



TEMPORAL  
TANTRUMS  
STORM SONG

# TEMPORAL TANTRUMS

TIME TRAVELLER'S HAREM

BOOK ONE

## STORM SONG

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*Dedicated to the anxious little voice in my head that said I  
couldn't do it.*

*Go fuck yourself.*

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## CHAPTER

# ONE

In the depths of a neglected city consciousness crashed into me like a freight train, derailing on impact.

*Fuck, my head.*

I peeled open sticky eyelids, greeted by a symphony of pain that crescendoed from the base of my skull down my spine. The cold concrete underneath me was unapologetic against my cheek and my thoughts were blurred and jagged at the edges like broken glass.

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered and rolled onto my back like a fucking wounded animal.

The room around me was covered in shadows, with barely enough light sneaking through the grimy windows to make out my personal hell. Moths danced waltzes around a flickering bulb that hung above my head—a useless chandelier in a dungeon of despair. It was poetic, really, in a sick and twisted sort of way.

I would have laughed, if it didn’t already feel like my ribs were the ones cracking a punchline.

*Drip, drip, drip...* The sound gnawed at my fraying sanity, each drop a ticking clock counting down to something inevitable and unwanted. Water—or *God, I hoped it was water*—pooled in uneven patches across the floor, reflecting what little light there was in distorted mirrors.

*Great. Just what we needed, fucking basement-murder ambiance.*

I tried to push myself up, but my hands slipped on the slick surface and sent spikes of fresh agony through my battered body. I wasn't sure if the dampness on my palms was from the basement or my own blood. But at this point, did it really even matter?

I rested for a minute to catch my breath, which felt like inhaling knives.

*Note to self, add 'avoid dank basements' to the job description.*

I finally managed to sit upright and shivered, more from the cold reality of my situation than the chill in the air. But despite it all—the pain, the confusion, the creeping sense of dread—I knew I couldn't stay down there. Not when every inch of me screamed that time was running out. For the girl. For me.

*Alright, Averill, I coaxed myself inside my head, Time to haul ass out of here. You've been in worse scrapes.* It might have been a lie, but hell, I'd take any sliver of bravery I could get.

With sarcasm as my crutch, I staggered to my feet, ignoring the screaming protests of my abused muscles. Every step was a negotiation, an exercise in sheer willpower over weakness. The basement mocked me, its silence oppressive, its secrets dark.

*Fuck you, basement.* I swayed on unsteady legs. *You haven't seen the last of me.* I embarked on what felt like a grueling trek towards the stairs, to who knows where, all because I couldn't let it go and had a burning desire for sweet revenge. Classic stubbornness at its finest. Because someone was going to pay for this. And they were going to pay a fucking-lot.

I barely made a dent in the distance to the stairs when a muffled sound stopped me cold in my tracks—a whimper, fragile and soaked with fear. It came from behind a stack of moldy boxes.

“Who’s there?” I choked out, my voice a hoarse blend of fear and fury.

There, in the dim light that slipped through the cracks above, was a sight that knocked the breath from my lungs. The little girl, her curly hair a halo of chaos, was huddled against the wall. And looming over her was a monster—no, just a man. But in that moment, he might as well have been the devil himself.

“Get the hell away from her,” I growled as every ounce of my anger morphed into a weapon itself.

The man’s face twisted into a menacing scowl, his eyes dark and cold. “You!” The word was a bullet, aimed straight at my gut. His anger wasn’t just directed at me—it was meant to be a death sentence.

“Please...” The girl’s whisper was a knife to my chest, and I knew—I couldn’t let this be her end.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” I lied, my promise a desperate chant that tried to conjure up safety like some kind of goddamn street magician. “I swear on my shitty life, you’re going to be fine.”

“Shut up!” the man spit, but his hold on the girl faltered—a crack in his armor.

“Listen to me,” I said, each word tethered to the thread of hope that I spun. “I’m getting us out of here. Trust me, okay?”

She nodded and the tiny bobble of her head felt like a little victory in this cesspool of despair.

“Good.” I locked eyes with the man. “Because if you think I’m scared of a basement-dwelling asshole, think again.”

His face contorted into an ugly sneer as his fingers dug into the girl’s arm. “You think you can stop me? I’ll kill you both.”

I tensed, ready to fight or run. But the girl’s eyes were still fixed on me, wide and trusting despite the terror that swam beneath.



I forced my lips into a razor-sharp smile. “Kill me? Honey, death and I are old friends. But you?” I let out a low laugh that ached my lungs. “You don’t want to dance with the devil yet. So why don’t you let the girl go, and we’ll settle this like civilized psychopaths.”

The man bristled and conflict twisted across his features. For a second, I thought he might loosen his grip. But then his hand snaked towards his waistband.

*Shit. No more talking.*

As his fingers closed around the gun, I moved. Three limping steps was all it took to reach him. I grabbed his wrist and twisted until he screamed and the gun clattered to the ground.

“Run!” I yelled at the girl. She scrambled away just as the man’s fist connected with my jaw. Pain detonated through my face but I barely felt it through the haze of desperation.

This fucker was going down.

We crashed to the floor, a tangled knot of limbs and fury. I dug my nails into his eyes, kicked him in the dick, anything to get the upper hand. I even bit him once. He screamed in pain as my teeth sank into his arm. It tasted like blood, and grime, and regret-but I didn’t care. I was desperate, determined to give the girl more time to get away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her slip through a crack in the boxes and disappear into the shadows. At least she was out of his reach now. I just had to keep him occupied.

With a roar, the man heaved upwards and I lost my grip. He scrambled for the fallen gun and before I could process what had happened a deafening bang sliced through the stale basement air. My body jerked like it had been electrocuted, the room spun, and I found myself staring at the ceiling.

Blood, slick and warm, oozed between my fingers—useless dams against the relentless tide that flowed from the bullet wound in my side. I pressed harder, gritting my teeth as a bolt of pain shot through me, igniting every nerve with

white-hot fire. The edges of my vision blurred, each heartbeat thudding in my ears like a drumbeat signaling the end.

“Shit,” I gasped, the word bubbling up through the coppery taste pooling in my mouth. “This is... inconvenient.”

The basement swam before my eyes, concrete walls merging with shadows, the water’s incessant *drip-drip-drip* a mocking soundtrack to my downfall.

As my body hit the ground, my tattoos lit up in a familiar blue hue, just like they always did every time I died.

A bitter laugh escaped my lips, only to dissolve into a wet cough. Then that familiar lurch hit me—the one that defied all logic—a sensation like falling backward through time itself.

*Here we go again.*

Time travel isn’t exactly something you major in at school, and mine sure as hell didn’t come with a manual.

My body convulsed as the basement faded away, replaced by the vertigo-inducing rush of days rewinding. Wind whipped through my hair and then, the pull—like hooks in my skin, yanked me back to a time when things were slightly less fucked up.

*Emphasis on slightly.*

I SLOWLY OPENED my eyes and the familiar sight of my run-down apartment greeted me. Immediately my stomach rolled and heaved as the images of the basement, the girl, the man, all flashed through my mind. The time-travel sickness never failed to remind me that the fucked up things were finally over.

I dropped to my knees and retched violently, my body convulsing like I was still in that hellish basement, that blurred, water-stained world of screams and blood. My fingers scratched at the worn linoleum floor, desperate for something, anything, to hold onto—to anchor me in the present timeline.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and yanked up the thin fabric of my tank top. There, scattered among the random tattoos splashed across my abdomen stood a fresh

work of art- a simple black tattoo in the shape of a gun that now found a home in the exact spot where the bullet in my side had brought my demise.

*Because that's just what I need, another reminder of another death I wish I could forget.* I rolled my eyes.

The faded black and white fur of my pet skunk, Smudge, stood out sharply against the frayed fabric of the couch and caught my eye. “Hey there, stinker,” I grumbled, my throat still hoarse from the stomach acid. His tiny nose twitched happily in response.

The room had a musty smell, a lingering reminder of the damp and dreary city outside. Despite its shabbiness, this place was our sanctuary, a safe haven from the harsh reality of the world outside-in this timeline or any other one. And I'd take it over bleeding out in some sick bastard's basement any day.

My eyes landed on the calendar beside my bed that read four days in the past- the same day the little girls mom initially reported her missing.

“Okay, let's get to work,” I pulled myself up to sit at the rickety old desk that doubled as my dinner table. My fingers already danced across the paper, almost before I could shove the old takeout boxes out of the way, scribbling details that threatened to slip through the strainer of my mind.

Tall, broad-shouldered, the bastard had eyes like a storm about to break – too damn memorable.

Smudge must have sensed the urgency; he waddled over and nudged my hand with his cool nose. “Not now, buddy. I need to focus.”

“Motherfucker had a scar, right here.” I mimicked a line down my left cheek, before I continued sketching with frantic strokes. “And his voice... what was it?” I closed my eyes and listened to the echo in my head. “Gravelly, like he'd gargled glass or some shit.” I muttered, the description growing clearer with each word etched onto paper. Height, build, eyes that saw too much and gave away nothing. “You're not getting away from me, asshole. Not this time. Right, Smudge?”

I glanced at Smudge, who was perched on the armrest of my battered couch, looking like he owned the damn place.

“Think you can hold down the fort while I kick some ass, fuzzball?” I pulled on my leather boots with more force than necessary. He blinked slowly, the white streak in his fur a mirror to my own that ran through my jet black hair. We were two freaks in a world that didn’t quite know what to do with us.

Smudge chortled softly, and I swore he understood every curse word that flew from my mouth. “Yeah, thought so. Let’s just keep the skunk-spray to a minimum today, okay? We’ve got assholes to hunt and asses to kick.” I slung my bag over my shoulder and the cool air hit me like a slap to the face, sobering and sharp.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath, staring down at the welcome mat that was anything but welcoming. There it was—a small red box, inconspicuous and yet glaringly out of place among the usual junk mail and flyers.

“Smudge, you seeing this?” I nudged the box with my boot, half expecting it to tick like some cliché movie bomb. Smudge only sniffed at it with disinterest before sauntering back to our door. “No help, as usual.”

I squatted down and the rain pelted my back, tracing rivers along the contours of my leather jacket. My fingers itched to pry open the lid right then and there, but something about the box felt too... intentional. A puzzle meant for me, a lure to reel in the curious cat. But hell, curiosity hadn’t killed me yet. Time travel had that perk—I always landed on my feet.... Eventually.

The box hadn’t been there four days before- well, *my* four days before- the first time I lived that day.

“Fine,” I swiped the box off the mat. I tucked it into my pocket and the edges dug into my thigh—a constant reminder of the unknown nestled against me. My mind raced with possibilities.

*Could be a gift. Could be a threat. Knowing my luck, it's probably both.*

“Alright, let’s not let this spoil the party.” I patted my pocket, ensuring the box wouldn’t fall out as I picked up the pace. Whatever was inside that box, it’d have to wait—there were bigger demons to chase than whatever Pandora’s bullshit was waiting for me.

Today wasn’t about surprises or my twisted past; it was about a little girl whose face wouldn’t stop flashing behind my eyelids. She needed me to be the hero, and hell, maybe for once, I could be.

I shook my head, banishing the shadows of doubt as I locked the door behind me.

*Nothing like a little kidnapping to spice up your day, huh?*

This was personal. Someone messed with the wrong PI, and they were going to pay. Whether it was with their secrets or their blood didn’t really matter to me.

When it came to surprises, most people got flowers or candy. Me? I got cryptic boxes and the chance to play savior in a city that chewed up heroes and spit them out without a second glance.

Lucky me.

I pulled the collar of my jacket up around my neck. I didn’t bother with an umbrella. It felt like a shield I didn’t deserve, not when that little girl was out there somewhere, scared and hoping.

## CHAPTER

# TWO

The sky pissed rain like it had a grudge against the city. I bolted through the soggy playground and mud splattered up my calves—*just fucking great*. The park buzzed with squealing kids and hovering parents, but there was no sign of the curly-haired moppet or the sick fuck who'd snatched her.

“Shit,” I hissed and surveyed the area. My hand found the steel hidden under my jacket, a comforting weight as I retreated to my unmarked car, the leather seat cool from the rain.

“Show yourself already,” I grumbled and eyed the swing sets with irritation.

My hands trembled as I tried to steady my racing thoughts and push away the anxiety that bubbled up inside me. I caught a glimpse of something red in the corner of my eye and immediately flicked to the mysterious box that rested on the seat next to me.

“Fine, you win, you inanimate bastard,” I sighed and gave in to the itch in my fingers to rip it open. The lid came off with an almost sensual ease— which is how you knew it'd been way too long since the last time I'd gotten laid.

In a single agonizing moment, I was completely oblivious to the man and girl in front of me.

“FUCK.” The word exploded from my lips, punctuated by a surge of adrenaline and fear.

The paper crackled under my fingers like an autumn leaf destined to crumble. I pulled out the newspaper clipping, and even in the dim light of my car, I could see it—the headline that had haunted my childhood dreams: “Local Woman Vanishes Without a Trace.”

“Twenty years,” I whispered and traced the faded print with a finger that trembled. “And still no fucking closer to the truth.”

But it wasn’t just any old clipping. No, fate—or whatever dickhead was playing games—had a sense of irony twisted enough to make me respect them.

“Jesus Christ...” The words got caught halfway up my throat, tangled in a web of memories and curses.

I had to shove the box away; the weight of it was suddenly unbearable. But as my gaze snapped back to the present—a clusterfuck of laughing kids and doting parents—it landed on something far more pressing.

Him.

The man who’d managed to slither into my day like a bad omen. He was a shadow darting through a sea of minivans and SUVs. My eyes narrowed as he made his beeline for the public toilets.

“Shit.” I shoved the door open and the chill of the rain assaulted my skin immediately. “Not on my watch, fuck face.” I tasted the storm in the air—metallic and sharp.

I WATCHED him slip around the corner, out of view. Of course. Because why make my life easy?

The rain was like a never-ending attack as I ran each drop a hammer pounding against any determination I had left. I raced around the corner, my boots slipping on the slick pavement.

There he was—er, there he *wasn’t*.

Sprawled on the sidewalk like yesterday’s news, the man lay motionless, his chest barely moving. And just a few feet

away was the little girl, her sobs cutting through the drone of the downpour.

“Hey,” I called out, my voice rougher than I’d meant as I knelt beside him. “Can you hear me?” My fingers searched for a pulse and found its weak thrum beneath the cold skin. Alive. Barely.

I DIDN’T KNOW if I was pumped or pissed.

The little girl’s cries intensified and her small frame quivered like a leaf. “It’s okay, sweetheart,” I lied smoothly, my eyes never leaving the man’s pale face. “You’re safe now. My name’s Averill. I’m—” but before I could finish, a flicker of movement caught my eye.

“POLICE! STOP RIGHT THERE!” The words tore from my throat as reflex, but the hooded figure didn’t hesitate.

He darted away like a shadow and disappeared into the increasing downpour in a split second.

“Damn it!” I swore under my breath. Three years on the force before I went PI and still, some habits died hard. I glanced over my shoulder at the unconscious man as the little girl’s mom ran up to her, a crying mess.

“HEY. HEY!” I snapped my fingers in front of the distraught mom’s face and gestured toward the comatose asshole on the ground. “If he so much as farts in his sleep you kick him in the balls as hard as you can, got it? The police are on their way.”

Just then, my partner Kylo’s cruiser swerved into view like he’d been summoned, the lights flashing a silent alarm through the rain.

“KYLO!” I barked, as he jumped out of the car, his brown hair plastered to his forehead. “Call it in. We need an ambulance for this guy.” I shoved the toe of my boot into the side of the crumpled form on the sidewalk without pausing. My gaze locked on to the shrinking figure of the hooded man.

“Shit, Averill, what the hell happened here?” Kylo’s voice was laced with concern and his eyes darted between me and the unconscious man.



“Later,” I snapped, already backing away. “Just watch him. And the kid.”

“Where are you going?” Kylo called after me, but I was already in my unmarked car, the door slamming shut with a sound lost to the storm.

“CHASING A GODDAMN RABBIT DOWN ITS HOLE,” I muttered and the engine roared to life.

I threw the gear into drive, one hand gripping the wheel, the other wiping the streaks of water from my face. My fingers tingled with the cold and something else—anticipation, maybe, or just the raw edge of rage.

“Stay safe, Averill,” Kylo’s voice crackled over the radio, a failed attempt at restraint.

“SAFE’S FOR PUSSIES AND PRIESTS,” I shot back and the corner of my mouth lifted into a smirk. The tires squealed their protest as I floored the accelerator, chasing the mystery wrapped in a hoodie.

RAINDROPS PELTED the windshield like tiny fists, blurring the world into a wash of color and light.

“Come on, come on,” I urged, leaning forward like it would somehow make the car move faster, to shrink the distance between us.

My heart thrummed with a rhythm that felt like a countdown. I knew the stakes were high; they always were when you were playing with time. And whoever this guy was, he held a piece of my past—a piece I was hell-bent on retrieving.

“Bet you thought you were clever, leaving your cryptic little gifts,” I growled, my knuckles white on the steering wheel. “Let’s see how smart you feel now.”

Each block passed in a blur, each turn a calculated risk. I was a hunter, and the city was my jungle—cruel, unforgiving, and utterly exhilarating.

“FUCK,” I breathed out as I lost sight of him for a second, my instincts screaming at me to keep going. To not give up. “Time

might be on your side, buddy, but karma's on mine. And she's a bitch with a long memory."

The narrow alleyway loomed ahead, a jagged tear in the fabric of the city too tight for the car. I slammed on the brakes, the screech of tires barely audible over my racing pulse. "You've got to be shitting me," I grumbled and killed the engine as I flung myself out into the downpour. My boots hit the wet pavement with a satisfying smack as I bolted after him.

"Got a good look at your hoodie, asshole" I screamed toward the figure, the bitter taste of adrenaline sweetened by a hint of dark humor. "You better hope I don't catch you, or it'll be more than just your fashion sense getting critiqued."

But deep down, something gnawed at me, a suspicion that whoever this mystery runner was, they were tied to the same twisted threads that bound me to this godforsaken shithole of a city.

"Running's only gonna make it worse!" I yelled, but the roar of rain swallowed my words. It didn't matter. I wasn't just chasing him; I was chasing answers, chasing ghosts.

AND I'D BE DAMNED if I didn't catch them both.

THE SLICK COBBLESTONES were treacherous underfoot, but I navigated them with the grace of a cat—a really pissed-off cat.

My lungs burned, my muscles screamed, but it was the adrenaline that sang sweetest in my veins. There he was, barely a few strides ahead, the hem of his hoodie taunting me. Close enough to touch, if I could just—

"Gotcha you son of a bitch!" My fingers closed around the fabric and with all the force I could muster I yanked him back.

He twisted and tried to pull free, but I held on, the fabric of his hoodie bundled in my fist like a lifeline.

AND THERE HE WAS, standing in front of me, panting and drenched in the relentless rain. His eyes were like two pools of liquid obsidian, glinting with both defiance and fear. His hair, dark as the night itself, clung to his face. His sharp jawline was dusted with just the right amount of stubble and gave him

an air of rugged charm. It was the first time in my life that I'd ever encountered a man so gorgeous that it was actually annoying.

BECAUSE WHO GAVE you permission to be built like that?

Also, do you have a brother?

“WHO SENT YOU? What do you want from me?” The questions poured out, every word laced with years of frustration and the bitter tang of betrayal. I was done playing games. It was time to confront the ghosts of my past head-on, and this stranger was the key.

As my grip tightened on the sleeve of his hoodie, something strange happened—a jolt ran through me, a sense of recognition so deep it rooted me to the spot. I was ready to rain hellfire down on this guy, but now? My fury faltered, replaced by an odd, nagging sensation at the back of my skull.

“Who- who the hell are you?” I demanded, the edge in my voice now dulled by uncertainty. There was no fear in the set of his shoulders, just a silent challenge that pricked at my curiosity.

He didn't answer, just faced me with a stare that felt too familiar. And damn it, I couldn't shake the feeling that I knew him—or should know him. The impulse to cuff him to the nearest lamppost and demand answers warred with the new, inexplicable urge not to hurt him.

“Fine, be the strong, silent type,” I rolled my eyes. It was like trying to get blood from a stone. With a grunt, I yanked at the hoodie again, more out of frustration than any real plan. But this time the fabric gave way, and the sleeve ripped clean off, revealing the stranger's arm.

“Shit.” The curse slipped out as I took in the tattoos that wound around his forearm—dark, intricate patterns that echoed the ink etched into my own skin. My heart kicked up a notch, pounding against my ribs like it was trying to escape.

*What the hell is going on?*

“Nice tats,” I said but my usual bite was missing. “You get those done at ‘Time Travelers Ink’ or something?”

I caught the smallest flicker of surprise in his eyes before he composed himself. He wasn't talking, but his body language spoke volumes. And those tattoos... they weren't just similar to mine; they were almost identical. Symbols of death and rebirth, inked reminders of lives lived and lost.

"Who are you?" I repeated, softer this time. A part of me didn't want the answer—I'd been down enough rabbit holes to last a lifetime—but the PI in me couldn't let it go.

"Does it matter?" His voice rumbled through the space between us, setting off sparks.

"Like hell it does." I shot back. "You're involved in this screwy mystery box shit, aren't you?"

He just watched me with those unnervingly steady eyes, and I had the sudden, maddening thought that he might just be enjoying this.

"Talk, dammit!" I snapped, my patience fraying. But even as I glared at him, ready to pounce, I could feel the heat of his gaze, the pull of some invisible thread woven between us. It made my face feel hot and angry.

*FUCK.*

"ARE you going to arrest me, Officer Winslow?" he taunted, the corner of his mouth quivering like he knew exactly what was running through my head.

"Considering it," I groaned. I needed answers, not another smartass comment. I had enough of those to choke a horse myself.

"Maybe you should," he challenged, stepping closer, closing the gap until I could feel the warmth that radiated from his body.

"Back off," I warned, but there was no real force behind it. My courage was cracking, chipped away by the mystery that stood in front of me.

AND HIS STUPID HANDSOME FACE.

"OR WHAT?" There was a spark in his eye, a dare that made my blood sing.

“Or I’ll—” I started, but the words died on my lips. Because right then, the truth of it hit me: I didn’t want to use force. Not with him. And I hated myself for it.

The rain-soaked alleyway felt like a swamp, the kind that drags you down when you’re already on your knees. I squinted through the downpour at the man’s tattoos—sinuous, dark lines weaving around his muscular arms.

“Those tattoos,” I growled, asking again, “where’d you get them?”

“Same place as you, I’d wager,” His voice was calm, but his eyes betrayed a flicker of recognition.

“Time traveler,” I muttered under my breath. It was the only explanation for the eerie sense of déjà vu, the shared marks of our impossible journeys. “You left the box, didn’t you? The article about my mom.”

He didn’t respond, just looked at me with those knowing eyes. I took a step closer, feeling the grit and grime of the city beneath my boots, the prickling tension in the air between us.

“Answer me!” My demand was met with silence, the kind that screamed louder than any words ever could.

“Maybe,” he finally said and shrugged nonchalantly. He turned to go, and I lunged for him, desperate for something tangible to hold onto.

“Stop!” But as my fingers grazed the fabric of his hoodie, my foot caught on an uneven cobblestone. I stumbled, cursing the skies and the filthy streets, as he slipped away into the shadows.

“Son of a bitch!” I yelled after him and scrambled back to my feet. The chase had turned into a wild dance, one where I was always a step behind, grasping at ghosts.

“Next time, I’ll be ready for you,” I swore to the empty alley, shaking with frustration and the cold bite of the rain. The mystery package, the cryptic encounter—it all pointed to him. And I needed answers, needed justice for a past that wouldn’t let me go. The words tasted bitter on my tongue. Whoever he was, wherever he came from, he was the key I’d been

searching for, and I wasn't about to let him vanish without a trace—not again.

THE RAIN HADN'T LET UP. The persistent downpour soaked through my clothes as I stormed back to the park. The alley spit me out like a bad taste, and there was Kylo, leaning against his squad car, his posture tense, eyes narrowed under the brim of his soaked-through cap.

“Where the hell did you go?” he demanded, voice rough with concern and something else—suspicion.

“Chasing ghosts,” I snapped and brushed past him, feeling the weight of his gaze on my back. “Did you call for backup?”

“Of course, I did,” he followed me. “The ambulance is on the way to the hospital and the little girl is scared to death, but she'll live. But Averill, this isn't the first time you've been suspiciously in the thick of it. How do you always manage to be in the right place at the right time?”

