slug. I didn't care what I drank, as long as it numbed the crushing pain.

"Ava?" I pulled my lips from the bottle and glanced up. Mason was stood before me in only his very snug fitting blue boxers. His hair was a little mussed from sleep and he looked so different out of his suit and all relaxed. I hated the way he looked from the already almost half empty bottle in my hand and to my face with disappointment. "Thirsty, were you?" he asked dryly, and I hated that the bitter tone he used when I first arrived in the city again, was back in his words.

"Don't start, Mace," I groaned as I glared at him. "I'm really not up to dealing with your bullshit right now." I lifted the bottle to take another drink, but before I could the bottle was ripped from my hand and Mason poured the whole lot down the sink before I even tried to get to my feet. "You asshole!" I yelled. I had already given up trying to stand. My legs weren't going to work with me, and pain was enough to bring tears to my eyes with every movement.

"We said no more drinking, didn't we?" he questioned as he dropped the empty bottle in the sink and dropped to a crouch before me.

"You didn't magically fix me with your crappy speech and overinflated ego, Mason. I'm in pain and that is the only thing that helps," I snapped.

“That is not helping, Ava!” He pointed up to where the empty bottle was and there was anger in his eyes, but concern too. “I know you think it is, but in the long run it will only make things so much worse. If you’re in pain, you come to me and Jack. You don’t reach for a bottle and hide from us. I thought we were past all of this.”

“I’m not past anything, Mason. It doesn’t matter what I do, or even what you guys do, the darkness lives inside me and it won’t stop trying to rip me to pieces in here.” I tapped the side of my head as I met his stormy eyes. “My injury too, The pain is alive in my body and that won’t let me go either. No sweet words, or even dominant commands can fix any of that,” I sighed exhaustedly.

“Maybe not,” he agreed as he dropped to the toiled floor and pushed himself around so he was sat right beside me, his thigh pressing against mine. “But you won’t know if you never come to us and give us a chance. Maybe we won’t have a quick fix, but if we know what’s going on, we can try to find alternatives to help you. Drinking until you pass out isn’t the answer, sweetheart and you know it.”

“I don’t know who I am any more, Mace,” I admitted as I fought not to allow tears to fall. “I k-keep losing pieces. No, not losing. They get taken from me by monsters and I...I don’t think there’s very much left of me in here. I feel so hollow and I keep fucking everything up.”

“Easy baby,” he soothed when I started to gasp slightly as my emotions overcame me. He wrapped his arm around me and pulled me into his side, his heat enveloping me and making me feel less alone and afraid instantly. “I know it feels that way right now, but you’re not hollow. You’re still in there. I see you. Jack sees you. You just need some time and peace to find yourself again too,” he told me.

“I don’t want to be broken for the rest of my life. I don’t want to be weak and dependent on other people. I want to be strong again and I...I’m so scared I can’t. If I lose Colt, I don’t even think I want to try,” I confessed.

“You are strong. So fucking strong. Just because you occasionally need a little help doesn’t change that. Trusting others to be there for you is just another way in which you show your strength. And don’t for one minute think Jack and I don’t feel honored every single time you push past that stubborn streak and actually reach out for us when you need us. It hasn’t happened much yet, but I’m proud of how hard you’ve been trying.”

“More like failing,” I scoffed. “That’s what it is every time I have to ask for help. Me failing yet again.”

“Jesus woman, you didn’t get less stubborn with age, did you?” he growled as he wrapped his hand around the back of my head and pulled it down until I had my ear pressed to his chest, his heartbeat soothing some of my raw emotion with its steady, comforting rhythm.

“I hate myself. If it weren’t for me Colt would be at home in bed, maybe with Kylan, where he deserves to be. I should never have allowed him to destroy his life and take me in all those years ago. He gave up his sown fucking mother for me, and I couldn’t even be there for him when he needed me.”

“Enough of this, Ava. You’re stuck in this circle of hate for yourself and guilt that does not rest on your shoulders. It’s hurting you and I’m not going to allow it anymore. None of what has happened is your fault and I’ll tell you that as many times as I need to until you believe it,” he lectured. He had both arms wrapped around me now and I knew it was pointless to try and move away from him. He wasn’t going to let me go, not that I really wanted to. The touch of his bare skin and hard, muscled body was more comfort than any bottle of liquor could ever be.

Remembering how being with Jack had eased my pain earlier I turned so I was almost facing Mason and pushed up on my knees, ignoring the pain that movement caused to pulse up my aching legs, He studied me as I moved closer to him, then our

lips crashed together as if we were in a race to see who would get there first. I grabbed his shoulders to try and keep my balance and instantly he slid his hands around my waist to hold me too. We kissed in a frenzied clash of teeth and tongues as I clung to him with everything in me, pleading with my kiss for him to never let me go. It was desperate and almost angry as we clung to each other and kissed almost ferociously. One of Mason's hands slid to my ass and he held me there as he moved me with ease so I knelt in his lap, our chests now touching as we pulled apart to gasp for breath.

"You made me wait far too long for that, Ava," he growled as he held me close and slid kisses down behind my ear and to my neck. My pain and fear turned to desire and longing with every kiss he touched on my skin, the brush of his heavy stubble against my skin only making me want him more.

I tore off the oversized t-shirt I still wore so I sat before him in only my cotton bra, my chest heaving as my breaths became more like pants, my need to feel something with him consuming me.

"Fuck. How could I ever forget how perfect you are," Mason uttered as he very softly ran his finger over my right shoulder and down my side. I hadn't realized until that moment that I hadn't even considered my scars before I ripped off my t-shirt.

"I'm a long way from perfect," I told him as I self-consciously slid my hand down to cover the brand on my stomach.

"You're perfect to me, baby," he whispered as he lifted me up by my hips until his lips could reach that hideous brand on my skin, and he kissed it, over and over. I could do nothing but brace myself against his shoulders and fight the emotions the reverence he was showing was making me feel. As he lowered me back down he stopped to kiss the scarred over bite mark that showed above the cup of my bra on my right breast. There were more beneath, but that was the most prominent.

“I missed you so much, Mace.” I whispered as he carefully set me back down and framed my face with his hands. “I already told Jack but you need to hear it too – I’m so sorry I ran from you guys. It was a mistake I will always wish I could go back and change.”

“We all have regrets. Jack and I should have come after you, and I will regret our decision not to forever too, but we’re all together now, and we still have long lives ahead of us to make the most of every second we get.”

“I love you,” I told him before I crashed my lips over his and kissed him hard and fast.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“I love you too, Ava. I always have,” he gasped in the second we broke apart. His hands started to roam over my body as I slid my own into his hair and hung on as he kissed me more slowly this time.

My hands had found their way down to his tightly packed abs when the silence around us was broken by the loud ringing of my cell phone. I hadn’t even realized I had it in the pocket of the sweats I was wearing. I guessed I put it there earlier and I hadn’t even bothered to change since.

“You should get that,” Mason groaned as he released me and banged his head back against the counter in annoyance. “It might be Kylan. He was really upset after seeing the surveillance footage and the guy who had Colt. Jack tried to get him to stay the night, but he wouldn’t,” he explained as I fought to free my iPhone from my pocket, eager to answer it if it were Ky needing someone to talk to.

“Hello?” I picked up the call. The number was coming up as unknown but I assumed Kylan could be calling me from his home or his restaurant.

“Is this Ava Scott?” A female voice asked. I looked to Mason with confusion as I replied it was. “I’m calling from Mount Sinai hospital. He was just brought in and gave me your name and number to call before he passed out. I’m going to need you or another relative to come down here as soon as possible,” she told me like she’d made the call a thousand times, and I knew she probably had, but that didn’t make it any easier for me to take in.

“My brother? Colt? Is he hurt? Is he alive?” I cried as I slid off of Mason’s lap and fought to get to my feet.

“Speaker, Ava,” Mason told me as he stood easily and pulled me up with him, pressing me to his front as I placed the call on loudspeaker.

“He’s alive, but about to be rushed into surgery. His injuries are concerning and the police have been notified already.”

“I’m on my way. I’ll be right there,” I told her before hanging up. I knew she wouldn’t tell me much over the phone. I needed to get down there.

“Go and get some clothes on. I’ll call the station and find out what they know so far. You need to wake Jack and call Kylan too,” Mason directed as I just stood shaking in his arms.

“He’s alive,” I whimpered as tears started to fall. “He’s really alive.”

“He is, baby. I told you he was a tough sonofabitch. Let’s wake Jack and he can help you while I call the station, okay?” Mason suggested instead when I didn’t move from his arms. I knew I needed to move. I had to get to the hospital, but the relief was so great that it left me frozen. I had tried to hold on to hope, but I had been so sure deep down that we were going to be too late for Colt. Finding out he had escaped and was alive was overwhelming.

I didn’t hear what Mason said as he passed me over to Jack in the hall outside the bedroom, but the next thing I knew I was sat in Jack’s lap in my room.

“Ava, we need you to talk to us, love,” Jack was saying as I seemed to snap back to reality. I gave myself a shake, annoyed how badly I had zoned out.

“I’m okay. I have to call Kylan. Can you get me a shirt to put on?” I asked as I turned my cell in my hand and started scrolling for Ky’s contact.

“Do you need some meds? Are you in pain?” he fussed, but I shook my head and slid from his lap to sit on the end of the bed.

Kylan answered the phone groggily and I knew I had woken him.

“He’s alive, Ky! He must have escaped and someone found him. He’s at Mount Sinai!” I rushed out all at once.

“What? Mount Sinai? How is he?” Ky asked, very suddenly fully awake now.

“They said he was going into surgery and that he has a lot of injuries, but he’s alive. Can you meet us there?”

“I’m already out the door. I’ll call a friend and arrange some security to be posted at the hospital. If Colt escaped this psycho, there’s a chance he’ll come after him again. I’m not risking that.”

“Thank you. I didn’t even think about that. He’ll be safe while he’s in surgery for now at least.”

“We’ll get him through whatever comes next, Ava. He’s alive, that’s what matters,” Ky added, obviously hearing the worry in my voice. I knew he was right, but I was terrified about the condition we were all about to find Colt in after over a week at the hands of a serial killer.

“I know. I’ll see you there.” I hung up the phone and let out a deep breath. Colt was alive. That was what I had to focus on. Ky was right.

“Come and sit for me, Ave. Let me get some clothes on you and we can get to the hospital,” Jack urged as he caught my wrist and gently guided me to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Ky is arranging security at the hospital incase that monster comes after Colt to finish the job. I should have thought of that. I can’t fuck anything else up, Jack,” I told him.

“Stop trying to take everything on your shoulders. We’re all here for Colt. We’ll all make sure to take care of him and protect him. He’s going to be alright.” Jack promised as he knelt on the floor and started putting socks on my feet.

“He’s alive,” I whispered to myself as it finally seemed to sink into my brain. My brother was alive.

“He’s alive,” Jack repeated as he looked to me with a crooked smile. He stood and kissed the top of my head, then pulled a t-shirt and sweater over my head that I hadn’t even seen him pick up. They were mine and the inane thought that someone had done my laundry for me hit me.

“We need to call Deacon too. He’s been here helping us every step of the way. He should know,” I suggested as I rose to my feet and grabbed for Jack’s arm when I instantly felt unsteady.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“I already sent him a text. Hell meet us at the hospital.” Jack pulled me into his side and wrapped his arm tightly around me. “Can you do this right now, Ave? You’re barely staying upright?” he questioned, and I hated that he was bang on the money. I was struggling to stand.

“I’m doing it no matter what. Colt asked for them to call me. He wants me there,” I told him stubbornly.

“Then at least tell me what we can do to make it easier for you.”

“My pain is bad tonight...in my legs and back, and I’m struggling to get my balance,” I admitted.

“She also threw back almost half a bottle of scotch, which I’m sure isn’t helping her stay on her feet,” Mason added and when I looked up he was stood in the doorway in a pair of jeans and a hooded sweater emblazoned with ‘NYPD’ across the front.

“When?” Jack asked as he looked to me expectantly.

“I’m not wasted. I have a high tolerance with all the meds I take. I’m fine,” I argued.

“We agreed you’d stop the drinking?” I hated the way Jack was looking at me like he was disappointed in me.

“Can we just get to the damned hospital? This can wait. Colt can’t!” I snapped.

“Fine, but we will be talking about this, Ava. Things need to change if any of us are

going to make this work,” Mason threatened, and I gulped, dreading that conversation.

“Great. Can’t wait for the intervention,” I quipped with an over enthusiastic thumbs up. It was my automatic defense. I didn’t want either of them to feel my shame and embarrassment I was feeling for being caught that night. My drinking had always been private before. There’d been no one to rebuke me for it or even care. Having the issue pulled out into the light made me feel like a naughty child. I hated it, but I also knew Mason was right – things had to change. Colt was alive and I had to be there for him through out whatever he had to deal with as a result of all he’d been through. I had to try harder to get my shit together. No more hiding.

CHAPTER 18

MASON

As soon as we walked through the entrance of the emergency department I pulled a wheelchair from the bank near the door and spun it towards Ava who was stubbornly refusing any help as she struggled like hell to walk on her own, leaning so much weight on her stick Jack and I were terrified she was going to wind up toppling over it.

“Sit,” I told her, my tone brokering no argument. I was so fucking worried about her. I knew she was tough as nails mentally, but physically there were days I was pretty sure she shouldn’t even be getting out of bed. Add to that how hard she constantly pushed herself and she seemed to be weakening before our eyes with each day that passed.

She was constantly in so much pain and I wished more than anything that I could just take it on for her. It tore me apart knowing there was so little we could do to help her. There had to be more than could be done to make her comfortable on those tough

days she had told us about, and that we were witnessing more of the longer she was with us. None of it changed the way I felt for her. I loved her. I had loved her for over a decade and she was mine no matter what, but I did fear I was going to lose her if things went on as they were.

“I’m not a dog!” She snapped at me.

“No, you’re a stubborn woman who is exhausted and in agony. Either you get in the wheelchair or I pick you up and carry you. Choose now because there’s no way Jack and I are watching you struggle any longer,” I told her in my most dominant voice, praying she would actually listen and just relent.

“Just use the chair, love, please. You said you use one at home anyway. How is this different? Mason’s right, you’re too exhausted to keep pushing tonight,” Jack added more gently.

Ava dropped the mask she had put up the second I had pulled the chair out, and all of her bravado fell away as her insecurity and fear showed through clearly. She started to chew on her lip as she glanced between us.

“I...I don’t want Colt to see me like this,” She admitted quietly, and instantly Jack moved to hold her. This was why our dynamic worked so well. I was a bossy asshole who loved control. Sure, I could be gentle when Ava needed me to be, but I wasn’t great at it. Jack liked control too, but he also had a softer, nurturing side that he thrived in, and that Ava needed at times. Between us we could give her everything she needed, which was how neither of us had ever even thought about trying to start something with her alone. She needed the both of us as much as we needed her.

“Do you plan to stay and be here for Colt now we have him back?” Jack asked softly. He had his arms wrapped around her as she pressed her face against his chest.

“Yes, of course.”

“Then Colt will find out about the shooting and about your injury. He’s going to see you on your good day and you bad because that man misses nothing and you know it. You can’t hide this from him anymore, Ave, and you don’t need to. Colt loves you. He would never think any less of you or what everbullshit has you so scared to tell him what happened. Do you hear me?”

