

Content Warnings

This book contains explicit sexual content, profanity, a very possessive/morally gray antihero, and topics that may be sensitive to some readers.

For more detailed information, click the QR code below.



Playlist

“Twisted”—MISSIO

“Ice Box”—Omarion

“Feel Again”—OneRepublic

“Dusk Till Dawn”—ZAYN & Sia

“Set Fire to the Rain”—Adele

“Burn”—Ellie Goulding

“My Kind of Love”—Emeli Sandé

“Writing’s on the Wall”—Sam Smith

“Ghost”—Ella Henderson

“Stronger (What Doesn’t Kill You)”—Kelly Clarkson

“Wide Awake”—Katy Perry

“You Sang to Me”—Marc Anthony

CHAPTER 1

Ava

There were worse things than being stranded in the middle of nowhere during a rainstorm.

For example, I could be running from a rabid bear intent on mauling me into the next century. Or I could be tied to a chair in a dark basement and forced to listen to Aqua's "Barbie Girl" on repeat until I'd rather gnaw off my arm than hear the song's eponymous phrase again.

But just because things could be worse didn't mean they didn't suck.

Stop. Think positive thoughts.

"A car will show up...*now*." I stared at my phone, biting back my frustration when the app reassured me it was "finding my ride," the way it had been for the past half hour.

Normally, I'd be less stressed about the situation because hey, at least I had a working phone and a bus shelter to keep me mostly dry from the pounding rain. But Josh's farewell party was starting in an hour, I had yet to pick up his surprise cake from the bakery, and it would be dark soon. I may be a glass half-full kinda gal, but I wasn't an idiot. No one—especially not a college girl with zero fighting skills to speak of—wants to find herself alone in the middle of nowhere after dark.

I should've taken those self-defense classes with Jules like she wanted.

I mentally scrolled through my limited options. The bus that stopped at this location didn't run on the weekends, and most

of my friends didn't own a car. Bridget had car service, but she was at an embassy event until seven. My rideshare app wasn't working, and I hadn't seen a single car pass by since the rain started. Not that I would hitchhike anyway—I've watched horror movies, thank you very much.

I only had one option left—one I *really* didn't want to take—but beggars couldn't be choosers.

I pulled up the contact in my phone, said a silent prayer, and pressed the Call button.

One ring. Two rings. Three.

Come on, pick up. Or not. I wasn't sure which would be worse—getting murdered or dealing with my brother. Of course, there was always the chance said brother would murder me himself for putting myself in such a situation, but I'd deal with that later.

"What's wrong?"

I scrunched my nose at his greeting. "Hello to you too, Brother Dearest. What makes you think something is wrong?"

Josh snorted. "Uh, you called me. You never call unless you're in trouble."

True. We preferred texting, and we lived next door to each other—not my idea, by the way—so we rarely had to message at all.

"I wouldn't say I'm in *trouble*," I hedged. "More like... stranded. I'm not near public transport, and I can't find a rideshare."

"Christ, Ava. Where are you?"

I told him.

"What the hell are you doing there? That's an hour from campus!"

"Don't be dramatic. I had an engagement shoot, and it's a thirty-minute drive. Forty-five if there's traffic." Thunder boomed, shaking the branches of nearby trees. I winced and

shrank farther back into the shelter, not that it did me much good. The rain slanted sideways, splattering me with water droplets so heavy and hard they stung when they hit my skin.

A rustling noise came from Josh's end, followed by a soft moan.

I paused, sure I'd heard wrong, but nope, there it was again. Another moan.

My eyes widened in horror. "Are you having sex right now?" I whisper-shouted, even though no one else was around.

The sandwich I'd scarfed down before I left for my shoot threatened to make a reappearance. There was nothing—I repeat nothing—grosser than listening to a relative while they're mid coitus. Just the thought made me gag.

"Technically, no." Josh sounded unrepentant.

The word *technically* did a lot of heavy lifting there.

It didn't take a genius to decipher Josh's vague reply. He may not be having intercourse, but something was going on, and I had zero desire to find out what that "something" was.

"Josh Chen."