“Maybe I'm psychic,” I smirked, avoiding his probing stare. My boots squelched on the soggy grass as I moved towards the cruiser.

“Or maybe you're hiding something,” he shot back, a hint of accusation threading through his words.

“Only my undying love for paperwork,” I opened the door and sunk into the driver's seat, the leather sticking to my wet clothes. Kylo slid in beside me, his scent—a mix of aftershave and rain—filled the small space, but I was already lost in thought, my mind replaying the image of the man's tattoos, so damn similar to mine.

“Look, Averill,” Kylo started, his voice low, “I don't know what kind of shit you've gotten yourself into, but we're partners. You can trust me.”

“Trust gets people killed,” I peered out into the rain, the droplets distorting the gray world outside.

“Maybe,” Kylo agreed, “but it also saves lives.”

“Save the hero talk, Quinn.”

“Jesus, Averill, you’ve been chewing that lip like it owes you money,” Kylo broke through my thoughts with his usual lack of tact. “I can practically see the gears smoking from here.”

“Occupational hazard,” I shot back, rolling my eyes.

“Right, and the Pope’s an atheist,” he groaned, but there was an edge of concern beneath his facetiousness.

My fingers absently traced the tattoos on my arm, each one a silent testament to a life once lived, a death once died. They were a timeline of pain etched into skin—a permanent reminder that trust didn’t just get people killed; it could get you erased.

## CHAPTER

# THREE

The leather steering wheel was slick under my palms and raindrops pummeled the roof of my beat-up car like an omen. I should've known better than to seek sanctuary in the lion's den, but there I was, driving through a fucking monsoon towards her—auntie dearest.

*BECAUSE PLAYING detective in your own family drama is a great idea, Averill.*

MY GRIP TIGHTENED on the wheel, every mile closer to that penthouse prickling my skin with the ghosts of old wounds.

“Turn around” whispered the rebellious part of me, but it was muffled by a louder voice that demanded answers. The city blurred past, a smear of grays and wet asphalt, as I fought the urge to slam on the brakes.

“Come on, Averill,” I caught my reflection in the rearview mirror. “You’ve faced off with lowlifes and scumbags—what’s one more battle with the queen of snide remarks?” Still, the thought of stepping into that penthouse made my tattoos itch, the ink like battle scars over my heart.

I pulled up outside the towering building. The doorman eyed my car like it was a cockroach he wanted to squash, but I flipped him a smile sharp enough to cut glass.

“Here for Madam High-and-Mighty,” I announced, not bothering to mask the disdain in my voice. He simply nodded, his judgment radiating off him like cheap cologne.



“Of course, Ms. Winslow,” he replied, with the warmth of a shark that smelled blood.

The elevator ride to the penthouse was a silent ascent into hell. My combat boots thudded against the plush carpet as I stepped into the realm of marble and crystal, the air thick with the scent of wealth and hypocrisy.

“Ah, Averill, you’ve finally decided to grace us with your presence.” Aunt Clarissa’s voice was like a record scratch in the symphony of luxury. She stood in the doorway, her designer clothes clinging to her slender frame. Her gaze raked over me like I was a stain on her perfect carpet of a life.

“Cut the crap, Clarissa,” I shot back and my pulse pounded in my ears. “I’m here for answers, not your twisted version of fucking family bonding.”

“Is that any way to talk to the only family you have left?” she tsked and a cruel smirk pulled at her freshly injected lips.

“Family?” The word tasted like ash in my mouth. “Don’t play that card. You’ve never been family, not really.”

“Always so dramatic,” she sighed and stepped aside to let me in. “Come, let’s get this over with.”

I STEPPED INTO THE LIONESS’ lair, each footstep reminding me why I had left, why this world was never mine to begin with. But I’d come too far to turn back. It was time to face the music, even if it was composed by the devil herself.

The penthouse door swung open fully, and there they were—my cousins, lounging like a cluster of mannequins in designer clothes on the Italian leather sofa. They looked up, their eyes as cold and calculating as Aunt Clarissa’s diamond collection.

“Look who crawled out of her cave,” Tristan smirked so wide it could’ve swallowed his ego. He was the oldest, a carbon copy of the kind of Wall Street sharks that made the recession look like a pool party.

“Is that a new tattoo, Averill? Or just another cry for attention?” Isla twirled her pearl necklace with manicured fingers that had never known a day of work.

“Both,” I let my jacket sleeve ride up to reveal the inked symbols of my tormented past. This was their game – goad and judge – but I wasn’t playing today.

A FLICKER OF MEMORY, as sharp as the edge of a knife, sliced through me. I was fifteen again, locked in my room at this very penthouse, the air heavy with the scent of my own misery. The darkness outside mirrored the one inside me, while those same voices sneered through the keyhole, “No wonder your mom...”

“EARTH TO AVERILL,” Tristan’s voice yanked me back to the present. “Enjoying your little trip down memory lane?”

“Blissfully,” I deadpanned and clenched my fists to keep the tremors of an old anger at bay. These polished vultures had pecked at the carcass of my self-esteem for years, leaving scars that no tattoo could cover.

“Enough chit-chat,” Aunt Clarissa interjected briskly, her gaze flicking between us like she was watching a tennis match she’d rigged. “We have things to discuss.”

“Indeed,” I agreed, feeling the weight of the newspaper clipping burning a hole through my pocket. They knew something about my mother’s death, I could feel it in the tension that strung the room tighter than piano wire.

“Let’s move to the dining room,” Aunt Clarissa suggested, her heels clicking against the marble floor like a metronome set to the rhythm of my rising pulse.

I followed, passing by framed photos of a family I barely recognized. Smiles as thin as the veneer of civility that coated this place. The memory of teenaged tears spilled on these same floors, the echo of my sobs drowned out by laughter from the other side of gilded walls.

“Your father wouldn’t approve of those tattoos,” Isla muttered as we walked, her voice dripping with disdain.

“Good thing he’s not here, then,” I kept my voice steady despite the storm brewing inside me. “He’s probably too busy making new friends in prison.”

“Always the charmer,” Tristan remarked, earning him a scathing look.

AT THE DINING TABLE, I took a seat, feeling like an imposter in a world that had rejected me long ago. I was the crack in their perfect crystal, the smudge on their polished silver.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” I said, leaning forward. “I want to know about my father.”

“Always so impatient,” Aunt Clarissa tsked and took her seat at the head of the table, the queen presiding over her twisted court.

“Patience was never my virtue,” I replied, my heart hammering against my ribs. “Answers, Clarissa. Now.”

“Always so demanding, too,” Tristan earned himself another lethal glare. He simply raised his glass in a mock toast and relished in the turmoil he’d incited.

“Easy, tiger,” Isla cooed, her lips curled in amusement. “You’ll scare the help.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” I thought back to the days when *I* was the help in this house of horrors, scrubbing floors to earn my keep, each bucket of soapy water a sea of unshed tears.

“Is this why you really came here, Averill? To dredge up the past?” Aunt Clarissa’s voice was smooth as silk and twice as suffocating.

“Maybe,” I conceded, my jaw setting hard. “Or maybe I’m tired of burying it.”

“Be careful what you dig for,” Tristan warned. “You might not like what you find.”

MY AUNT, a portrait of icy disdain in her Chanel suit, sipped her tea with the nonchalance of someone discussing the weather, not family secrets.

“Tell me where he is, Clarissa,” I said, my voice steady despite the chaos that brewed inside me. “I need to see him.”

“You and your *needs*,” she growled and set down her cup with a clink. “Always so dramatic. Just like your mother.”

Her eyes flicked to my arms, where inked memories snaked their way across my skin—a tapestry of survival. “And those tattoos... Goodness, you look more ready for incarceration yourself than a family gathering. A walking cliché of rebellion.”

“Nice,” I shot back, feeling the tug-of-war between hurt and anger. “But it’s not like I had much of a family to gather with, did I?”

“Family,” she scoffed and leaned back against her chair, upholstered in some absurdly expensive fabric I couldn’t name. “That word lost its meaning here long ago.”

“Maybe for you,” I countered, my determination a hard knot in my throat. “But I’m not letting go that easily. Now where is he, Clarissa? I have a right to know.”

“Rights,” she mused like she was contemplating the concept for the first time. “You think you’re entitled to so much, Averill. Yet what have you contributed? Besides trouble and now, it seems, demands.”

“Contributed?” The irony tasted bitter on my tongue. “How quickly we forget the past. Or does scrubbing your floors and enduring your venom not count?”

“Ah, yes, playing the victim. How quaint,” she remarked dryly. “Your father is where he belongs, and that’s all you need to know.”

“Belongs?” The word was a slap. “He’s still my father, regardless of what he’s done or what you think of him.”

“Think of him?” Her voice raised an octave, laced with something that almost resembled emotion. “He tore this family apart. And you, a constant reminder of that destruction.”

“Then help me understand!” I pleaded and my voice cracked with desperation. “Help me put it back together! Tell me where he is!”

“Understand?” Her laugh was cold and sharp. “What is there to understand? He killed your mother, and your delusional quest won’t change that.”

“Delusional?” I was on my feet now, every muscle coiled tight. “No, Clarissa. It’s you who refuses to see beyond the walls of this fucking cage. But I won’t be caged. Not by you, and not by the past.”

“Sit down, Averill,” she ordered, her tone leaving no room for argument. “You’re making a scene.”

“Scene?” My voice dripped with sarcasm. “Honey, I haven’t even started.”

“Enough,” she hissed and stood to match my height, but she could never measure up where it counted. “You want to find him so badly? Do it without my help. You’re good at being alone, aren’t you?”

“BETTER ALONE THAN WITH SNAKES,” I growled. “One day, Auntie dearest, you’ll choke on your own venom.”

“YOUR OBSESSION with finding him is unhealthy,” she tutted, examining her nails as if this whole conversation was beneath her. “Move on with your life, Averill.”

“Unhealthy?” I laughed, the sound bitter in my ears. “What would you know about health? You poison everything you touch.”

Her gaze snapped to mine, lethal and as quick as a cobra strike. “Be very careful, dear.”

“Or what? You’ll cut me off from the family fortune?” I snapped. “Oh wait, you’ve already done that.”

“Enough.” She signaled the end of our discussion. “I won’t indulge this any longer.”

“Indulge?” My head reeled, disbelief mingling with anger. “All I’m asking for is—”

“Nothing I’m willing to give,” she interrupted sharply. “Get out and don’t come back until you can behave like a civilized person.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got no intentions of darkening your doorstep ever again.” With that, I turned on my heel, each step away from her a step closer to the truth. I didn’t need her. I had myself, and that was enough.

“GOOD RIDDANCE,” she spat behind me, but I was already gone, out into the storm that mirrored my own fury, my anger hardened like steel in the forge of betrayal.

The butler offered an awkward, sympathetic smile, one that I returned with a grimace. He knew the score—just another spectator in the Winslow circus. The revolving door released me into the downpour and fat droplets of rain pelted against my face like Clarissa’s thinly veiled insults.

“Watch me, Clarissa,” I whispered to the howling wind. “Watch me find him without you.”

CHAPTER

FOUR

“Damn it,” I paced the cramped confines of my apartment like a caged animal. The stench of yesterday’s Chinese takeout mingled with the dampness that seeped in through the poorly insulated windows, a reminder that life just loved to rub salt in old wounds. The only way forward was through the man who’d left my life in shackles—my dear old dad, currently playing house in the clink.

I hadn’t seen him since I was seven, that day emblazoned in my brain like a shitty tattoo. Now, twenty-odd years later, the thought of facing him churned my stomach. But if anyone had the answers I needed, it was him.

“Shit,” My hand hovered over the closet door. With a reluctant tug, I pulled out an ancient box, a Pandora’s container of dusty memories and musty regrets. My hands trembled as I opened it, revealing tokens of a childhood lost: a battered teddy bear, a broken keychain, and photos that had never graced the walls of Aunt Clarissa’s House of Horrors.

“Ah, family,” I thumbed through photographs with a smirk. “Nothing says love like a bit of psychological warfare before bedtime.” The images whisked me back to those joyous days under my aunt’s care, where affection was as scarce as a good hair day in this godforsaken city.



THE WEEK STRETCHED out like a bad joke, each punchline worse than the last. There I was, slouched on my dingy couch, digging through every database known to man—or at least to a

PI with too much time on her hands. If only my libido had been half as active as my obsession with this whole shit show, maybe I wouldn't have been so pent up.

WHO KNEW childhood trauma could be such a cockblock?

I RUFFLED through papers strewn across the coffee table. A week of this detective work between dull shifts at the precinct, and the most action I'd gotten was a paper cut. Sexy.

*Jesus, Averill, you need a drink. Or a date. Or at least a damn hobby.*

My aunt had done a bang-up job of hiding the whereabouts of Daddy's new digs, but she underestimated my stubborn streak. And my ability to cyber-stalk like a pro.

"Gotcha," I finally hissed and the screen's glow illuminated the triumph on my face. Smudge, my involuntary roommate, sniffed disapprovingly from his corner. "Don't judge me. You're the one who can't go two days without spraying the toaster."

With the prison info in my hot little hands, a cold sweat broke out across my forehead. Now came the hard part: sitting across from the man whose blood ran through my veins but felt more like a stranger's. It was time to see if the apple really did fall far from the tree—or if it just rotted nearby.



"KYLO, if you don't stop blowing up my phone like a paranoid ex, I'm gonna start charging you for the emotional labor," I muttered under my breath and swiped away another text as I cruised through the rain-slicked streets of the city.

Seriously, Ave, are you dodging me? What's got you so tied up lately? ☐

Nothing that a good old-fashioned bar brawl can't fix 😊

THE DASHBOARD LIGHTS flickered in sync with my mounting irritation.



Or maybe just a beer... at Sullivan's? Our spot? ☐

Rain check, partner. I'm swamped. 😴

Right, because your couch surfing is super important.

Hey, it's a pretty competitive sport. ☐

I PICTURED HIM, jaw set, mind racing like a detective on the scent—which, ironically, probably wasn't far from the truth. I found myself reaching for another excuse—one that didn't reek of desperation and dead ends.

I felt the weight of his unspoken questions. Kylo knew me well enough to sense when I was neck-deep in trouble. And right now, I was practically drowning.

Look, I'll explain everything over a dozen kamikazes, okay? Scout's honor.☐

I TYPED THE LIE SMOOTHLY, knowing full well my next stop wasn't a barstool but a prison chair.

Scouts don't drink kamikazes, Averill.

Mine did.

I COUNTERED BEFORE SIGNING OFF. The car hummed beneath me, lulling me into a false sense of solitude.

*Let's just hope this little reunion is worth the price of admission.* I braced myself for the confrontation ahead.



THE CHILL of the sterile visiting room seeped through my jacket and I sat rigid on the hard plastic chair, my hands clasped tight enough to blanch my knuckles. It had been years—years since I'd been that scrawny kid with a backpack too

big for her body and eyes too wide for her face. But there, in the echo of institutionalized blues and grays, I was seven all over again. The girl who thought her daddy was invincible until he was carted away in cuffs.

“Jesus,” I muttered under my breath, “I need a shot of something illegal.”

“Miss Winslow?” A guard’s voice cut through the dread that pooled in my stomach.

I lifted my head just in time to see him usher in the ghost from my past. The man was older, his hair salt-and-pepper where it used to be jet black, lines etched deep into his weathered skin like a road map of regret. He looked smaller than I’d remembered, or maybe I’d just built him up to be a giant in my mind.

“Hi, Dad,” I said, voice steady as a tightrope walker in a tornado.

His eyes—*my eyes*—widened at the sound of my voice, and something broke behind that hardened exterior.

Shit, were those tears? I could handle anger, disappointment, even indifference, but not tears.

“Averill...” His voice cracked, and I swore the walls themselves leaned in to listen. “You’re... you’ve grown so beautiful.”

“Comes with the territory of not being seven anymore,” I shot back, more venom in the words than I intended. “You haven’t seen the last twenty years of awkward phases, trust me.”

He reached out, hesitated, then settled his hand back onto the table. A gesture aborted, a connection unmade. Thankfully.

“God, I—I never thought I’d see you again. I’m sorry, Averill. For everything.”

“Save it,” I countered quickly, uncomfortable with the weight of his gaze. “We both know you’re not in here for stealing candy bars.”

He wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, the movement rough, like he was scrubbing away the sentiment as much as the moisture. “But, I always hoped you’d live a life beyond my mistakes.”

“Living the dream, one day at a time,” My sarcasm was a comfortable shield against the raw emotion that threatened to surface. “Your little girl became a PI. How’s that for irony?”

“Always knew you’d do something great. You have your mother’s spirit,” he said softly.

“Don’t drag her into this,” I snapped and my gaze darted around the room like I could find an escape hatch somewhere between the cinder block walls.

“Sorry,” he murmured and looked down at his shackled hands. “I just... I missed you.”

“Join the club,” I spit, but the bitterness was starting to taste old even to me. “Membership: me.”

A silence stretched between us, filled only by the hum of the lights and the distant clink of chains. My throat felt tight, every instinct screaming at me to bolt, but my ass remained glued to the seat. Maybe I was hoping for answers, maybe I was just a whore for punishment.

Either way, I was there, and there was no turning back.

I leaned back in the rigid plastic chair, arms crossed, like I could physically barricade myself from the tidal waves of regret that emanated from the man across from me. The fluorescent lights of the visitation room cast a harsh glow on his already sunken skin. God, he looked like hell.

“Look, Averill, I’m sorry,” he said, his voice a gravelly whisper that seemed to disintegrate before it reached my ears. “For everything.”

“Sorry doesn’t quite cut it, does it?” My voice was laced with enough sarcasm to peel paint off the walls. “I mean, ‘Oops, I misplaced your favorite toy’ is one thing. ‘Oops, I may have contributed to the lifelong trauma of my only child’? Not really in the same ballpark.” My fingers tapped an

impatient rhythm on my thigh – a morse code for ‘get me the hell out of here.’

He flinched, but nodded, accepting the barb. “You’re right. I can’t change the past.”

“Damn straight you can’t,” I rolled my eyes. The echoes of slamming metal doors filled the silence that followed.

I watched him shift uncomfortably in his seat, the chains around his wrists clinking softly. Then his gaze landed on my tattooed arms and lingered. He squinted, leaning forward slightly, and my muscles tensed.

“Those markings on your arm...” His voice trailed off, hoarse with disuse and emotion.

“Observant, aren’t we?” I replied, pulling down the sleeve of my leather jacket defensively. “It’s a long story, and I’m fresh out of story time patience today.”

“Does it have something to do with...” He swallowed hard, and for a moment I saw a glimpse of fear in those weary eyes. “With time travel?”

“Whoa, hold your horses, Nostradamus.” I snorted, even though a chill skittered down my spine. “What, did you get hit by some kind of psychedelic fairy dust in here?”

His expression turned solemn, almost haunted. “Averill, if time travel is involved in your life...you need to be careful.”

“Thanks for the tip, Dad. I’ll add it to the list of fatherly advice right between ‘don’t get caught’ and ‘always have an alibi,’” I said, but my heart hammered against my ribs. How the hell did he know about my gift? What secrets were tangled up in the ink etched into my skin, and how did they lead back to the shattered man in front of me?

“Please, Averill,” he continued, voice barely above a whisper now. “Be cautious.”

“Always am,” I muttered. But his words had planted a seed of doubt, watered by the rain that seemed to whisper secrets against the glass. The atmosphere in the visitation area was as thick as the tension coiling in my gut.

“Time’s up, Winslow,” a gruff voice cut through the clamor, and I jolted, nearly toppling the flimsy chair backwards. The guard’s meaty hand clamped down on my shoulder.

“Chill, Hercules,” I snapped and brushed off his grip with a glare that could curdle milk. “I’ve got legs. I can use ‘em.”

My father’s worn face crumpled with something that looked suspiciously like remorse, but I wasn’t buying what he was selling. Not today, not ever. “Averill, I—” he started, but I held up a hand.

“Save it, Pops. This soap opera’s been canceled due to lack of interest.” I pushed back from the table, everything in me screamed to bolt, to escape the weight of his gaze and the prison that suddenly felt too small for all the secrets between us.

“Miss Winslow, now,” another guard barked, less patient than his buddy. Apparently, my reputation preceded me.

“God, you’d think I was plotting a breakout with all this manhandling,” I joked but the humor fell flat, lost in the sterile scent of bleach and despair that permeated the room.

“Let’s go,” growled the first guard, his fingers digging into my arm with unnecessary force. I shot him a poisonous look. “Watch the merchandise, pal. Tattoos like these don’t come cheap.”

Before they could fully usher me through the doorway my father called out, his voice steeped in apprehension. The two words he uttered?

“Oswin Yorke.”

I froze, the guards behind me erupting in rage, but I didn’t give a shit. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered in that moment except for the words that had fallen from his lips. The only words he’d ever said that felt like they meant something.

“What did you just say?” My head snapped back in his direction.

“Move it!” the second one chimed in, shoving me forward. My feet shuffled across the linoleum, but my mind raced miles ahead.

Oswin Yorke. That name was a key, I could feel it; a key to a lock I wasn't sure I wanted to open.

Their hands were remorseless on my back, propelling me towards the door, and I stumbled out into the corridor. The door slammed shut behind me with a finality that echoed in my chest. A surge of rebellion swelled within me, itching to lash out, to fight against the iron grip of the past that refused to let go.

“Thanks for the hospitality, boys,” Sarcasm dripped from each word like venom. “I'll be sure not to recommend this place on Yelp.”

They didn't laugh. No sense of humor, these prison guards. Probably sucked it out of them at the academy, along with any semblance of empathy. But that was fine by me; empathy was overrated.

As they marched me out, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was leaving something crucial behind, that the answers I needed were just beyond my grasp, locked away with the man who had given me life, then torn it apart.

“Next time, maybe try not to piss off the staff,” the first guard muttered but his tone suggested it was advice he knew I'd ignore.

“Where's the fun in that?” I joked, but my heart wasn't in it. The seed of doubt my father had planted was sprouting, its roots digging into the cracks of my carefully constructed walls.

THE RAIN HADN'T LET up when I exited the building, if that's what you could call it. It was more like being shoved out on my ass like yesterday's trash but the details didn't matter.

What mattered is that I finally had something. Something that felt like it would lead me to the answers my soul so desperately sought.

OSWIN YORKE. The name felt familiar in my head. It danced on the edges of my memory, teasing me with fragments of forgotten images and half-formed thoughts.

As I sprinted towards my car, a sudden blur of motion caught my eye. I whipped my head around to see Kylo's patrol car hurtling towards me. His tires screamed against the slick pavement as he skidded to a halt in front of me. The window rolled down, and his voice cut through the downpour.

"Get in!" Kylo's words rang out over the deafening sound of rain pelting against metal.

"Why? What's going on?" I shouted back, my voice barely audible over the roaring storm. I spotted Smudge, lazily curled up in a ball of black and white fur lounging in the back seat. "And was skunk-napping really necessary? Were you at my fucking apartment?"

"No time to explain! Just get in!" Kylo's eyes darted around, scanning the surroundings like he was expecting something to jump out from the shadows.

Apprehension gripped me like icy fingers, but with no other options, I lunged into the passenger seat. The car door slammed shut behind me, and before I could even buckle up, Kylo hit the gas pedal, propelling us forward with a surge of power that pressed me against the seat.

Bullets suddenly whizzed past us, tearing through the rain-soaked air. The sound of shattering glass filled the car as the windshield shattered under the shower. Instinctively, I ducked, feeling a spray of glass shards graze my cheek.

"What the hell is happening? Who are they?"

Kylo didn't answer, his focus fixated on evading our assailants. The rain-drenched streets blurred together as we swerved through the city, desperately trying to outrun the danger that lurked behind us.

As we whipped around another turn, Kylo's hands were all over the dashboard, flicking switches and mashing buttons like a mad scientist. Suddenly, the car sprang to life. For the first time since I'd met him, I couldn't keep myself from wishing it

was my body that his hands were gliding so effortlessly across instead.

*Shit. How desperate am I fucking getting? Is this what rock bottom feels like?*

It dawned on me that Kylo might be more than just a reckless driver and pretty face. Who knew he had secret talents?

What's next? Juggling chainsaws while tap dancing?

"They're after you," Kylo finally spoke, his voice laced with urgency. "Someone wants you silenced."

My mind raced, connecting the dots in a flurry of thoughts. The prison guards' lack of laughter at my so obviously funny jokes, my father's cryptic words, and now this relentless pursuit—it was all connected, but how?