“I just want to see him,” she uttered and I could hear how tight her throat was. She was fighting tears again and it broke my heart. I hated the hell she had been through, and was still struggling to push through too. We needed her to just let us in so we could at least help her to fight, but she w=really was the most stubborn woman.

“Then let’s go and find him, okay?” Jack told her as he turned her so she was before the wheelchair. He held onto her as he lowered her down to the seat and I sigh or f=relief left me when she just settled into it and lifted her feet onto the pads for them.

I leaned over her and kissed her temple softly as I spoke, “Thank you, baby. I can’t stand to watch you hurting.”

She turned her head and looked up at me, then placed her hand over my stubbled cheek and just held it for a moment. She smiled just a little and it was enough for me to relax just a little. I knew she was still in pain, but the fact she had allowed us to coax her into the chair gave me hope that she might one day stop fighting every time we tried to help her.

Jack asked at the reception desk about Colt and we were shown to a waiting room on the surgery floor. A nurse explained that Colt had been stabbed multiple times and was going to be in surgery for a while. She assured us a doctor would update us as soon as possible, then left us. She couldn’t even tell us if he was stable for now, or any of the reassuring words I knew Ava needed to hear.

“St-stabbed?” Ava squeaked as she looked back at me with glassy eyes.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“He’s tough. He escaped. He’s not going to stop fighting now,” I told her as I fought to keep my own emotions in check. Losing Colt would break me too. He was my brother in everything but blood and my life would never look the same without him in it.

Jack pushed open the door to the waiting room and Kylan was running at us instantly. He stopped when he saw it was us and I saw the disappointment cross his face momentarily. He had hoped we were a doctor with news.

The guy looked even worse than he had the evening before. He was even paler and his eyes were glassy with tears. He was wearing sweats, a ratty sweater and his sneakers weren’t even a pair. One was black and one was blue. If I didn’t believe from meeting him earlier that he loved Colt, I saw it now.

“Ava? What happened? Are you okay?” he gasped as he dropped down to his knees before her and placed a hand on her knee.

“I’m fine. Just tired and in pain. Have you heard anything?” she asked as she placed her hand over his and ran her other up and down his arm, trying to soothe him.

“No. They...the nurse...she said he’s been stabbed. She said something about internal bleeding but I...I don’t think I was listening properly. I’m so scared he won’t pull through. I can’t get him back just to lose him again,” he said shakily. I wondered when the last time was that he had eaten or slept. His hands were shaking badly and the dark circles around his eyes were deep.

“We are not going to lose him. He knows we’re all here waiting for him and he won’t

go without a hell of a fight. He has promises to keep, remember?” Ava told him and he nodded shakily. He stood and rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hands.

“You both need to try and rest while we’re waiting,” I told Ava and Ky as I looked between them. Colt was going to lose his shit when he woke up to find the two people he loved in the state they were.

“I can’t rest. I’ve barely slept since Ava told me Colt was missing,” Ky told me.

“Me neither. Can we get coffee?” Ava asked as she looked from me to Jack.

“I’ll go. I’ll see what I can find other than that crap that comes out of a machine,” Jack offered as he gave me a questioning look. I nodded to him, assuring him I’d stay with them both while he was gone.

Deacon arrived a few minutes after Jack walked out. He helped me to persuade Kylan to actually sit and stop pacing. Ava settled next to him and she chatted quietly trying to reassure him and keep him calm. Jack returned with coffee from the cafeteria downstairs. It was shit, but better than the sludge from the machines.

Finally, after two hours of us all watching both Ky and Ava with so much worry, they both fell asleep, Ava went first, with her head resting on Ky’s shoulder, which meant he had to actually sit still, and moments later he was out too. I just hoped that once they both found out Colt was out of danger, and set their eyes on him, they’d relax enough to eat and sleep the way they both desperately needed to. Even though I barely knew Kylan, I felt the need to take care of him for Colt, knowing how important he had to be to him.

“Ava’s using a wheelchair now?” Deacon asked in little more than a whisper as he looked to Jack and I from where he sat opposite us.

“She told us she uses one at home, but we had to push her to use that one. She was in so much pain and dead on her feet. Once this is over and Colt is safe she needs to get a few days of rest,” Jack explained.

“She’s even paler tonight,” he sighed as he looked over at her.

“How serious are you about her?” I asked, unable to hold it in any more. I saw the way he watched her and looked at her. I felt the genuine care and concern in his words when he spoke with her, and fussed over her, but how much could he really be into her? He hadn’t known her a week! She’s been ours for years.

“What do you want me to say, man?” he said as he turned to me with annoyance. “I barely know her, but I’m serious enough to know I’m not walking away unless she tells me to. I like her, and I’ve never felt for a woman the way I do her. Maybe it won’t work but I want the chance to try with her. Are you going to keep trying to stop that?”

“Listen, this isn’t the time or place to be talking about this,” Jack told us both.

“No, maybe we should clear this up here and now,” Deacon said, his stare never leaving my face. He was such a contradiction. On the outside he was a mountain of a guy, even more built and slightly taller than me. He was intimidating as hell if you didn’t know him, but knowing him I also knew he wasn’t aggressive or intimidating at all. I had seen him with Ava, how gentle he could be with her and the easy way in which he could put her at ease while also making her feel safe. But there in that moment, as he started at me with determination and some challenge in his eyes, I was pretty sure he’d throw down with me if our conversation came to blows. He was a complicated guy to work out and I didn’t like that. I was good at reading people. It was a skill that made me a fucking great detective, but I just couldn’t get a good read on Deacon.

“Ava is ours. We fell in love over a decade ago and nothing has changed that. If you think you can sweep her out from under us, you’re wrong,” told him flatly.

“She doesn’t belong to anyone, and Ava will make her own decisions about what she wants. If you love her like you say, then you know that as well as I do. And I do believe you love her, that both of you do, and I’ve heard her say she loves you too. I have no intention of trying to steer her away from either of you. We’ve already been through this. I just want the chance to date her and get to know her. If it works out between us, then yeah, it will obviously turn into a complicated with the three of us and one of her, especially since you seem to dislike me so much,” he said as he pointed a finger at me. “Is it so wrong to just see where things go, if that’s what Ava wants too?”

“No,” Jack spoke up. “It’s not, not if it’s what she wants and I think it is, Mason. You have to stop being an ass to Deacon and let this happen. Ave knows we love her, and I don’t think she wants to walk away from us. She just has feelings for Deacon too. She needs both of us =, right? That’s what we always said.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Well, maybe she needs Deak too,” he told me and I found myself nodding. I knew he could be right. There had to be a reason our closed off girl had trusted Deacon so easily and built feelings for him. I couldn’t take that from her, even if I wanted to.

“I’ll try,” I agreed reluctantly. “But if you hurt her I will bury you somewhere no one will ever find your body,” I added menacingly as I glared at Deacon.

Before Deacon could even form a response the door to the waiting room was thrust open loudly, waking both Ava and Ky instantly.

“Colt MacMillan’s family?” the doctor asked as he looked around at us all.

“Yes!” Kylan gasped as he shot to his feet and raced across the room. “I’m his fiancé and that’s his sister. How is he?” I looked to Ava and realized she was struggling to move the chair herself, so I walked over and pushed so she was beside Kylan.

“He’s out of surgery and stable for now. We’re keeping him under close observation for tonight as a precaution, but I don’t foresee any serious complications,” the doctor explained and Ky and Ava cried out in relief simultaneously.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“A nurse mentioned there was internal bleeding?” Jack questioned.

“There was. Mr. MacMillan had been stabbed three times. No vital organs were hit, but he had some internal bleeding and we were forced to remove his spleen. He had also lost a lot of blood, but as I said, he’s stable. The police are eager to speak with him as soon as he wakes.”

“Will he make a full recovery?” Ava asked shakily.

“Physically, yes. There will be some extensive scarring, but a plastic surgeon would be able to help with that if it’s something your brother wants to look into. He was lucky. One of those stab wounds was millimeters from an artery. As it stands, barring complications, he should be able to return home in a few days.”

“Can we see him?” Kylan asked as he swiped tears from his cheeks.

“He’s just being moved from recovery. A nurse will come and let you know once they have him situated.”

Kylan dropped to his knees and hugged Ava hard, and she was holding onto him just as tight, as Jack and I thanked the doctor before he left the room.

“Come ok,” Jack said as he placed a hand on Kylan’s shoulder. “Let’s sit back down until the nurse comes in. He’s going to be alright.”

“Physically. That’s what the doctor said. He wasn’t telling us everything though, I could see it in his eyes,” Ky said as he rose to his feet and took a deep breath. His

whole face was red from crying now.

“He’s alive and he will recover. That’s enough for now. Whatever else he needs, we can make sure he gets,” Ava told him with a snuffle. She’d been crying too and I couldn’t stand it anymore. I walked over to her and scooped her from the chair, pressing her to my front and breathing easier as she melted against me and pressed her face against my neck, seeking comfort.

“Let’s just all sit down and take in the fact Colt is going nowhere. We have him back and we have to be really bloody grateful for that right now,” Jack suggested and I agreed completely.

AVA

I’m confused when I open my eyes and see the stark white wall opposite me. Then I feel stubble brush my cheek and smile as Deacon plants a kiss just above the corner of my mouth.

“Okay sweetheart?” he asked in little more than a whisper. I remember then. We’d all been shown into a private room by a nurse an hour or so after the doctor had told us Colt was stable. Colt was hooked up to an IV and heart monitor. His face was bruised and swollen down the right side. He looked pale and his whole torso was bandaged with stark white dressings, but he looked better than I had expected. He was still knocked out by the pain meds and the nurse advised us he was unlikely to wake any time soon, so as Kylan settled right at his side, clutching his hand, which was bruised and scratched up pretty badly, Deacon had scooped me up from the chair I sat in, pressed me against his chest, and pleaded with me to just try and sleep a little. I hadn’t wanted to in case Cole woke, but I must have passed out eventually.

“I’m good. Did anything change?” I asked as I used Deacon’s bicep to pull myself up so I was sitting astride his wide lap. Jack was in a chair in the corner closest to the

door, his head propped back against the wall as he slept with his mouth slightly open. Ky was out too, Colt's hand still clutched tightly and his head laid on the bed beside it.

"No. He still hasn't woken up, but his vitals are steady. The nurses said it won't be long now."

"Where's Mace?"

"Police found where they think Colt escaped on, based on what he was able to tell them when they brought him in. Mason wanted to check it out. I can call him if you want him to come back though?"

"No. He should check the scene before that fucker has time to rush back and clean up. We still have to stop him before he does this to some other poor innocent. I'd be there too if I didn't need to be here so much," I replied as I looked over to Colt. He was still way too pale and I hated the bruising on his face and hands. His knuckles were a mess and I knew he had fought like hell to escape. I was so proud of him for that. He'd never been much of a fighter. It wasn't really in his nature. He was protective, especially with me, but he wasn't the typical macho type. I didn't even know he could fight. I knew he worked out religiously at his home gym, and he had always been in peak shape as long as I had known him, but fighting? It wasn't who he was. I was the scrappy one between us and always had been.

"Jack went down the cafeteria and got some pastries and muffins. You should try to eat something. You need to take your meds too, right? Did you bring them?" Deacon worried.

"No. I'll be okay for another few hours without them though, and I'll eat something soon. Just let me wake up first," I told him. The idea of food was not appealing. My emotions were like a whirlwind whipping around my mind chaotically and it was

upsetting my stomach, not to mention my pain was making me feel nauseous too. But I wanted to try and reassure Deak. He worried about me way too much.

“I’ll go back to Jack’s place and get your pills when Jack wakes up. I can stop for some decent coffee on the way back too.”

“Decent coffee would definitely be appreciated I told him as I turned to smile at him gratefully.

“How are you feeling?”

“Relieved that I have my brother back,” I sighed.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know. I’m okay, big guy. Stop worrying so much. I have some pain but I always do. I’m good,” I promised him as I cupped his cheek and looked into his captivating eyes. “I’m sorry about all of the chaos you’ve been dragged into since you met me.”

“You’re worth every second of the chaos, Ava. I don’t know what it is, but when I’m with you something inside of me just settles and I feel peace for the first time in a really fucking long time. I feel like I was meant to meet you that night outside Temple.”

“I feel something similar. I don’t like to be touched by others. Even colleagues I worked with for years knew not to touch me in anyway unless they had to, but that night when you helped me, it felt different. It felt safe. You make me feel safe, and I really like you Deacon. I know everything’s fucked up right now, but if you can stick with me, I really want to get to know you better.” I admitted.

“I already told you, and I will again as many times as you need me to – I’m not going

anywhere. You're stuck with me." He leaned in and pressed his firm lips to mine, his slight stubble brushing against my skin with each small peck he gave me. I wanted more. I wanted to know what it would feel like to really kiss him, but it wasn't exactly the place.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“I know it’s weird, but I have to ask you about Jack and Mason too. I’ve loved them for so many years, and now that I feel like I might have a chance to get my life back on track, I want them to be a part of it, just like I want you to be too. God, I sound like a greedy bitch,” I groaned as I covered my face.

“I’ve spoken to the guys, and I know how much they mean to you. I understand that you love them, and more than that I think you need them too. I’m just hoping there’s space for you to love and need me too if this thing between us goes as I hope it will.”

“Me too,” I admitted. It was quite the turnaround. I had gone from pushing everyone away when I arrived back in New York, telling myself constantly there could never be anything for me and any man, especially not Jack and Mason. Now I was clinging to them tight and falling for a third guy. What the fuck was I doing?

My thoughts were abandoned and I was instantly on my feet when I saw Colt move the hand Kylan was clutching. I ignored the pain that shot up my back at the fast movement and hurried to Colt’s side.

“Colt?” He stirred and I saw his eyelids twitching. “Colt, open your damned eyes and look at me, please!” I begged in a hushed whisper.

“It m-must be bad if you’re s-saying pl-please,” he rasped, then he smiled, wincing right after because the movement obviously hurt his face.

“Oh God, Colt! Don’t you ever scare me like that again!” I scolded him tearfully as I clutched his hand and leaned in closer to his face just as he opened his eyes.

“Bam,” he whispered as he looked at me and tried to smile again.

“I’m here. Kylan too. You scared the shit out of all of us.”

“Ky?” Colt turned his head and I saw tears fill his eyes when they landed on his exhausted fiancé fast asleep, clutching his hand.

“You guys met?” he looked back to me warily and I glared at him.

“You’re such an idiot, Colt! Why would you feel like you need to hide who you are from me? I love you, no matter what. Don’t you know that?”

“Yes. I know it. I am an idiot,” he rasped as he looked behind me to where Deak had risen to his feet. “Deak?”

“Hey man,” Deak said as he gave Colt a chin lift.

“Deak’s been helping Jack, Mason, and me try to find you. I’m so sorry I didn’t answer your calls when you needed me,” I squeaked as my tears escaped and slid down my cheeks.

“Don’t you dare do that, Ava. Do not start blaming yourself for a thing that happened. It was all on me. I should have gone to Mace with what I found out. I’m guessing you found my file?”

“Yeah. I won’t call you an idiot again, but just know I thought it when I found what you’d been up to,” I sniffled as I swiped at my tears with my sleeve.

“Is Mason looking for that bastard? I gave the cops what I could when I was brought in, but I was a mess.”

“They found where they think you were held. Mace is there now,” I assured him. I winced as pain shot through my back at just the small movement of my arm and I knew I needed pain meds.

