

twisted
LOVE

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

twisted
GAMES

Playlist

“Queen”—Loren Gray

“Castle”—Halsey

“Arcade”—Duncan Laurence

“You Should See Me in a Crown”—Billie Eilish

“Telepatía”—Kali Uchis**

“Stay”—Rihanna

“Uncover”—Zara Larsson

“Secret Love Song”—Little Mix

“They Don’t Know About Us”—One Direction

“Minefields”—Faouzia & John Legend

“Wildest Dreams”—Taylor Swift

“Princesses Don’t Cry”—Aviva

“Fairytale” (Slow Version)—Alexander Rybak

“I Guess I’m in Love”—Clinton Kane

**For the chapter 18 vibes more than the lyrics

CHAPTER 1

Bridget

“Spank me! Master, spank me!”

I stifled a laugh at my bodyguard Booth’s face as Leather the parrot squawked in his cage. The parrot’s name said all you needed to know about its previous owner’s sex life, and while some found him amusing, Booth did not. He hated birds. He said they reminded him of giant flying rats.

“One day, he and Leather are going to get into it.” Emma, the director of Wags and Whiskers, clucked her tongue. “Poor Booth.”

I held back another laugh even as I felt a small pang in my heart. “Probably not. Booth’s leaving soon.”

I tried not to think about it. Booth had been with me for four years, but he was leaving for paternity leave next week and staying in Eldorra after to be closer to his wife and newborn. I was happy for him, but I would miss him. He was not only my bodyguard but a friend, and I could only hope his replacement and I had the same rapport.

“Ah, yes, I forgot.” Emma’s face softened. She was in her early sixties, with short, gray-streaked hair and warm brown eyes. “Lots of changes for you in a short time, my dear.”

She knew how much I hated goodbyes.

I’d been volunteering at Wags and Whiskers, a local pet rescue shelter, since my sophomore year of college, and Emma had become a close friend and mentor. Unfortunately, she too was leaving. She’d still be in Hazelburg, but she was retiring as the shelter director, which meant I would no longer see her every week.

“One of them doesn’t *have* to happen,” I said, only half joking. “You could stay.”

She shook her head. “I’ve run the shelter for almost a decade, and it’s time for new blood. Someone who can clean the cages *without* her back and hips acting up.”

“That’s what volunteers are for.” I gestured toward myself. I was belaboring the point, but I couldn’t help it. Between Emma, Booth, and my impending graduation from Thayer University, where I was majoring in international relations—as expected of a princess—I had enough goodbyes to last me for the next five years.

“You are a sweetheart. Don’t tell the others, but...” She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “You’re my favorite volunteer. It’s rare to find someone of your stature who does charity because she wants to, not because she’s putting on a show for the cameras.”

My cheeks tinted pink at the compliment. “It’s my pleasure. I adore animals.” I took after my mother in that regard. It was one of the few pieces of her I had left.

In another life, I would’ve been a veterinarian, but in this life? My path had been laid out for me since before I was born.

“You would make a great queen.” Emma stepped aside to allow a staff member with a wriggling puppy in his arms to pass. “Truly.”

I laughed at the thought. “Thank you, but I have no interest in being queen. Even if I did, the chances of me wearing the crown are slim.”

As the princess of Eldorra, a small European kingdom, I came closer to ruling than most people. My parents died when I was a kid—my mother at childbirth, my father in a car accident a few years later—so I was second in line to the throne. My brother, Nikolai, who was four years my senior, had been training to take over for our grandfather King Edvard since he was old enough to walk. Once Nikolai had children, I would be bumped further down the line of succession, something I had zero complaints about. I wanted to be queen as much as I wanted to bathe in a vat of acid.

twisted
HATE

Playlist

"Don't Blame Me"—Taylor Swift

"Talk"—Salvatore Ganacci

"Free"—Broods

"Daddy Issues"—The Neighbourhood

"You Make Me Sick"—P!nk

"Animals"—Maroon 5

"Give You What You Like"—Avril Lavigne

"wRoNg"—Zayn

"Waves"—Normani featuring 6LACK

"50 Shades"—Boy Epic

"Only You"—Ellie Goulding

"One More Night"—Maroon 5

"I Hate U, I Love U"—Gnash

"Wanted"—Hunter Hayes

CHAPTER 1

Jules

Nothing good ever came from swiping right on a guy holding a fish on a dating app. Double red flags if said guy's name was *Todd*.

I should've known better, yet there I was, sitting alone at the Bronze Gear, DC's hottest bar, and drinking my hideously expensive vodka soda after being stood up.

That's right.

I'd been stood up for the very first time by a fish-wielding Todd. It was enough to make a girl say *fuck it* and throw away sixteen dollars on one drink even though she didn't have a full-time salary yet.

What was it with men and fish pictures anyway? Couldn't they choose something more creative, like cage diving with sharks? Also marine animal-centric, but less mundane.

Maybe the fish was an odd thing to fixate on, but it prevented me from dwelling on the awfulness of my day and the hot, sticky embarrassment coating my skin.

Get caught in a sudden downpour halfway to campus with nary an umbrella in sight? Check. (Five percent chance of rain, my ass. I should sue the weather app company.)

Get trapped in an overcrowded Metro train that stunk of body odor for forty minutes due to a power problem? Check.