"Where are you taking me?" I gripped 'oh shit' handle above the door like it would somehow save me from the bullets that still whizzed past.

"Somewhere safe." Kylo grumbled. "So you can tell me what the hell is going on."

He whipped the steering wheel to the left and the entire car jarred, nearly taking out an elderly woman selling fruit on the corner.

"If we make it there alive."



## CHAPTER

# FIVE

Rain rushed down the windshield like it was trying to wash us all the way to hell- or maybe the Hudson, whichever came first. Kylo's knuckles were white on the steering wheel, the muscles of his arms shifting with each jerky turn. I swore my heart was going to tear through my chest as another bullet pinged off the car's frame. "Could you possibly drive any faster, or should I start working on my last will and testament now?" My words were barely audible over the melody of rain and gunfire.

"Your sarcasm is not helping, Averill," Kylo shot back, his voice steady despite the chaos. His focus never wavered, eyes scanning the road ahead. He swerved, tires screeching like a banshee announcing our impending doom.

"Sorry, fucked up humor is my favorite defense mechanism. You'd think after four years you'd be used to it." The words tumbled out, but my pulse hammered against my temples—a sweet symphony of dread and adrenaline.

"Used to it? I thrive on it," He tossed me a grin. That smile of his could've lit up the gloomiest corners of New York, but right now, it was just a reminder that we were neck-deep in shit creek without a paddle.

As Kylo maneuvered the car through the labyrinth of traffic, I couldn't help but admire the bastard. He drove like he was born to do it—like some kind of escape artist, always one step ahead of the chains. And damn if that skill didn't add fuel to the fire that was my growing, inconvenient attraction to him.

“Watch out!” My shout was ripped away by the wind as he swerved again, avoiding a yellow cab by inches. “Fuck me, that was close.”

“Let’s save the flirting for when we’re not being shot at, okay?” Kylo’s lips quirked up momentarily.

“Right, because nothing turns a girl on like being shot at,” I rolled my eyes and prayed to any god that would listen that the blush in my cheeks wasn’t noticeable.

THEY SEEMED to be closing in, but Kylo was unshaken, threading the needle through New York’s congested arteries with the precision of a surgeon.

“Where did these guys come from anyway? It’s like we’ve got our own fan club,” I tried to keep the tremor out of my voice. Behind us, red and blue lights danced through the downpour, giving the whole night an eerie glow.

“Fan club, hit squad—same difference,” Kylo said grimly. “We need to shake them before we reach the safe-house.”

My gaze was glued to the rearview mirror, where the silhouettes of our pursuers loomed like vengeful ghosts.

“Almost there,” Kylo voice cut through my tangled thoughts. “Just hold on.”

He navigated through an impossibly tight space between two hulking delivery trucks and water splashed high against the windows. My grip on the seat tightened, but damn the man had some finesse.

“Does dodging near-death count as foreplay?” I joked, trying to ignore the heat creeping up my neck.

“Only with you, Winslow,” his voice was low as he weaved through the streets with a kind of intense focus that made my insides twist in all the right ways.

“Yeah, yeah. Just keep your eyes on the road, Quinn,” I warned, even though part of me kind of liked the idea of those eyes on me instead. But there was no time for that—not now.

Then, like a beacon, the neon sign of the motel safehouse buzzed into view. ‘Sleep Easy Motel’ it read, flickering

erratically. But there was nothing easy about this, and sleep felt like a distant dream.

As Kylo pulled into the parking lot, the smell of wet concrete and mildew greeted us—a cocktail of dampness that wormed its way into all my senses.

“Home sweet home,” I sang dryly, taking in the dilapidated building. We might have been out of the frying pan, but the fire was waiting, just beyond those flickering neon letters.

“Looks charming,” Kylo killed the engine. His voice held a note of relief, but his eyes were still sharp, scanning for more trouble.

“Charming’s one word for it,” I replied, stepping out into the rain that hadn’t let up since we’d started this insane dash across the city. The ground squelched beneath my boots, and I wrinkled my nose at the pervasive mustiness that clung to the air.

“Better than a bullet,” Kylo offered, locking the car with a beep that sounded absurdly normal in the midst of our chaos.

“Marginally.” My reply was automatic, my mind already darting to what came next. But as I glanced back at him, there was a moment—a fleeting, charged pause where the world seemed to shrink down to just the two of us.

“Thanks, by the way,” I said, softer now, a rare moment of sincerity slipping through my sarcasm. “For the whole not-dying thing.”

“Anytime,” he sighed and there was something in his gaze that made my breath catch. Desire? Maybe. But there was no room for that—not here, not now.

“Let’s get inside,” I broke the moment as I headed toward the dubious sanctuary of the Sleep Easy Motel. The sirens were still distant, but they weren’t gone. Neither was the tension, coiled tight within me, ready to spring at the slightest inconvenience.

“Lead the way,” he murmured, and I wondered if he felt it too—this electric current between us, dangerous and undeniable.



THE LOCK GAVE way with a gritty click, and the door creaked open like it was sharing secrets. I stepped into the dim room, my breath fogging in the damp air that smelled like mothballs and old cigarette smoke. For a moment, just one goddamn quiet moment, the pounding rain and the chaos of the city seemed to fall away.

I flipped on the light switch only for a single bulb to flicker lethargically overhead, casting erratic shadows across the room.

“Cozy,” Kylo deadpanned, shutting the door behind us with a solid thud. There was safety in that sound—a sealed barrier between us and whatever shitstorm brewed outside.

“Cozy is for kittens and knitting clubs, not motels that double as crime scenes.” My eyes scanned the room, taking in the worn-out couch with its floral pattern so faded it looked like it had been through a war. A war it lost, spectacularly.

Kylo dropped his duffel bag onto a table that wobbled precariously on three and a half legs. “It’s got character.”

“Character and probably tetanus.” I ran a finger along the peeling wallpaper and watched it curl further away from the wall. It’s the kind of detail you’d miss if you weren’t looking for all the ways the world was falling apart at the seams.

I caught sight of our reflections in a smudged mirror that hung crookedly on the wall. The flashing neon sign from the motel flickered through the window, painting our faces in hues of red and blue. It could’ve been mistaken for police lights—ironic.

Kylo’s body tensed and his arms crossed tightly over his chest, a dangerous glint in his eyes as he confronted me. “Why the hell are we being chased across the city for digging into your past?” His voice was low and menacing, sending shivers down my spine.

I snapped my head towards him, my own posture rigid with frustration. “Maybe you could tell me why you were so interested in my past.” I grumbled, feeling a sense of betrayal

creeping in. “I thought we were partners, Kylo. Partners are supposed to trust each other.”

“Trust? I didn’t even know you had a damn pet skunk until I broke into your apartment!” Kylo’s voice rose with anger as he gestured to the fuzzball curled up on the motel couch.

“Leave Smudge out of this.” I shot back, my tone sharp and defensive. “Let’s just say there are some dangerous people after me and leave it at that, okay?”

An awkward silence hung between us, and I tried not to let my gaze wander over Kylo’s tall, muscular frame as it usually did. But he could sense my unease, and finally growled out a response. “Fine. You take the first shift, I’ll watch the door.”

I knew how much Kylo hated being kept in the dark, but for once I needed to keep this secret from him. And I could see the hurt and frustration in his eyes as he made an exception for me. It hurt me to see our trust faltering, but I couldn’t risk involving him in this dangerous game.

The idea of sleep appealed more than I cared to admit. “Sure, play the gallant guardian. I won’t argue.”

“Didn’t think you would.” His gaze lingered for a moment too long, and damn it if my heart didn’t betray me with a stupid little flutter.

“Keep your eyes to yourself, hotshot.” I settled into the couch and propped my feet up on the coffee table with a clatter. “We need to stay sharp, not start a staring contest.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said, but we both knew it was a lie.

Hell, everything about this night was a lie. The danger, the adrenaline, the way my skin tingled under his gaze—it was all some twisted fantasy. But fantasies don’t stop bullets.

I sank deeper into the couch and let the sounds of the storm blend with the hum of silence that stretched between us. It was a dangerous thing, silence. Made you think. Made you feel things best left buried. Like how much I wanted to kiss him and forget—just for a heartbeat—that the world was hunting us down.

The neon sign flickered like a dying star and cast shadows over Kylo's face as he leaned against the doorframe. His shirt clung to him and rainwater traced paths down his well-built torso. I couldn't help but notice, despite the nagging voice in my head that mocked me for being so damn predictable.

"Like what you see?" Kylo caught my gaze with a smirk.

"Seen better," I shot back, but my pulse thumped wildly at the lie.

"Ouch," he feigned hurt and pressed a hand to his heart. "You wound me, Winslow."

"Please," I scoffed, rolling my eyes. "It'll take more than my tongue to do any real damage."

"Is that a challenge?" His eyes sparkled with mischief, and it was infuriating how much I enjoyed it.

"Consider it a warning," I crossed my arms, trying to regain some sliver of control. But the air was charged, thick with electricity.

I watched him move around the room, his muscles shifting under his damp clothes as he checked the locks on the windows and doors. Even in this rundown shithole, he took charge like he was securing a palace. It was oddly endearing, and I hated that I thought so.

"Are we expecting company?" I asked, trying to sound casual, but the tension in my voice gave me away.

"Can't be too careful," he replied, not turning to look at me. "Besides, I've got precious cargo."

"Referring to yourself in the third person now? Ego much?"

"Ha-ha," he said flatly. "You know what I mean."

"Sure, sure," I muttered, hating how my heart fluttered at the implication.

We settled into an uneasy quiet, the kind that wrapped around you like a second skin. I found myself watching him again, the way the dim light accentuated the angles of his jaw,

the depth of his eyes. It was disarming, the vulnerability I saw there—mirroring my own.

“Remember that time you accidentally cuffed yourself to the suspect?” I blurted out, desperate to break the silence with something, anything.

“Accidentally? You tripped me!” He turned, finally facing me, but the indignation in his tone was softened by the laughter in his eyes.

“Details, details,” I said with a dismissive wave of my hand. “Point is, we made a hell of a team back then.”

“Still do,” he said quietly, and something in those two words sent a shiver down my spine.

“You’re not wrong,” I admitted, and it felt like giving away a piece of myself. “Even if you are a pain in my ass ninety percent of the time.”

“Only ninety? I must be slipping,” he teased, closing the distance between us with a few purposeful strides.

“Give it time. You’ll hit a hundred before sunrise,” My breath hitched as I looked up into his eyes, so close now that I could count the flecks of gold around his pupils.

“Sounds like a plan,” he whispered, his breath warm against my skin.

And then, against all reason, all self-preservation, I wanted nothing more than to close that infinitesimal gap, to taste the rain on his lips and forget the world that wanted us dead or alive—preferably the former.

But I didn’t. Because fantasies are for people who don’t live our life, who don’t have targets painted on their backs. Instead, I stepped back, putting space between us once more.

“Get some sleep, Quinn,” I said, my voice steady despite the chaos inside me.

“Goodnight, Averill,” That simple farewell felt too intimate, too loaded with unspoken promises.

I watched him settle into a chair by the window, forever the vigilant guardian, and wondered if maybe, just maybe, I'd find safety in dreams where bullets were just fireflies, and the only thing that chased me was the morning sun.



## CHAPTER

# SIX

The scent of sizzling bacon cut through the stale air of the motel room, a sensory contradiction if there ever was one. It was like a whiff of hope in a place where dreams came to die. Freshly brewed coffee followed, a rich, dark aroma that promised a temporary relief from my own mental fog. I never pegged Kylo for a breakfast guy—hell, I barely pegged him for human some days—but there he was, doing his best impression of domestic bliss in this shithole.

“Ugh,” I groaned, stretching limbs that felt like they’d been molded to the shape of the lumpy mattress overnight. The bed had all the comfort of a slab of concrete, with springs that poked and prodded like an over excited acupuncturist. I rolled my shoulders and tried to shake off the stiffness. I considered the irony there I was, Averill Winslow, hunter of truths and collector of scars, undone by a damn budget motel bed.

“Morning, sunshine,” I called out sarcastically, my voice raspy from sleep—or from screaming into the void in my nightmares; it was always a coin toss. “Did you slaughter a pig out here or something?”

“Good morning to you too,” Kylo shot back, unamused or maybe just too focused on not burning our only source of food. “And no, I didn’t slaughter anything. Yet.”

“Promises, promises,” I mumbled under my breath as I shuffled toward the kitchenette, toes curling against the cold floor. My eyes were still half-glued shut, but I could make out the outline of Kylo, standing there like a goddamn

Abercrombie model turned housewife. Lucky for him, I wasn't in the mood to play house—or was I?

“Keep that up, and I might start thinking you care,” I teased and leaned against the doorframe. It wasn't entirely untrue. The man had seen me at my worst, but there he was, cooking breakfast like we weren't knee-deep in the kind of shit that would make lesser men run for the hills.

“Someone's gotta keep you alive,” he flipped the bacon with a finesse I wouldn't have expected from his large, calloused hands. Hands that...

*Focus, Averill.* I shook myself internally and pushed away thoughts that had no business mingling with the smell of bacon. There was a time traveler on the loose, and my mother's death still hung over me like a storm cloud ready to burst. That was my reality, not whatever this cozy little scene pretended to be.

“Alive and kicking,” I affirmed and snagged a strip of bacon from the plate with a quick, practiced move. “Literally, if necessary.”

“Wouldn't expect anything less,” Kylo said with a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He knew me well enough by now to know that I'd fight tooth and nail for answers—and for a piece of perfectly cooked bacon.

A giggle managed to slip from my lips as I took a bite and let the salty, crispy perfection momentarily distract me from the looming specters of betrayal and revenge. But only for a moment. After all, in this city the rain outside didn't wash away sins—it just made them stickier.

“Could you put on a shirt? You're violating about fifteen health codes,” I grumbled, even though my gaze lingered on the expanse of his back, tracing the lines of his shoulder blades down to the dimples above his waistband.

“Health inspector now, are we?” He glanced over his shoulder and a smirk played on his lips. The steam from the frying pan curled up around him, wrapping him in a sultry embrace that my thoughts couldn't help but entertain. It was

like the fucking skillet was conspiring with him, blurring the boundaries between desire and the need for distance.

“Someone’s gotta uphold the law.” My attempt at indifference faltered as he turned, revealing the full extent of his bare chest—every ridge and valley sculpted as if chiseled by some sadistic artist keen on testing my self-control.

“Trust me, you’re the last person I’d peg for a stickler for rules,” he flipped the bacon with a deft twist of his wrist.

“Only when it suits me.” I leaned against the counter edge, arms crossed, pretending to be calm. But every sputter of grease, every waft of coffee beans seemed to weave this domestic spell and lulled me into a dangerous sense of security.

“Breakfast is almost ready,” Kylo said, plates clinking as he set one on the laminate countertop. “I hope you like your eggs with a side of mystery.”

“Only if the mystery involves figuring out how you manage to cook without burning the place down.” I watched him move, the natural light struggling through the grimy window, catching the contours of his body and casting him in a glow that felt too pure for a world as stained as ours.

He laughed, and the sound tugged at something deep inside me, a knot I kept tightly wound. “You know me—I like to live dangerously. Come on, sit. Eat.” He gestured to the table with a nod of his head.

I hesitated, a part of me wanting to maintain the walls I had taken twenty years to build so meticulously around myself.

“Fine, but only because I can’t interrogate people on an empty stomach.” I approached the table. Each step felt like a surrender as my eyes trailed after Kylo as he sauntered across the room, the muscles of his back shifting beneath his skin—a living canvas that beckoned to me with every breath he took.

“Priorities,” And there they were again, those damn dimples.

For a moment, I allowed myself the luxury of this domestic charade, and pretended the storm outside was just rain and not the looming shadow of betrayal and deception. But even then, I knew better. Nothing was ever just rain in this city.

“Your culinary skills are the only reason I haven’t kicked you out yet.”

“Good to know I have a use,” Kylo said, eyebrows dancing mischievously.

“Several,” I mumbled under my breath, more to myself than him.

“Did you say something?”

“Nothing,” I lied. It was too early, and my brain-to-mouth filter was still rebooting.

With a knowing smirk, he turned back to the stove, flipping a pancake with unnecessary flair. I rolled my eyes but couldn’t suppress the smile that tugged at my lips. The bastard knew exactly what he was doing.

Shifting my attention, I reached for the newspaper clipping that lay folded in my pocket—the harsh black and white print a stark contrast to the false cheeriness of the morning. My mother’s youthful face stared back at me from the page, frozen in time, her smile more eerie than cheerful. It was the same damned article I’d read a thousand times, the same cold words.

I traced the outline of her face, the paper already worn thin from my touch. It was a ritual, a silent conversation between me and her ghost. Each time I hoped for a different ending, for the truth to magically rewrite itself in the ink.

“Hey,” Kylo voice pulled me back from the brink of memory’s abyss. “You okay?”

“Always,” I lied again and tucked the clipping away from view. My mother’s death was the anchor that kept me in this city, the whisper of betrayal that echoed down every alleyway, soaked into the fucking bricks. And rain or not, I would pull that truth from the shadows—no matter what it took.

“Oswin Yorke,” I started, the name rolling off my tongue with a mix of curiosity and distaste. “He’s the key to all this—the time traveler who might just know what happened to her.” I nodded toward the folded newspaper tucked away, knowing he understood.

Kylo furrowed his brow, the morning light casting shadows on his face. “Time traveler? Sounds like a bad sci-fi flick, Ave.”

“Trust me, it’s weirder than fiction.” I ran a hand through my hair and felt the weight of every sleepless night. “My guess is Yorke’s been popping in and out of timelines like a tourist. If anyone knows how my mom died, why she died—it’s him.”

“Okay, let’s say I buy this time travel crap,” Kylo said, skepticism laced with an undercurrent of support. “How do we find this guy?”

“Find him?” I pushed back from the table with a chair that cried out in protest. “I’ve got more strings to pull than a goddamn marionette, but finding him isn’t the problem. It’s making sure he doesn’t slip through our fingers again.”

A muscle twitched in Kylo’s jaw, a sign he was taking this as seriously as I needed him to. “We’ll figure it out, Averill. Whatever it takes, right?”

“Damn straight,” I replied, pacing the cramped space of our motel room, feeling caged by more than just the peeling wallpaper and musty stench. “I want justice for her, Kylo. Closure. And if that means chasing after some time-hopping enigma, then so be it.”

“Then we’re chasing,” he said simply, his determination settling over me like a promise.

“Good,” I muttered, pausing by the window where rain streaked down the glass like the tears I refused to shed. “Because I’m not letting this go—not when we’re this close.”

A fire kindled in my chest, one that burned away the remnants of a sleepless night and fueled the rage that had become my constant companion. It was the same fire that

sparked whenever I thought of my mother, lying cold and alone while lies wrapped around her legacy like a weed.

“Hey,” Kylo pulled me back from the edge of my own thoughts, his voice firm but gentle. “We’ll get him, Averill. And your mom’s story won’t just be a cold case or a shitty headline. We’ll make it right.”

“Make it right,” I echoed, the words tasting like a vow on my tongue. I met Kylo’s gaze, seeing the reflection of my own stubborn defiance staring back at me. For the first time, I let myself lean into the trust that I’d built brick by painstaking brick with Kylo.

“Thanks,” My gratitude was raw and unfiltered. “For staying. For believing in this—believing in me.”

“Always,” he responded with a half-smile that chipped away at the walls I’d erected around myself.

In the wake of our conversation, the kitchenette felt less like a makeshift prison and more like a war room. With Kylo at my side, Oswin Yorke’s days of running were numbered.

“Catching someone who can slip through time? It’s like trying to handcuff smoke.”

“Then we better be the goddamn wind,” Kylo countered, his confidence as infectious as a yawn after midnight.

“Wind, huh?” I felt the tightness in my chest ease a fraction. “Guess we’ll have to blow hard.”

“Leave the dirty jokes for later,” he tossed the towel onto the counter. “For now, let’s focus on getting clean.”

“Speak for yourself, Quinn. I’m as clean as snow,” I fired back, watching as Kylo moved towards the bathroom. The faucet turned on, the sound of water hitting the shower floor an oddly soothing percussion in the otherwise silent room.

“Sure you are,” he called over his shoulder, a teasing tone in his voice. “Just like New York City is known for its sparkling sidewalks.”

“Hey, they sparkle after a rain. Granted, it’s more cigarette butts and used condoms than fairy dust, but still...”

Kylo's laugh bounced off the tiles, and I found myself smiling despite the dread that coiled in my gut like a hungry snake. This was our rhythm, the push and pull that kept us sane in a job that had a way of eroding your soul like acid.

My traitorous mind played reruns of Kylo's bare back, each muscle a testament to his strength. And wasn't that just the sexiest thing? A man who could carry the weight of the world—or at least my screwed-up corner of it—without breaking a sweat.

“Fuck focus,” I grumbled. “It's overrated anyway.”

Through the thin door, the sound of running water was a siren call, luring me away from the web of conspiracy theories and dead ends. I knew I should be plotting our next move, getting my head in the game. Instead, I found myself fantasizing about soap suds tracing paths along Kylo's skin. It was a distraction, dangerous and delicious, and I was diving headfirst into the deep end.

*Because why not?* I sneered at the peeling wallpaper like it was judging me. *It's not like life's been all roses and handcuffs... Well, there were handcuffs that one time.*

The steady patter of the shower beat against my self control, and I pushed back from the table. Each step toward the bathroom was a battle, the gravity of my quest pulling me one way, the gravity of Kylo's presence tugging me another.

“Two minutes,” I promised myself, the lie bitter on my tongue. “Just long enough to—”

What? Stare? Drool? Offer to scrub his back? Because that wouldn't be weird at all.

“Shit,” I sighed as my hand closed around the doorknob, the cool metal grounding me for a fleeting moment. Then, with a twist and a push, I was inside, the humid air clinging to my skin like an accusation.

“Taking stock of the towels?” Kylo's voice sliced through the mist, half-muffled by the shower curtain.

“Inventory is key,” My tone was light. But fuck it. If I was going down, I'd be doing it on my own terms.

The lock clicked into place with a finality that echoed in the small space. My panties hit the floor with a whisper, their descent marking the collapse of my last shred of restraint.

“Need help with that inventory?” I asked, my voice a mix of bravery and something far more raw as I slid the shower curtain aside.

Kylo’s grin was sin itself, and as I stepped into the cascade of hot water, I let it wash over me—the dirt, the doubts, and every damned rule I’d ever set for myself. Because here, in this little slice of nowhere, with the only person crazy enough to stick around, I found something that felt a lot like home.

“Absolutely,” he reached for me. “Let’s make sure we count everything.”

“Twice,” I added, because if I was going to hell, I might as well enjoy the ride.



## CHAPTER

# SEVEN

There I was, steam curling around me like some damn film noir set piece, only instead of a smoky bar, it was a cramped motel bathroom. And instead of a stiff drink, I had Kylo Quinn sharing the water with me.

“Cozy, isn’t it?” I said nervously, my voice almost lost in the drumming water.

“Intimate,” he corrected with that half-smile made up of charm and trouble. The kind that usually had me rolling my eyes or reaching for my gun – sometimes both.

Kylo stepped closer, close enough that I could count the droplets that clung to his lashes. His hand brushed against my arm, and it was like he was tracing a live wire straight to my core. Shivers chased down my spine, skipping merrily along and diving deep between my legs. I bit back a curse because I wasn’t some damsel, and Kylo Quinn wouldn’t be the one to make me swoon – even if he did look like sin and salvation had a love child.

“Like what you see, Winslow?” he teased, obviously reading the heat in my gaze.

“I’ve seen better.” I smirked, but we both knew I was full of shit.

His laugh echoed through the tiny space and mingled with the rhythmic pattering of water. The tension was thick, like the steam that fogged up the mirror. It wasn’t just the fact that I was pressed against the cold tiles with him hovering over me,

it was the goddamn electricity buzzing between us, threatening to blow the power out.

“Never knew you were such a liar,” he murmured and his thumb drew lazy circles on my skin that threatened to take my breath away.

“Part of the job description, remember?” But the sarcasm fell flat, stripped away by the raw need that threaded through my words.

Averill Winslow doesn't do vulnerable.

But there I was, laid bare in more ways than one, with a man who had seen me at my worst. We were partners in crime-fighting, not bed-sharing, but the lines blurred faster than my last stakeout.

“Kylo,” I warned, or maybe pleaded – hell, even I wasn't even sure anymore.

“Shh,” he hushed me, a smile in his voice. “Let's not think about crimes and cases right now.”