“What’s wrong?” Colt demanded instantly.

“Nothing. I’m fine,” I lied, but it wouldn’t hold long with the way Colt was now taking me in, scrutinizing every detail about me. Then he must have seen the wheelchair in the corner.

“Ava. I knew something was going on when you kept dodging my visits. Tell me,” Colt growled.

“I will, but not now, okay? You just woke up and you need to speak to Kylan because he’s not sleeping or eating he’s so worried. I’m okay and I have the guys to help me. We can talk later.” I was almost pleading as I looked into his eyes and urged him to just drop it. The last thing I wanted to do was burden him with all of my crap right then.

“We’ve got her Colt. Just concentrate on getting better and getting out of here, okay?” Deacon backed me up and I was grateful.

“For now,” Colt nodded as he locked his eyes with mine. “But you will tell me everything when I get out of here. No more pushing me away.”

“Never again,” I agreed. “I thought I’d lost you.” The tearful words were barely out before Colt was pulling me into his side and wrapping his free arm around me. He kissed the top of my head and let out a deep sigh. “You should wake Ky. He needs to see you.”

“Do you like him?” Colt asked a little nervously.

“I love him. I think he’s perfect for you Colt. Hurry up and marry him as soon as you can,” I told him honestly.

The angle I was being pulled at to hug him was really straining my back so I kissed his cheek then pulled back grabbing the bed to steady myself when I wobbled too much. Deacon stepped up behind me too and wrapped his hand around my hip supportively.

“Ava...” Colt began as he looked to me with way too much worry. I wasn’t the one he needed to worry about. He was the one in a hospital bed.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“Ky!” I cut him off as I loudly woke his fiancé. Kylan startled awake and sat up looking to Colt with wide eyed fear, then he realized Colt was awake and they were in a tangled embrace as they clung to each other tightly.

Jack, who had obviously been woken by my shout appeared at my side and took my hand in his.

“He’s awake,” he said as he squeezed my hand reassuringly.

“He woke up a few minutes ago,” I sniffled as I fought to push down my raw emotions. Colt and Ky were talking in hushed tones behind us but I tried hard not to listen, wanting them to have some privacy as they held each other emotionally. They looked just as good together as I knew they would, even with Colt all bruised and bandaged.

“Come and sit back down, love. You’re dead on your feet,” Jack said as he took me from Deacon and sat with me curled up on his lap. I pressed my head against his chest and closed my eyes. The knowledge that Colt was awake and being his usual self was the greatest relief of my life.

“I should go and collect her pills. She needs to take them soon,” Deacon uttered quietly to Jack.

“I didn’t think of that. Would you mind, Mate?” Jack asked.

“No problem. I’ll stop for coffee too. Try to get her to eat something. It’s been hours,” Deak said.

“She can make her own decision when to eat,” I told him as I open my eyes and looked to him with annoyance.

“Fine, then she should eat something soon before she falls on her ass,” Mason snarked as he leaned in to kiss me on the lips chastely. “Be good,” he added with a wink, then he slipped from the room with Jack apartment keys in his hand.

The sound of the door closing seemed to pull Colt and Ky from their moment and Colt turned back to where Jack and I sat, his smile falling as he studied me even harder.

“Don’t colt. I’m just tired,” I told him as I made myself sit up in Jack’s lap, despite the pain it caused.

“You’re so thin. What the fuck happened?” Colt demanded.

“Nothing.” I replied at the same time Jack blunted out the truth,

“She was shot on the job, two years ago. She has a spinal injury.”

“Jack!” I hissed in horror.

“You were shot? You found out you had a spinal injury and you didn’t fucking tell me!” Colt roared, then had to sit back as he became breathless.

“This is why I said we’d talk about it later. You need to rest and have calm,” I told him as I turned a quick glare to Jack.

“He needs to bloody know. You should have told him when it happened,” Jack told me.

“I’m fine,” Colt grimaced as he turned to look at me again. He stayed laid back against his pillows this time but he was still breathing too hard.

“Should you even be here? You look exhausted and so pale? Should she be here?” he asked as he looked over my head and to Jack.

“She needs to eat something and get some rest, but you know how stubborn she can be. Deacon’s gone to get her meds for the pain she’s in.”

“Pain? You’re in pain two years after it happened?” Colt asked as he looked to me again.

“No.” I said with a stubborn shake of my head. “We’re not discussing this anymore. You need to rest and stop worrying about me. I’m fine. You’re the one we need to worry about.”

“I’ll worry about Kylan, so he can worry about you, sweetie.” Ky spoke up and I turned my glare on him

“You!” I snapped as I pointed at him. “I thought you were my friend.”

“I am, always, but it’s time for you to come clean with your brother, Ava. He won’t relax until he knows everything. You know that,” Ky sighed.

“I just want it noted I’m against this marriage if it means the two of you constantly ganging up on me,” I said more playfully as I looked between Ky and my brother.

“Ava?” Colt pushed, stopping the distraction I had hoped to initiate.

“My injury is chronic,” I sighed. “No cure. No fixing it. I have pain and numbness. I have issues with balance and I get exhausted really easily and quickly. There’s

nothing doctors can do other than give me pills to manage some of it.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“You were shot in the back?” Colt asks and I nod.

“My partner was shot. I thought I’d taken the perp down, but when I went to try and help my partner, the fucker shot me in the back. I managed to get my gun and take him down, but it meant the end of my career. The CPD gave me a shitty pension and slammed the door in my face, but I was the lucky one. My partner died on scene.”

“Why the fuck would you not call me when that happens? Why have you been dealing with this alone all while pushing me away?” he demanded. He looked exhausted and I hated that I was wearing him out even more.

“I was embarrassed and ashamed of how broken I am now. I didn’t want you to see me like this, or worse, how I was right after it happened.”

“Jesus Christ, Bam. I don’t even know what to say,” Colt whispered as he rested back and closed his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Colt. I fucked up. I know that now,” I sniffled as Jack held me closer.

“Just tell her she’s not running away now you’re safe Colt, because I’m worried that’s what she plans to do, no matter how hard Mace and I have tried to convince her she needs to be here, with all of us,” Jack spoke up.

“Jack! Just shut the fuck up!” I snapped angrily.

“You are not leaving. Don’t you fucking dare, Ava Scott,” Colt snapped and when I looked at him he had me pinned in place with the scariest look I’d ever seen from him.

“You are moving back home, with me, where I can take care of you. Don’t even bother arguing. I won’t listen, and if you run I’m sending someone to drag you right back. No more of your independent bullshit, you hear me? You belong here and here is where you’ll stay. I have someone deal with your house in Chicago and ship your belongings to our place.”

“You sound like a crazy kidnapper,” I threw back at him with some ire.

“I’m your damned brother and you’re going to listen to me this time! You have struggled on your own for two fucking years because of your pride, while I was here clueless to it all. No more.” I had never seen Colt so angry. Even when he first took me in and I rebelled in a major way, he had never ever gotten so angry with me. It shocked me and actually made me listen to him. I knew he was scared for me and that was why he was reacting as he was. That was the only reason I didn’t bite his head off.

“You’re engaged. You’re going to get married. I can’t live with you,” I argued instead.

“I have no objections. You’re gonna be my kid sister too and I plan to take the role seriously,” Ky spoke up.

“I’m thirty-four years old,” I reminded him with a roll of my eyes. Ky just shrugged with the hint of a smile.

“It’s settled. I’ll have my lawyer make arrangements to clear out your house and put it up for sale.” Colt said firmly. I groaned as I realized I had something else to come clean about.

“What is it, love?” Jack asked.

“I...um...I haven’t exactly been living at the place you set up for me,” I admitted as I glanced guiltily to my brother.

“What do you mean?” Jack asked.

“Where have you been living?” Colt demanded, still sounding pissed.

“I...after I was released from the hospital I was scared you’d come to visit me...like a surprise visit, and I didn’t want you finding me the way I was so I...I rented a place.”

“What place?” Colt asked knowingly. He knew me too well and he read my reluctance.

“It was in the city. I didn’t have much money after I got medically retired, so it wasn’t much. My stuff though, it’s all there.”

“What do you mean you didn’t have much money? I set an account up for you filled with money, and you have several credit cards with no limit?”

“I didn’t want to use them. I knew you’d worry if I started using all of the money you gave me.”

“So you lived in a shit hole? Is that what you’re not telling me? Was it even safe, Ava?” he growled as he looked at me. When I looked away I gave him the answer without words.

“Fuck!” Colt cursed loudly.

“Colt, just take a breath. No, it wasn’t the best place to live but I can take care of myself and you know it. I was okay. I managed perfectly well alone,” That was a lie

but one I had been selling to myself for months, so it was easy to spout.

“She’s home now, Colt. The past is the past. Let’s all just focus on the future. We need to get you on your feet and keep you safe while the cops chase down the psycho who took you. Ava can get moved in at your place and I’ve hired security, so you’ll both be safe. Everything will be alright now,” Ky soothed as he brushed his hand over Colts greasy and dirty looking hair.

“Mason, Deacon, and I are here for you both too. Kylan’s right. We all need to look forwards, not backwards,” Jack agreed.

A nurse chose that moment to come in and take Colt’s vitals and check his dressings. Jack and I left the room to make some space, and Ky stayed with him.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“What the fuck was that?” I snapped at Jack the second we were out in the hall.

“It was being honest. You needed to do it.”

“Not when he just woke up, and not after everything he’s been through, you asshole! I planned to tell him, but not until he was home and feeling better. You just piled more stress on him he really didn’t need,” I growled.

“He can handle it, Ave. He seemed fine,” Jack smirked and I shoved him hard.

“He’s not fucking fine! He was held for over a week by a psycho who gets off on inflicting pain like you cannot imagine. He will have faced a week of torture and being told over and over how evil he is. That monster will be in his head just as prominently as the marks he left on Colt’s body. I bet his body is a patchwork of welts and cuts under those bandages, as well as the three stab wounds! You have no idea Jack!” I pushed him away again when he moved to grab my hands, then stormed past him.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“None of your business!” I said as I walked as steadily as I could away from him. I didn’t have my stick. I didn’t even know where it went when I got in that wheelchair, but walking without it was a nightmare, especially when I was trying so hard not to falter and stumble, knowing Jack would be watching me.

I made it to the elevator without him following me. When I stepped out on the ground floor I called Mason, grateful I had thought to put my cell in my pocket on my way

out of the apartment.

“Ava?” Mason asked, sounding worried almost the second I hit call.

“I’m okay,” I reassured him quickly. “Are you still at the crime scene?” I asked.

“Yeah. Colt was definitely here, we found his busted up cell phone and his wallet. How is he?”

“Awake. He was talking to us all. He seemed good,” I told him. “I want to see the crime scene. Can you send me the location?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, honey. There’s a lot of blood and....other stuff. You don’t want to see it,” he cautioned.

“I need to, Mason, please. I won’t freak out. I just have to see it.” I wanted to know exactly what Colt had been through so I could be there for him when the darkness crept in. I knew what he had been through to some extent and I wanted to do all I could to be there for him. “I can handle this,” I added when he still hadn’t replied.

“Okay. I’ll send you a pin, but have Deacon or Jack drive you over here.”

“I won’t be long,” I told him, then hung up. There was no way I was asking Jack to drive me anywhere. I was so pissed off with him. I understood him wanting me to be honest with Colt, but he should have trusted me to judge when it would be the right time. That had not been it and now I had the guilt of knowing Colt was stressed and worrying about me after everything he’d already been through. This was why I had planned to leave the city again once I knew he was safe. All I could bring him was worry and stress and he deserved so much more.

CHAPTER 19

AVA

I was regretting telling Mason I wouldn't freak out the second I walked into a maintenance room for the subway, where that monster had held Colt. Mason had already explained to me that the maintenance rooms were rarely entered unless there were issues with the track, so it was the perfect place for him to hold Colt, close to the abduction site, for easy transfer and with multiple exits if the psycho needed to flee, which he obviously had one after Colt's escape.

"I was held in a room like this. Not this one, but it was so similar," I uttered as I tried hard to not breathe through my nose. The sight of the familiar space was bad enough, but the smell, the smell was what was going to take me right back to my night of torture and have me losing my mind with anxiety and fear.

"I'll have units start checking subways across the city. It's unlikely this fucker left evidence, but we might get lucky," Mason said, and I nodded. It was definitely worth a try.

The room was dark, lit by just a single lightbulb that hung above us. It was a concrete room, lined with pipes and wires that obviously serviced the subway and above.

I gasped and covered my mouth as I stepped further in and my eyes adjusted to the darkness. There was a chain hanging down from one of the thick pipes above and below it, and spread far and wide across the concrete ground was blood. So much fucking blood.

I had seen gruesome crime scenes before, many times in my time with homicide. I'd seen blood and brain matter and so much more that turned my stomach, but it had never affected me the way the sight of that blood did and that was because I knew that blood belonged to my brother.

“Breathe, baby. Colt’s safe,” Mason said softly as he came up beside me and ran his hand up and down my back.

“I’m okay,” I uttered as I pushed down my nausea and took a calming breath. “What did forensics bag?” I asked. The crime scene had already been photographed and any potential evidence bagged and removed.

“Nothing good,” Mason sighed as he scrubbed a hand over his face. He had changed into one of his trademark suits, but he looked completely exhausted.

“Tell me.”

“Ava...”

“Okay, I’ll tell you and you stop me when I’m wrong.” I turned to face him and folded my arms over my chest. “A whip?” Mason nodded. “A cat and nine tails, barbed, right?” Again he nodded and the reluctance on his face had my resolve slipping. My lip started to tremble and I couldn’t talk to go on. Images of what that kidnapping, murdering bastard had put me through flashed in my head and I felt myself sway to the side as my legs started to shake along with the rest of me. Mason grabbed me and pulled me into his front, surrounding me and shielding me from everything around us.

Page 64

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“I’m here, baby girl. You’re safe,” he whispered as he kissed softly close to my ear.

“Colt’s not okay. He can’t be. Not after this,” I whimpered as I clung to him.

“No, I don’t think he is, but we’ll get him through this,” mason promised me.

“I was wrong. I...I can’t handle this, Mace,” I admitted, which was monumental for me, but being there, surrounded by not only my own memories of hell, but seeing Colt’s too, it was too much.

He gathered me up in his arms and carried me right out of there like I was a child, and I clung to him feeling as lost as one.

I lifted my head from his shoulder as the fresh air surrounded us, and I took in a huge breath. I was shaking again, but this time it was caused by my memories, not by my injury. I looked to Mason and tried for a smile, though it was weak.

“Sorry. I really thought I’d be okay,” I told him.

“You did amazing, baby. Now will you please let me take you back to Jack’s so you can rest a little?”

“I should get back to Colt,” I wavered.

“Jack text me to say he’s out cold for now. Let’s go and get a few hours’ sleep, then we can see Colt this afternoon, okay?”

“Did they find anything here Mace?” I asked as I looked from him to the forensics team who were loading their van.

“They found the knife, as well as the other stuff. We’re hoping for finger prints or DNA but that’s gonna take them a while. There no cameras around here so that’s a dead end, but Colt willbe giving a statement later, Maybe he will remember something that can get this guy,” Mason explained.

“We have to stop him.”

“We will. I won’t stop until he’s dead or behind bars for the rest of his life. He hurt the woman I love. Nothing will stop me from bringing him down,” he promised.