"Hey, you're the one who called me." He must've covered his phone with his hand, because his next words came through muffled. I heard a soft, feminine laugh followed by a squeal, and I wanted to bleach my ears, my eyes, my *mind*. "One of the guys took my car to buy more ice," Josh said, his voice clear again. "But don't worry, I got you. Drop a pin on your exact location, and keep your phone close. Do you still have the pepper spray I bought for your birthday last year?"

"Yes. Thanks for that, by the way." I'd wanted a new camera bag, but Josh had bought me an eight-pack of pepper spray instead. I'd never used any of it, which meant all eight bottles—minus the one tucked in my purse—were sitting snug in the back of my closet.

My sarcasm went over my brother's head. For a straight-A med student, he could be quite dense. "You're welcome. Stay put, and he'll be there soon. We'll talk about your complete lack of self-preservation later."

"I'm self-preserved," I protested. *Was that the right word?* "It's not my fault there are no—wait, what do you mean 'he'? Josh!"

Too late. He'd already hung up.

Figured the one time I wanted him to elaborate, he'd ditch me for one of his bed buddies. I was surprised he hadn't freaked out more, considering Josh put the *over* in overprotective. Ever since The Incident, he'd taken it upon himself to look after me like he was my brother and bodyguard rolled into one. I didn't blame him—our childhood had been a hundred shades of messed up, or so I'd been told—and I loved him to pieces, but his constant worrying could be a bit much.

I sat sideways on the bench and hugged my bag to my side, letting the cracked leather warm my skin while I waited for the mysterious "he" to show up. It could be anyone. Josh had no shortage of friends. He'd always been Mr. Popular—basketball player, student body president, and homecoming king in high school; Sigma fraternity brother and big man on campus in college.

I was his opposite. Not *unpopular* per se, but I shied away from the limelight and would rather have a small group of close friends than a large group of friendly acquaintances. Where Josh was the life of the party, I sat in the corner and daydreamed about all the places I would love to visit but would probably never get to. Not if my phobia had anything to do with it.

My damn phobia. I knew it was all mental, but it *felt* physical. The nausea, the racing heart, the paralyzing fear that turned my limbs into useless, frozen things...

On the bright side, at least I wasn't afraid of rain. Oceans and

lakes and pools, I could avoid, but rain...yeah, that would've been bad.

I wasn't sure how long I huddled in the tiny bus shelter, cursing my lack of foresight when I turned down the Graysons' offer to drive me back to town after our shoot. I hadn't wanted to inconvenience them and thought I could call a car and be back at Thayer's campus in half an hour, but the skies opened up right after the couple left and, well, here I was.

It was getting dark. Muted grays mingled with the cool blues of twilight, and part of me worried the mysterious "he" wouldn't show up, but Josh had never let me down. If one of his friends failed to pick me up like he'd asked, they wouldn't have working legs tomorrow. Josh was a med student, but he had zero compunction about using violence when the situation called for it—especially when the situation involved me.

The bright beam of headlights slashed through the rain. I squinted, my heart tripping in both anticipation and wariness as I weighed the odds of whether the car belonged to my ride or a potential psycho. This part of Maryland was pretty safe, but you never knew.

When my eyes adjusted to the light, I slumped with relief, only to stiffen again two seconds later.

Good news? I recognized the sleek, black Aston Martin pulling up toward me. It belonged to one of Josh's friends, which meant I wouldn't end up a local news item tonight.

Bad news? The person driving said Aston Martin was the *last* person I wanted—or expected—to pick me up. He wasn't an *I'll do my buddy a favor and rescue his stranded little sister* kinda guy.

He was a *look at me wrong and I'll destroy you and everyone you care about* kinda guy, and he'd do it looking so calm and gorgeous you wouldn't notice your world burning down around you until you were already a heap of ashes at his Tom Ford-clad feet.

I swiped the tip of my tongue over my dry lips as the car stopped in front of me and the passenger window rolled down.

“Get in.”

He didn’t raise his voice—he never raised his voice—but I still heard him loud and clear over the rain.

Alex Volkov was a force of nature unto himself, and I imagined even the weather bowed to him.

“I hope you’re not waiting for me to open the door for you,” he said when I didn’t move. He sounded as happy as I was about the situation.

What a gentleman.

I pressed my lips together and bit back a sarcastic reply as I roused myself from the bench and ducked into the car. It smelled cool and expensive, like spicy cologne and fine Italian leather. I didn’t have a towel or anything to place on the seat beneath me, so all I could do was pray I didn’t damage the expensive interior.