Easier said than done when I was acutely aware of every goddamn inch of him. It was a dangerous game we were playing, dancing on the edge of something that could either burn us alive or douse the flames we'd been fanning since the day we met.

“Kylo,” I said again, my voice steadier, but there was no hiding the raw edge to it.

“I'm right here, Averill.” His lips were near my ear, his breath hot against my neck. “Always,” he added, and it wasn't a promise or a threat, it was just a fact. Like gravity or the never-ending drizzle that plagued this city.

“Damn you, Quinn,” I muttered and leaned into his touch, surrendering to the storm he stirred up inside me. Because maybe, just maybe, I wanted to explore these depths – with him as my anchor. “Christ, your touch...” I gasped, the words catching in my throat as his fingertips danced a path of fire across my skin.

“Too much?” His voice was a low rumble, threaded with a chuckle that said he knew exactly what he was doing to me.

“Never enough,” I bit down on my lip to hold back the tide of desire that threatened to spill over. The sensation ignited something primal in me.

Our eyes locked, intense and unyielding, a silent challenge passing between us.

“Kiss me, asshole,” I ordered, only half-joking, because if he didn’t soon, I might have lost my damned mind.

Kylo didn’t need to be told twice. His lips crashed against mine, a perfect storm of longing and raw desire that tasted like sweet victory and felt like coming home. It was a kiss that spoke of dark alley chases and shared secrets, of the trust we had built brick by bloody brick.

“Fuck, Averill,” he murmured against my mouth and his words sent a thrill straight to my core. “You have no idea what you do to me.” His tongue slid against mine, and all thoughts of sassy comebacks melted away, leaving nothing but the insistent throb of need.

My heart pounded like it was trying to break free from my chest, racing with the same appetite I used to chase down leads on the grimy streets. Except now, the chase was different; I was hunting down every last shred of control I thought I had, and Kylo was right there with me, matching me step for desperate step.

“God, you’re—” I tried, but the words tangled up with moans that spilled out uninvited.

“Yours,” Kylo finished for me, his voice thick with emotion, sealing the vow with another deep, soul-shattering kiss that left me reeling and utterly, irrevocably his.

The steam from the shower fogged up the glass, cloaking us in a cocoon of heat and need. My fingers traced the contours of Kylo’s muscled back, the hard lines I’ve watched tensely stand guard over crime scenes now softening under my touch. His skin was hot, slick with water and something far more intoxicating—desire, pure and unfiltered.

“Jesus, Averill,” he groaned, and I couldn’t help the smirk that danced across my lips as my hands roamed lower, mapping out the territory I’d only dared fantasize about during those long stakeouts.

My fingers traced every inch of his body, eliciting shivers and gasps from him as the water pounded against our skin. Our movements a desperate dance, crashing against each other and the wall, fueled by a raw, primal desire. His lips left a trail of fire down my neck and ignited my senses as his hand crept up my thigh, awakening an itch inside me that only he could scratch.

I gasped for air as he pressed his lips harder against mine, my back arching off the cold tile wall. The heady aroma of his cologne and our shared shower gel enveloped me, sending my senses into overdrive. The lingering taste of cigarettes on his tongue ignited a fire within me and mingled with the sweet breath we shared in between feverish kisses. His rough stubble grazed across my flushed skin, each scrape sending electric shocks down my spine and pooling at the base of my stomach.

Our tongues entwined again, this time more desperate and demanding. My fingers dug into his shoulders as he pressed me harder against the wall and his cock slammed into me, claiming me as his own. I gripped onto him tighter, feeling every corded muscle beneath his skin quiver under my touch as he matched my intensity stroke for stroke. Our hips grinded together in the tight space, pushing against one another like two star-crossed lovers in a crowded club. He tore his lips away from mine and trailed hot kisses down my jawline, following the path of tiny droplets of water rolling down from my forehead to my chin. “God Averill,” he whispered huskily against my skin before capturing my lips once more.

“God complex much?” I teased, even as my body betrayed me, singing with anticipation at the press of his cock against me. His laugh was low, a sound that managed to turn me on more than any moan.

“Only with you,” His hands skimmed over my breasts with a possessiveness that should have terrified me.

But the detective in me wondered if this was how it felt to cross the line, to blur the boundaries between partners in law and partners in... whatever the hell this was.

“Good answer,” I breathed, arching into his touch.

Our hands were a frenzy, touching, teasing, stoking the flames until I was pretty sure we could have powered all of NYC with the energy that crackled between us. And when his cock slid home, filling me so perfectly it was like he was made for this—to be inside me—I damn near lost my mind.

“Fuck, Kylo!” The words were torn from me, every bit as raw and real as the city we swore to protect. The tile was cold against my back, but I barely noticed; all I felt was him—his heat, his strength, his relentless rhythm.

“Tell me what you want, Averill,” he growled against my neck, each thrust punctuating his words.

“More,” I gasped, because it’s all I could think, all I could feel. “Don’t you dare fucking stop.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.” His voice was a dark promise that sent a shiver racing down my spine, even in the warmth of the shower.

We moved together, a dance honed on the streets but perfected here, in the most intimate of tangos. Water cascaded over us, but it was his name that was a constant stream from my lips—a spell, a prayer, a curse—as pleasure built, coiling tight in my belly.

“Kylo,” I warned, my nails digging into his shoulders marking him with transient trails that mirrored the ink etched into my own skin—temporary but significant. Everything else slipped away—the case files, the badge, the unending rain on the pavement outside. There was just this, just him, just us.

“I’ve got you,” he assured me, and I believed him. Not because he was my partner and had my six on the job, and not because he was the man currently driving me to the brink of insanity. But because when I looked into his eyes, I saw the same storm that’d been brewing inside me, wild and untamed.

“Harder, Kylo,” I commanded, my voice barely above a whisper “Make it count.”

“Christ, Averill,” he breathed into my ear, and there was a worship there that almost made me blush. Almost.

His hands roamed with possessive intent, mapping the planes of my wet skin like he was charting new territory. I taunt, half-moan, half-chuckle, feeling the tell-tale clenching that screams the arrival of something monumental.

“Jesus, you feel so—” The rest of his sentence got lost in a growl as he drove deeper, finding a new rhythm that sent sparks skittering across my vision.

My body sang a different tune—one of pure, unadulterated bliss.

“Oh, fuck!” My hips bucked against his as I spiraled towards climax, each thrust pushing me closer to the edge, where the cityscape blurred and all that existed was sensation, Kylo, and the relentless pursuit of ecstasy.

“Come for me, Averill,” Kylo murmured, his lips tracing the shell of my ear.

“Kylo...” His name fell from my lips like a blessing as the wave broke, pleasure crashing over me in an assault that left no room for thought, only feeling—the kind of overwhelming surge that drowned out the chaos of the world beyond the misty confines of the bathroom.

“Fuck yes, Averill,” he groaned as he followed suit, his release searing through him, branding me in the most intimate of ways. Whispers of affirmation mingled with moans, our voices entwining like our bodies, stitching together the fragments of ourselves that we’d laid bare to one another.

“Bet you didn’t see this in your case predictions,” I smirk weakly, the aftershocks still rippling through me.

“Predictable’s overrated,” Kylo countered, his breath hot against my shoulder.



THE TRANSITION from the steamy enclosure of the shower to the sprawling expanse of the motel bed was a blur. The air outside was cooler, but Kylo's body against mine was an inferno that scorched any chill straight out of the room. We stumbled, half-drenched, water droplets mingling with sweat as we fell onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs—a mess of desire that couldn't be contained by tiles and shower curtains.

“Fuck Averill,” he panted, his breath hitching as I wrapped my legs around him, drawing him closer. “You're insatiable.”

I smirked as my body arched up to meet his. “Private investigators—we like our... cases thorough.”

“Then let's not leave any stone unturned,” he murmured, his voice rough as he shifted, maneuvering between my thighs with a primal grace.

And there he was, Kylo—fucking Quinn—on his knees in front of me, worshiping at the altar of my body with a passion that had nothing to do with purity and everything to do with sin. His tongue painted strokes of fire across my skin, mapping out my clit in a way that would make cartographers jealous. Every flicker and swirl was a revelation, peeling back layers of myself that I didn't even know were there to be discovered.

“Kylo,” I gasped and my fingers tangled in his short hair, holding on like he was the only thing tethering me to reality. “You—oh God, you have a goddamn talent for this.”

“Tell me what you want, Averill,” he coaxed, his eyes locked on mine with an intensity that could melt steel—or at least the walls I'd built around myself.

“More,” was all I could manage, and it was truth stripped bare—no dark humor, no sarcasm. Just the raw edge of need, honed sharp by every betrayal, every loss that led me here, to this bed, with this man who seemed hell-bent on proving that trust could be just as exhilarating as vengeance.

“MORE IT IS,” he vowed, and his mouth descended again, a promise and a curse all rolled into one.



THE LIGHT PEEKING through the blinds glinted off of our sweat-covered bodies. Kylo held me tight, like he was protecting his territory. And I finally realized that he wasn't just a temporary escape from my usual crazy life.

"Christ," I panted, my heart thundering like it wanted to break free. "Who knew the good cop routine came with such... fringe benefits."

He laughed, his chest vibrating against mine. "You'll find I'm full of surprises, Winslow." he soothed and ran a hand down the curve of my spine, tracing the path of ink that told stories I rarely shared. "This is different. This is real."

We lay there, the rhythm of our breathing slowly syncing up as we descended from the heights of passion. His fingers traced lazy circles on my back, grounding me in the moment—a rarity for someone who could slip through time as easily as other people slipped through lies.

"Stop thinking so hard," Kylo sighed. "Right now, there's just this—us."

"Us," I echoed, allowing the word to fill the space between us, marveling at how heavy and light it felt at the same time.

"Kylo," I started, the sarcasm faltering, leaving something far too sincere in its wake. "I—"

"Hey," he interrupted, a finger lifting my chin so our eyes met. "No need for words. I know."

And maybe, just maybe, I let myself believe him. In the tangle of limbs and sheets, with the city's symphony of rain and sirens playing in the distance, I found a semblance of peace. Even if it was fleeting, even if it was madness—I clung to it, to him, like he was the anchor I'd never known I needed. His grip tightened around me like he could hold the pieces of my fractured world together. And for the first time ever, I was afraid of what all this softness might do to a girl like me.



## CHAPTER

# EIGHT

The sign outside the motel flickered like a dying firefly and cast a ghastly glow over the cheap patterned carpet. I sat on the edge of the bed, legs crossed, picking at the frayed stitching of the comforter. Kylo paced the same way he did when his brain was doing somersaults inside his skull.

“Oswin Yorke,” I muttered and rolled the name around my tongue like sour candy. “Sounds like a villain from a shitty romance book.”

Kylo stopped mid-pace and turned to me, his expression serious enough to wipe the smirk off my face. “We need to dig deeper into this Yorke guy. Your old man wouldn’t have dropped that name if it wasn’t our next breadcrumb.”

“Or maybe he’s just fucking with us from behind bars,” I said it, but even I didn’t believe that. It was the only lead we had, and damn if it wasn’t gnawing at me.

“There’s someone who might help us unravel this clusterfuck—Ansel Lake.” Kylo’s eyes met mine.

“Ansel Lake?” The name sounded like it came straight out of the billionaire’s club for eccentric playboys. “The rich asshat on the news that claims to care more about pandas than profits?”

“That’s the one. His heart bleeds for every cause under the sun, but it’s his dad who’s the real character—some modern-day Dr. Frankenstein.” Kylo ran a hand through his hair, looking like he was trying to piece together a jigsaw puzzle in the dark. “I always thought the old man’s yammering about

government conspiracies and time machines was bullshit. But now..." He trailed off and locked eyes with me.

"Time travel, huh?" I tapped my fingers against my thigh. "So what, we're gonna crash one of his Gatsby-esque shindigs and hope he spills the secrets of the universe?"

"Close," Kylo said, a half-smile tugging at his lips. "There's a benefit ball this weekend. All the high rollers will be there, rubbing elbows and writing checks. If we want answers, we've got to get close to Lake."

"Undercover at a fancy ball? Fuck, Kylo, you're not going to make me wear a tiara, are you?"

"Only if you promise to curtsy," Kylo smiled, the familiar glint of mischief in his eye.

"Fuck off," I said, but I couldn't help the grin that came with it. "Alright, Agent 007, let's do this. But if I end up in a dress that looks like a fucking cupcake, I'm blaming you."

Kylo's laugh was rich and warm in the stale room. "Deal. Just remember to act the part. These people can smell outsiders a mile away."

"Acting, lying, deceiving—I'd say it's right up our alley," I pushed myself off the bed and my reflection in the mirror across the room caught my attention. The woman that stared back seemed almost foreign; her eyes held too many secrets, and the white streak in her black hair was a stark reminder of the life she led—a life that now involved infiltrating a world so far removed from the grimy streets and rain-soaked alleys of the city.



THE GLINT of the chandeliers from the high-end boutique danced mockingly in my eyes as Kylo whisked me through a forest of luxurious gowns, each more extravagant than the last. "Remember, we need to blend in, not stick out like a sore thumb with a middle finger raised," he reminded me.

"Right, because nothing says 'undercover' like a thousand-dollar price tag," I fingered the delicate embroidery of a dress

that probably cost more than my rent.

Kylo's hands were surprisingly gentle as he plucked a deep emerald gown off the rack—a stark contrast against the brown of my skin. “Try this,” he pushed it into my arms. The silk whispered secrets as it brushed past my tattoos, and for a moment, I was caught in the fantasy of luxury.

“Doesn't exactly scream ‘private investigator’,” I muttered.

“Let's hope it screams ‘wealthy socialite’ instead,” he flashed a grin that did annoying things to my pulse.

IN THE FITTING ROOM, the gown clung to my curves with the promise of sin. I had to admit, I looked damn good. The mirror threw back an image of someone who could almost belong to that elite world—almost. It was the same lovely world my dear Aunt made sure to keep me out of. She kindly raised me in the shadows of my charming and filthy rich cousins, bless her heart.

Emerging from the curtains, I found Kylo waiting, the epitome of suave in a three-piece tux that should have been illegal for how well it complimented him.

“You clean up like a fucking GQ model,” the words tumbled out before I could stop myself, laced with more heat than I'd intended. I couldn't help but let my eyes roam. The fabric hugged his physique like it was painted on. Somewhere deep inside me, something primal and hungry stirred.

Kylo's eyes widened with surprise and a flicker of appreciation danced in them. “You make even the gown jealous,” he replied, his voice filled with a mixture of admiration and amusement.

A blush crept up my cheeks as I stood in front of him, the emerald dress hugging my figure. The way it flowed down to my feet and accentuated every curve and dip of my body was nothing short of breathtaking. The intricate beadwork shimmered under the boutique's warm lights and cast an ethereal glow that made me feel like a goddess.

“You really do look like something out of a fairytale,” Kylo murmured, his voice tinged with genuine wonder. He took a step closer and gently brushed a lock of hair behind my ear. His touch sent shivers down my spine, electrifying every nerve ending in my body.

I couldn't help but smile at his words. I wasn't just Averill: street-smart and rough around the edges. Now, I was Averill, the poised and alluring socialite who could navigate the treacherous waters of high society.

He flashed a charming smile and offered his arm. “Shall we?”

“Lead the way, Prince Charming.”

But inside, the question gnawed at me: How? Our badges definitely didn't come with a golden paycheck.

“Seriously though, Kylo, are you secretly a Chippendale dancer or something?” I asked, only half-joking as he guided me through another section of the store, this one for accessories that cost more than my entire wardrobe combined.

“Something like that,” he replied, cryptic as ever. “I have distant relatives. Rich ones. Their love language is apparently cold hard cash.”

“Must be nice,” I eyed a necklace whose diamonds mocked me with their sparkle.

“Trust me, it comes with its own set of handcuffs,” Even though his tone was light, shadows flickered behind his eyes.

I let him fasten the damned thing around my neck, the cold kiss of jewels against my skin.

“Planning to rob a bank after we're done here?” My tone dripped with sarcasm.

He raised an eyebrow, a half-smile playing on his lips. “Only if you're my Bonnie, Winslow.”

“Bonnie ended up riddled with bullets, remember?” I shot back and my heart skipped a beat at the flirtation.

Shit.

This was Kylo, my partner, the guy who'd seen me puke my guts out after a particularly gruesome case. Not some glossy-eyed romantic.

"Point taken." He adjusted the jewelry and watched me through the mirror's reflection. "What do you think?"

"About your James Bond cosplay? It's convincing." But the truth was he looked more than tempting; he looked like every bad decision I'd ever wanted to make wrapped up in a tailored suit.

"Good. Because you're about to make us look like New York's finest power couple." His voice held a hint of challenge.

As we exited the store, a chill breeze hit my cheeks and I felt them flush with embarrassment. I couldn't believe how quickly Kylo had transformed me with just a change of clothes and some makeup. He stood by the door of the sleek town car and held it open with one hand while his other hand rested casually in his pocket. With a sly grin, he gestured for me to enter first. My heart fluttered as I stepped into the luxurious car, feeling like a celebrity being chauffeured around by her handsome bodyguard.

The engine revved to life and the purr of the car infiltrated the small space. Kylo slid into the driver's seat, his devilish smile never wavering. "Ready for our grand entrance?"

I leaned back against the plush leather seat, my nerves tingling with an intoxicating mix of excitement and fear. "As ready as I'll ever be."

## CHAPTER

# NINE

We arrived at the benefit ball, the air thick with the scent of money and pretension. My arm looped through Kylo's and we stepped into the gilded hall, a sea of glittering dresses and sharp tuxedos swirling around us. I leaned closer to him, our bodies brushing as we navigated through the crowd.

"Remember, we're just here for Yorke and Ansel," I whispered, but there was a part of me that gorged in the charade, in the pretend intimacy. But if there was one thing I'd learned in my time as a PI it was that there was a thin line that separated reality and pretend- and I was about to waltz all over that motherfucker.

"Got it. But can't say I mind the view while we're at it," Kylo murmured and his gaze skimmed over me before meeting my eyes. There was a heat there that I tried to pretend wasn't.

"Focus, Quinn. Eyes on the prize, not on my ass," I said, acutely aware of how my dress clung to me. It was a dangerous game, acknowledging the tension between us.

"Can't a guy do both?"

"Greedy bastard," I giggled and we continued to move through the crowd. My hand tightened on his arm, and for a split second, I let myself imagine what it would be like to be here with him under different circumstances—no agendas, no bullshit cover stories, just Kylo and me. It was a fleeting thought, chased away by years of built-up walls.

“Let’s find our mark,” I shook off the dangerous daydreams. But as the night unfolded, I knew it wouldn’t just be the mission that would test me—it would be resisting the pull of the man that pretended to be mine.

The murmur of the crowd swelled around us, a symphony of wealth that I couldn’t help but mock internally. Crystal chandeliers glittered overhead like stars in a sky too rich for my blood. The sounds of a live orchestra drifted through the air as couples danced elegantly across the polished wood floor.

“Alright, so we’re newlyweds, madly in love, blah blah...” I began, keeping my voice low as I leaned closer to Kylo. “You’re an investment banker on the rise, and I’m... what? A trophy wife?”

“Art dealer,” he corrected smoothly. “With a taste for the bizarre.” His lips twitched into a half-assed smile as he glanced down at me. “Suits you.”

“Ha-ha, very funny” I snorted and rolled my eyes. The thought of ‘playing house’ with Kylo sent a thrill down my spine and ignited something far south of my belly button. My body reacted, an ache building between my thighs—the kind you get when you’re starving and someone wafts a steak under your nose. But shit, this wasn’t the time.

*Control, Winslow.*

We mingled through the crowd, sipped on champagne and nibbled on tiny canapés that tasted like caviar and truffles.

“Stay focused, Averill. We need his trust before we can pump him for information,” Kylo whispered, his breath warm against my ear.

“Right, because Mr. Animal Rights is going to spill his guts to a couple of love-struck idiots,” I muttered, the sarcasm dripping like poison from my tongue.

“Exactly,” Kylo’s eyes scanned the room. “He’s a sucker for a happy ending.”

“Then he’s gonna love us,” My words were laced with enough irony to choke a horse.

We paused near a towering ice sculpture, the frigid air around it doing nothing to cool the heat that pooled inside me. This charade was messing with my head. Or maybe it was the way Kylo's hand settled on the small of my back, a silent message of solidarity—or ownership.

Fuck, why did bad things have to feel so good?

“Look sharp, here comes our mark,” Kylo murmured.

Ansel Lake entered the ballroom like some kind of eco-warrior prince. Broad-shouldered and dressed to the nines. His jaw was set with determination and his eyes sparkled with kindness. He had that ‘saving the world, one tree at a time’ vibe that made women swoon and men roll their eyes.

“Damn, he’s like Captain Planet with a trust fund,” I couldn’t keep the smirk from tugging at my lips.

“Remember,” Kylo said, his voice tight, “we need him on our side.”

“Relax, I’ll charm the pants off him—if necessary.” I winked even though the idea made my stomach twist. Not with dread, mind you, but with something dangerously close to anticipation.

“Let’s keep it strictly metaphorical,” Kylo said, but there was a hard edge to his voice that hadn’t been there before.

“Jealous, Quinn?” I teased and enjoyed the flicker of irritation in his eyes a little too much.

“Of Captain Planet?” he groaned. “Please.”

“Good,” I said, patting his chest. “Because I might just have to fall head over heels for our tree-hugging tycoon. For the mission, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Kylo rolled his eyes, there was no missing the tension in his jaw.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself for the performance of a lifetime. Playing pretend with Kylo was one thing; pulling the wool over Ansel Lake’s perceptive eyes was another beast entirely.



And Jesus H. Christ, I needed to get my body under control.

This was about finding answers, not indulging in whatever twisted fantasy my traitorous clit decided to weave together.

“Showtime,” I said, my voice steady despite the riotous desire I desperately tried to cage. I plastered on the brightest, most carefree smile I could manage and stepped forward with Kylo by my side, ready to dance with devils and deities if that’s what it took.

THE CHANDELIERS ABOVE DRIPPED LAVISHNESS, sending shards of crystal light cascading across the ballroom like a shower of stars. I was caught in the flood, my skin flickering with reflections as Ansel Lake made his way toward us, the crowd parting for him like he was Moses and they were a Red Sea made up of disciples for his environmentally friendly gospel.

Before I could stop myself my foot shot out, my body probably taken over by the fear of somehow fucking up the only chance I had left at pulling out the entire thread of this loose end. In an instant I flung myself forward, gracefully of course, and pretended to trip landing me directly in the arms of Mr. lake himself-

“Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry!” I feigned embarrassment as the entire ballroom’s eyes were glued to the both of us, each breath hitched and waiting to see what happened next.

Ansel’s arms were wrapped around me, his hands landing perfectly at the small of my back.

“Are- Are you alright?” His warm brown eyes stared down at me. “I knew the champagne was imported, but I didn’t know it was that potent.” He smirked in an innocently charming way.

“Oh, No. I just- uh, tripped.” I lied, my cheeks acting like their own lie detector, buzzing bright red. “I’m Averill-”

*Shit. That wasn’t the name I was supposed to use.*

Panic crawled up my throat like yesterday’s takeout and a wave of fear washed over me as I scrambled to do damage

control. “I- uh- this is Kylo.” I blurted out the words like I didn’t have a fucking filter.

Kylo rushed over to me as Ansel helped me to my feet.

“Kylo, Averill, it’s a pleasure,” Ansel said, his voice as smooth as the aged scotch I imagined was swirling in half the glasses there. He extended a hand to Kylo first, respecting the bro code or whatever the hell you wanted to call it. “Your wife is absolutely stunning.”

I stifled a snort and watched Kylo’s face turn a shade that wasn’t featured on any of the overpriced suits we’d sifted through earlier. I couldn’t tell if it was shock that I’d gone completely off the script that he’d just spent hours hammering into my pretty little head, or at the simple mistake. “She’s not — We’re just work friends,” he corrected and shot me a look that screamed ‘*help*’.

I don’t know why, but something about the way that he was so quick to correct in public, but blow my back out in private left a sour taste in my mouth.

“Of course, my apologies.” Ansel turned his magnetic gaze on me. His eyes held the kind of heat that felt familiar, a shade so deep I could feel myself teetering on the edge ready to dive in. “Well, in that case, Averill, may I have this dance?” He flashed a smile that matched his charm. “It’s the only reward fit for saving a damsel as beautiful as yourself, is it not?”

“Sure,” I breathed out and almost forgot to play it cool.

Almost.

Kylo cleared his throat, an awkward sound that was music to my ears. “She’d love to.”