I lay my head back on Mason’s shoulder and tucked my arms under me. It was freezing cold and there was once again a covering of snow on the sidewalks.

“I’m tired,” I admitted.

“Let’s go then.” Mason didn’t put me down until it was to set me in the passenger seat of his car. He shucked off his gray wool coat and draped it over me once I had my seatbelt in place. “Close you eyes and rest, baby,” he told me, and I think I passed out before he even rounded the car and got into his side.

I woke up and smiled a little when I realized my head was resting on Mason’s naked chest. He was fast asleep and snoring loudly, but he had a tight grip around my middle where he held me against him. I didn’t remember anything after falling asleep in his car, so I assumed he had carried me inside without waking me. He’d even removed my sneakers and sweats so I was laid in just my panties and sweater.

I managed to reach my cell which was on the nightstand and checked the time, relieved I hadn't been asleep for too long. I needed to get back to Colt, but the nap had definitely done me good. My pain was less and the pounding in my head had stopped. I quickly opened a message to send to Kylan. I didn't know if Deacon would still be there and I was still too annoyed to speak to Jack.

AVA – How's Colt?

KY – Sleeping. They have him pain meds so he'll be out for a while. Get some rest.

AVA – I'll be back soon.

I placed my phone back on the nightstand, feeling better knowing Colt was resting too. He would need to sleep a lot after all of the blood he had lost.

"You should be asleep," Mason rumbled as he pulled me so I was actually laid across his body.

"I slept," I countered.

"Do you feel any better?"

"Much better after waking up laid against you."

"I didn't want to leave you in case you had nightmares," he explained. I rose up and rested my head on my arm as I used my other hand to press a finger to his lips.

"You're exactly where I needed you to be. You don't have to explain," I told him, feeling lighter than I had in a long time. I had dreamed so many times of laying in bed with him, usually having hot and wild sex, but also just as we were then, just snuggling and talking. In my dreams Jack would be laid in the bed with us too, but

that wasn't happening right then, not with how pissed I was with him.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

But Colt was safe. He was being guarded by the security team that Ky had paid for, and from what he'd told me, they were the best. Kylan was with him so I knew he wasn't alone, and I had actually slept soundly again. I felt good, and who wouldn't with the mountain of perfect man I had beneath me, A mountain of perfect man who loved me.

When he opened his mouth and sucked in the finger I'd been holding to his lips every single nerve ending inside of me seemed to come alive and shoot right to my core. He sucked on my finger and my clit throbbed as my breaths sped up.

"Mace," I moaned as I looked into his deep, dark eyes and pleaded with him to see what I needed. Once upon a time I'd have just told him, but I'd lost almost all of my confidence since those days, especially when it came to sex.

"Do you need to come, baby?" he asked with a small smirk crossing his face.

"So much," I gasped as I felt his hands wrap loosely around my hips, then run sensually up my sides under the sweater I wore.

"Strip for me." I hesitated for a second. It wasn't that I didn't trust him, but he didn't really know how messed up I was when it came to sex, and Mason used to thrive on his dominance and power over me when I gave him my submission. Would he get too carried away after so long apart? Would I be able to speak up if it all became too much? "Ava, look at me," he commanded and I instantly acquiesced. His hands moved back to my hips and he just held me. "Tell me why you just panicked."

"I...I didn..."

“And don’t try to lie to me. I know you too well, don’t I?”

“Yes damn it,” I sighed as I rolled my eyes at him. “I just...I’m different. I can’t...not like before. I can’t do that anymore.”

“Do what, sweetheart?”

“Any of it,” I uttered as I slumped forwards and wrapped my hands as far as I could get them around him. I just needed to feel close to him. “I still need you to be in control. I...it feels good to just let go and do as you tell me, but I...the pain I used to love. That’s gone. You can’t bind me in any way or I’ll freak out too. I told you I’m a mess.”

“Do you trust me, Ava?” he asked as he held me tightly against his chest and tucked my head under his chin.

“Always,” I agreed easily.

“Then trust me to know what you can handle. This isn’t a scene. Your mine now, and while I still crave some control, this isn’t a scene at the club. I just want to make love to you. Can you trust me to do that?” he asked.

“Yes, Mace. I want that.”

“Me too. I’ve waited far too long to have your perfect body pressed against mine again,” he said as he kissed the top of my head.

“I’m sorry...”

“No. No apologies, but next time you’re worried you tell me, or whoever you’re with, right away. Okay? We won’t ever be able to make anything work if you can’t talk to

me and Jack.”

“I know,” I nodded. “I’ll try.”

“Do you want to just get cleaned up and find something to eat instead? It’s fine if you do. We don’t need to rush anything.”

“No.” I lifted my head and smiled as I took him in all over again. He was so handsome. I was pretty sure he had gotten even more so with age. “I want this, Mason. I need you.”

“Good, because I really fucking need you too, but if we’re doing this, you’re going to be open with me. If things are going too fast, or you feel worried or uncomfortable you’re going to tell me right away and we’ll slow down, or stop, okay? I need you to give me this, baby, because I would never be able to get over hurting or scaring you. Can you do that for me? For us?”

“Yes. I promise,” I agreed.

“Then I believe I gave you an order. Show me that sexy little body, Ava,” he said, the smile back on his face as he slid both of his hands behind his head and just watched me as I rose up onto my knees. It wasn’t the best position for my back or legs, but I wasn’t in pain.

Trying not to allow my own insecurities about my scars and too thin body to take from the moment I slowly stripped off the sweater I wore, trying hard to make it look sexy, but I knew my movements, especially pulling over my head were a little awkward and stilted. I threw the sweater aside and dared a glance to Mason, relieved to see he didn’t look put off. Next I reached back to unclip my bra. The cups dropped free and I slid it down my arms and tossed it aside. This time when I looked to Mason his eyes were heavier and filled with heat as he seemed to take me in. It gave me a

confidence boost, and actually made me feel sexy in his eyes.

“Perfect,” he said as he moved his arms and grabbed my hips. He picked me up with ease and sat me on the bed beside him, then he sat up and leaned in close to me.

“Lie down,” he ordered and I complied. My breaths were come faster now and I could feel my whole chest rising and falling more acutely than ever. I knew my panties were wet and I had to clamp my legs together as I tried to relieve some of the tension mounting at my core.

“Such a good girl,” he whispered as he leaned down and toyed with my left nipple as his lips pressed softly to mine. He knew what those words did to me, and I started to writhe as my need only became ore and more desperate for him.

“Open your legs for me, Ava,” he said, almost startling me from the pile of goo he had made me with his languid kisses and gentle caresses.

I saw the satisfaction in his face when I parted my legs, doing as he wanted me to. Then his hand started to slide down to my thigh and I slammed my eyes closed again as desire rushed through me, making me shudder under his touch.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“Am I going to find these panties wet?” he asked playfully, and I moaned loudly again as he cupped my mound, then slid his finger under the edge of the thin cotton I wore. “Oh yeah, baby. You do need to come, don’t you?”

“Please Mason,” I gasped. The bed moved under me and when I opened my eyes and looked for Madon I found him on his knees at the foot of the bed, leaning over so his face was aligned with my center.

He slid both of his hands up the center of my thighs, then moved out, lipping one finger under each side of my panties and peeling them down slowly. Too slowly. He pulled them away and tossed them aside as I whined with the building need inside of me. He was going to drive me insane if he didn’t touch me soon.

“Stay still, just like that for me, and you’ll get to come. You want to come Ava?”

“Yes!” I cried. Before I could even start to beg I felt Mason between my legs, then his tongue was on me. I fought no adhere to his command that I stay still as he drove me wild with his mouth over my clit and his huge d=fingers pushed deep inside of me, giving me exactly what I was so very needy for.

“My perfect girl. Keeping so still for me. Time for your reward, baby,” mason said, then he sucked hard on my clit while his fingers found that perfect place inside of me and I cried out as I shattered with blissful release. My orgasm tore through me violently and there was no more keeping still as my back arched up off of the bed.

“So perfect, baby,” Mason said and I felt him pull me against his body, but I was still floating. It had been a long time since I experienced that feeling of complete pleasure.

All of my worries were far away and I was just maxed out on bliss.

When I finally came back I found myself curled up in Mason's arms and on his lap where he sat against the headboard. My head was resting against his chest and he was surrounding me with his arms. I wasn't sure I had ever felt as secure as I did right there.

"Hey, you back with me?" he asked with a dreamy smile. I reached up and ran my finger through his thin goatee beard. It suited him and made him look distinguished. I also loved the way it felt against my skin when he kissed me.

"Do you like it?" he asked. "The beard?"

"Hell yes. You look hot, and it feels good too," I added with a blush I could feel rising on my cheeks.

"Does it now?" he laughed. "You feel okay?"

"Like you need to ask," I scoffed. "Please tell me you have a condom," I added.

"Are you sure you're ready?"

"I've had sex in the last ten years, Mace?" I sighed with a roll of my eyes.

"Don't say any more or I'm gonna have to go and hunt down every one of the fuckers who ever touched you," he growled as he pulled me even closer to his body, if that were possible.

"Don't be insane!" I hit out as his chest softly and laughed. "And yes, I'm very sure. You said you were going to make love to me. I'm holding you to that."

“I fucking love you, Ava Scott,” he uttered as his lips crashed down over mine and kissed me hard and fast. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled myself up to get closer as I gave back just as ferociously. The pain in my back stopped me from turning to straddle his thighs as I wanted to, so I was relieved when he picked me up and laid me on the bed, moving to lean over me on all fours as he continued to kiss me hard.

His hand had just begun to roam down my body when a blaring alarm erupted through the apartment, stopping us both dead.

“What the fuck?” I yelled over the noise.

“It’s the security alarm. Fuck!” Mason scrambled to his feet and was rifling through his clothes. He stood with his gun in his hand and looked to me.

“Get dressed, baby. You got your gun?”

“Yeah. Go I’ll be right behind you,” I told him, fully expecting him to argue, so I was surprised when he just nodded.

“Be fucking careful. I’ll start at the front of the apartment,” he told me, then he left the room in nothing but his tight boxers, gun in hand.

I got to my feet and pulled on my sweater and my still damp panties. Gross. I grabbed my gun from where I had tucked it in the top drawer of the nightstand and checked it was loaded as I had left it.

The blaring alarm had my adrenaline pulsing in a way I had learned to overcome in my years as a detective, but I was rusty now. As I emerged from my room I pressed my back to the wall and held my gun in front of me as I moved towards Jack’s room at the back of the apartment. I knew the fire escape was under his bedroom window and

that seemed the most likely if anyone had tried to make entry. I opened the door as quietly as I could and slid into the room, clearing all of the corners, then checking the closet and adjoining bathroom. When I found nothing I moved to the window and instantly knew it had been tampered with. The lock was hanging at an angle and had been jimmied from underneath. I tried to lift the window and it wasn't locked any longer. I knew there was no way Jack left it that way.

I lifted the window all of the way and looked down the fire escape for anyone retreating, but the metal steps were clear and I didn't see anyone on the street below who looked suspicious. There were footprints in the freshly fallen snow though, and I knew someone had tried to get in. They had likely fled the second the security alarm blared.

I moved out of the room to check the others in case and found Mason coming towards me.

"Clear," he told me. "I checked every room and the front door's locked."

"They tried to get in with the fire escape. The lock's been jimmied and there's prints in the snow under the escape," I said as I lowered my gun and set it on Jack's dresser as I walked to the window to show Mason.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“Who the fuck would try to break into Jack’s place?” he asked as he looked out of the open window to the footprints below.

“Could have just been an attempted burglary. Timing could just be coincidence.” I shrugged.

“It could be. It could also be the Owen’s haven’t quite given up their search for Colt yet,” he pointed out and my stomach lurched. He was right. Owen had told me he’d let things lie, but he was a criminal and experience had taught me they weren’t usually trustworthy.

“Fuck! We have to get to the hospital,” I gasped. I moved to go to my room, but I moved too fast and pain shot up from my thigh to the center of my back, taking my breath away in its intensity.

“Easy, baby. There’s a security team watching Colt, and Jack. He’s safe,” Mason told me as he wrapped his arms around me, holding me against him.

“I still need to go to him. I need to see for myself that he’s safe, and Ky needs to warn the security company he hired,” I told him, all of my bliss well and truly gone as my worries set firmly back in.

“We’ll go. Come on. Let’s get some clothes on,” he said as he scooped me up and carried me to my room. I clung to him and realized not all of my bliss was gone. I still had Mason pressed against me, and that was definitely a piece of heaven.

AVA

Mason left me in my room to shower and get dressed while he went to Jack's to do the same. When he was done he managed to fix the broken lock on the window temporarily and called the intrusion in so there would be an official report on file.

Just over an hour after the scare of the alarm going off we were back at the hospital. Mason stopped outside to speak with the two security guards Ky had hired to protect my brother. I slipped into the room, once again leaning heavily on my stick. Despite the fact I hadn't even been awake two hours after my impromptu nap I was tired again, and my pain was setting in at the higher end of the scale, especially in my lower back.

"Ave? Where the hell have you been?" Jack snapped the second I walked in.

"Do not fucking start with me," I growled as I turned to glare at him hard. He was sitting in the corner of the room, his cell in hand. I knew he'd been texting and calling me since I left, but I had ignored him.

"Is everything okay?" Colt asked as I completely bypassed Jack and headed towards the bed.

Colt was sat up, his cell, or what I knew had to be a replacement cell, in his hand and a coffee on the table in front of him. He had some color back in his cheeks and he looked fully awake now. Kyran was sat right beside him in the same clothes he'd been wearing earlier. He looked just as drawn and exhausted as he had when I last saw him, but there was a satisfied, happy smile on his face now.

"Jack's an ass, but I guess we all knew that already," I shrugged nonchalantly. "How are you feeling?"

“Good. The pain meds they have me on are good,” Colt laughed. “Where did you disappear to?”

“I went to meet Mason, then we went to Jack’s to sleep for a few hours. I’m sorry I just walked out like that,” I told him.

“You needed to rest. I’m glad you went,” Colt told me. “Now you can help me to convince Kylan he needs to do the same.”

I looked to Ky and smiled softly. “He’s right. You look beat. Why don’t you go home and sleep for a while? I’ll stay until you come back,” I promised.

“Why don’t you all just go home to sleep and shower? I’m a big boy. I’ll be fine here on my own for a while,” Colt cut in, and if I didn’t know him so well I might have missed the slight wobble in his voice that told me he was pushing the easy tone he was using.

“Come on, pal. I’ll drive you home on my way to my place. I really need to shower and change,” Jack spoke up.

“You sure you can stay?” Kylan asked as he looked to me with concern.

“I’m sure. Mason’s here too, and Deacon text to say he’d be back in a few hours. He just had to sort out the security at the club for tonight,” I explained. “I’ll take care of him, Ky. I promise. He’s safe now.”

“Okay. Just for a few hours. I know I look quite a state,” he laughed as he self consciously ran a hand over his rather wild hair.

“You always look amazing, you know that,” Colt said, looking to his finance with a gentle smile. “But you have to get some sleep for me, babe. I’m worried about you.”

“I will. I’ll sleep, sort myself out and come back later, okay? You rest to though. No trying to get out of bed on your own,” Ky insisted as he looked to me. “Damn idiot nearly ripped his stitches open earlier trying to get to the bathroom alone while I nipped out to take a call. He’s unsteady on his feet.”