“Thanks for picking me up. I appreciate it,” I said in an attempt to break the icy silence.

I failed. Miserably.

Alex didn’t respond or even look at me as he navigated the twists and curves of the slick roads leading back to campus. He drove the same way he walked, talked, and breathed—steady and controlled, with an undercurrent of danger warning those foolish enough to contemplate crossing him that doing so would be their death sentence.

He was the exact opposite of Josh, and I still marveled at the fact that they were best friends. Personally, I thought Alex was an asshole. I was sure he had his reasons, some kind of psychological trauma that shaped him into the unfeeling robot he was today. Based on the snippets I’d gleaned from Josh, Alex’s childhood had been even worse than ours, though I’d never managed to pull the details out of my brother. All I knew was Alex’s parents

had died when he was young and left him a pile of money he'd quadrupled the value of when he came into his inheritance at age eighteen. Not that he'd needed it, because he'd invented a new financial modeling software in high school that made him a multimillionaire before he could vote.

With an IQ of 160, Alex Volkov was a genius, or close to it. He was the only person in Thayer's history to complete its five-year joint undergrad/MBA program in three years, and at age twenty-six, he was the COO of one of the most successful real estate development companies in the country. He was a legend, and he knew it.

Meanwhile, I thought I was doing well if I remembered to eat while juggling my classes, extracurriculars, and two jobs—front desk duty at the McCann Gallery and my side hustle as a photographer for anyone who would hire me. Graduations, engagements, dogs' birthday parties, I did them all.

"Are you going to Josh's party?" I tried again to make small talk. The silence was killing me.

Alex and Josh had been best friends since they roomed together at Thayer eight years ago, and Alex had joined my family for Thanksgiving and assorted holidays every year since, but I still didn't *know* him. Alex and I didn't talk unless it had to do with Josh or passing the potatoes at dinner or something.

"Yes."

Okay then. Guess small talk was out.

My mind wandered toward the million things I had to do that weekend. Edit the photos from the Graysons' shoot, work on my application for the World Youth Photography fellowship, help Josh finish packing after—

Crap! I'd forgotten all about Josh's cake.

I'd ordered it two weeks ago because that was the max lead time for something from Crumble & Bake. It was Josh's favorite

dessert, a three-layer dark chocolate frosted with fudge and filled with chocolate pudding. He only indulged on his birthday, but since he was leaving the country for a year, I figured he could break his once-a-year rule.

“So...” I pasted the biggest, brightest smile on my face. “Don’t kill me, but we need to make a detour to Crumble & Bake.”

“No. We’re already late.” Alex stopped at a red light. We’d made it back to civilization, and I spotted the blurred outlines of a Starbucks and a Panera through the rain-splattered glass.

My smile didn’t budge. “It’s a *small* detour. It’ll take fifteen minutes, max. I just need to run in and pick up Josh’s cake. You know, the Death by Chocolate he likes so much? He’ll be in Central America for a year, they don’t have C&B down there, and he leaves in two days so—”

“Stop.” Alex’s fingers curled around the steering wheel, and my wild, hormonal mind latched on to how beautiful they were. That might sound crazy, because who has beautiful *fingers*? But he did. Physically, *everything* about him was beautiful. The jade-green eyes that glared out from beneath dark brows like chips hewn from a glacier; the sharp jawline and elegant, sculpted cheekbones; the lean frame and thick, light brown hair that somehow looked both tousled and perfectly coiffed. He resembled a statue in an Italian museum come to life.

The urge to ruffle his hair like I would a kid’s gripped me, just so he’d stop looking so perfect—which was quite irritating to the rest of us mere mortals—but I didn’t have a death wish, so I kept my hands planted in my lap.

“If I take you to Crumble & Bake, will you stop talking?”

No doubt he regretted picking me up.

My smile grew. “If you want.” His lips thinned. “Fine.”

Yes!

Ava Chen: One.

Alex Volkov: Zero.

When we arrived at the bakery, I unbuckled my seat belt and was halfway out the door when Alex grabbed my arm and pulled me back into my seat. Contrary to what I'd expected, his touch wasn't cold. It was scorching, and it burned through my skin and muscles until I felt its warmth in the pit of my stomach.