Ansel offered his hand, and I placed mine in his, feeling the roughness of his palm against my own. It was a working man’s hand, a detail that didn’t fit the suit, his trust fund, or the surroundings but somehow made him all the more attractive.

I hesitantly stepped onto the dance floor and the chaotic room faded away until it was just Ansel and I. I felt the pressure of his hand on my lower back, gently guiding me in a

rhythm that felt both unfamiliar and strangely natural. My body tensed with desire, but my mind couldn't help but question if I belonged there, swaying to this ancient beat.

"ARE YOU ENJOYING THE EVENING?" Ansel asked, his voice low and intimate.

"More now," I admitted, because fuck it, I was only human, and he smelled like sandalwood and something distinctly masculine that I couldn't put my finger on but definitely wanted to get closer to.

"Good," he said, and there was a sincerity to his smile that I wasn't used to. "I'm glad I can contribute to your night."

My gaze flickered past his shoulder, where Kylo stood with his arms crossed. Jealousy looked good on him; it brought out the fire in his eyes, made them darker, more intense. It was a look that said he thought he had some claim to me, which was bullshit, but the possessiveness of it all made my insides clench in the most delicious ways.

"Seems like he doesn't think so," Ansel observed, following my line of sight.

"He can go suck a lemon," I said through a playful smirk, but the tightness in my chest said I cared more than I let on.

"Something tells me lemons probably aren't his favorite flavor."

"Guess he'll just have to pucker up and deal with it," I settled into my groove with Ansel, both our steps and our back-and-forth.

"Careful, Averill," Ansel whispered and his lips hovered near my ear. "You might just give me the impression you enjoy making men jealous."

"Who says I don't?" I retorted, but my breath caught when his thumb brushed against the side of my ribcage, a stroke that was surely innocent but felt anything but.

For a moment, I forgot about the mission, about Kylo, about everything except the man who danced with me like we were the only two people in the world.

“Can you excuse me?” I removed myself from Ansel’s grasp.

His brow furrowed slightly in concern, or maybe it was disappointment—hard to tell with the lighting in there.

“Is everything alright?” he asked, voice laced with something that sounded suspiciously like genuine worry.

“Fine, I just need to... powder my nose,” I said with a fake smile and turned toward the restrooms, which were probably fancier than my entire apartment.

THE MIRROR GREETED me with an image of someone who looked like Averill Winslow but felt like a complete stranger. There she stood, hair immaculate, face flushed from dancing—or was it from being sandwiched between two incredibly attractive men?

God, what a shitshow.

*Get it together, Winslow.* I dabbed at my forehead with a tissue. *You’re not some damsel in distress swooning over every guy who looks your way.*

But as I stared into my own eyes, a wave of inadequacy washed over me. Kylo, with his smoldering eyes that seemed to see right through me, and Ansel, with his disarmingly sincere charm—they both deserved better than a sarcastic, time-traveling trainwreck like me.

“Champagne, miss?” A bathroom attendant extended a silver tray towards me, snapping me out of my self-deprecating spiral.

I paused for a second, gnawing at my lip.

“Sure, why the hell not?” I grabbed a flute and let the bubbly liquid fizz on my tongue. It wasn’t going to solve my problems, but it sure as hell might make them more entertaining.

“Looks like you’re having quite the evening,” the attendant observed with a knowing smile.

“Understatement of the century,” I took another swig. “I’m usually the one causing chaos, not caught up in it.”

“Isn’t life funny like that?” she mused before she glided away to offer bathroom liquid courage to another soul.

Life was a goddamn comedian, all right.

I took a deep breath and prepared myself for round two—or was it three?—of whatever this night had in store. Ansel didn’t give a rat’s ass about the room teeming with New York’s finest snobs; he only had eyes for me. And damn if that didn’t send a thrill down my spine.

“BACK SO SOON?” Ansel greeted me as I approached, his smile warmer than the champagne I’d just downed.

“Your magnetic personality pulled me back,” I shot back sarcastically, feeling the alcohol loosen my tongue and inhibitions.

“Is that so?” He took the empty glass from my hand and set it aside before offering his arm. “Shall we?”

“Lead the way, Casanova.” My pussy fluttered as I tucked my hand into the crook of his elbow, actually giving myself this moment of thoughtlessness. Because after years of dodging bullets and temporal anomalies, I deserved a night to just let go—even if just a little.

“Try not to fall for me too hard,” I warned, half-joking, as we rejoined the crowd of dancers.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Ansel pulled me close once again and his hand rested at the small of my back like it belonged there. “I prefer to fall *with* someone, not for them.”

“Smooth,” I rolled my eyes, unable to suppress the flutter in my belly. Who knew Mr. Morally Righteous was also Mr. Suave?

THE THIRD GLASS of champagne sat heavy in my hand, bubbles tickling my nose as I swayed to the music with Ansel. Each step we took was a dance of shadows and light, our bodies pressing closer in a rhythm that made me forget the mission, the danger, the fucked-up tangle that was my life.

“Mind if I cut in?” Kylo’s voice sliced through the melody, a sharp note that made me stiffen.

Ansel glanced at me with a question in his eyes before he nodded and slipped away into the crowd, whispering that he'd fetch another drink for me—a fourth that I probably didn't need but would happily take anyway because tonight, restraint could go fuck itself.

As soon as Ansel vanished, Kylo's arms ensnared me, pulling me against his chest with a possessiveness that sent shockwaves down to places that should not have been zinging with arousal right now. His gaze burned into mine, dark and intense and all sorts of dangerous.

“What do you think you're doing, Averill?” he demanded, his voice laced with an edge so dominant it had my pussy betraying me with a quiver. “You're taking this undercover thing too far.”

“Jesus, Kylo,” I shot back, my tipsy brain firing off sarcasm like it was going out of style. “We screwed once in a motel room that's seen more action than a fucking war zone. I'm hardly wearing your ring.”

His jaw clenched and hurt flashed across his features before he masked it with anger. But before he could launch a counter strike, Ansel reappeared, grinning and oblivious, holding out a flute that sparkled under the chandeliers.

“Thanks, man,” Ansel said, all sincerity and warmth. It was enough to defuse even Kylo's simmering temper. “Was I interrupting something important?” He glanced between us.

“Nothing I can't leave unfinished,” Kylo's words dripped with anger before he stalked off and left a cold void where his body had been.

“Asshole,” I muttered under my breath, took the offered glass and tried to tamp down the swirl of emotions Kylo had stirred up.

Ansel's arm found its way around my waist again and we resumed our slow dance. “Seems like there's more between you two than just work,” he ventured, his voice low in my ear.

“Is it that obvious?” I sighed and my cheeks burned with a blush I couldn't quite suppress.

“Only to someone who pays attention.” His lips brushed against the shell of my ear and shivers cascaded down my spine. “Your feelings are valid, Averill. You don’t always have to put everyone else first.”

“New concept for me.” I felt the weight of his gaze as he peered into my soul. “Not exactly my forte, giving a damn about what I want.”

“Maybe it’s time to start.” Ansel’s thumb traced circles over my back. His eyes locked onto mine, earnest and intense. “Love is a vast and beautiful creature, Averill,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “Your heart can hold it for more than one person, and each with a depth that’s staggering.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, the word slipping out as his proximity turned my thoughts into a haze of desire. I leaned in, ready to surrender to the kiss I knew would sear me to the core, but Ansel hesitated, his fingertips grazing my cheek.

“I need to know this is what you want,” he said, “and that you’re clear-headed enough to make this choice.”

“Never been clearer,” I lied, because everything was as murky as the Hudson River, but I craved him with a ferocity that drowned out reason.

Our lips met, and the world fell away—the taste of champagne on his tongue was intoxicating, the press of his mouth against mine electric. When he pulled away his eyes smoldered and he extended his hand toward the corridor that led away from the ballroom.

“Let’s find somewhere more... private,” he murmured, and I let him lead me down the dimly lit hallway.

Anticipation coiled tight inside me as we ascended towards his penthouse floor, where promises and passion waited for me—and, maybe even, a night that would change everything.

## CHAPTER

# TEN

The city was sprawled out beneath us like a kingdom of lights. I couldn't help but think that if the world was going to go to shit, a penthouse with its floor-to-ceiling windows wouldn't be a bad place to watch the world burn from. Ansel's hand at the small of my back was warm, a silent promise that was both terrifying and thrilling.

"Welcome to my humble abode," he said with a smirk as he gestured grandly to the steel and glass space that screamed *'I'm richer than you'* in every minimalist line.

"Wow, you really need to work on your definition of 'humble'," I tried to keep the awe out of my voice. I'd seen swanky joints in my line of work, but this was something else. Even the rain against the windows looked expensive.

Ansel laughed. "I'll make a note of it."

We stood close, the air between us charged with the kind of electricity that could power all the neon signs in Times Square. And then we were moving together, hands fumbling with fabric, but not in the clumsy way of two people who didn't know what they were doing. This was anticipation, thick and hearty, laced with the desire that had been simmering since our eyes first met.

His fingers traced the ink on my arms, each tattoo a scar from a past life I'd rather forget. But there I was, laying it bare for him. His touch was meticulous, like he understood that he was reading a story written in pain and resilience.



“Your tattoos... they’re...” He struggled to find the word, his gaze never leaving the artwork on my skin.

“Permanent reminders of temporary feelings,” I finished the thought for him, my voice a mix of sarcasm and raw honesty. “Like a hangover that never quite goes away.”

He laughed, and I felt the vibration through his chest against mine. Our clothes fell away, piece by piece, until we stood there, two souls stripped down to nothing but vulnerability and aching need.

“God, Averill,” he breathed my name like a prayer. Normally, I wasn’t the religious type unless you counted my faith in the holy trinity of whiskey, coffee, and avoiding emotional attachments. But something about this felt different.

Our kisses were slow, deliberate, a faint dance of lips and tongues that promised more than just a quick fuck against the expensive Egyptian cotton sheets of his bed. There was tenderness there, unexpected and unwelcome. Because tenderness led to feelings, and feelings were about as welcome in my life as a fart in a fucking spacesuit.

The reflection of the city in the window watched us, a million eyes full of secrets and sins like my own. But there, in Ansel’s arms, I allowed myself the illusion of safety, even if it was as fleeting as the lightning that split the sky outside.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath as Ansel and I stumbled into his bathroom—with its marble counters and a bathtub so big it could have doubled as a goddamn swimming pool. “You could drown a small army in here.”

“Only if they’re exceptionally small,” His lips curved into a smirk that did things to me I didn’t want to admit.

Ansel’s fingers trailed down my spine, unhurried, and ignited a trail of sparks that sizzled beneath my skin. The heat of the water lapped at our legs as we sank into the liquid extravagance, the steam rising up around us like mist off a forbidden cove. Our bodies found a natural rhythm, buoyant in the warm embrace of the bath, brought on by too much champagne and not enough common sense.

“God, this is... nice,” I breathed, because ‘nice’ was a safe word. It didn’t betray the fact that my nerves sang hymns to the heat of his touch or the way the water seemed to kiss every inch of skin it touched. My words were lost somewhere between my mouth and the place where his lips met my collarbone.

There was something sacred in the silence that followed, punctuated only by the symphony of rain and the hum of the city below. Ansel’s hand moved across my skin with awe, tracing the inked reminders of my past lives like he was committing each one to memory.

“Hey,” he said after a while, his voice softened with a vulnerability that made my chest tighten. “Can I tell you something?”

“Depends,” I said warily, my eyes fixed on the pattern of raindrops that raced down the glass. “Is it going to kill the mood?”

“Maybe,” he admitted, and I turned to look at him—really look—at the sincerity that painted his handsome features. “I want to do good in this world, Averill. Help people, help the planet... leave something behind that’s more than just a legacy of wealth.”

“Sounds... noble.” I couldn’t keep the skepticism from creeping into my tone, but Ansel didn’t flinch.

“Everything I do, I do to counteract the damage my father has caused. He was a bad man, did terrible things...” There was a shadow there, in the set of his jaw, the furrow of his brow. “I need to make it right.”

“Undo the sins of the father?” I raised an eyebrow, the cynic inside me laughing at the idea. “Seems to me like you’re doing okay.” I let my gaze wander over his broad shoulders, down the planes of his chest. “For a saint.”

“I never said I was one of those.”

“Good,” I smirked. “Because saints don’t get to do what we’re about to do next.”

WATERLOGGED fingertips traced the skyline of Ansel's back, muscles shifting like tectonic plates under smooth skin. I still reeled from his confessions, from the heat of his gaze when he spoke of redemption. It was intoxicating, the blend of naked ambition and bare skin.

“Ever think your halo might be a little crooked?” My voice was playful, but there was truth at its core. We were two halves of the same tarnished coin—both marked by our fathers' sins, both desperately clawing for something purer than the bloodlines we'd been dealt.

Ansel's laugh rumbled through the bathwater. “I'm no angel, Averill. But I'd say we're doing a damn good job of polishing each other's halos tonight.”

I leaned back as we rose from our liquid cocoon.

“Let's take this somewhere... more dry,” Ansel suggested and I couldn't help but agree. There's only so much aquatic acrobatics one can perform before dreaming of the solid ground—or in this case, a king-sized bed that promised a different kind of dance.

THE BEDROOM WAS a haze of soft shadows and silk sheets, the city's pulse dimmed by thick curtains. I watched Ansel, the way his eyes darkened with desire.

“Come here,” he murmured, and it wasn't a request. It was an anchor thrown into the stormy sea between us, pulling me inexorably toward him.

Our bodies collided with a hunger that was nearly violent in its need, a symphony of sighs and gasps. His hands were everywhere.

“You are fucking breathtaking,” he breathed against my ear.

I panted and arched into him as we moved in sync, a passionate dance that spoke of things neither of us dared to say aloud. His mouth found mine, and I tasted the remnants of wine promises. It was dizzying, the way he made me feel seen, known in ways I had never allowed before. Every thrust, every

caress shattered another piece of the armor I had built around my heart.

“Tell me what you want,” Ansel growled, a dare more than a question.

In that moment, with him, I wanted everything. “Everything,” I admitted.

“Then take it.”

So I did. I took his body, his whispered praises, his unspoken dreams. We both clung to the dangerous flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, we could wash away the stains left by our fathers.

I whispered his name, a desperate plea, as our bodies moved together in perfect harmony. “Say it again,” he demanded, and I did, over and over until our names were the only words we knew. Our passion ebbed and flowed, leaving us spent and tangled in the safety of his bed.

“You’re such a beautiful sight, taking my cock like that.” Ansel murmured, his words threatening to pull me down into yet another wave of pleasure. “Who would I be to keep such a sight to myself?”

In one smooth move Ansel pulled me to my feet and beckoned me to the other side of the room. The next thing I knew the city was sprawled beneath us like a kingdom of electric veins, pulsing with life and secrets. The cool glass of Ansel’s floor-to-ceiling windows pressed against the bare skin of my nipples as he claimed me, the heat of his body a stark contrast to the chill of the surface. His hands were on my hips, guiding, taking, praising. My tits pressed against the glass harder and harder with every thrust.

“Fuck, Averill. You’re incredible,” his voice was low, breath hot on my ear.

“Comes with practice,” My sarcasm was swallowed whole by a moan.

“Good job.” he whispered and punctuated each word with a deep thrust that made my knees weak and made me clutch at him for support.

“Gold star for effort,” I managed to say with a reckless grin stretched across my face. It was a lie; he deserved a goddamn constellation for the way his cock stretched me.

I watched our reflection—a tangle of limbs and lust, painted in shadows and neon.

“Ansel,” I gasped, as the tension wound tighter, spiraling toward oblivion.

“Come for me,” he commanded, and the dam broke. Pleasure washed over me in waves and dragged his climax from him with a guttural groan that echoed in the huge room. We clung to each other as the echoes of release faded and our ragged breaths mingling.

“God, that was—” I started, but no words seemed enough. Instead, I turned my head and found his lips with mine, a gentle kiss that held the ferocity of moments ago. We stumbled to the bed and collapsed onto it. The sheets stuck to us as we struggled to catch our breath.

“Ansel,” I said again, quieter this time, sobered by the whirlwind of thoughts that chased the post-orgasmic haze from my mind. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.” His eyes searched mine. They had that same intensity I’d seen in the bathtub, talking about his father and his wanting to heal.

“Oswin Yorke,” I watched his face closely. “What do you know about him?”

There was a hesitation, a flicker in his gaze, but I couldn’t read it—not fear, not surprise, something else. Something I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

“The fucking tattoos, I knew they reminded me of something,” He said with a glint of recognition in his eyes. “You shouldn’t go places asking for Oswin, Averill. Not if you value your life.”

“I need to know, Ansel.”

He sighed, the sound heavy with things unsaid, things that might shatter the fragile peace we’d found. “Let’s get

comfortable.”

“Comfortable,” I echoed and swallowed hard. “Right. Because this conversation is going to be anything but.”

The plush of the bed was a stark contrast to Ansel’s body as he pulled me close and wrapped us in a silken blanket. But comfort was the last thing on my mind. He went from a passionate lover to a guarded mystery, which was more surprising than the chill of the air on my sweaty skin.

“Where did you hear that name?” The question came out edged like steel, slicing through the serenity of the penthouse. Ansel’s grip on me tightened, not painfully, but with urgency.

“Jesus, Ansel, It’s not like it’s Voldemort or something.” But the humor felt hollow, bouncing off the suddenly impenetrable walls he’d erected between us.

“You don’t understand.” His voice dropped an octave and the bass vibrated against my ribs.

“Then make me understand,” My tone was all sharp edges, because if there’s one thing I hate, it’s being kept in the dark. Especially when it comes to matters of fucking life and death. And something told me Oswin Yorke fell squarely into that category.

Ansel’s sigh was a heavy cloud in the room, thick with unspoken fears. He ran a hand through his damp hair.

“Oswin Yorke is...” He paused and searched for the right words—or maybe the courage to say them. “He’s an assassin, Averill. Not just any assassin—”

“Let me guess,” I interjected, my voice laced with sarcasm. “Time-traveling hitman? Comes with a free DeLorean?”

“Dammit, Averill, this isn’t a joke!” Ansel’s outburst echoed off the glass walls, and for a split second, the city below seemed to hold its breath. “He eliminates high-profile targets. Influential people whose deaths can change the course of history.”

“Great,” I muttered under my breath. “No pressure then.”

“Your involvement with him... it could put you in serious danger.” The concern in his voice was genuine. “You have to stay away from him.”

“Too late for that now, isn’t it?” I said, my laugh as brittle as the ice that formed on the window panes outside. “I’m a magnet for the dangerous and the damned.”

“Please, Averill.” His plea was almost a whisper as his forehead rested against mine. “Promise me you’ll be careful. If you’re up against Oswin, you’re going to need a plan.”

“Plans are cute,” I interrupted and pulled away to look him dead in the eye. “But my life eats plans for breakfast and then spits out the bones. Yorke has answers, and I’ll drag them out of him if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Be careful,” Ansel said again, his voice a low rumble of thunder to the lightning that crackled in me but I was already halfway out the door, my head teeming with the dread and determination of a woman who knew too much and still not nearly enough.

Safe was for people with less interesting lives.

## CHAPTER

# ELEVEN

I stood at the edge of the grand ballroom and my fingertips grazed the luxurious fabric of my gown—a disguise, a charade I played too well. The shadows clung to me like old friends as I typed out a message on my phone.

Meet me out back. Now.

I sent the text to Kylo without further explanation because, honestly, he didn't need one. Not after he was so quick to disown me as his fake wife earlier.

I slipped through the back door and let it close with a quiet thud behind me. The darkness enveloped me, and for a moment, I allowed myself the luxury of being just another faceless figure in the night—no past deaths weighing down on my conscience, no ink-stained memories etched into my skin.

Through the steady fall of rain, I spotted headlights approaching, cutting through the haze like a beacon. Kylo's car pulled up and the engine's low growl was somehow comforting among my chaotic thoughts. I stepped forward and the hem of my dress soaked up the puddles, embracing the cold that seeped through the layers.

Kylo's door swung open, and his form emerged, all brooding intensity and sculpted lines. The sight of him could still send an involuntary shiver through me, but tonight, there was a storm brewing in his eyes, one that I had accidentally conjured.



“Very funny, Averill,” Kylo snapped and his voice was laced with an emotion I knew all too well. Jealousy was an ugly beast, and right now, it was written all over his handsome face.

My sarcasm was a shield, one I wielded with precision, especially when the truth was too raw to handle.

“Jealous much?” I raised an eyebrow, but the smirk that usually accompanied my taunts was gone. This wasn’t a game—not really.

“Damn it, Averill! This isn’t about jealousy. It’s about trust.” His hand raked through his drenched hair and water droplets flicked in my direction. The protective mask he wore so well was cracking, revealing the vulnerability he kept hidden beneath.

“Trust,” I repeated, the word bitter on my tongue. “That’s rich coming from you.”

“Enough with the games. What’s going on?” He stepped closer, the heat of him almost scalding against the chill of the rain.

“Games are all I know, Kylo. Maybe I’m sick of playing them,” I admitted. My voice was barely above a whisper, drowned out by the city around us.

“Then talk to me, Averill. Tell me what you’re thinking for once without the sarcasm.” His plea was genuine and his gaze searched mine for something I wasn’t sure I could give him.

His jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck straining to contain the anger. I could feel the tension radiating off him, the same tension I felt inside myself. We were two sides of the same fucked up coin—bound by loyalty, torn by desire, and utterly, irrevocably screwed.

“Get in the car. We’re going back to the motel,” his tone left no room for argument.

“Fine,” I growled and slid into the passenger seat, the leather cool against my damp skin. I glanced at him, taking in the rigid set of his shoulders, the clenched grip on the steering wheel.

“Kylo...”

“Save it, Averill,” he interrupted, and we drove off into the night, leaving unanswered questions swirling in the rain-soaked silence.

STREETLIGHTS STREAKED by in a blur and cast ghostly halos through the mist that clung to the windows. Kylo’s hands were white-knuckled on the steering wheel, his silence as loud as any words.

“Kylo, would you just—”

“Would I what, Averill?” he snapped, finally breaking his silence. “Listen to more lies? More excuses?” His sliced through the heavy air between us.

“Damn it, they’re not lies!” My temper flared, hot and quick. “You think I planned that?”

“Didn’t you?” The accusation hung there, heavy and suffocating.

“Of course not!” I shot back, turning to face him fully, trying to find the man I knew underneath layers of anger. “I was working an angle. You know how this goes.”

“Working an angle,” his words dripped with disdain. “And I’m sure you let him work your angle, and work it, and work it again, huh?”

“Jesus, Kylo, do you even hear yourself?” I screamed. “I’m out here playing fucking 3D chess with these sleazebags, and you’re stuck on checkers, questioning my loyalty.”

“Maybe because I can’t see your fucking board, Averill!” His gaze flicked to me, raw and searching, before it returned to the road. “I’m in the dark here, left guessing what move you’re going to make next!”

“Welcome to my world,” I muttered under my breath.

“Speak up if you’ve got something to say,” he demanded and tension radiated from him like heat from an oven.

“Fine! Look, I know it looked... compromising, but it was a means to an end.” I struggled to keep my voice even, to

explain without revealing too much of the vulnerability I kept locked tight.

“Compromising doesn’t even begin to cover it,” His knuckles strained against the leather of the wheel. “Do you have any idea how that looked?”

“Like I give a damn about appearances,” I shot back and the bitterness seeped into my tone. “We’re not at some high school prom, Kylo. This is bigger than that.”

“Is it?” His eyes met mine again, and I could see the hurt that lurked behind the anger. “Because right now, it feels pretty damn personal.”

“Everything’s personal with you,” I said, the words laced with the signature sarcasm that I used like armor. “God forbid someone else has a life beyond your field of vision.”

“Stop deflecting!” His shout echoed in the confined space of the car, and I flinched. “You’re always pushing people away, hiding behind your fucking dark humor. When are you going to let someone in?”

“Maybe when someone proves they’re not going to use it against me,” I countered and the old fear crept into my voice despite my best efforts. “You want to know what I’m really thinking? That maybe I’m terrified of letting anyone get too close. Satisfied?”

“Terrified?” He shook his head and his expression softened slightly. “Averill, all I’ve ever wanted is to be there for you. To help shoulder whatever burden you’re carrying.”

“Then why does it feel like you’re just adding to the weight?” My question hung in the air, heavy with a truth I rarely acknowledged.