“Mason will be here to help him. I won’t let Colt do anything else moronic,” I promised.

“Now who’s ganging up on who?” Colt demanded, but I saw the smile on his lips. He was happy to see his sister and his fiancé getting along so well.

As Colt and Ky hugged and said goodbye to each other, Jack approached me where I had sat in a chair beside Colt’s bed. He crouched down beside me and I glared at him.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“When are you gonna stop being pissed off with me?” he asked softly.

“Not yet,” I snapped back. “I’m still really pissed at what you did Jack. It wasn’t fair on me or Colt.”

“I just wanted the truth to come out once and for all. I cant lose you again Ava, and you were thinking about running. Don’t try and deny it. I’d do anything to stop that from happening again.”

“I’m not leaving,” I told him flatly. “Not yet anyway, but even if I do, you can’t stop me Jack. I’m an adult and I’m allowed to live my own fucking life!”

“Just know that there won’t be any running from me this time, love. You go, and I come right after you. I meant what I said. I love you and I am not letting you get away again. You, me, and Mason were always meant to be. I know that. Mace knows, and you do too if you’ll just stop fighting it.”

“I’m not fighting it anymore, but you make it a fuck of a lot harder to embrace what we could have when you act like you did earlier. If we’re together then we need to be a team. What you did...it hurt me. It made me feel like you didn’t trust me, and I don’t like feeling that way.”

“You ready, Jack?” Ky asked, breaking whatever Jack was about to say.

“We’ll talk later. Just stop being angry with me. I am always on your side. I love you,” Jack told me as he kissed my cheek feather light.

“Love you too,” I whispered. He wasn’t forgiven and he knew it, but we had come to a truce for now.

Just as Ky and Jack started for the door to leave, Mace walked in and stopped them.

“You guys leaving?” he asked.

“Yeah. I need to shower and I’m dropping Ky at his place on the way,” Jack answered.

“Just hold up a minute. Did you tell them?” Mason asked as he looked to me. I just shook my head. I should have, but I hadn’t really had chance yet.

“Tell us what?” Jack asked as he looked between Mason and I.

“Ava and I went back to crash at your place. The security alarm was triggered while we were there. No one came into the apartment, but someone tried. The fire escape window was jimmied and the lock broken,” Mason explained.

“Are you both alright?” Colt asked as he sat forwards and reached for me. I took his hand in mine and smiled.

“We’re both fine. Like Mace said, no one got in. The alarm must have scared them away.”

“Who do you think it was?” Ky asked. He was back at Colt’s other side, looking terrified all over again. “Not the guy who hurt Colt?”

“No. I doubt it. If he wants to finish the job he started, he’ll know Colt’s still in the hospital. I was thinking the Owen’s,” Mace answered as he looked to me with a weak smile.

“The Owen’s? The crime family?” Colt asked.

“Yeah. When Ava found that file you made we had suspicions that they had been the ones to grab you. They had already sent goons after Ava in search of you, so it seemed possible,” Mason went on.

“What? Did they hurt you? I thought I saw bruising on your face. Did they do that?” Colt asked all at once. The bruising on my face was barely even there any longer, having faded over the time I’d been in the city so I was surprised he’d noticed anything.

“It was nothing. I handled it,” I brushed him off. “When I went to see Owen’s he told me he’d back off. I assured him you knew nothing about their business and he seemed satisfied, but maybe he wasn’t. He may still be looking for you.”

“Fuck! How did I make such a damned mess?” Colt sighed.

“I’m on it. I have forensics dusting Jack’s window for prints as we speak. We’ll beef up security there if Ava’s staying there for now and we’ll keep her close. You’re safe with the security Ky hired, and I’ve spoken to them so they know to be even more vigilant.”

“I want Ava to have a security guard twenty-four seven. There’s no way this shit storm I created is touching her again,” Colt raged as he looked around at all of us.

“I can arrange that, Colt. We’ll keep her safe, Just try to stay calm,” Ky fussed as he pressed Colt to lie back again.

“I don’t need security. I can handle myself, plus one of the guys is usually with me. I’m safe, Colt. Ky’s right. You need to stop getting so worked up,” I warned.

“Mason?” Colt looked to his best friend.

“She’s right. Jack, Deak, or I will make sure one of us is always with her, and she’s carrying too. She’ll be fine,” Mason agreed, and when I smiled gratefully over to him, he gave me a panty melting wink.

“Carrying?” Ky questioned.

“I have my gun on me,” I explained as I pulled it from the small of my back and held it up to illustrate. “I might not be able to fight the way I could before, but my aim is really fucking good.”

“I still don’t like it. You have to do something to put an end to this, Mace. We’re not risking Ava or Colt getting hurt again,” Jack spoke up.

“I need evidence first. We have to prove Owen’s is behind it all. We got nothing from the struggle outside Temple, and that sonofabitch got the bun back. Maybe if I’d had that I could have got prints and tied it to Owen’s, but without it...” Mason trailed off as he looked sheepishly to me.

“Thanks for reminding me exactly how much of an idiot I am,” I told him with a roll of my eyes. I never forgive myself for never hanging that damned gun over. I’d been such an idiot to forget about it.

“Hold up!” Colt said. “What altercation? Is that where those bastards did that to your face?” Colt asked. “And what gun?”

“A lot has happened, big bro. We don’t need to go into it all now,” I said in an attempt to put him off.

“You said you spoke to Owens? When and how?”

“She’s right, man. You don’t need to hear everything now,” Mason told him.

“Stop trying to protect me. I’m fine and I want to know everything, especially when it has put my little sister in fucking danger. Tell me damn it!” Colt demanded. All four of the guys in the room turned to look at me and I sighed exhaustedly.

“For fuck’s sake, Colt! I’m trying not to overwhelm you. You’re in hospital. You need to rest and relax,” I growled.

“Tell me now, Ava or I swear to god I will get up and discharge myself this fucking second,” he snapped and I knew he was at the end of any patience he might have had before.

“Fine. One of Owen’s goons came to Chicago and broke into my place looking for you. I managed to get him down and he ran, but not before he got a couple hits in. That’s the bruises on my face. He dropped his gun so I picked it up, knowing there’d be fingerprints. I also knew you were in trouble, and since you weren’t answering your phone I came to the city and went to Temple looking for you.”

“We had no idea you were missing, mate,” Jack sighed as Colt looked to him. “You left us Mace and those voicemails and we didn’t even question it really. We knew you were worried Ava hadn’t been answering your calls so it just made sense.”

“He forced me to make those calls. Told me to leave two voicemails. He had a gun to my head, so there was nothing I could do to clue you in,” Colt sighed.

“You’re safe now,” Ky soothed him.

“Anyway we started looking for you and Mason filed a missing person’s report. Jack mentioned the money you borrowed so I started looking into that. I found the contract for the loan and went to see Gibb Neaverson, so I knew it was nothing to do with him. He pointed us to Ky’s restaurant though, and that’s where we met Kylan. He told me about the file you were building, and I remembered the safe at our place.

Once I had the file I was pretty sure it was Owen who had grabbed you.”

“So her stubborn and insane ass decided to go and see him. Offer him money to get you back,” Mason cut in.

“We had no other choice!” I barked. “I had to get him back and Owen’s was most likely. He had already sent another of his guys after me to retrieve the gun I was holding onto. I had stupidly forgotten all about it, so I never handed it over to Mason to get forensics on it,” I groaned, feeling embarrassed. It was such a dumb thing to forget.

“He took the gun?” Colt asked and I nodded. “Did he hurt you?”

“I was fine,” I assured him, but he looked straight over me to Mason.

“Jesus brother, you’re getting me neck deep in shit with your sister here,” Mason groaned as he rubbed nervously at the back of his neck.

“The fucker stabbed her in the shoulder. Luckily, Deak got to her and we were able to call in the doc to fix her up,” Jack spoke up and Colt looked

“I think you’ll find what happened was I called Deacon after fighting the guy off. I might have been stabbed but he was hurting too!” I defended myself.

“Christ Ava! What the hell were you thinking?” Colt hissed angrily. He looked pale again and I hated that we were putting him through all of this. It could have waited until he was better and stronger.

“I was thinking I didn’t want to my brother!” I snapped back at him angrily. I buried my face in my hands and leaned forward as I fought to breathe through the tears that were threatening. “It was my fault, Colt.” I uttered through a tight throat. “I basically

cut you out of my life. If I'd just answered your fucking calls. I was so scared. I c-
couldn't lose you," My voice broke on the last word and a sob slipped out with it.

Strong arms wrapped around me and I knew it was Jack from the scent of his
aftershave. He pulled me against his chest and hugged me against him.

"It's over now, love. Colt's safe. Everyone's safe. Just try to breathe for me, nice and
slow," he soothed.

I took some deep breaths and fought to get myself together. I was so sick of crying! I
never cried any more, at least not until I returned t New York and everything started
to change.

"None of what happened was your fault, Bam. I don't want to hear you say anything
like that again, you hear me? I don't even think that sick fuck grabbing me was
anything to do with what I was messed up in. I think he chose me by chance. He
never asked me what I knew, or why I had been looking into the disappearances.
He'd have taken me no matter what," Colt told me.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“I never should have pushed you away though,” I said tearfully as I turned my head against Jack’s chest and looked to my brother. “I was stupid and selfish. I’m so sorry Colt.”

“It’s never going to happen again. I don’t care how old you are, I’m never going to allow you to push me away like that again. I spent the last week thinking I was going to die. I spent so much time looking back and regretting so many things I’ve done in my life, but one of the best things I did was taking you in. You made me who I am – who I was always meant to be. You pulled me out of the depression my father spent my entire life drowning me in and pulled me up into the light. I love you, so fucking much and I refuse to see you hurting anymore. You’ve been through enough. Do you understand me? No more torturing yourself.”

I couldn’t speak, my throat too tight with emotion as I swiped angrily at the tears running down my face again. Instead I reached out to grab his hand and instantly I was pulled to his side. He moved over and before I could pretest Jack was helping to lift me until I lay on the bed beside Colt, my head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around me and held me, as I draped my own very gently around his waist. I knew the stab wounds he sustained were lower, but I wasn’t sure about other injuries and the last thing I wanted to do was hurt him.

“I love you too Colt,” I whispered tiredly after a few moments of gathering myself. “Thank you for so much – for protecting me those times my mom was screaming some hotel down for cash from our dad, for taking me in when she left me, for not getting rid of me when I was a nightmare teen, and most of all for not dying. I don’t know what I’d do without you in my life.”

“You’re never going to find out. I’m not going anywhere,” he promised as he kissed my temple. I just cuddled as tightly as I dare against him and reveled in having him back. Nothing and no one was ever taking him from me again.

CHAPTER 21

AVA

Morning sweetie. Can I get you some breakfast? I have pancakes keep warm in the oven, or I’m just making bacon and eggs?” Kylan offered in his upbeat tone that was way too upbeat for me first thing.

It had been a week since I moved back home with Colt. He demanded I get my stuff over there the day he was released from the hospital, and I was happy to agree, wanting to be there to help him in his recovery.

Colt had been kept at the hospital for three days before he was released with antibiotics, pain meds, and advice not to lift anything heavy or push himself too hard for the next few weeks.

Kylan had been staying there too, unable, or unwilling to leave Colt’s side after everything that had gone on. He was still paying a small team of security to protect his fiancé, and we always had a guy stationed outside of the apartment, 24/7.

To say it had been a strange week was an understatement. We were like this odd family, especially with Kylan constantly in the kitchen cooking up some gourmet treat for us.

Colt was definitely in over protective mode when it came to me, and was constantly checking on me and asking about my injury, determined to learn everything he could about my struggles and the drugs I took for the symptoms so he could help me, and he

was determined. I had fought with him till I was blue in the face that he should be laid down and resting, but he was having none of that. I would have pushed him harder on the matter, but I suspected why he was so determined to keep busy. He was struggling mentally with what happened. I had heard him crying out from nightmares during the night. I left Ky to soothe him, not wanting to intrude, but I knew the psychological effects of what had been done to him were really getting to him if he had too much time to just sit and think.

When I had asked him about the nightmares he had been pretty tight lipped, just reassuring me that he already had an appointment with a trauma counsellor Kylan had convinced him to speak with. I was so relieved he was willing to do that, and that Ky had thought to talk him into it. If Colt didn't want to talk to me about what he had endured I got it, but he needed to talk to someone.

"Just coffee for now thanks," I answered Ky as I all but collapsed into a seat at the counter opposite where Ky stood cooking.

"Are you alright?" he asked as he studied me. I knew I looked like shit. I was still in the oversized t-shirt I stole from Jack's place and the sleep shorts I collapsed into bed in the night before. My hair was wild around my face and I had no doubt I looked as exhausted as I felt.

"Just tired. I had a rough night," I told him with a weak smile.

"I'll get you some coffee." I watched as he turned to make me a coffee with the fancy pod machine he and Colt seemed to love. Maybe it was because I was so used to the crappy coffee we'd had at my office in Chicago, but I wasn't a huge fan of the pimped up coffee that fancy ass machine spat out. I liked my coffee strong and black. I could do without the foam and the other bullshit, especially first thing on a morning.

I looked up as Colt walked into the kitchen and was taken aback to see him in tailored

navy slacks and a white and light blue pinstriped shirt tucked into them. He was obviously dressed for work, his hair styled neatly and his shoes on already. It was quite a contrast to the sweats and hoody he'd sported all week.

"What do you think you're doing?" I demanded as I stared him down.

"I need to check on my businesses. I've been gone for too long and there are some major fires I need to put out," He explained as he finished fastening his shiny silver cufflinks, then pushed his arms out in front of him to adjust his cuffs, before dropping his hands back to his side.

"It's too soon. The doctor said you needed to rest," I argued worriedly.

"Don't waste your breath, Ava. I spent all yesterday evening arguing with him, but the stubborn asshole is determined. I did manage to persuade him he needs to have security with him everywhere he goes though," Ky spoke up.

"I'll be fine. It's been almost two weeks and I'm just about healed up. I haven't even taken any of the pain pills for three days. It's time to get back to normal," Colt shrugged. He walked over, grabbed a cup, and started making himself a coffee.

"I don't like it, Colt. That monster is still out there somewhere and we have no idea who tried to break into Jack's place before. Someone is still after you," I reminded him. The FBI had taken over the hunt for the fucker who hurt Colt and I after seeing the evidence of the brand on my body, the girl who worked at Temple and was killed – Helen, and now on Colt too. Mason gave them all of the disappearances Colt had found, the police now pretty sure of them could be victims of this serial killer. I'd made an official statement about what had happened to me all those years before, and my scars had been photographed for evidence. Colt had been through the same process and now it was up to the FBI to track down the killer and stop him.

The attempted break in at Jack's apartment had gotten us nowhere, since forensics found no prints and the footprints in the snow had been heavily trodden over by the time they got to the scene, so we still had no idea who was behind that either.

"I don't either. At least listen to your sister if you won't listen to me. She's an ex-cop. She knows what she's talking about," Ky pleaded as he moved up behind Colt and wrapped his arms around his waist. I loved seeing them that way. Seeing the peace and contentment in Colt's eyes whenever he and Ky touched was everything after years of him being alone. I wanted him to be happy, and he was with Kylan, even in the midst of everything happening around them.