I swallowed hard. *Stupid hormones.* "What? We're already late, and they're closing soon."

"You can't go out like that." The tiniest hint of disapproval etched into the corners of his mouth.

"Like what?" I asked, confused. I wore jeans and a T-shirt, nothing scandalous.

Alex inclined his head toward my chest. I glanced down and let out a horrified yelp. Because my shirt? White. Wet. Transparent. Not even a little transparent, like you could *kind of* see my bra outline if you looked hard enough. This was full-on see-through. Red lace bra, hard nipples—thanks, air-conditioning—the whole shebang.

I crossed my arms over my chest, my face flaming the same color as my bra. "Was it like this the entire time?"

"Yes."

"You could've told me."

"I did tell you. Just now."

Sometimes, I wanted to strangle him. I really did. And I wasn't even a violent person. I was the same girl who didn't eat gingerbread man cookies for years after watching *Shrek* because I felt like I was eating Gingy's family members or, worse, Gingy himself, but something about Alex provoked my dark side.

I exhaled a sharp breath and dropped my arms by instinct, forgetting about my see-through shirt until Alex's gaze flicked down to my chest again.

The flaming cheeks returned, but I was sick of sitting here

arguing with him. Crumble & Bake closed in ten minutes, and the clock was ticking.

Maybe it was the man, the weather, or the hour and a half I'd spent stuck under a bus shelter, but my frustration spilled out before I could stop it. "Instead of being an asshole and staring at my breasts, can you lend me your jacket? Because I really want to get this cake and send my brother, your best friend, off in style before he leaves the country."

My words hung in the air while I clapped a hand over my mouth, horrified. Did I just utter the word *breasts* to Alex Volkov and accuse him of ogling me? *And* call him an asshole?

Dear God, if you smite me with lightning right now, I won't be mad. Promise.

Alex's eyes narrowed a fraction of an inch. It ranked in the top five most emotional responses I'd pulled out of him in eight years, so that was something.

"Trust me, I was not staring at your breasts," he said, his voice frigid enough to transform the lingering drops of moisture on my skin into icicles. "You're not my type, even if you weren't Josh's sister."

Ouch. I wasn't interested in Alex either, but no girl enjoys being dismissed so easily by a member of the opposite sex.

"Whatever. There's no need to be a jerk about it," I muttered. "Look, C&B closes in two minutes. Just let me borrow your jacket, and we can get out of here."

I'd prepaid online, so all I needed was to grab the cake.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "I'll get it. You're not leaving the car dressed like that, even wearing my jacket."

Alex yanked an umbrella out from beneath his seat and exited the car in one fluid motion. He moved like a panther, all coiled grace and laser intensity. If he wanted, he could make a killing as a runway model, though I doubted he'd ever do anything so "gauche."

He returned less than five minutes later with Crumble & Bake's signature pink-and-mint-green cake box tucked beneath one arm. He dumped it in my lap, snapped his umbrella closed, and reversed out of the parking spot without so much as blinking.

"Do you ever smile?" I asked, peeking inside the box to make sure they hadn't messed up the order. Nope. One Death by Chocolate, coming right up. "It might help with your condition."

"What condition?" Alex sounded bored.

"Stickuptheassitis." I'd already called the man an asshole, so what was one more insult?

I might've imagined it, but I thought I saw his mouth twitch before he responded with a bland, "No. The condition is chronic."

My hands froze while my jaw unhinged. "D-did you make a joke?"

"Explain why you were out there in the first place." Alex evaded my question and changed subjects so quick I had whiplash.

He made a joke. I wouldn't have believed it had I not heard it with my own ears. "I had a photo shoot with clients. There's a nice lake in—"

"Spare me the details. I don't care."

A low growl slipped from my throat. "Why are *you* here? Didn't figure you for the chauffeur type."

"I was in the area, and you're Josh's little sister. If you died, he'd be a bore to hang out with." Alex pulled up in front of my house. Next door, a.k.a. at Josh's house, the lights blazed, and I could see people dancing and laughing through the windows.

"Josh has the worst taste in friends," I bit out. "I don't know what he sees in you. I hope that stick in your ass punctures a vital organ." Then, because I'd been raised with manners, I added, "Thank you for the ride."

I huffed out of the car. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, and I