“Because I care, dammit!” He slammed his hand against the steering wheel, his frustration thick in the air. “I care more than I should, more than makes fucking sense. And it’s tearing me apart, seeing you throw yourself into danger without a second thought.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” I whispered, more to myself than to him. “Caring too much in a world that doesn’t care

back.”

THE TENSION WAS a living thing that writhed between us like a third passenger as we stormed through the motel parking lot. The rain had picked up, because why the fuck wouldn't it?

“Tell me, Averill,” Kylo spit out my name like it was something vile, “Do you enjoy making an ass out of everyone who cares about you?”

“Kylo, I—”

“Save it.” His hand flew up in the air, stopping me mid-sentence. “I thought I knew you.”

“Congratulations, Detective. You've cracked the case. I'm a regular Houdini—master at escaping emotions and handcuffing hearts. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Stop joking around!” He whirled on me, the whites of his eyes stark against the anger that painted his features. “This isn't a game, Averill. We're in the middle of an investigation, and you're playing with fire.”

“Maybe I like the heat,” I tried to keep my voice steady as we reached the motel entrance, our shoes squeaking on the linoleum as we passed the threshold.

“Damn it, Averill! This isn't about what you like,” he growled and gripped my arm tighter than he'd probably intended. “It's about being reckless with people's lives, with your life.”

“Let go of me, Kylo.” I pulled away, the echo of our conflict resonating off the walls. His grip loosened but the hold he had on me, on my conscience, was as tight as ever.

Our voices carried through the dimly lit hallway and bounced off the closed doors and sleeping lives behind them.

“Look at us,” I said, my voice still fuming with anger. “We're like some tragic opera duo, doomed from the first act. But guess what? There's no audience here for your grand gestures.”

“Tragic?” he echoed and the word sliced through the space between us. “What's tragic is that you can't even see how

much this is hurting—”

“Me?” I interrupted and my own pain surged forward, demanding to be heard. “You think I don’t know what it’s like to be torn apart? I live in a constant state of disassembly, Kylo. And every time I try to piece myself back together, someone else comes along looking for a piece.”

“Is that why you push away anyone who tries to help?” His voice was softer now, but it still held a sharp edge. “Because you think they’ll just take more from you?”

“Isn’t that the usual transaction?” I turned to face him fully and our eyes locked. “That’s how it was for my entire childhood, and that’s how it is now.”

“God, Averill,” he whispered, his voice barely audible over the rain that pelted against the window panes. “I don’t want to be another person you fight. I want to be on your side.”

“Then stop making it feel like a battlefield,” my throat was tight with emotions I’d sworn to keep at bay. “Because right now, I can’t tell my friends from my enemies, and that’s a dangerous place to be when you’re already at war with yourself.”

His gaze didn’t waver, and in those brown eyes, I saw the reflection of my own pain. The rift between us had turned into a chasm, and I wasn’t sure if either of us was ready to build a bridge.

The motel’s grimy walls seemed to close in around us and the buzzing fluorescent lights overhead cast a glow that made Kylo’s face look like it was carved from stone. “What the hell were you thinking, Averill?” he demanded.

“Thinking?” I leaned against the chipped paint of the door frame. My arms folded across my chest defensively as I eyed him, the metallic taste of dread settling on my tongue. “Assuming I think is your first mistake.”

Kylo’s jaw clenched, and I swore I heard his teeth grind. “Don’t play games with me. After everything we’ve been through— Dammit, Averill!” He stepped closer and the heat from his body mingled with the cold air that seeped in from

under the ill-fitting door. “I saw the way he looked at you during the ball, and the way you looked back. Don’t pretend there’s nothing there.”

“Fine.” I threw my hands up, exasperation lacing my voice. “There’s something there, Kylo. Are you happy now?”

His expression crumbled for a moment, revealing a hurt that cut deeper than I’d expected. “Do I look happy to you?”

“About as happy as a cat in a bathtub,” I replied but my sarcasm fell flat against the vulnerability I saw in him.

“Is this a joke to you?” His voice held a tremor, barely perceptible, but it was enough to make my heart skip a beat. “Because I’m not laughing, Averill. I can’t just stand by and watch you—”

“Watch me what?” I interrupted and my own anger flared. “Live my life? God forbid Averill Winslow makes a decision without consulting her overprotective police partner.”

“Overprotective?” He took another step, close enough now that I felt the anger rolling off of him in waves. “I’m trying to protect you from making a mistake that could ruin everything we’ve worked for.”

“Protect me, or control me?” The question slipped out before I could stop it, and I saw it hit him like a punch to the gut.

“Control you?” Kylo’s voice broke, and he raked a hand through his short brown hair. “You think that’s what this is about?”

“Isn’t it?” I challenged, but a part of me—the part that remembered every late-night stakeout and shared secret—whispered that I was being unfair.

“Jesus, Averill.” He leaned against the wall opposite me, his posture sagging. “I don’t know how to make you see that I care about you. That I—”

“Care about me so much that you can’t trust me to handle my own shit?” My words were a snarl, and I hated the bitterness that coated them.

“Trust isn’t the issue. It’s—” He stopped short, his eyes searching mine.

“Go on,” I urged and my pulse thrummed in my ears. “Finish your sentence.”

“Damn it, Averill!” Kylo’s voice cracked, a fault line opening between us. “I only said that because—I’m in love with you, okay? There—I admitted it. And it scares the hell out of me.”

The confession hung heavy in the cramped space, every word carried the weight of unspoken fears. I wanted to laugh it off, to bury it under layers of sarcasm, but the honesty in his admission pinned me silent.

Tears—traitorous and hot—streaked down my cheeks and cut through the layers of foundation like rivers carving canyons.

“I’m just... shattered pieces pretending to be whole.” The words tumbled from my lips, raw and unfiltered, as I met Kylo’s stormy gaze. “You two—damn it, you’ve seen parts of me I buried under concrete.”

He stood still, arms crossed, a statue carved from pain and jealousy.

“I never... God, I never let anyone in because who would want a girl more familiar with death than life?” My laugh was bitter, my humor as dark as the night sky outside. “But you two idiots crashed through my defenses like a wrecking ball.”

“Av...” Kylo began, but I cut him off with a sharp gesture.

“No, let me finish. I feel something for both of you—something wild and terrifying that defies logic or reason.” I swallowed hard and searched his face for any sign of understanding. “It’s like I’ve been colorblind my entire life, and suddenly the world is bleeding reds and golds so vibrant it hurts. Most people spend their lives searching for one person to love them,” I continued, my voice steadier now, even though it felt like I was confessing sins to a jury more than bearing my soul to a man I cared about. “And here I am,

greedy enough to fall for two. Who am I to argue with what this damaged heart wants?”

The room felt charged with an electricity. It crackled between us, a current of sexual tension and profound connection that could power the city for a year—or burn us all to the ground.

“Say something,” I felt more vulnerable than I’d ever been willing to admit. “Please.”

Kylo’s jaw clenched. I could almost hear the cogs turning in his head, could almost see the invisible threads that tied us together stretching to their limits.

“Damn it, Averill,” Kylo finally said, his voice rough as gravel. “This isn’t how things are done.”

“Since when have we ever done anything by the book?”

And as we stood there, swallowed by the hush of anticipation, I couldn’t help but question every choice that had led me to this moment. Choices that had splintered the group, strained relationships to breaking points, and left me bare before two men who somehow held fragments of my fractured soul in their hands.

It was tense, the air thick with words unsaid and feelings unexplored. Like we’d all met before, in another life, another time, destined to repeat the same dance until we got the steps right.

“Let’s just... let’s just think about this,” Kylo murmured, his eyes never left mine.

“Think away,” My voice was a groan, and before I knew it, my hand had reached for the cool of the front door handle. “Matter of fact? I’ll give you all the time you fucking need.”

The door clicked shut with a finality that felt as deafening as the silence. This was the part where the heroine was supposed to have hope, wasn’t it? I wondered if hope was just another four-letter word.



*After all, fairy tales end at midnight—and look at that,  
we're way past curfew.*

## CHAPTER

# TWELVE

The cold dampness of the night seeped into my dress as I stood outside the dingy motel room. The door slammed shut with a finality that echoed in my pounding heart. The argument with Kylo still sizzled in my mind, his words like acid on my skin. My breath came out in short puffs, visible ghosts that dissolved into the air. The damn neon sign above flickered in a lazy rhythm, casting a glow over the puddles in the parking lot.

“Fuck it,” I muttered and my gaze landed on Kylo’s car. It looked like a patchwork quilt of metal. Bullet holes peppered the side doors, each one a story, a close call, a reminder that we lived life with a target on our backs.

“Kylo’s precious baby,” I smirked and the idea formed like a storm cloud in my mind. “Well, let’s see how she handles betrayal.”

Without another thought, I strode over to the car and the gravel crunched beneath the expensive heels Kylo had given me for the ball. My fingers found the hidden spare key he kept under the wheel well. Trusting idiot.

“Always prepared for the worst,” I said, half admiration, half mocking. “Except when it comes to me.”

I slipped into the driver’s seat and the familiar scent of leather and Kylo’s aftershave invaded my senses. It felt like a violation, an intimate betrayal. But wasn’t that the theme of my life?

“Sorry, partner,” I whispered, not sure if I meant it, as I fired up the engine. The car roared to life, a beast waking up from a catnap. The tires squealed their protest as I pulled out of the lot.

I laughed darkly to myself and imagined the look on his face when he realized his car — and his unruly partner — were gone. But it didn’t matter. Nothing did anymore.

*Every man for himself, right?*

New York’s neon fingers clawed at the night sky and the car was a torpedo cutting through its veins.

*Get my shit, get out, lay low.* I coached myself, trying to drown out the doubts with determination. *You’ve danced this tango before.*

MY APARTMENT COMPLEX LOOMED, like it guarded memories I’d rather forget. But tonight, it wasn’t about what I wanted. It was about survival. With a screech of tires, I parked Kylo’s bullet-ridden baby haphazardly by the curb. The engine ticked like a time bomb as I killed the ignition.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” I pat the dashboard. “We’re not done yet, but you need a break from me.”

I slipped through the rain toward the apartment building, its icy embrace a reminder that nothing lasted forever—not the calm, not the storm, and sure as hell not me.

I bolted up the stairs. I didn’t bother with stealth. Every second counted. Subtlety was a luxury—and I was a broke bitch.

“Home sweet hell hole,” I breathed and the familiar scent of must and desperation greeted me like an unwelcome relative at Christmas time. My eyes darted around the cramped space and zeroed in on my wardrobe. Clothes were thrown around like a testament to my chaotic existence.

“Ah, there you are,” I snatched the leather jacket and slipped out of my drenched dress. I hissed as the fabric clung to my skin, reluctant to part ways, and zipped up the jacket to appraise my reflection in the cracked mirror. My gaze flicked

to the corner of the room, to the bag I always kept packed for quick exits.

“Always be prepared,” I mocked, the Boy Scout motto twisted into a survivor’s creed. Grabbing it, I threw one last glance at the apartment—the scene of too many bad decisions.

“Goodbye, crappy apartment. It’s been real. It’s been nice. But I can’t say it’s been real nice.” My voice echoed, hollow and heavy with unspoken goodbyes. But there was no time for nostalgia; sentimentality was a weakness I couldn’t indulge.

Time to disappear.

That’s when the world decided to throw its next punch. The door burst inward with the force of a hurricane, splintering wood and shattering the fragile silence. The SWAT team flooded the room like a well-oiled machine made of muscle.

*Fuck me sideways.*

“Hands in the air!” One of them barked and the command sliced through the chaos.

“Easy there, boys. Wouldn’t wanna ruin your spotless arrest record by shooting an unarmed woman, would you?” My voice fell flat.

“Shut up! On the ground, now!” Another shouted, gun trained on me.

“Touchy touchy,” I retorted and slowly stepped back.

“Clear!” Came the call from the bedroom, and I mentally kicked myself for not making this escape quicker.

“Seems like overkill for little ol’ me,” I observed, watching their precise movements, the way they communicated without words.

“Are you alone?” The apparent leader eyed me with suspicion etched into his features like lines of age.

“Always,” I answered, and it was the truest thing I’d said all day. Alone was something you got used to when your life

was a revolving door of betrayal and loss. Alone was safe. Alone meant no more goodbyes.

“Search the place,” he ordered, and I watched them tear through my apartment with detached interest. Each overturned cushion and opened drawer was another nail in the coffin of my former life.

“Should’ve asked for a search warrant first, sweet cheeks. You know, for formality’s sake.” My smirk didn’t reach my eyes.

“Keep her talking,” one whispered to another.

“Sure, let’s chat. I’ve always wanted to be interrogated in my own home,” I leaned against the wall. “You guys want coffee or something? Make yourselves at home.”

“Ma’am, this is serious.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I shot back, but inside, my mind raced. Time was slipping through my fingers, I needed a miracle. And miracles, as it turned out, were in short supply.

All at once I ducked under the swing of a fist aimed at my head and pivoted on the balls of my feet. The SWAT guy had bulk and body armor on his side. I had adrenaline and desperation - not always the best cocktail, but it got shit done.

“Come on, guys,” I huffed and darted around another officer who thought he could corner me by the kitchenette. “Don’t you have some drug lords to chase? I’m just a girl with an affinity for old memories and shitty apartments.”

A grunt was my only reply as I grabbed a chair and flung it towards the advancing team. It clattered ineffectively off their shields, but it bought me precious seconds. Seconds where my mind worked overtime and conjured escape routes from a place that had none.

“Enough!” Barked someone who sounded like he enjoyed yelling at kids on his lawn. “Get her!”

“Creative,” I muttered, eyeing the balcony door. I might’ve sneered at action movies for their ridiculous stunts, but I was

about to pull one myself. A calculated risk or a desperate act of stupidity? Jury's still out.

“Freeze!”

“Can't! Hypothermia's a bitch!” Time slowed, my body already slamming into the glass door.

It shuddered but held.

Of course it fucking did.

My landlord couldn't fix a god damn leaking faucet, but this he reinforced?

An arm looped around mine and yanked me back. That was it; game over. But then...

“Let her go.”

The voice cut through the chaos – low, authoritative, familiar. Ansel stood there, his presence like flipping the channel from a horror flick to a surreal drama. The SWAT guys looked at him, confused as hell.

Same.

“Ansel? What the—”

“Run,” He said, eyes dark and intense.

“What does it look like I've been doing? Fucking Pilates?” I struggled against the officer's grip.

“Sorry about this,” Ansel told them, and what happened next was straight out of a psychedelic trip at Coachella. He smirked, and a green cloud escaped his mouth, snaking around the room like it had a mind of its own.

“Is that... weed?” I was dumbfounded as the smoke enveloped each team member and turned their eyes a shiny disco ball green. I mean, I heard of calming the enemy with kindness, but this was some next-level pacifist shit.

The SWAT members stood motionless and their eyes glinted emerald and vacant. I pulled away, free now, and stumbled towards Ansel. He steadied me with those strong arms that seemed capable of holding up the world.

Outside, sirens wailed—a serenade to the madness. I scooped up the box of memories from my closet and clutched it like a lifeline. The past felt heavy in my hands, but compared to the present, it was a featherweight.

“Time to go, Averill.”

“Lead the way, Gandalf. Where’s your secret fortress anyway?”

Ansel’s fingers dug into my arm, not hard enough to hurt, but with an urgency that matched the pounding of my heart. We were moving, and I was trying to get my head around what I’d just seen—the smoke, their eyes...it was like something out of a comic book.

“Can you do that mind-whammy thing all day, or is there a battery life on your mojo?” My voice was edged with acid as we slipped past the frozen SWAT team, their guns now idle in their hands.

“Let’s not test it,” he grunted, his jaw set in concentration. It was clear the effort was taxing him; veins stood out on his temples, sweat beaded on his forehead. I could see the strain in his eyes, a stormy sea about to break its banks.

“Shit, this is bad,” I muttered under my breath. “If you pass out, I’m not hauling your ass anywhere.”

“Appreciated,” Ansel said through gritted teeth. His words were short, clipped by the effort of keeping the green-eyed zombies at bay. The air crackled around us with an unseen energy, and I couldn’t help but wonder if there was a countdown ticking away somewhere. We finally reached the lobby door, and Ansel shoved it open.

“Car’s this way,” he nodded towards a nondescript sedan parked haphazardly on the curb. The night was a blur of streetlights and the sheen of wet asphalt.

“Got it. Five-star getaway car. Very inconspicuous,” We darted across the street and dodged puddles that looked deep enough to swallow us whole.

“Stay close,” he ordered, but I wasn’t planning on making a solo run for it—not yet anyway.

“Trust me, no one’s more surprised than me that I’m sticking to you like glue,” I replied, half-laughing, half-wondering if I’d actually survive the night without going full psycho. Adrenaline surged through my veins and pushed me forward, but fear clung to me, whispering every possible scenario where this went south.

“Here.” He fumbled for keys and unlocked the car. I slid into the passenger seat, soaked and shivering, while he took the driver’s side. Ansel’s profile was etched against the glow of the dashboard, shadows playing across his handsome features.

“Okay, Gandalf,” I tried to steady my voice. “You’ve got the magic stick. Now what?”

“Drive.” He answered simply. The engine roared to life, and we peeled away from the curb, leaving behind the eerie green-eyed officers, temporarily suspended in time—or whatever witchcraft Ansel had conjured.

“Thanks, by the way,” I managed a glance at him. There was something between us, some kind of electric charge that wasn’t just from his supernatural party tricks. “For the save.”

“I meant what I said, Averill. Stick with me.”

The town car was a sleek shadow against the rain-slicked street, an oasis of calm in a desert of chaos. I clutched the box of childhood memories like it was a lifeline, the walls softened from years of hiding in the back of my closet, each dent and tear a testament to a past that seemed both distant and painfully close at the same time.

But the illusion shattered when a staccato beat of gunfire echoed in the distance, the direction we’d just come from. My body tensed, every muscle coiling like a spring, but Ansel... he didn’t even flinch.

“Jesus, Ansel, what the hell was that?” I demanded, staring wide-eyed at him.

“Needed to be done,” he replied with a grimace, his gaze fixed on some unseen point beyond the car window. “They



would've never stopped coming. My father...he doesn't know how to let go."

"Your father?" I echoed, my mind racing. The box on my lap suddenly felt heavier. "What does he have to do with—"

"Later," Ansel cut me off. "At the mansion. It's the only safe place now. Trust me, Averill," Ansel turned to look at me, his eyes searching mine for understanding.

"Trust is earned, not given," The heat of my anger had cooled, replaced by a gnawing curiosity. "And you're gonna owe me one hell of an explanation."

My heart still hammered from the close call, but there was something about Ansel's presence that made me feel like maybe, just maybe, I wasn't in this fight alone.

"Hey, think we can make a pit stop first?" I asked, a sardonic twist to my lips. "There's a guy I need to apologize to for borrowing his car. Without, you know, asking."

## CHAPTER

# THIRTEEN

The patter against windows of Ansel's high-tech mansion was a private drumline to our awkward symphony. The tension was so thick you could have cut it with a knife. Then again, with Kylo's mood, it felt like there were enough knives to go around. We were perched around a sleek, obsidian meeting table that probably cost more than my entire life. Me, Kylo, and Ansel—three people with too many secrets and not enough trust.

"Feels like *déjà vu*, doesn't it?" I tried to slice through the tension with a bit of sarcasm. My voice echoed slightly in the cavernous space and bounced off the cold, modern lines. I caught Ansel's eye, his face as unreadable as one of those ancient stone statues. Rich boy had layers, and I wasn't just talking about his tailored clothes.

Kylo shifted beside me and his muscles tensed beneath his shirt—a silent, protective presence. He was always there, as solid as the Brooklyn Bridge, but even he couldn't bridge the gap between us right now.

"More like a bad rerun," Kylo muttered, hands clasped in front of him like we were at a prayer meeting and not a conspiracy huddle.

Ansel cleared his throat, a sound that ricocheted around the room like a warning shot. "My father," he began, his tone grave, "was involved with... government projects. The kind that don't officially exist."

I arched a brow. “Sounds like every conspiracy theorist’s wet dream. What, did he help fake the moon landing?”

“You could say that,” Ansel’s eyes darkened. “He experimented on children. Tried to turn them into... weapons.” His jaw clenched, and for a moment, he looked less like a tycoon and more like a survivor.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better or worse?” my heart pounded a little harder against my ribcage. The idea of kids being twisted into something monstrous—it hit too close to home.

“Ansel, you’re not telling us you were one of the...” Kylo trailed off, his voice a notch above a whisper.

“Guinea pigs?” I supplied helpfully. “Lab rats?”

“Victims,” Ansel corrected sharply, and suddenly, green smoke curled from his lips like it had before and dissipated into the sterile air. It was unsettlingly pretty, a magician’s trick soaked in horror stories.

“Mind control,” he explained, almost apologetically. “A byproduct of their... work on me. I can influence people, make them do things, but only for a short time. And only so many.”

“Handy at parties,” I joked, but bile rose in my throat. This wasn’t a laughing matter. The thought of someone poking around in your head, making you dance to their tune—it made me want to shower in bleach.

“Ansel, why are you telling us this?” Kylo asked, his voice tight.

Ansel locked eyes with me, “Because you need to understand what we’re up against. And maybe...” He hesitated, a rare crack in his armor. “Maybe because I need you to understand me.”

“Understand you? I’m still working on tolerating you,” I shot back, but my heart wasn’t in it. Because for all my bravery, I felt it—the strange force that tied us together. The bitter irony that the man I’d dubbed Captain Planet might have more in common with me than I dared to admit.

“Welcome to the freak show,” I murmured and ran a hand through my hair, the white strip standing out stark against the black.

“Membership comes with privileges,” Ansel said, the ghost of a smile on his lips. But there was nothing funny about the haunted look in his eyes—the look of a man who’d been turned into a monster and hated every second of it.

“Great,” I said, pushing back from the table. “Does it also come with a handbook? ‘Cause I’ve got a few questions about the recent plot twists in my life.”

“Oswin Yorke,” Ansel continued, his voice steady but somber, “isn’t just a shadow you’ve been chasing. He was... is a product of the same nightmares that haunt me. Like me, he was experimented on. The government made us into their weapons, Averill. Oswin’s ability to time travel isn’t natural—it was forged in labs, through pain and suffering.”

“Forged, huh?” I said dryly. “Guess they skipped the assembly instructions with me.” I couldn’t help the quiver in my voice. Oswin’s powers were a twisted mirror of my own. Was I a weapon too? Sharpened and then forgotten in a dusty armory?

“Your abilities are identical,” Ansel pressed on and the glow from the lights cast an eerie light over his features. “That’s no coincidence.”

“Identical? So, what—you think Oswin’s my long-lost twin brother or something?” I rolled my eyes, but inside, cogs turned. Connections were made. “This little family reunion just keeps getting better and better.”

Ansel ignored my jab. “I believe Oswin is responsible for your mother’s death. He’s not just any assassin; he’s the most deadly because he’s mastered control. His power has evolved, Averill. He conjures murder weapons from the ink on his skin.”

“Conjuring weapons?” My pulse quickened. “So his tattoos aren’t just for show. Handy trick.” It was too absurd,

too fantastical, and yet there was an edge of horror to it that sliced through the sarcasm.

“Exactly. Look at your own arms, your own tattoos. They’re reminders of your past deaths, aren’t they? Symbols of your journey.” Ansel’s gaze drilled into me and urged me to see the connection.

“Reminders, yeah. But they don’t pop off my skin and start slashing at people.” I rubbed my inked arms absently. Oswin had control. Control I didn’t have, control I never even knew was possible.

“Think! With your power, could you become an unstoppable force like him?”

“Unstoppable force?” I echoed and the words felt foreign on my tongue. “You make it sound like we’re superheroes. I can barely manage to navigate my own timeline without tripping over my feet.”

“Yet here you are, still standing, still fighting. And I’m offering to help you harness that strength,” Ansel said solemnly.

“Help, huh?” I leaned back and crossed my arms, a barrier against the swell of possibilities threatened to drown me. “Let’s just stick to taking down the bad guy before we jump into any hero capes.

“Fine,” Kylo grunted and cast a dark glance in Ansel’s direction. “I’ll help her train.”

Ansel offered a tight-lipped smile, the kind that said he knew he’d won but didn’t want to rub it in—too much. “Good. You’re both welcome to stay here as long as necessary. And Averill, I will teach you everything I know about harnessing your ability.”

“Generous,” I murmured, not sure if living under the same roof as Captain Planet here would be a stroke of luck or a Greek tragedy waiting to happen.

Suddenly the meeting room felt too small for all our egos.