"Guys! You're both overreacting," Colt said as he turned in Ky's arms and kissed him chastely. "I'll have security following me, not to mention I'm going into the city in the middle of the day. I'll be safe. I can't hide away any more. I have to get back to my usual routine."

"I'm coming with you then," I told him, sending him a look that dared him to argue.

"You'll be bored. I have meetings most of the day," he sighed.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“I’ll be fine. I’m coming with you, Colt. No arguments.” I trusted the security Ky had hired. I’d looked into the company and they had a great reputation, but still, I didn’t want to leave my brother’s life completely in the hands of strangers. I had my gun, and I’d proved a few times in recent weeks I could still fight if it came to it, even as broken as I was. I needed to be with him, at least this first time he was leaving the apartment alone.

“Fine. I need to leave in an hour at the latest,” Colt relented with an annoyed shake of his head.

“I’ll be ready,” I agreed.

Three P.M. and I was completely sure of one thing – Colt’s normal life was boring as pig shit. We’d been to two of his restaurants, a wine bar, and now were in the back of a nightclub he owned in the city. Colt was in a meeting with the club manager, head of security and a ton of other staff I hadn’t even paid attention to when Colt introduced us. I was standing in the hallway, leaning against the wall, and trying hard not to die of boredom. Of course I could be inside the meeting. We had the two security staff Ky had hired watching out front and protecting Colt, but I’d made the mistake of going into the meeting that morning with Colt. The only thing that was more boring was standing in a hallway waiting was being inside listening to figures, and talk of work schedules, invoices, ordering systems, blah, blah, blah! No thank you!

My mind once again strayed to thoughts of Jack, Mason, and Deacon. I hadn’t seen

them much in the last week as I got settled in with Kylan and Colt. I'd been busy trying to help Colt arrange the clearing of my house and crap hole apartment back in Chicago, and the shipping of all of my belongings to Colt's place.

Of course Mason and Jack had been around to see Colt and check in with me, and when we'd had moments alone they'd both made it very clear they didn't intend to let me go. I had just asked them both for some space to settle back into things in New York though. It was a lot all at once. So much was changing and my anxiety was high simply because I was returning not only to the city where I had been attacked so violently all those years ago, but also the very apartment I had returned to after escaping. I showered every morning in the same glass cubicle I had barely stood in that morning after, shaking, bleeding and in so much pain. Each night I went to sleep in the bed I had woken screaming in for days after Colt had found me and brought me home. Being back with Colt, especially after almost losing him was amazing, but I worried my mind wasn't strong enough to deal with being back in that apartment, or indeed, that city.

Thankfully, Jack and Mason seemed to be giving me the space I needed to just try and find my place again, not that it stopped them from constantly texting to check on me. They were clearly making it clear they'd give me breathing room, but would never stop taking care of me. I was good with that. I loved them, and I sure as hell welcomed their care and attention now I had accepted I didn't need to be ashamed in front of them.

But then there was Deacon too. I knew bringing him into everything would just complicate matters for us all. What Jack, Mace, and I had was established. Sure, it had lay dormant for years and was definitely rusty, but it was there, and we could so easily slip back into it if I gave in to them both, but my feelings for Deacon were too strong to push aside. Since Deacon seemed to feel the same, I felt we needed to at least explore things deeper and see where it went.

We'd been texting all week but with him working and me worrying about Colt and everything else going on, we hadn't seen each other. I missed him. He was different to Jack and Mason. They were so intense most of the time, and I loved that about them, but the alpha in both of them could become overwhelming at times, especially after I had spent ten years living alone and listening to no one other than myself. Deacon wasn't like that way. He worried and he was protective, but his nature was more laid-back and easier going. He didn't try to push me into things, or assert himself over me. While I craved those things from Mason and Jack a lot of the time, I also just needed to be able to take charge sometimes too. Deacon let me do that, but while also always making me feel safe and protected when he was near. He reminded me of who I had become after the attack and before the shooting. He reminded me of how strong and badass I had been as a detective in CPD, and she hadn't been so bad when I remember her.

I felt like I needed them all, and since they all seemed to be willing to try it, I wanted that. To try. I just needed to get my shit together enough to find the next steps with all of them.

"Appreciate it. Thanks for your time." I looked up at the sound of Colt's voice. I hadn't even heard the office door open, but Colt was shaking the hand of the club manager. He looked just like his old self – sharp suit, perfect hair, confident smile in place and exuding his usual charm. I didn't know how he did it after what he'd been through, but I wished he could teach me to hide my darkness the way he could. It had been a week and he seemed completely restored to himself. Was that even possible after a week at the hands of a psycho? A week of being tortured?

"Everything good?" I asked as I gave myself a shake and walked over to him, leaning heavily on my stick. I was tired after the full day we'd had, but I refused to let it show. Colt was doing an excellent job of faking it, so I would too.

"All done. Let's head out," he agreed with a nod of his head. He held his arm out for

me to go before him, which I did, and he followed.

As soon as we got outside of the club and into the parking lot, Colt manhandled me closer to one of the security guys with us before I could even protest. He picked me up and plopped me back down again so fast I almost lost my footing and the baldheaded guy I'd been placed before barely manage to catch me.

"Colt!"

"Keep her safe. I just....one minute!" Colt called shakily over his shoulder but he was already running away from us to the side of the building and around the corner.

"The other protection guard looked to em with confusion as they both just watched him go.

"Follow him!" I yelled. "He's the client! Follow him, damn it!" Thankfully, they both got to moving then, and I tried as hard as I could to move with pace after them. What the fuck was Colt playing at?

When I finally got to the corner of the building, breathless and shaking, I saw the two guards standing back. I had my mouth open about to ask them what the fuck use they were to anyone and what they thought they were doing when I heard my brother, coughing and spluttering. Panicked, I shoved past the both of them and found Colt on his knees in the tiny alleyway that ran down the side of the club. There was a space a few feet wide lined with a fence and Colt was knelt near the end, his back to me, and he was vomiting violently.

"Watch our fucking backs!" I hissed to them both, then I started down the uneven ground down the alleyway. When I got to Colt I dropped my stick and leaned heavily over his back, wrapping my arms around the front of his shoulders, holding him as tight as I could, just wanting him to know I was there in the only way I could get to

him in the tight space.

“Bam,” he sighed as he used a tissue to wipe his mouth and sat up a little. He put his hand over mine and I could feel him shaking hard. He was gasping for breath and his skin was so cold against mine.

“I’m here,” I whispered as I pressed my head against the side of his.

“I...I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you dare apologize, Colt. Can you stand?” I asked him as I rubbed my hand up and down his bicep.

“Yeah. I’m alright. I just got overwhelmed I think,” he told me shakily.

“You’re having a panic attack. Believe me, I know,” I laughed lamely.

“No. It can’t be. There was nothing to set off such a thing,” he argued.

“Sometimes it’s not anything you can touch or see. Sometimes your own thoughts can trigger you. You’re tired and I’ll bet, in pain too. You let your defense’s down. That’s all. It’s normal after what happened to you. It will get better if you deal with it,” I told him, giving advice I’d never bothered to follow myself – not fully anyway.

“You’re right,” He agreed. “Maybe we should call it a day.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“I agree. Let’s go home,” I told him as I leaned into kiss his cheek before I shakily pushed up to my full height and fumbled to grab my stick from the floor. Colt stood too and I indicated for him to go first, relieved the security had moved so they weren’t just stood staring at him any longer.

As soon as we were both in the car with eh security detail up front driving, I pulled a bottle of water from my backpack and handed it into Colt’s trembling hand.

“Drink,” I ordered, relieved when he did just that.

“How did you learn to do this, Ava?” he asked after a few moments of quiet.

“Do what?”

“Cope. Push past the shit repeating over and over in your head and carry on living your life? I just...it’s like a video of every moment I spent in that nightmare is in my head, and one moment of silence, or one thing that takes me back there and the whole starts paying in my head again. I try to stop it, but I...I can’t.”

“I’m the wrong person to ask,” I scoffed. “But I know talking to a therapist helped me. You know, you were the one who forced me to do it first. I think if you can make yourself talk about it all, as hard as that is to do, it does get it out. It’s like talking about it makes that video fade and if you do it enough, you can make the video stop eventually. It took time, Colt, and I threw myself into becoming a cop and getting through training, which helped.”

“I just don’t want to fall apart. I don’t want that fucker to think he ever broke me,”

Colt confessed.

“He won’t. You’ll get through this. You’re not alone. You have Ky, and the guys. I’m here for you for whatever you need. You’ll find your feet again. You already are,” I assured him.

“And what about you?” he asked.

“Me? I’m getting settled back in,” I shrugged nonchalantly.

“You’ve barely seen Jack and Mason? You all seemed very close when I woke up in the hospital. What changed?”

“You know?” I asked with shock.

“Of course I know. I knew ten years ago, bam,” he laughed. “Thankfully, I never witnessed anything myself, but Temple is my club and I know everything that happens there. I knew you were doing scenes with Mason and Jack, and I knew you were falling for them too. I just never realized how serious it had all gotten.”

“It never got serious before. I liked them and apparently they were into me, but we never even told each other. They wanted to wait for me to finish college before they took anything further. Then everything went wrong and I didn’t want to see them again. I was embarrassed and ashamed,” I confessed. “Now I’m back they...they tell me they want to. They love me Colt, and I love them too. I always have.”

“Then what’s the problem. It wouldn’t be the first menage relationship I’ve heard of.”

“I know. It’s not that. It’s me. I worry I’m too fucked up to be with them. I can’t give them what they want. You know! After what he did to you, could you submit for anyone?” I asked.

“I’ve never been a submissive, Ava, so I can’t answer that question, but I can tell you that I am determined I won’t allow what that psycho put me through take anything else from me. I know it will take time and probably a ton of therapy before I can walk into Temple again. The sounds...I know they’ll trigger me, but I will find a way to face it. Temple is mine. The sex life I choose to safely and consensually live is mine and he can’t have either.”

“I think it’s too late for me. I already allowed him to take huge parts of me,” I sighed. Colt reached over and placed his hand over my knee, giving it a gentle squeeze. I looked up at him and he wiped a stray tear from my cheek and forced a smile.

“Then you fucking well take it back, Ava. Don’t let him have it. Don’t let him have any single part of you. You’re stronger than that asshole. We both are.”

“Yes we are.” I agreed. I wasn’t so sure I believed it, but I knew Colt needed to hear me say it.

“So you’ll call the guys, stop avoiding them?”

“I’m not avoiding them. I just needed some space, but I will call them,” I agreed.
“And Deak.”

“Deak?” He asked with confusion.

“Do you know of any relationships with more than two guys?” I asked him with a smirk.

CHAPTER 22

AVA

I had no idea why I was so nervous, but I was.

Three days had passed since Colt's meltdown outside his club, and while he'd been taking things easier, he'd continued returning to work and trying to get things back to normal. Much to my and Ky's relief he'd also started for a trauma therapist he felt able to talk to, and seem determined to follow through with the plan.

Seeing Colt fight so hard had pushed me to stop hiding so much too. While I wasn't ready to speak to a stranger about my issues yet, I was trying harder to see the sunny side of things. I was home with the brother I loved. The FBI were working hard to find and stop the monster who hurt both of us and killed so many others. Everyone I loved was safe and I was doing a hell of a lot better than I had been back in Chicago. I hadn't touched a drop of alcohol since the night Colt was found, and finding a healthy routine with Colt and Ky seemed to be helping with my injury. The pain wasn't any less, but regular meals constantly forced upon me by Ky, and having a clean safe place to live and sleep seemed to be making it all feel more manageable.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

I'd reached out to Jack and Mason and we'd spoken. I'd been honest and told them I wanted to move things forward, but also explained I uncertain of how. Of course they had it all figured out and assured me we'd all be fine. We had plans together tomorrow. They had told me they abducting me for the day, which filled me with equal parts excitement and trepidation.

But that night it was about Deak. We'd decided to go on an actual date, sort of. I'd told him I couldn't stand to go to some fancy overpriced restaurant. Dressing fancy wasn't really my thing and I'd only have been conscious of people watching me and commenting on me if we sat in some stuffy place I clearly didn't fit in. But Deak had assured me he had an idea he thought I'd love, and I could wear my jeans if I wanted to.

While I'd shed the jeans for a maxi length floral dress from my very old selection of clothes I'd left at Colt's, I hadn't gone over the top. It was still cold out, so I paired the dress with low heeled brown boots and my denim jacket. I'd taken the time to straighten my hair and put on some make up, but now as I stood waiting for Deak to pick me up I continuously looked in the mirror and talked myself out of it. I was in New York and I'd dressed like we were going to a barn dance or something. I was already halfway through ripping off my jacket to start over when Ky called to tell me Deacon was there. Early.

"Fuck!" I hissed as I struggled back into my jacket and slipped my cell back into the pocket. I didn't have time to change. It would take me way too long with how slow I was, and my entire wardrobe was extremely slim pickings. I had only owned jeans, tees, and sweater in Chicago, and anything I owned before I left New York years ago was now too big on my skinny frame.

I sighed, knowing I didn't have time to stress about it anymore, and instead picked up my stick and made my way through the apartment.

I'd like to say the sight of Deacon stood in the living room dressed casually in jeans and a henley relaxed me, but it didn't, because that mad looked like sex on legs no matter what he wore. His heavily muscled, chiseled body filled everything out perfectly, and when he looked to me and smiled – he was so handsome. I had no idea what he saw in me. I would never be good enough for him.

“There you are. You look beautiful, sweetheart,” he told me as he moved closer, then I was in his arms. I wrapped my arms around his waist, not realizing how much I'd missed him in the weeks since I saw him until he touched me. Now I was in his arms I just relaxed and felt at peace. “You doing okay?” he asked as we pulled apart enough so I could look up and meet his eyes.

“Good. I'm happy to see you. I missed you,” I admitted.

“I'm glad you said it first, because I was desperate to tell you how much I missed you too,” he told me with a shy smile. “Are you ready?”

“Yep. Good to go.” He held his hand out to me and I placed mine into it without hesitation. With a quick call of ‘bye’ to Colt and Ky behind me we left the apartment and headed to the street where Deacon had parked his truck.

“I'm so relieved I finally get to take you out. It seems like every time we've spent together before has been amid carnage,” he told me as we left Colt's apartment building.

“Tell me about it. It's been a hell of a last few weeks,” I agreed.

“How's Colt doing? He seemed good?”

“He’s strong, and he’s really good at holding everything inside,” I sighed. “But he’s not okay. It’s going to take time and a lot of work on his part for him to feel like himself again. He’s agreed to see a therapist though, so that’s good.”

“It is. And you? How are you really doing?” He opened the passenger side of his truck and helped me in, then stood staring at me as I sat almost eye level with him in his talk truck.

“I’m doing better,” I answered honestly. “Seeing how strong Colt’s being is pushing me to want to try too. Maybe I’ll even see a therapist or something eventually,” I shrugged.

“I think that could be good for you,” he agreed and I nodded.

“Let’s not spend tonight talking about all of the chaos that’s happened. Let’s just have some fun and get to know each other better, okay?” I suggested, hoping he’d agree. My life had been about nothing but stress, worry, and terror for weeks, and I just wanted to leave it all behind for one night.

“Yeah sweetheart. That sounds good to me,” he agreed. He smiled as he leaned into the car and kissed the end of my nose, making me laugh in surprise. “Buckle up.”