Go on a three-hour apartment hunt that resulted in two blistered feet and zero leads? Check.

After such a hellish day, I wanted to cancel my date with Todd, but I'd already postponed twice—once for a rescheduled study group, the other when I was feeling under the weather—and I hadn't wanted to

leave him hanging again. So I sucked it up and showed up, only to get stood up.

The universe had a sense of humor all right, and it was a shitty one.

I finished the rest of my drink and flagged down the bartender. “Can I get the check please?” Happy hour had just started, but I couldn’t wait to go home and curl up with the two real loves of my life. Netflix and Ben & Jerry’s never let me down.

“It’s already covered.”

When my eyebrows shot up, the bartender tilted her head toward a table of preppy-looking twentysomething guys in the corner. Likely consultants, based on their outfits. One of them, a Clark Kent look-alike in a gingham shirt, raised his glass and smiled at me. “Courtesy of Clark the consultant.”

I stifled a laugh even as I raised my own glass and smiled back at him. So I wasn’t the only one who thought he looked like Superman’s alter ego.

“Clark the consultant saved me from eating instant ramen for dinner, so cheers to him,” I said.

That was sixteen dollars I could keep in my bank account, though I left a tip anyway. I used to work in the food service industry, and it made me obsessive about overtipping. No one dealt with more assholes on a consistent basis than service workers.

I finished my free drink and kept my eyes locked on Clark the consultant, whose gaze swept appreciatively over my face, hair, and body.

I didn’t believe in false humility—I knew I looked good. And I knew if I walked over to that table right now, I could soothe my bruised ego with more drinks, compliments, and maybe an orgasm or two later if he knew what he was doing.

Tempting...but no. I was too exhausted to go through the whole hookup song and dance.

I turned away, but not before catching the flash of disappointment on his face. To his credit, Clark the consultant understood the implied

twisted
LIES

Playlist

“Tears of Gold (Slowed)”—Faouzia

“Made to Love”—John Legend

“God is a Woman”—Ariana Grande

“Infinity”—Jaymes Young

“Style”—Taylor Swift

“Crazy in Love”—Sofia Karlberg

“Coffee”—Miguel

“Heat Waves”—Glass Animals

“I know You”—Skylar Grey

“Earned It”—The Weeknd

“Beautiful”—Bazzi

“Die for You”—The Weeknd

“Harleys in Hawaii”—Katy Perry

“Said I Loved You...But I Lied”—Michael Bolton

CHAPTER 1

Stella

“Stella!”

My heart rate sped up. Nothing triggered my fight-or-flight response like the sound of Meredith’s voice.

“Yes?” I hid my trepidation behind a neutral expression.

“I trust you can bring all the items back to the office yourself.” She slipped on her coat and tossed her handbag over her shoulder. “I have a dinner reservation I simply can’t miss.”

“Of—”

She disappeared out the door.

“Course I can,” I finished.

The photographer paused what he was doing and raised his eyebrows at me. I answered with a tired shrug. I wasn’t the first magazine assistant who’d suffered under a tyrannical boss, and I wouldn’t be the last.

Once upon a time, working at a fashion magazine would’ve been a dream. Now, after four years at *DC Style*, the reality of the job had dulled any shine the position once held.

By the time I packed up the photo shoot, dropped the items off at the office, and started my walk home, my forehead was slick with sweat and my muscles were well on their way to becoming Jell-O.

The sun had set half an hour ago, and the streetlights cast a hazy orange glow over the snow-packed sidewalks.

The city was under a blizzard warning, but the bad weather wouldn’t kick in until later in the evening. It was also faster for me to walk home than take the Metro, which freaked out whenever there was so much as an inch of snow.

One would think the city would be better prepared considering it snowed every year, but nope. Not DC.

I shouldn't have been looking at my phone while walking, especially given the weather, but I couldn't help myself.

I pulled up the email I'd received that afternoon and stared at it, waiting for the words to rearrange themselves into something less upsetting, but they never did.

Effective April 1, the cost for a private room at Greenfield Senior Living will increase to \$6,500 per month. We apologize in advance for any inconvenience this may cause, but we are confident the changes will result in even higher-quality care for our residents...

The green smoothie I'd downed during lunch sloshed in my stomach.

Inconvenience, they said. Like they weren't hiking the prices of an assisted living facility by over twenty percent. Like living, breathing, *vulnerable* human beings wouldn't suffer because of the new management's greed.

In, one, two, three. Out, one, two, three.

I tried to let the deep breaths wash away my rising anxiety.

Maura had practically raised me. She was the one person who'd always been there for me, even if she didn't know who I was now. I *couldn't* move her to another assisted living facility. Greenfield was the best in the area, and it'd become her home.

None of my friends and family knew I'd been paying for her care. I didn't want the inevitable questions telling them would raise.

I would just have to find a way to cover the higher costs. Maybe I could take on more partnerships or negotiate higher rates for my blog and Instagram. I had an upcoming dinner with Delamonte in New York, which my manager said was an audition for their brand ambassador position. If I—

"Ms. Alonso."

The deep, rich voice brushed my skin like black velvet and stopped me in my tracks. A shiver chased its wake, born of equal parts pleasure and warning.