Ansel rose from his seat and his tall frame loomed over us like a watchtower. "Allow me to show you to your rooms," his voice carried an air of authority. "You'll need a comfortable place to rest and recuperate before we begin your training."

I followed Ansel as he led us out of the meeting room and down a long corridor adorned with ancient tapestries that depicted mythical creatures. The woven threads seemed to come alive under the dim glow of the torches that lined the walls, their vibrant colors pulsed with hidden magic.

We reached a huge staircase that spiraled upwards towards the upper levels of the fortress. At the top a corridor stretched before us, lined with doors adorned with intricate carvings and polished brass handles that gleamed in the light.

Ansel opened the first door on the left and revealed a luxurious guest suite. The room was expansive, with high ceilings and large windows that let in the waves of sunlight. A plush king-sized bed sat in the center of the room, covered in soft silk sheets and fluffy pillows. The walls were decorated with ornate tapestries and paintings of magical landscapes.

"It's beautiful," I breathed and stepped inside, taking in the lavish surroundings.

"I did my best to make it comfortable for our guests." Ansel said with a hint of pride in his voice.

"I'll say," Kylo muttered under his breath.

Ansel ignored him and continued to show us around the room. There was a seating area by the window, with two cozy armchairs that faced each other with a small table between them.

"We also have an en-suite bathroom," Ansel gestured towards another door at the far end of the room.

"This is incredible," I turned back to Ansel. "Thank you."

"It's no trouble at all," he replied with a smile. "You'll have everything you need here during your stay."

"Speaking of which," Kylo interrupted and crossed his arms impatiently. "How long do you expect us to stay?"

“As long as necessary for your training,” Ansel answered calmly.

“And how exactly are we going to train?” I asked, curious about what kind of techniques Ansel had in mind for harnessing my power.

Ansel’s smile grew wider and his eyes gleamed with anticipation. “We’ll start with the basics,” he stepped closer to me. “Control, focus, and understanding the intricacies of your power. I have specific exercises that will help you gradually hone your abilities.”

I arched an eyebrow. My skepticism still lingered. “And what if I don’t want to become some unstoppable force?” I asked, my voice laced with defiance.

Ansel paused for a moment to study me with an intensity that made my skin crawl. “Averill,” he said softly, his tone almost paternal. “It’s not just about becoming powerful. It’s about reclaiming your own agency. “Discovering the limits of your strength and using it to protect those you care about.”

My cynicism wavered for a second as I thought about all the people who had suffered because of Oswin’s powers. My mother, innocent bystanders caught in his wake of destruction. Maybe Ansel had a point.

“Fine,” I finally relented, raising my chin defiantly. “I’ll give it a shot. But don’t expect me to start wearing a cape and saving the world anytime soon.”

Ansel chuckled and his eyes twinkled with amusement. “No capes required,” he assured me. “Just an open mind and a willingness to embrace your true potential.”

I nodded and felt a flicker of determination ignite inside me. Maybe, just maybe, this training could be the key to unlocking the mysteries of my own existence.

As Ansel turned to leave the room, Kylo cleared his throat loudly, breaking the momentary silence that settled between us. “So, uh, where’s my room?” he asked as his voice dripped with impatience.

Ansel glanced back at Kylo and a knowing smile played at the corner of his lips. “Your room is right across the hall from Averill’s,” his tone was laced with amusement. “I hope you find it to your liking.”

Kylo huffed and followed Ansel out of the room, muttering something about wanting a room with a minibar and a view of the beach.



CHAPTER

# FOURTEEN

We ended up in an in-mansion-gym that looked like it was ripped straight from a fitness magazine. Kylo started me off with weights, and I couldn't help but imagine tossing one at his head every time he corrected my form—a little too close, a little too hands-on.

“Keep your back straight,” he instructed, his voice more command than concern.

“Any straighter and I'd be a fucking board,” I grit my teeth as I pushed through another set.

His hand brushed against mine and a spark shot up my arm.

Hello, sexual tension, my old friend.

I wasn't sure if it was the workout or the proximity to Mr. Broody that was making me sweat more.

“Focus, Averill,” Kylo sounded annoyed, but his eyes screamed of a different kind of frustration.

We moved onto endurance training, which involved a lot of panting and Kylo shouting something about pushing limits. My body was on fire, and not entirely from the exertion. Every brush of skin, each shared breath, it was like dancing on the edge of a knife—exciting, dangerous, inevitable.

“Doing okay?” he asked after a particularly grueling set and a bead of sweat trailed down his temple.

“Define ‘okay,’” I panted, half-delirious with exhaustion and the sheer magnetism between us.

“Still alive,” he replied with a smirk that could start wars—or end them.

“Then by those standards, I’m fucking fantastic.”

Training with Kylo was a battle of wills—his determination to push me, my stubbornness to prove him wrong, and the unspoken desire that simmered beneath the surface.

“Take five,” Kylo said eventually, his voice softer now. He handed me a towel and his fingers lingered on mine for a second longer than they needed to.

“Only five?” I wiped the sweat from my brow. “You’re going easy on me.”

“Trust me, I’m not,” he said, and I wondered if he meant the training or whatever this tortured dance we were doing was.

AFTER KYLO’S RELENTLESS REGIMEN, I was already drenched in sweat and my muscles screamed for mercy. But Ansel—Captain Planet with his save-the-day complex—was just gearing up to take me through another round of hell.

“Ready to switch gears?” Ansel asked and rolled out a padded mat with a thud that echoed in the huge training room. “We’re going to work on your close combat skills.”

“Because being a human punching bag is exactly what I need after Kylo’s torture fest,” I muttered under my breath and stepped onto the mat with legs that felt like jelly.

Ansel didn’t miss a beat. “You’ll thank me when you can take down a guy twice your size.”

“Or when I kick your ass for making me do this,” my smirk was more playful than venomous.

He demonstrated a series of moves—blocks, strikes, evasions. I tried to copy him, but my limbs were clumsy attempts at shadowing his fluid motions.

He corrected my stance. “Imagine your opponent, anticipate their next move.”

“Hard to imagine an enemy when all I see is you,” I locked eyes with him. “Unless you’re volunteering?”

“Perhaps I am,” the corner of his mouth twitched upwards.

“Then bring it, Lake,” I challenged.

Our close combat training quickly escalated into something more, a dance of bodies and emotions. With each move, I felt the tension between us building.

As we moved together, his hands guided me. He was close, too close, his warmth radiating against my skin. I could feel every muscle in his body as he effortlessly pinned me down, his breath hot against my ear as he whispered instructions.

“Focus,” he said as he released me and stepped back with a smirk on his lips.

My mind was anything but focused. All I could think about was the heat between us, the way our bodies moved in perfect synchronization. It was exhilarating and dangerous all at once.

Ansel’s voice broke through my thoughts. “You’re getting better,” he said with approval.

“I have a good teacher,” I replied with a flirtatious smile.

He laughed. “Let’s see if you can take me down now.”

I lunged at him with everything I had, determined to prove that I could hold my own against him. But no matter how hard I tried, Ansel always seemed to be one step ahead.

“You’re still thinking too much,” he said as he easily dodged another one of my attacks.

“Or maybe you’re just too good,” I countered, slightly out of breath.

“Trust your instincts,” Ansel replied with a sly grin before launching into another set of moves that left me struggling to keep up.

But despite my best efforts, Ansel always seemed to have the upper hand. And as our bodies continued to move in perfect harmony, it became clear that this was more than just training—it was a seductive tango between two equally matched opponents.

But before I could delve deeper into my thoughts, Ansel grabbed me in a hold that forced me to focus on the present moment. With his strength and expertise, he easily overpowered me and pinned me to the ground.

“Impressive,” he said with a proud smile on his face. “You’re getting better.”

I couldn’t help but feel a sense of accomplishment at his words. I had always been determined to improve myself, especially after realizing that I was part of a world filled with supernatural abilities and beings.

“Thank you,” I replied breathlessly as he released me from his hold.

“You have potential,” Ansel continued as he helped me up. “But it’s not just about physical strength. It takes mental strength as well.”

“How did he do it?” I asked curiously. “Yorke.”

Ansel’s brow furrowed and his usual cheerful smile faded. He leaned forward, voice low. “Oswin was terrified of his power over time. Whenever he traveled, he’d envision scorching those he loved with the sands of the hourglass. He’d jolt awake, heart hammering, soaked in sweat. For years, Oswin evaded sleep, avoiding the twisted dreams that plagued him. He starved himself, desperate to curb his ability. It wasn’t just about facing his fear,” Ansel said thoughtfully. “It was also about accepting himself and embracing his abilities.”

I couldn’t help but wonder what my own deepest fear was.

“Guess I’ll have to RSVP to my personal nightmare then, huh?” The thought sent a shiver down my spine.

“Only if you’re ready,” Ansel said seriously. “It’s not something to be taken lightly.”

But as we continued, the self-doubt gnawed at me. Every missed block, every slow reaction, felt like proof that I wasn't cut out for this—that maybe I'd never be. But, with each mistake, I forced myself back up, gritting my teeth and squaring my shoulders.

“Again,” I insisted and wiped the sweat from my brow with a shaky hand.

My body was a mess of bruises and aches, but there was something exhilarating in pushing past the pain, in finding the will to keep going when everything screamed to stop. This was more than just training; it was a test of will, a battle against my own limits.

“Good. Now, use your momentum,” Ansel instructed as he feinted to the left, and I pivoted, throwing my weight behind a counter strike that nearly caught him off guard.

“Nice try,” he said with a chuckle and effortlessly regained his balance.

“Next time won't be a try,” I promised and felt a flicker of confidence amidst the exhaustion.

“Think of it as a dance,” Ansel smoothly moved into a defensive stance. “But instead of counting steps, you count breaths.”

“Or bruises,” I rolled my shoulders to ease the tension that had settled there. Each movement was a conversation with my body, one that spoke of limits and the pressing need to break them.

KYLO WATCHED FROM THE SIDELINES, his brown eyes intent on mine. “You're overthinking it, Averill. React, don't predict.”

“Spoken like someone who's never been blindsided by the past.” My voice was sharper than I'd intended.

“Your past is exactly why you'll succeed,” Ansel countered. “You've survived every damn thing life threw at you.”

“Surviving isn't the same as mastering,” I muttered and bounced lightly on the balls of my feet.

“Then let’s turn survival into art,” Kylo closed the distance between us with a few purposeful strides.

I lashed out with a roundhouse kick, which he blocked effortlessly. The impact jolted through me, a visceral reminder that I was there, alive, and still fighting.

“Good!” Ansel cheered from the side now. “Now stop pulling your punches.”

“Wasn’t aware I was.” My response came out breathless as I followed up with a series of jabs, each one parried by Kylo’s quick reflexes.

“Your body remembers trauma,” Ansel approached to adjust my stance. “It hesitates where your mind does not. Trust yourself, Averill. Trust that you know how to hit—and when.”

“Better?” I asked and threw a mock jab at Kylo’s shoulder.

“Getting there,” Kylo replied with a grin.

“Let’s take a break,” Ansel suggested and stepped back to give us space. “You’re doing great, Averill. Really.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” I huffed, but my chest warmed at his words. I collapsed into one of the plush chairs that lined the room, my limbs heavy but oddly satisfied.

“Water?” Kylo offered and tossed me a bottle.

“Thanks.” I took a long gulp and felt the cool liquid soothe my burning throat. “So, what’s next? We gonna wax on, wax off, or am I going to learn how to catch flies with chopsticks?”

“Patience,” Ansel chastised gently, even though his lips twitched in amusement. “Mastery comes with time and—”

“Blah, blah, blah,” I interrupted and waved a hand dismissively. “Spare me the fortune cookie wisdom.”

“Fine,” Kylo interjected and squatted down to my level. “What do you want, Averill? What’s driving you?”

“Revenge,” I locked eyes with him. “Closure. And maybe a little bit of self-preservation.”

“Then use that,” Kylo urged. “Channel it into every move. Make your anger your fuel, not your handcuffs.”

“Guess it’s time to make friends with the beast.”

“Exactly,” Ansel nodded. “You’re not alone in this fight, Averill. Remember that.”

“Right,” I said and stood up to stretch. “Because nothing says ‘team bonding’ like beating the crap out of each other.”

“Come on, Averill,” Kylo taunted and circled me like a predator. “Let that anger out. You’re holding back.”

“Am I?” My eyes narrowed. My fists clenched reflexively, and I felt the coiled springs of frustration ready to snap. I lunged forward, faking left before striking right, but he dodged effortlessly, his grin infuriatingly cocky.

“Better,” he acknowledged, “but you can do more. Push harder.”

Ansel’s voice cut through the tension. “Picture Oswin, Averill. Imagine it’s him you’re fighting.”

The image of Oswin, smirking with the newspaper clipping in hand, flashed through my mind and ignited a wildfire of rage. I channeled it into my next move and braced for the impact.

But instead of the solid thud of my foot against Kylo’s side, I felt myself falling, the world dissolving around me in a kaleidoscope of light and motion.

When I opened my eyes, I was back in the training room, poised to strike. Kylo circled me once again, taunting me to push harder. I blinked in confusion - hadn’t I just kicked him? But no, we were back in the same starting positions.

“What just happened?” I muttered.

“I believe the kids these days would say you got your ass whooped.” A knowing smirk played on Ansel’s lips.

I glanced over at him and sweat streamed down my temples. “Thanks, Captain Obvious.”

“Focus!” Kylo snapped, regaining his footing and coming at me again.

I parried his attacks, each block and counterstrike punctuated by the drumming rain against the mansion’s windows. I moved with intent now, every muscle fiber woven with the threads of vengeance.

“Your form is improving,” Ansel observed, his gaze analytical. “You’re more fluid, less predictable.”

“Guess I’m a fast learner,” I grunted and ducked under Kylo’s arm before I delivered a blow to his midsection.

“Or maybe you’ve always had it in you,” Ansel mused. “You just needed the right motivation.”

“Motivation or not,” I panted, “I’ll make sure Oswin regrets ever crossing paths with me.”

“Good,” Kylo steadied himself. “Use that certainty.”

“Keep this up, and you’ll be unstoppable,” Ansel stood at the edge of the ring with his arms crossed.

“Unstoppable, untraceable, unbelievable,” I listed between jabs. “Add whatever ‘un’ you want to the list.”

“Unbelievably stubborn,” Kylo caught my wrist and pulled me into a hold.

“Unbelievably sexy,” I twisted out of his grip and landed a palm strike to his chest.

We continued sparring, the dance of combat as intimate as any tango. With each dodge, each touch, the space between Kylo and I crackled with an energy that had nothing to do with fighting.

“Break!” Ansel called out, and we parted, chests rising and falling in sync.

“I can see it, you know,” Ansel walked towards us. “The confidence building. It suits you.”

“Confidence, strength, a little bit of badassery,” I listed off as I wiped sweat from my brow. “It’s a good look on anyone.”



“Especially you,” Kylo murmured, and there was something in the way he looked at me that spoke of more than just admiration for my fighting skills.

“Alright, boys,” I squared my shoulders. “What’s next?”

“Next,” Ansel’s eyes locked on mine, “we harness that fire inside you until it burns so bright, Oswin won’t stand a chance.”

“Oswin,” Kylo whispered the name like a curse.

“Oswin,” I echoed, my voice filled with the promise of retribution. “He thinks he can taunt me, leave breadcrumbs like that newspaper clipping, and get away with it?”

“Never,” Ansel joined us. “We’ll bring him to justice, for your mother, for all of us.”

“Justice,” I mused, more to myself than to them. “Yeah, that’s what they’ll call it. But between you and me?” I leaned in and lowered my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I’m looking forward to the revenge.”

“Revenge is a powerful motivator,” Ansel’s hand found its way to the small of my back, a gesture that sent shivers down my spine. “Use it.”

*Oswin Yorke won't know what hit him.*

## CHAPTER

# FIFTEEN

The ache in my muscles was a sweet sort of torture, proof of the hours spent in Ansel's high-tech dungeon he called a training room. I flopped onto a plush couch that probably cost more than my entire existence and tried not to look as wrecked as I felt. Ansel stood across from me, his chiseled features set in a mask of concern—or was it anticipation? I couldn't tell with him, and to be honest, I didn't care the difference.

“Ready for the next step?” Ansel's his voice was laced with a calmness that made my skin crawl. How could someone so...sterile have such an impact on the fraying threads of my sanity?

“Sure, let's add ‘mind control’ to the list of your many charms,” I replied with a snort and eyed him warily. “Because nothing says trust like letting you mess around in my head.”

Kylo shifted uneasily beside me, his protective instincts practically sparking in the air. He caught my eye with a silent question. Was I sure about this? The honest answer was no, but since when did Averill Winslow back down from an insane plan?

“Relax, Averill,” Ansel's hand hovered above my arm—a touch I wasn't sure I wanted. “I'm only going to guide you. You're in control.”

“Right,” I muttered, “said every control freak ever.”

But as Ansel's power washed over me, a green cloud encircled us in a haze, a part of me succumbed to the deep

well of relaxation that called to me. I sank into the couch and the room tilted slightly as my body gave in to the warmth that spread through my limbs.

“Easy, Averill,” Ansel whispered, his breath ghosting over my temple, a stark contrast to the cold fingers of doubt that still clawed at the edges of my mind. “Trust me.”

The world spun, and the last thing I saw before closing my eyes was the conflicted shadow on Kylo’s face, the way his jaw clenched tight enough to shatter bones. He wasn’t just worried; he was scared—scared for me.

The green smoke enveloped us and carried us away on a wave of Ansel’s making. I floated on the edge of something vast and terrifying, a reminder that I was about to dive headfirst into the unknown—with the one man Kylo and I had vowed to never fully trust. As the real world faded to black, I clung to the irony—it had always been easier to navigate the shadows than the light.

A sensation like falling through clouds, thick and disorienting, swallowed me. Ansel’s presence was a tether in the chaos. His hand gripped mine with a strength that was both reassuring and completely terrifying.

“Keep your eyes on me,” he ordered, his voice a lighthouse in the foggy void.

“Because that never leads to disaster.” Vertigo clutched at my stomach. The green smoke that had carried us there dissipated into shadowy tendrils, and the silence that followed was haunting.

“Welcome to my mind’s version of a vacation hotspot,” My attempt at humor fell flat, engulfed by the oppressive atmosphere of my inner world.

The world inside my head was about as welcoming as a tax audit.

I stood on the precipice of an unforgiving landscape, the skies overhead a brooding canvas of charcoal and venomous green. The land stretched out before me, a tapestry of ruin and decay, punctuated by the skeletons of structures that once held

significance. A dilapidated house here, a shattered clock tower there—each a monument to a memory I’d rather forget.

“Cheery place you’ve got in here,” Ansel’s voice echoed against the desolation.

“Please, this is nothing. You should see it around Christmas.”

But even my own cynicism couldn’t lighten the weight that bore down on me with each step we took. The ground beneath our feet crumbled like stale bread, a metaphor for my fractured psyche if there ever was one.

Ansel gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll get through this together.”

“Sure,” I muttered, unconvinced. “Because everything’s peachy when you’re strolling through someone’s psychological minefield.”

The first rumble of thunder echoed through the desolation, a low growl that seemed to rise from the ground under my feet. I glanced at Ansel, his expression drum-tight with concentration as he scanned the horizon. His posture radiated a confidence I envied.

“Cozy weather we’re having.” I watched as dark clouds roiled together overhead, like the sky seethed in anger. The winds picked up and flung dust and debris from the crumbling structures around us, forcing me to shield my eyes.

“Stay close, Averill,” Ansel shouted and grabbed my arm to steady me.

“Was planning on it. Not exactly picnic conditions,” I shot back, but my voice was drowned out by the howl of the wind. A part of me wanted to laugh at the absurdity, at the metaphorical storm inside my head becoming all too literal. But laughter was a luxury I couldn’t afford—not when every gust felt like it peeled layers off my soul.

Lightning split the sky, a jagged line of pure, furious energy, and for a moment, everything was illuminated—the ruins of my psyche laid bare. Then came the rain, fat drops

that slapped against my skin with the force of accusations and soaked through my clothes, chilling me to the bone.

THAT'S when I saw it—a silhouette that formed inside the storm, something massive and terrifying. It loomed out of the chaos, its features indistinct yet unmistakably monstrous. My breath caught in my throat and a primal fear gripped me as the creature stepped forward, revealing its hideous form.

“Ansel...” My voice was a whisper of alarm.

“I see it, Averill.”

It was a behemoth stitched together from every nightmare I'd ever had, a merger of all the things I feared the most. Its skin was the color of despair, a mottled gray that seemed to suck in what little color there was. Spikes jutted from its shoulders and down its back. Its eyes were a void, endless pits of darkness that promised oblivion.

The beast loomed larger than life, a nightmarish figure pulled from the trenches of a mind that had seen too much darkness.

“Remember who you are.” Ansel's voice was firm, grounding.

“Someone who's really wishing she had a flamethrower right about now,” I squared my shoulders and forced myself to meet the gaze of the monster inside me.

Its roar was deafening, a sound that threatened to shatter my sanity. But if there was one thing I knew about monsters, it was that they thrived on fear. And I'd be damned if I gave this one the satisfaction.

“Come on then, ugly,” I taunted and drew on every ounce of defiance I had. “Let's dance.”

My feet shifted, narcing on my instincts to bolt, but fear rooted me as firmly as the dark memories that clawed their way up my throat.

“Running is what it expects. It's what it wants,” Ansel's voice was steady in the midst of chaos. “Stand your ground, Averill.”

“You’re not the one it’s drooling over like a Thanksgiving turkey.” I growled back, as the monster’s shadow stretched out toward me, a tangible wave of dread that threatened to swallow me whole.

“Look at me,” Ansel commanded, and there was something in his tone that made me want to obey. “You are stronger than this. Than all of it. Your past doesn’t define you – your actions do.”

“Great pep talk, coach.” Even through the sarcasm Ansel’s belief in me ignited something—a flicker of disobedience inside the murky landscape of fear. “Okay, so let’s say I don’t run. What then? Offer it a cup of tea and have a nice chat about our feelings?”

“Confront it. You’ve handled worse, Averill. Remember all the monsters you put behind bars.”

“Those were humans. Squishy and fucking mortal. This thing is... more.”

“More doesn’t mean invincible. You’ve got this.”

“Fine,” I huffed and squared off against the creature. “But if I end up as monster chow, I’m haunting your ass for eternity.”

I clenched my fists, my tattoos stark against the ash of my knuckles—reminders of battles survived, etched into my skin. Each mark a testament to a time I’d refused to give up, to give in.

The monster charged, and the world narrowed down to the thunderous beat of my heart, the howl of the wind, and the certainty that I could either face my demons or let them devour me. I wasn’t about to pick the latter. Not today.

“Ansel, if I get out of this, you owe me a bottle of your most expensive bourbon,” If I was going to wrestle with my inner demons, I might as well get a decent drink out of it.

“Deal,” he shouted back and his eyes glinted with that same infuriating confidence that made me want to prove him right and wrong at the same time.

I squared my shoulders and planted my feet firmly on the metaphysical ground beneath me, even as it quaked. The tattoos on my arms felt alive, each line a story, a scar, a victory that whispered of resilience. Fear was a luxury I couldn't afford—not when the past clawed its way out of the grave to drag me back down with it.

Then I spotted them, haunting reminders of my past. Ghosts draped in the gowns of my deepest regrets. My mom stood with them, her image flickering like an old film projection, her sad eyes staring into mine with a familiar disappointment. The air around me was suddenly thick with tension as each figure materialized, a physical embodiment of the pain I had spent years trying to hide. Beside my mother, other forms took shape, each one representing a wound I had attempted to bandage with layers of sarcasm. Like figures in a tragic play, they stood in front of me, demanding to be seen and acknowledged.

“Party’s getting crowded,” I tried to keep my voice steady. “Guess I should’ve RSVP’d.”

Their whispers were a symphony of regret, each word another weight added to the already crushing burden on my shoulders. I felt their accusations, their unresolved emotions clawed at the edges of my consciousness like nails on a chalkboard.

“Shut up,” I hissed under my breath, but they wouldn’t.

The ghosts swirled around us, a carousel of despair. Their translucent hands reached out to drag me into the abyss.

“Stop it,” Ansel’s tone broke through my self-deprecation. “You’re stronger than this.”

“Am I?” The question hung between us, both a challenge, a plea. I felt the swell of emotions that threatened to breach the dam of my defenses, ready to drown me in my own self-loathing. “Sometimes I think the universe has a sick fucking sense of humor, giving me the power to rewind time when all I’ve managed to do is fast-forward to one disaster after another.”