I knew I was smiling like an idiot as he closed my door and rounded the car to jump into his side. I couldn’t help it though. He was the sweetest.

“Oh my God,” I groaned as I sat back in a comfortable high back chair and blew out a deep breath. “We ordered way too much. I was joking when I said I wanted the entire menu,” I laughed.

“I didn’t order the entire menu, just a good selection, and speak for yourself. I’m still eating,” Deacon chuckled as he icked up another huge beef rib.

He had booked us a table at a steakhouse outside of the city. The inside looked rustic with a huge open log fire roaring at its center and tables set with tall, inviting upholstered chairs. The music was low enough that we could easily talk to each other, but loud enough that you felt you didn’t have to lower your voice when you spoke. And the food – it had been heaven. I’d eaten far too much from the selection Deak chose but it was like I couldn’t stop myself. It had been so long since I had a good steak.

“I’m glad to see you eating. You have so much more color in your cheeks since you moved in with Colt and Kylan,” he told me.

“Ky is definitely a feeder. If I keep eating the breakfasts he makes I’ll end up unable to fit through the door and leave the apartment,” I laughed.

“You said he liked to cook?”

“Yeah, he loves it, and he’s amazing. I don’t know why he bothers hiring chefs. He should juts do the cooking himself at his restaurants, or one of them at least.”

“How about you? Do you cook?”

“Do Pop tarts count?” I asked, trying to keep a straight face.

“Seriously?”

“No,” I laughed. “Well, not really. I can do the basics. I make decent pasta, and I can scramble eggs, but I never really bothered when I lived alone. I was a real cop – lived mainly on coffee, donuts, and takeout. You?”

“I cook. I had to be pretty serious about my diet when I was training for Strongman competitions, so I learned to make all my own meals. I can’t make anything fancy, but I don’t starve.”

“Do you miss the competitions?”

“Not anymore. When I first had to stop it broke me. All I had ever wanted was to complete in the World’s Strongest Man, and I had been so close to it that year. I lost my dream I guess, but I learned wallowing wasn’t going to change any of it, and I moved on. I have my health for now, and I still get to work out, which was always my true love. I have a good job and a nice place to lay my head at night. I’m grateful for what I have, and then you came along and everything just seemed to fall perfectly into place.”

“Stop,” I told him with a roll of my eyes. “I’m no one’s happy ever after.”

“I’m not looking for happy ever after, Ava. I just want you,” he said as he dropped the rib he was eating, and wiped his hands on his napkin.

“Don’t get all soppy on me, big guy,” I laughed, but I couldn’t remove the smile from my face.

“Fine. For now. You want to go somewhere else after this? A club, or we could find a late night showing some place?” he offered instead.

“Can we just go to your place? Maybe just watch a movie or something? I’d love to see your place,” I suggested. I was exhausted if I were honest, and I really didn’t feel like doing anything but snuggling up against this huge, handsome man I seemed to have by some miracle found myself attached to.

“That sounds perfect, honey,” he agreed, much to my relief.

Deacon’s apartment had come as quite a surprise to me. I knew he use to compete professionally so I suspected he would have some money behind him, but his place exceeded everything I expected. I had thought it would be something like Jack’s place – a comfortable and sizable modern apartment but smaller than Colt’s, and more on the ‘homey’ side.

Deacon’s place was not like that. It was a cavernous penthouse overlooking central park with floor to ceiling windows on two huge sides of the living space. The kitchen, which ran the length of the large pace was sleek and shiny, with a huge counter which seated eight at bar stools around two sides. He had modern light features that hung down from the double height ceilings like huge art installations, and hanging on the walls were pieces of art I had no idea about, but which were definitely modern and fancy. The space was dominated by two huge charcoal sectionals with matching armchairs, and a TV that looked like a cinema screen. It was a little sparse and impersonal, but it was still jaw dropping to walk into.

“What do you do?” I gasped as I stood taking in all of the space. “Rob banks on the weekend?”

“Nah. It’s family money. I inherited it all when my old man passed away years ago. I use an investment broker to handle it, and he seems to know what he’s doing too. I do alright,” he shrugged, looking almost sheepish on the matter.

“Why the fuck would you work at the club if you live here?”

“I need to keep busy, and I like the club. Protecting the people who work and play there gives me a purpose,” he shrugged.

“Do you have an upstairs to this place too?” I asked as I continued taking it all in.

“Yeah. The main suite is down here, but there’s another four guest rooms and an office upstairs. I made one into a gym though. I haven’t been here long. Just a few months,” he explained.

“Why such a big place? You live alone, right?” I pressed.

“I’m a big guy,” he shrugged. “I just like my own space I guess. Plus the view.”

“It is pretty amazing,” I agreed as I walked closer and looked out of the huge windows out over the street lit city all around and below me. It was the most beautiful view of New York I’d ever seen.

“Has this changed your mind about me? I know this place is pretty crazy just for me,” Deak sighed as he appeared just behind me. I could see the worry on his face through his reflection in the window and I hated that he was doubting me.

“It hasn’t changed my mind,” I laughed as I turned to face him and wrapped my arms around his waist. “It’s your place. It should be whatever you need it and want it to be. It’s definitely impressive.”

“I promise I’m not usually this excessive. I give tons of my money to charity when I can. This is the only over the top, crazy, selfish thing I ever allowed myself.”

“Deak, stop worrying. I’m not judging you. I love your place too. Just tell me you have candy somewhere in that huge kitchen for our movie and you’ll win me over completely,” I assured him as I looked up into his eyes and smiled.

“I may have stocked up for when you came around here. I put it all away and labelled it the kids cupboard,” he chuckled.

“Hey!” I protested as he started to walk away from me, still laughing.

“You eat like a damn kid on Halloween, all candy, chocolate, and crap. If anyone opened the cabinet I stocked for you they’d think it was for kids,” he defended.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“I have a sweet tooth. It’ a thing!” I cried.

“Just settle in and pick out a movie. I’ll handle the snacks, trouble maker,” he told me with a firm stare he couldn’t hold before he started chuckling at me.

“Fine, but no dammed veggie sticks!” I warned as I flopped down onto the sectional directly opposite the TV and started searching throughNetflixfor a movie we could watch. “Oh, this sofa, Deak! It’s like a cloud,” I cried as I lifted my legs and laid across the hugely wide, buttery soft leather.

“I know. I bought the biggest one I could find. It’s even wide enough for me to fall asleep on and not roll right off again,” he laughed as he appeared with two huge platters, one laden with candy, cookies, and everything I needed to induce a sugar coma. The other was his. It had some crackers, salami, and meat, and veg sticks. I just turned my nose up at it as he set down. “Don’t worry my sugar fueled beauty, that one is for me. Do you have enough junk on yours?” he asked, smothering a grin.

“For now,” I agreed with a wink that made him chuckle. I loved the deep timbre of his laugh.

He placed down a beer each too, then he turned and scoped me up, holding against him as he got settled on the sofa, then set me between his legs so I could lie back against him, and I did, sighing in comfort. “This feels so good,” I admitted as I snuggled my side into him and relaxed even more.

“It does,” he agreed. “Did you pick a movie for us to watch?” he asked as his arm looped around my waist and held me there securely.

I tried to focus as I pushed play on the action movie I'd chosen for us to watch, but it proved almost impossible when I was surrounded by so much maleness. Deacon not only felt amazing wrapped around me as he was, but he smelled amazing too, and when he started to run his hand up and down my thigh in a soothing rhythm my insides set alight and need coiled tightly at my core. I wanted him. That was all I could think. I hadn't eaten a thing or drank even a sip. My body was on fire and holding myself still was becoming impossible. All I needed in that moment was for him to stop being such a gentleman for once.

"Deak," I uttered as I moved enough to meet his eyes.

"What's up, honey? You need to move around? Is your back hurting?" he fussed as he paused the movie.

"Oh, I'm in pain," I told him. "But it's not my back." Before he could question me further I moved up onto my knees and straddled one of his huge thighs.

"Ava?"

"I feel too good in your arms, Deacon. You make me want more. Will you give me what I need, please?" I asked breathily.

"Like I could deny you anything when you ask so sweetly." His lips crashed down over mine and he kissed me hard and fast, his arms wrapping around me enough that when he stood, he kept me in his arms and our intense kiss never broke. He carried me through the lounge and down a hall that I knew led to his room. I didn't even bother to look around me as we walked through a large set of double doors, my hands already too busy undoing the buttons on his Henley.

My ass hit a soft mattress and I instantly started working to get off my own clothes, stripping away first my jacket, then pushing the straps of my dress over my shoulders

to wiggle it down my body. I was relieved when I looked up and Deacon was doing that same. When he got down to just his boxer briefs and looked to me a little unsure, I unsnapped my bra and tossed it aside with a come hither smile. I wasn't shy or nervous, or anything but horny and hell and desperate to feel Deacon inside of me.

Finally he shucked his boxers, but before I got a good look he was leaning over the bed and over me, stalking after me as I scooted up the bed so I lay in the center. As soon as Deacon was close enough I caught his stubbled cheeks between my hands and pulled him in close, kissing him even more ferociously than we had been before.

"You're sure?" he gasped between kisses.

"Don't I seem pretty sure?" I asked teasingly.

"You say stop, and everything stops, yeah?"

"Okay," I agreed before I smashed my lips over his again. "And what if I say go?" I asked breathlessly after I came back up for air.

"Trust me, I'm already to go." He smiled devilishly. I reached up, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him in closer, my smile only spreading when he kissed me again, but this time slower, and almost possessively. I was writhing between him, my thighs pressed together with the desperate need for some friction and relief between my legs.

My entire body was alive and so sensitive. A deep moan escaped my lips as I felt the slight covering of hair on his chest brush against my nipples.

"Deak!" I gasped. "I need you."

"Right here, honey," he said as he slid his huge hand down my pale body and right

into my underwear. He pushed a thick finger inside of me and I cringed at the sound it made. “So ready for me,” he uttered as he looked to me with a look filled with heat.

He pushed another finger inside of me, and with just a couple of flicks of his thumb over my clit I was gasping as my orgasm crashed through me all at once, so strong and sudden it stole my breath from me. Finally a moan found it’s way out of my mouth and as I opened my eyes and looked up I found Deacon leant up on his elbow, just watching me.

“Beautiful,” he whispered. I blushed under his close perusal, but I felt too euphoric to feel embarrassed. He pulled his hand from my panties and made short work of sliding them down my legs.

“You still okay with this?” he asked me as he knelt on the bed beside me and leaned over to the drawer in his fancy wall mounted night stand.

“So much more than okay. I want this Deacon. I want you,” I panted as I reached for his face, cupped his cheek, and pulled him close enough to gently kiss his lips.

His hand smoothed a path down my body as he moved his body over mine, caging me in. He started kissing my neck and down my chest to my breasts, teasing me and driving my need higher and higher.

“Deacon, please!” I cried.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“You’re so impatient,” he chuckled deeply as he rose on onto his knees and grabbed the condom, tearing it open and rolling it on smoothly. Seeing him up close like that made me worry whether he was going to fit. It seemed he was big all over.

“I’ll go slow to start with, “ he told me as his eyes locked with mine. I worried I’d said something out loud, but opted to keep my mouth closed for fear of him stopping. I did not want anything to stop or slow down.

I lay still, my chest heaving with need and anticipation as he lined up with my core and then slid into me gently. He moved slowly and cautiously at first, thrusting forward little by little. He was checking my face constantly and I knew he was worried he’d hurt me, or I’d freak out, but all I could feel was pleasure.

I wrapped my hand around the back of his wide neck and pulled him down until he was leaning over me again, his chest brushing my nipples with every small movement. I smiled at him before reaching up to kiss him hard, and he picked up his pace, his movements getting longer and faster as he kissed me just as ferociously.

I became completely lost to anything but Deacon, myself, and the pleasure building between us. Needing him deeper and closer I wrapped my legs around his waist and started to move with him. I clung to him as sweat coated our bodies and the we became lost in the moment. My orgasm was building inside of me to the point I feared the impact it would have when it finally came, but nothing would stop me from seeking it.

“Fuck! Deacon!” I cried loudly, barely finding the breath I needed to get the words out. I was so close, but at the same time I didn’t want the bliss of the moment to end.

I was so close to Deak. He was with me in every thrust of our hips, every movement. I clung to him tightly as he continued to lavish kisses on any part of my flesh he could reach and it felt magic. It felt like the build-up to flying I used to reach when I played with Jack and Mason at the club so many years ago.

“So fucking perfect, Ava,” Deacon panted as he slightly adjusted his position. He pressed his hand between us, brushing over my clit and that was all it took to set off my orgasm. Heat rushed through me as my back arched and my muscles tensed with the intensity. Peace and calm engulfed me as I got lost in the pleasure.

All I could do was cling to Deacon and hope it would be enough to keep me held down to the world as I flew off somewhere heavenly.

The sound of Deak crying out his own release, then the slowing of his thrusts seemed to bring me back to myself some, but still I just clung to him.

We were a mass of sweaty, tangled limbs and gasping breaths as we lay clinging to each other and coming down from the amazing high.

“You okay, sweetheart?” Deacon asked after a while, though we still hadn’t moved.

“Good,” I breathed heavily. “So good.”

“I need to move and deal with the condom,” he said, and before I could even protest he was pulling out of my hold and getting to his feet. He went into what I assumed was his adjoining bathroom and I heard water running.

With a groan I stretched my body. It was aching, but in the best possible way. Deacon had supported me so carefully as he made love to me that there was no pain from my back, and I just felt good. Relaxed.

I sat up on the edge of the bed and slid to my feet, crossing Deacon's spacious bedroom and walking into the bathroom behind him. I didn't even worry or feel conscious of my scars. Deacon hadn't commented on them when I got naked, and he'd known they were there, so clearly they hadn't bothered him.

Deacon was at the sink, washing his hands when I walked in. I wrapped myself around his back and my arms around his waist as I looked at his reflection in the mirror.

"Hey, beautiful," he grinned as he looked at my reflection too, then he turned in my arms and pressed me closer to his naked body. "Still doing alright?" he asked.

"I'm perfect," I assured him as I cuddled into his chest and sighed contentedly. "I'm falling way too fast for you, Deak."

"Me too, sweetheart, but I'm not fighting a damned thing. Obviously, you were made for me," he told me so easily it made me feel emotional.

"But Jack and Mason. I love them too. Could you ever..."

"We'll make it work, Ava," he told me, cutting off my worries. "You were obviously made for the three of us, so we'll just have to find a way we can all be together, okay? I don't want to let you go."

"I don't want you to let me go."

"Then I never will. Everything will be okay. I'll make sure of it. We all will," he promised, and for once I decided to hope for something good, and believe him.

CHAPTER 23

AVA

I was disappointed to wake up alone after being perfectly snuggled against Deacon and held tightly in his hold all night, but there was still a huge smile on my face as I sat up and stretched. Pain shot down my back, somewhat dampening my happiness as I winced with the pain, but nothing could take away from the amazing night I'd had with Deacon.

It wasn't a good day for me, pain wise, I realized as I took a shower in Deacon's huge en-suite shower room and got myself dressed. The pain in my back was severe and it ran up to my neck, causing a thumping tension headache. I'd need to go back to Colt's for my meds as soon as I could, but I wasn't in a rush to leave Deacon. I'd heard him moving around elsewhere in the apartment, so I knew he was close, and I couldn't wait to see him.

Wearing last night's clothes, no makeup, and my hair thrown up in a messy bun, I made my way slowly through the huge apartment and froze when I got to the living space and found not just Deak in the kitchen, but Jack and Mason sat at the counter talking to him.

"What are you guys doing here?" I asked as I moved closer, my smile growing wider. It had been a while since I saw either Jack or Mace and I had missed them.

"Morning, sweetheart," Deacon greeted as he looked over to me from behind the stove and smiled broadly. He was dressed in a very form fitting black t-shirt that defined every one of his muscles, and he looked amazing.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“Good of you to join us, sleepyhead,” Jack joked as he got to his feet and came over to me, kissing me softly on the cheek before he wrapped his arm around me and helped me over to where Mace sat.

“It’s not that late,” I defended myself.

“Don’t even joke, Jack. I’m just glad she’s actually getting some rest for once,” Mason said as he leaned back on his stool and reached his arm back to wrap around me. I placed my hand on his shoulder and moved close enough to kiss him chastely on the lips.

“She can hear you, and doesn’t need you worrying about whether or not she is resting enough,” I told him with a raise of my eyebrows. “What are you both doing here?” I asked as I looked between them. I took the seat in the middle and dropped my stick to the floor beneath me.

“I called them. Jack was complaining he’d barely seen you when we were at the club yesterday. I thought we could all have breakfast together,” Deak explained, and for the first time I realized he was cooking bacon and pancakes.

I blushed a little as I realized what he was up to. He was keeping his promise to me the previous night, that we’d make things work. In order to make a relationship between all of us work, we needed to spend time together.

I looked to him with a small smile and tried hard not to worry about the fact the guys had to know something had gone on between Deak and I the night before, seeing as they knew I stayed over. I had nothing to be embarrassed or concerned about. Jack

and Mason had agreed to me seeing where things went with Deak. They knew I loved them too.

Surprisingly, they both seemed pretty relaxed as they sat there chatting to Deacon and laughing at a joke he made. Mason had even removed his suit jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his black shirt. He turned to me, not for the first time in the last few minutes and smiled softly. He was trying. He and Jack both were. For my sake they were giving Deacon a shot and that meant everything to me.

“Any news on our religious psycho killer?” I asked as the conversation lulled. I leaned forward and pressed one hand on Mason’s thigh and the other on Jack’s.

“No updates from the FBI so far, but they have been requesting information on the missing people from local PD, so they are working the case,” Mason explained. He placed his warm hand over mine on his leg and gave it a squeeze. “We came to a dead end at the attempted break in at Jack’s place too. Whoever was trying to get in was wearing a black hoody with the hood up. Any street cams that caught a glimpse in the city, only got the back or side of his or her head.”

“But there’s been no other attempts?” I asked as I turned to Jack.

“Nothing. I updated my locks and security system though, so they’d be stupid to try anything now,” Jack answered, and I nodded.

“It’s weird they haven’t tried anything since. Maybe it was just a coincidence? Some criminal trying his luck?”

“Maybe,” Mace agreed.

Deacon started handing out plates for us all, then sat kitty corner to Jack with his own. The food was good and we all dove in with gusto. For several minutes there was

no sound but the clicking of cutlery against our plates.

“So,” Jack broke the quiet. “I’m guessing you guys hate a good time together last night?” he looked between Deak and I, and I smiled brightly, unable to stop myself as I thought about everything we’d done the night before, from the moment Deak picked me up at Colt’s place. It had been wonderful.

“We did,” I confirmed.

“You look happy, baby,” Mason said, and I turned to him, surprised not to hear any annoyance, or jealousy in his tone.

“I am. Colt’s safe and happy with Ky, and I...I get to eat breakfast with all of you. I feel better than I have in the longest time.”

“That’s what we want for you, love. To be happy,” Jack told me.

“We all had a talk before you got up this morning,” Deacon added and I looked to him with worry. “It was a good talk,” he assured me with a soft smile.

“Deacon doesn’t want to let you go, and we don’t want that either now we see how happy you are,” Jack chimed in.

“And we sure as hell don’t want to lose you, or even miss another day with you ever again,” Mason said.

“We decided, if you agree with it, that it might be good for us all to spend some time together,” Deacon concluded.

“Okay,” I nodded. “You mean like days out together? Dates? That type of thing?”

“We can do that if that’s what you want, Ave, but we’re all a little keener to get things moving faster. Mace and I already wasted so much time we could have been with you, and we need to get used to Deacon fast if this is going to work. What we were thinking was that we’d all try moving in together,” Jack explained.

“What?” I gasped.

“We get that it’s fast, and it’s all good if it’s too fast for you. We were just thinking if we spent some intense time together, we could move things along to where we’re all already pretty sure they’re headed,” Deacon told me.

“We love you, Ava. I hate being apart from you for more than a few hours. I want you to finally be ours – mine, Jack’s, and Deacon’s, if that’s what you want too,” Mason added.

“It is what I want,” I agreed easily. “But I just moved back in with Colt and this is so fast.”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“How about we try it for a set time?” Jack asked. “Let’s say one month. We all move in together for one month, see how it goes and go from there. I’ll keep my place and Mace will keep his, just in case.”

“We’re moving in here?” I asked, though it was a stupid question. Deacon’s place was huge. There was plenty of space for all of us there, and it was pretty central for us all too. It made sense.

“That’s what we were thinking,” Mace nodded.

“And you’re on board with this?” I looked to Deak.

“I suggested it. I want this thing between us all to work, and I think this is the best way right now, if you’re good with it?”

“I’m more than good with it.” I smiled brightly. “It sounds amazing, but I’ll need to talk to Colt. He’s struggling and I don’t want to leave him alone if he needs me staying with him.”

“Of course, love.”

“I never imagined any of this happening when I came back here. I came back for Colt, that was all. I never even believed anyone would want me again, let alone two guys I’d been obsessing over for years, and a drop dead gorgeous man who’s way out of my league,” I sighed. “I never wanted to tie anyone down with all of the shit that comes along with me.”

“You’re the one who’s out of all of our leagues, sweetheart,” Deacon told me. “And we don’t care what comes along with you. We’ll deal with all of it as long as it means we get to have you. You know that.”

“I’m starting to,” I nodded.

“So you’re willing to try us all living here together then?” Mason asked, seeming surprised.

“If Colt’s good with it, then yes. Don’t look so shocked,” I laughed.

“I just didn’t expect you to give in so easily. I was ready for an argument.”

“No arguments from me,” I shrugged as I ate the last piece of my pancake.

“Okay then,” Deacon said as he jumped up from his seat and walked into the kitchen to open a drawer. He pulled out a huge bunch of keys and handed us each a fob from one of the rings. “These get you into the building and elevator,” he explained. “This is the key for my place,” he went on as he handed out silver keys next. “I have enough spaces in the underground lot for all your cars and I’ll arrange for you to have the remotes for the garage doors by tonight. Otherwise make yourselves at home. There’s four bedrooms and bathrooms upstairs, but Ava gets first pick.”

“Okay then,” I said as I looked between them all. “I see we’re actually doing this.”

“We are,” Mason said as he finished the last of his coffee, then got to his feet. He took his dishes into the kitchen and set them in the sink.

“Leave those, Mate. I’ll cleanup before I head out,” Jack offered and Mason nodded gratefully.

“I have to get into the office, but I’ll bring some of my shit tonight,” He walked over to his seat beside me and took his jacket from the back, gracefully swinging his arms into it and sliding it on like it was a practiced move.

“Let me know if there are any updates on the murderer,” I requested and he nodded, then leaned down and kissed my lips softly. “Be good today. I’ll see you tonight.” With that, he was gone.

“He was in a rush,” I sighed as I turned to see the door slam close.

“His boss is riding him hard at work. He has a pile of cases on his desk he should be working on, but instead he’s been looking for the sick fuck who took Colt and hurt you,” Jack explained.

“I thought he handed everything to the FBI?”

“He was supposed to, but you know what he’s like. Mace wants the chance to handle the monster who hurt people he cares about,” Jack explained.

“What do you want to do today, sweetheart? I don’t need to be at the club until later, so we can head out somewhere or I can take you home?” Deak offered.

“Home would be great, if you don’t mind. I need to get my meds, and talk with Colt about all of this...about us,” I replied.

“Shit! I can’t believe I forgot about your meds,” Deak cursed angrily.

“It’s fine. I’m okay. I just need to take them soon,” I assured him as I cuddled into his side and wrapped my arms around his waist.

“Okay. Grab what you need and we’ll head out now. Jack, you staying here?” Deak

asked as he looked behind him to where Jak was beginning to clean up from breakfast.

“I’ll clean up, then head over to my place to pack a bag before work tonight, if that’s okay?”

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:53 am

“All good, man. I’ll see you at Temple tonight,” Deak replied as he moved over to get his keys from where they sat in a bowl on the coffee table.

“You gonna be here when I get back tonight?” Jack asked me as he came closer.

“Yeah. Even if Colt’s not ready for me to move out, I’ll come and stay here tonight with you all. It’ll be our first night together. I don’t want to miss it,” I told him as I looped my arms around his neck and looked up into his deep blue eyes. “Are you sure you’re good with all of this?”

“It’s going to be quite the adjustment, but I’m good with anything that brings me closer to you,” he told me. “Now go, get your meds, and talk to Colt. Text me later to let me know what he says please.”

“I will.” I reached up onto my tiptoes and kissed him briefly. When I tried to pull back he chased me and kissed me again, only harder this time.

“Love you, Ava,” he told me.

“Love you too.” I released him and turned to follow Deacon from the apartment, excited at the prospect of us all being there together later that night and for the foreseeable future. It felt like a dream I hadn’t ever dared to reach for, but was getting anyway.

It was almost lunch time when Deacon pulled up outside Colt’s apartment building to

drop me off. We'd agreed he's leave me to chat with my brother and I'd meet back at his place later that night. While I was reluctant to leave him after the great night and morning we'd had together, I knew I needed to speak to Colt alone. While Colt knew I was interested in all three of my guys already, I was pretty sure he'd be surprised to hear we planned to live together so soon.

"You sure you don't want me to come with you?" Deacon asked and I laughed.

"I think I'll survive telling my brother I'm moving out again at thirty-four years old," I chuckled.

"Just make sure he knows we plan to take good care of you," he worried.

"Excuse me? What is this, the dark ages?"

"I know you take care of yourself. I just meant, I know Colt's worried about your injury and the bad days you have. I just want him to know we'll be there when you need us," he backpedaled.

"I'm sure you guys can do all that macho posturing when you're alone," I told him with a roll of my eyes. "I'm not asking his permission to move out. I just want to make sure he'll be okay if I moved out. He's been through hell and he only just got back to his life. I don't want to abandon him when he needs me, not again."

"Okay. Go talk to him, honey. Call me if you want me to pick you up later, okay?"

"I'll probably just see you back at yours when you get off work, nut I'll text you so you know what's happening," I assured him as I leaned over and kissed him.

I laughed as he watched me walk all of the way into the apartment building and lock closed the door behind me before he'd drive away. He really was so sweet and over

protective. I'd never admit it aloud, but I kind of liked it.

I knew Colt was home as I walked in the door, because he'd already sent me a message that morning letting me know he was working from home that day if I needed anything. He did that a lot now, checked in and let me know I could call if I needed anything from him. I hated that I'd made him feel like he needed to do that by hiding away from him as I had after the shooting, and I was resolved to do much better as a sister moving forwards.

"Colt?" I called as I walked inside and closed the door behind me. The apartment was quiet so I headed right for Colt's office as he exited it, walking towards me.

"Hey you. Did you have a good date?" he asked as he smiled and gave me a waggle of his eyebrows.

"I guess being out all night was the clue, huh?" I asked dryly as I rolled my eyes at him.

"It was, though as your big brother I imagined you spent all night talking and doing nothing other than that. Correct?"

"Of course. We even braided each other's hair and told ghost stories," I joked. "You doing okay? Ky at work?"

"Yep and yep. Ky had a meeting with a new supplier. He said he'll be back later this afternoon. I was just catching up on some paperwork. Did you eat lunch?"

"I just finished breakfast. Jack and Mason came over so we could all eat together," I explained.

"So things are going well then?"

“Yeah, they are actually. Listen, I need to grab my pain meds, but then can we sit down and talk? It won’t take long, but it’s fine if you’re too busy right now.”

“Never too busy for you, bam. Go and get what you need and I’ll make some coffee,” Colt offered and I nodded eagerly.

Once I was in my room I changed into jeans and a baggy sweatshirt, wanting to be comfortable. After I’d spoken with Colt I had plans for a long, steamy bubble bath to soak my aching body. The night before with Deacon had been amazing, but his size had taken it’s toll and I was pretty sore between my legs that morning too. I took all of my meds, including some of the pain pills, brushed my teeth then headed out in search of coffee.

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“Sorry, Ava. We’ll have to talk when I get back. Ky just called. Someone slashed his tires while he was in the restaurant and he had to call the cops. I don’t want him handling it all alone,” Colt told me from where he perched in an armchair pulling on his shoes.

“Slashed his tires? Does he know who?” I asked.

“No, but there are cameras in the parking lot. Ky was upset when he called. He’s not great in a crisis,” he told me hurriedly, and I could see how worried he was.

“Just one second. I’ll come with you,” I said as I turned back for my room to grab my slip on sneakers. As I walked in there I got a feeling of unease about the whole thing and grabbed my gun from my nightstand too. I checked it was loaded, then tucked it in my jeans at the small of my back. I slid my feet into my ugly sneakers and hurried back to Colt, who waited with eh apartment door open.

“Where’s your security?” I asked as we exited the apartment and moved to the elevator.

“I told Ky to tell them they weren’t needed today. I wasn’t planning to leave the apartment. Plus, I feel stupid with paid men following me around. It’s been two weeks. The bastard who took me will have moved in now.”

“Colt! What if he’s just been watching and waiting for his chance to get to you?” I asked as my unease increased. “This could all be a ploy to get you out in the open. That psycho probably slashed Ky’s tires knowing you’d come running.”

“Well if he did, then it was a bad plan, since Ky says two cop cars turned up when he called in the damage,” Colt tried to reassure me, but I was far from mollified.

“I’m calling Mason. I want him to meet us...” my words were cut off as we walked into the underground parking lot and I was instantly thrown off of my feet and to the ground so hard my phone flew from my hand. My head bounced off of the concrete and blood was trickling down the side of my head as I tried to sit up.

“Ava!” Colt yelled, then he was grunting and I could blurrily see him fighting with someone a few meters from me. A loud grunt from Colt had my panic rising as I pushed up from the ground and forced myself to stand despite the dizziness clouding my vision. I took a few deep breaths to try and steady myself as I stumbled around a little, and finally my head seemed to clear enough for me to see.

“Stop!” I yelled as I pulled my gun from the small of my back and held it out in front of me. A tall figure, dressed in a black hooded sweatshirt was on top of my brother, hitting him as Colt struggled to block the hits and get himself free.

When he continued, completely ignoring my command I moved closer until my gun was less than a foot from his head.

“Hands up right now or I put a bullet through you brains,” I warned. I was winded, but I kept my voice calm and steady.

I let out a shaky breath when he released Colt and stood slowly as he lifted his hands above his head. He turned to face me and all of my breath seemed to leave my lungs as I once again saw those evil eyes that had haunted my nightmares and flashbacks for so many years.