“Power isn’t just about changing what’s been done,” Ansel pulled me closer. His eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that burned. “It’s about shaping what will be.”

“Guess I better start shaping, then.”

The monster charged, a nightmarish freight train, and I launched myself forward to meet it. We collided with a force that should have shattered bones, but this was a battle of wills, not strength.

The monster bucked and tried to throw me off, but where I’m from we cling to our convictions as stubbornly as we do our subway poles during rush hour. I dodged a swipe that would have ended this twisted therapy session rather permanently and landed a solid punch. The impact vibrated up my arm, a satisfying throb that echoed the beat of my heart.

I never liked therapy anyway.

I grunted, breathless, and felt the tide turn. Every hit, every dodge was a statement, a declaration. I wasn’t just fighting this monstrosity—I was pummeling every shard of self-doubt, every ghost that dared to haunt me. I wove between attacks, my movements becoming more fluid, more confident.

The beast roared, a sound that shook the desolate landscape, but I was done being intimidated. I’d lived through enough real nightmares; what was one more? If I had any chance to make it out of my head alive, I had to evolve. I had to unleash the powers I’d spent most of my life wishing didn’t exist.

If Yorke had somehow figured out how to manipulate his tattoos, maybe I could too. There had to be a reason the universe chose to brand me with a tattoo of each weapon that ended my life and forced me to slip through time. The universe was an ironic motherfucker.

I yanked up my shirt, my eyes landed on the black smudges of ink that made out the gun that the sick fuck had killed me with in his basement a few weeks ago- you know, before I went back in time and sent his ass to prison for the rest of his life.



My fingers scrambled over the ink markings and searched for the tool I so desperately needed. The monster's claws raked across my back, tearing through flesh as I twisted away.

Fuck.

But as the blood began to flow, something miraculous happened. The ink began to glow and shimmered like a mirage until it detached itself from my skin. My hand closed around the handle of a very real, very solid weapon.

The beast's final lunge was pure desperation, a last-ditch effort to snuff out the spark that I'd fanned into an inferno inside myself. I sidestepped and watched as it stumbled past me, its momentum too great to stop.

I saw the opening – a chink in the monster's seemingly impenetrable armor. I launched the bullet forward, my effort empowered by every scar, visible and invisible, that marked my skin and soul. The bullet plunged deep into its chest. The creature reared back, eyes wide in fear or confusion; I didn't care.

“Take a good look. This is the last face you're ever going to see.” I snarled angrily.

Inky clouds wrapped around me as the monster howled its fury before it dissolved into nothingness. Silence descended, so thick you could choke on it.

The rush was exhilarating, intoxicating. This was more than a fight; it was catharsis, it was redemption—it was damn near spiritual.

I stood there, panting, and watched as the remains of my pain and fear disappeared into nothing.

“Is it really gone?” I half-expected the nightmare to rebuild itself from the ruins.

But as the storm around us quieted, and the dark clouds parted to reveal a less oppressive sky I knew it was over. The victory wasn't just about surviving; it was about conquering.

“Let's get out of this head trip,” I offered Ansel a shaky smile. “I've got real-life asses to kick.”

He reached out to take my hand, and together we focused on the world beyond the confines of my mind.



THE TRANSITION BACK WAS DISORIENTING. Reality warped and bent until, with a gasp, I found myself back in Ansel's mansion. I blinked rapidly, the afterimage of that desolate landscape still etched onto my retinas.

"Welcome back," Kylo stood beside me with a concerned frown.

"Miss me?" My voice was rough around the edges but laced with newfound power.

"Always," he replied and his gaze searched mine for signs of the ordeal I had endured. "Did you..."

"Kick its ass? Yeah," I cut in and exhaustion seeped into my bones now that the adrenaline waned away. "I did. Someone get me a drink," I suddenly craved the burn of whiskey. "And maybe a new set of knuckles."

"Coming right up," Kylo already moved toward the bar.

I slumped into a chair. The physical exhaustion was just a shadow of the emotional relief that washed over me. I'd faced down the monster inside, the echoes of my past, and emerged not just intact but reinforced.

"Looks like therapy's overrated after all," I huffed.

"Or perhaps you've just redefined the term," A hint of admiration colored Ansel's tone.

THE WHISKEY BURNED a trail down my throat, but it was nothing compared to the searing fire of rebirth I'd just walked through. Legs draped over the arm of the chair, I swirled the amber liquid in my glass and watched the light play tricks with its depths—just like my mind had been doing for years.

"Quite the show you put on," Ansel's voice was low and he took a seat across from me.

"Thanks, I'll be signing autographs later," My tone was laced with the kind of sarcasm that could cut steel. But

beneath the barb, there was an undercurrent of gratitude. He'd stood by me in the eye of the storm, even when I'd been ready to bolt.

“Your power,” he leaned forward, elbows on knees, “it’s not just about jumping through time. It’s about confronting what most people spend their lives running away from.”

I tossed back the rest of my drink in one gulp. The thought should’ve terrified me—and a part of me was still shaking—but I couldn’t deny the rush, the sense of control that came with staring down my nightmares and making them blink first.

“Most people don’t get the chance to face their demons so literally,” Kylo handed me another glass. His eyes held that familiar spark of pride that always managed to thaw my icy exterior just a bit. “You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

“Or more masochistic,” I countered, but the smile that threatened the corners of my mouth felt strangely genuine. I extended my tattooed arms and examined the intricate ink that traced my history in permanent lines. Each one a story, a death, a life lesson etched into my skin.

“Maybe now you can start collecting tattoos for the demons you’ve defeated instead of the ones that’ve defeated you.”

I stood up and felt the weight of their gazes on me—not heavy like judgment, but anchoring, like I wasn’t facing the darkness alone anymore.

Ansel stepped forward, his eyes locked onto mine, and before I knew it, he pulled me into his embrace. His lips claimed mine in a passionate kiss. I felt my body respond, tingling with a mix of desire and relief as his lips explored mine.

Kylo watched us and his eyes darkened with jealousy, but it only fueled the passion that now coursed through my veins. He stepped forward, his hands reaching for me, and without a second thought, he pulled me into his arms too. The two of

them kissed me, their kisses intertwining, and a powerful surge of emotions washed over me.

And for a split second, nothing else mattered in the world.

## CHAPTER

# SIXTEEN

The heat of their bodies melded together in a chaotic tangle of limbs and lust. Ansel's lips crashed against mine, hot and insistent, while Kylo's mouth trailed a scorching path down the column of my neck. Their hands—my god, their hands—were everywhere, tracing the contours of muscles through fabric, mapping out territories they both staked claim to.

“God, Averill,” Ansel murmured against my lips, his voice a deep rumble that vibrated through me. His fingers gripped my hips and pulled me closer until I felt the undeniable hardness of his cock pressing through the barrier of denim.

Meanwhile Kylo's breath was a warm whisper at my ear, “You have no idea how long I've wanted this.” His words were punctuated by the unbuttoning of my blouse, a slow reveal that left my skin buzzing where the cool air kissed it.

Their eagerness was tangible. Each touch sparked an electric craving that shot straight to my core. I could feel them, hard and wanting, and something about that power sent a thrill straight down to my clit. It was like playing with fire, except I was the flame, and they were the moths drawn to my blaze.

“Fuck...” The word slipped from my lips as Ansel's hand skimmed lower and stroked through the fabric of my jeans in a way that had my pussy clawing at my panties like a caged animal desperate for freedom. Freedom from doubt, freedom from the past, freedom to just feel. And as I leaned into the kiss and melted into the intoxicating cocktail of muscles and men, I realized I was done running from the things I wanted.

No holding back. No fear. Just raw, unadulterated passion that had simmered beneath the surface for far too long. With a shared, silent agreement, we crossed the point of no return, diving headfirst into the abyss without a single look back. Because when betrayal and revenge were your bread and butter, surrendering to pleasure felt like the sweetest kind of rebellion.

I dropped to my knees and the rough carpet bristled against my skin—a delicious contrast to the smooth warmth of Ansel and Kylo’s skin as I positioned myself between them.

“God, Averill,” Ansel groaned as I freed him from the constraints of denim. His voice was a raw edge of lust that cut straight to my pussy.

The head of Ansel’s cock was flushed and swollen, glistening with precum as it sprang free from his pants. I teasingly swirled my tongue around the sensitive tip before taking the entire thing into my mouth. My warm lips slid down his shaft, feeling the veins pulse against my tongue as I took him deeper into my throat with each stroke.

“Fuck, Ave, your mouth—” Kylo’s voice melted into a low groan when I leaned forward and engulfed his cock next.

My fingers wrapped around the base of Ansel’s cock and stroked rhythmically while he watched Kylo stretch my pretty little throat.

Their hands roamed over me and ignited trails of fire across my skin. Each touch erased the lines I’d drawn around my heart, line by scarred line. My thoughts dissolved into pure sensation, an array of pleasure.

“Perfect,” Ansel’s fingers threaded through my hair.

The rest of the world could wait—we were creating our own storm, and I was the eye, calm and fierce and utterly alive.

“Look at her, Kylo,” Ansel murmured, his voice a velvet command that sent shivers down my spine. “She’s ours.”

“Yours?” I smirked, a breathless concession. “Cute. Now make me believe it.”

“Bedroom,” Ansel’s voice was a low growl, his hand firm around mine, pulling me away from the entangled mess of limbs and lust we’d become in the living room. His other hand trailed along my forearm and ignited every nerve ending, marking a path that sizzled across my skin like electricity.

“Lead the way, Mr. Lake,” My words were heavy with the kind of sarcasm that thinly veiled my skyrocketing pulse. Each step through the dimly lit hallway felt like a dance with destiny, one I never knew I had the rhythm for.

“Careful, Averill,” Kylo’s voice teased from behind us, “You might actually start enjoying this.”

We reached the bedroom. This wasn’t just a threshold; it was an abyss, and with each second that ticked by, I teetered closer to the edge.

“Perfect,” Ansel whispered, his breath hot against my ear, “Insanity suits you.”

“Flatterer,” I blushed, but there was no bite to it. My defenses were crumbling.

Kylo’s hand brushed mine, a silent plea laced with desire. It was a touch that spoke volumes, a safety net in the chaos of our tangled emotions.

The room swallowed us whole, a sanctuary of shadows and whispers where only the brave—or the foolish—dared to tread. It pulsed with a carnal energy, the kind that seeped into your pores and hijacked every rational thought inside your head. Ansel’s bedroom had become an altar of indulgence, and I was the offering caught between two deities of desire. Ansel to my back, Kylo to my front—their heated gazes could have scorched the devil himself.

Ansel’s fingers danced across my skin. His hands were assertive and left no doubt about his intentions. “I think we’ve done enough talking.”

His body pressed flush against mine, a wall of heat and muscle. The pressure of his cock nudged insistently at my ass, an unspoken command that resonated with every fiber of my being.

“Christ, Ansel,” I gasped, my head falling back against his shoulder as he teased me, his tip prodding at the entrance that throbbed with a mix of fear and need. “You’re not going to—”

“Shh,” he silenced me with a firm hand on my hip and guided me back onto him. “Just feel.”

And feel I did. The stretch was excruciatingly perfect, a fullness that made my eyes roll back as Ansel buried himself inside me in a smooth, powerful stroke. A strangled moan escaped my lips, mingled with the steady drum of rain against the windowpane. It was a symphony of pleasure, underscored by the storm that mirrored the one in my pussy.

“Fuck,” I breathed, nails digging into Kylo’s arms for support as Ansel set a pace that walked the line between pain and ecstasy. The sensation was all-consuming, a relentless assault on every sense. I was impaled by him, skewered by a pleasure so sharp it bordered on agony.

“Is this what you wanted?” Ansel’s voice was a growl, tinged with triumph as he filled me completely, each thrust stoking the flames higher.

“Maybe,” I managed to rasp, every word punctuated by his rhythmic invasion. “Or maybe I just like the attention.”

“Trust me, Averill,” Kylo’s hands roamed over my trembling body, “the pleasure is all ours.”

If this was betrayal, then let me be damned. If this was revenge, let the world burn. And if this was ecstasy, then let it cascade over me like the relentless downpour outside.

Ansel panted and his grip tightened as he drove deeper inside me.

“Look at me, Averill,” Kylo commanded, his voice rough with lust as he positioned himself in front of me. His dick pressed against my glistening pussy, a promise of pleasure as tangible as the humid air that clung to our skin.

I lifted my gaze to meet his and with a moan that seemed to draw the very essence from my lips, he entered me and filled the void that screamed to be claimed. The sensation was



so intense it bordered on sensory overload, and I couldn't hold back a sharp intake of breath.

“Are you with us, Ave?” Kylo whispered, a hint of mischief lacing his words. “Or did we lose you to the pleasure already?”

“Sweetheart,” I managed, my voice a ragged thread, “it would take more than two cocks to make me lose my shit.”

But gods, they were trying their hardest.

Caught between Ansel's relentless rhythm from behind and Kylo's thrusts, my body was a vessel of ecstasy that quivered with each dual penetration and their movements began to synchronize.

“Fuck, Ave,” Ansel groaned from behind me. His hands gripped my hips with a possessiveness that sent shivers through me. “Your ass is so goddamn tight.”

“I'll be sure to put that on my resume.” My sarcasm was blunted by the waves of pleasure cresting within me.

“Damn right you will,” Kylo chuckled as he drove into me with a force that left no room for laughter—only gasps and the sound of my holes being stretched.

Betrayal and revenge had been my fuck-buddies for so long, but now they lay forgotten outside the bedroom door, replaced by these two men who demanded all of me and offered themselves in return.

“More,” I rasped, the word torn from my throat as their rhythm built to a frenzy. “Don't you dare stop.”

Kylo's hand snaked down to where our bodies met and his fingers coaxed more pleasure from me as he massaged my clit. “We've got you, Averill. We're not going anywhere.”

“God, you're both so fucking ravenous,” I gasped, the words barely escaping between sharp breaths as they moved inside me. The room echoed with our collective panting, the slick sounds of our bodies in motion created a melody of raw desire.

“I can’t get enough of you,” Ansel grunted from behind me. His fingers dug into my hips, claiming me with every thrust. “You’re... incredible.”

Their hands roamed over my tattoos, tracing the inked history of my past lives, each touch igniting a different story—a different death—within my memory. But it wasn’t the pain of the past that surged through me now; it was pleasure, pure and consuming.

“Keep talking, boys,” My body betrayed my cool demeanor with its desperate arching for more. “Your dirty talk is almost as good as your—oh!”

A sudden shift in angle, and Ansel hit a spot that made my vision blur, a strangled sound caught in my throat. Kylo’s thumb found my clit again and rubbed circles that sent jolts of electricity snapping through my veins. The room spun, or maybe that was just my mind trying to keep up.

“Fuck, Averill,” Kylo murmured. “Feel how wet you are... how much you want this.” His hands slid up my torso and came to rest on my breasts, thumbs flicking over my nipples in a rhythm that matched his relentless thrusts.

And there it was again—that growing crescendo of need that threatened to consume me whole. I clung to them, my nails digging into Kylo’s shoulders, my ass pressing against Ansel’s pelvis, greedy for every bit of friction I could get.

“Please...” It was a plea, a prayer, a demand—all wrapped up in a single word that vibrated through the charged air. My detective’s mind, usually so well-versed at piecing together puzzles, was blissfully empty except for the overwhelming love and lust I felt for the two men who unraveled me thread by thread.

“Almost there, babe,” Kylo’s thrusts became erratic as he sought our mutual undoing.

“Let go, Averill,” Ansel coaxed, his voice a deep baritone that resonated inside my chest. “We’ve got you.”

I was close, so damn close. The city might have been a swirling mass of shadows and secrets outside, but there, in that

room, the only thing that mattered was the heat of their skin against mine, the strength of their arms holding me, and the promise of an ecstasy that would surely wash away every last scar etched into my soul.

The world narrowed down to the raw pulse of pleasure, a torrent about to break free. I could almost hear the darkened skies of New York outside our window, whispering for me to let go, to surrender to the storm inside.

“Christ, you’re—” Kylo cut off with a grunt as I clenched around him, drawing him deeper into the velvet of my body.

“Good?” A smirk curled my lips even as my vision started to blur.

“Perfect,” they both said in unison, like their souls were synced or some shit.

The tension coiled tighter inside me, a spring wound to its limit. My breaths came in ragged pants that matched the erratic beat of their cocks inside me, their thrusts turning desperate, seeking that edge.

I shattered. The climax ripped through me in a cataclysmic wave that dragged cries from my throat that drowned out the city’s ballade. They followed, a duo of release that filled me with their cum, their strength, their everything.

“Fuck... Averill...” Kylo’s voice was a rough whisper.

“Beautiful,” Ansel breathed out in the aftermath of our shared whirlwind.

We collapsed together, a tangle of limbs and satisfaction, the bed a makeshift raft adrift in the aftermath of our storm. My breaths came heavy and mingled with theirs in a rhythm slowed to lazy drifts. The room held the electric charge of what we’d done, the air thick with the scent of sex and secrets.

“Rain check on any more witty comebacks,” I murmured, the effort too much when every inch of me thrummed with satisfaction.

Lying there, with Kylo’s chest pressed against my back and Ansel’s arm draped over my waist, I was caught on an

emotional rollercoaster.

“Never thought... you’d surrender, Averill,” Kylo muttered. His breath was warm on my neck and tickled the tiny hairs there.

“Guess it’s true what they say about there being a first time for everything.”

“Or two,” Ansel smirked and his fingers traced idle patterns on my hip. “You okay?”

I let out a snort, because what else could I do when faced with the epitome of male concern post-earth-shattering sex? “I’m lying here sandwiched between Captain planet and Detective Beefcake. How could I not be?”

“Detective Beefcake, huh?” Kylo murmured and amusement laced his tone as he nuzzled into my hair. “I think I can live with that one.”

“Should get it printed on your badge,” I suggested and tried to ignore the way my heart did somersaults. “No wait! T-shirts.”

Their hands, still moving with a tenderness that left scorch marks on my skin, didn’t help my whirlwind of emotions. Their touch was a promise, one I wasn’t sure I was ready to keep, even as my body sang its agreement with every caress.

Maybe I was crazy for letting them in, for letting myself fall into this unconventional setup, but as the rain continued to fall and their steady breathing lulled me toward sleep, I couldn’t deny the simple truth: for the first time in forever, I felt like I wasn’t facing the world alone. And maybe, just maybe, that wasn’t such a bad thing.

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTEEN

Golden sunlight filtered through the curtains of Ansel's dining room and cast a warm glow over the spread of breakfast that was more a display of hedonism than a meal. Fresh fruits glistened beside an assortment of pastries and exotic cheeses, while the rich scent of fresh coffee hung in the air like an intoxicating promise. As I sat at the table with Ansel and Kylo, my appetite wasn't for food; it was for them. The memories of last night's tangled bodies and fevered moans clung to me tighter than the silk robe I'd thrown on.

"Pass the sugar, would you, Averill?" Ansel's voice sliced through my daydream. I obliged mechanically and my fingers brushed against his as I did. My mind, however, feasted on a different kind of breakfast—one where I was sprawled across this exact table, legs wide open, their mouths taking turns sending waves of pleasure coursing through my clit instead of nibbling on these fucking French croissants.

"Thinking about dessert already?" Kylo's smirk cut deeper than any knife could carve the fancy butter that sat on the table between us. He knew exactly where my thoughts were, the bastard.

"Only if it's served hot and comes in two servings," I smirked back hungrily.

My gaze flickered between them as I set down my coffee cup with a deliberate clink. "What's our next play for catching Oswin Yorke?"

Ansel leaned back, the picture of casual confidence. “Actually, I have a lead. Oswin’s got a job tonight at ‘Le Etoile’—that five-star place downtown.”

“Great.” I rolled my eyes. “So which one of you is going to slip into a cocktail dress? Because I’ll be sitting in the surveillance van with popcorn watching this shitshow unfold.”

“Ha-ha,” Ansel dryly retorted, but Kylo’s hand suddenly found mine under the table—a grip firm with unexpected authority.

“Actually, Averill, you’re not getting off that easy. You owe me a night of playing the doting wife,” Kylo declared and his thumb grazed my knuckles provocatively. “Last time we played house, Ansel got to fuck my fake wife, remember? Tonight, it’s my turn to keep you close.”

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath and heat pooled low in my belly. Was it from the danger of the mission or from the idea of pretending to be Kylo’s anything?

“This could be the chance to clear my dad’s name and—” I swallowed, feeling the weight of years of betrayal and loss heavy on my chest—“and maybe find justice for my mom.”

“Then we’ll make it count,” Kylo’s gaze locked onto mine intensely. “Whatever it takes, right?”

“Right,” I breathed, and the word felt like a vow that bound me to him, to this mission, to a future that could either save me or damn me forever.

“Let’s just hope Oswin doesn’t mistake you two lovebirds for his next targets,” Somehow Ansel managed to sound both amused and deadly serious at the same time.

“Let’s hope he does,” I countered with a smirk. “It might be the closest thing I get to a happy ending in this fucked-up fairy tale.”



THE REST of the day was spent shopping for my disguise. I didn’t care. I was too busy enjoying the way their eyes raked over me. I sat on a plush velvet stool in front of a three-way

mirror, as a wave of designer dresses were paraded in front of us.

“This one,” Ansel handed a deep red gown to the fawning sales person. “It’ll make her look like she bled money from half the men in this city.”

My pussy drooled so much I was afraid of messing up the imported fabrics.

The door groaned shut behind Kylo. His fingers traced down my bare skin, carefully zipping me into the garment that pooled on the floor around me. It was a velvety black dream, a strapless gown that clung to my curves and made me feel like I was ready to accept an Oscar. I felt his heat seep into my back and goosebumps scattered across my skin. I shivered under his touch, but I refused to let him see me sweat—literally or figuratively.

“What do you think?”

“You look stunning,” he murmured, his voice rough with desire.

I bit my lip nervously and I glanced around the room, trying to find something else to focus on besides him. But he was quick to react, grabbing my jaw and forcing my eyes back to his.

“Don’t look away from me,” he growled and his fingers dug into my skin softly. “Not again.”

We were interrupted by a knock at the door. Ansel appeared, a look of wonder in his eyes as he saw me in the lavish dress. “Are you guys ready?”

“As ready as a 4 AM booty call.” I smirked.

Ansel rolled his eyes, but I could see a hint of amusement in his expression. “Let’s hope you can keep those legs together tonight.”

“Well, if you’re done admiring each other,” Kylo grumbled and his hand lingered on my hip possessively, “We have a party to crash.”



THE RESTAURANT'S chandelier cast a kaleidoscope of colors across our table—a distraction I didn't need. Across from me, Kylo played the part of my enamored date with an ease. His fingers brushed mine as he handed me the wine list, but it wasn't the vintage reds that made my pulse race.

"Remember, we're here for Yorke," Kylo murmured, his voice low enough for only me to hear. The reminder was pointless; the memory of last night's threesome was a relentless undertow that dragged my focus under.

My eyes scanned the room. Somewhere in the sea of luxury and fake smiles, Yorke lurked, but all I could think about was how Ansel and Kylo had made me come undone mere hours ago.

*Focus, Averill.* Clearing my dad's name, avenging my mom—those were the goals, not reliving the way Kylo's teeth had grazed my—

His hand landed on my knee, and I snapped back to the present. "Thinking about it again?" Kylo's thumb traced circles on my inner thigh.

"Maybe," I tried to sound annoyed rather than aroused. "It's not exactly easy to forget."

"Good," he breathed out and his fingers inched higher, hidden beneath the table. I stiffened and my fork clattered against my plate. "Because ever since I first felt your cunt squeezing me, I haven't been able to think about anything else."

"Kylo," I warned quietly through gritted teeth as heat pooled between my thighs at his words.

"Relax," he laughed and his hand moved further up my leg until his thumb grazed the edge of my panties. "I'm just being a good husband, taking care of my wife's needs. Shhh." His other hand reached for his glass, a perfect picture of nonchalance as one finger slipped beneath the silk barrier of my underwear, teasing the soaked lips he found there.

"Fuck," I gripped the edge of the table as his finger slid inside me. My heart thundered in my chest, a frantic drumbeat



that drowned out the ambient noise of the restaurant. The risk of getting caught should've been a deterrent, but the thrill only heightened the sensation. Each stroke sent electric sparks coursing through me.

"Quiet," Kylo reminded me. His face was serene like he was discussing the fucking weather or something while his fingers worked magic between my trembling legs. "We wouldn't want to draw attention."

"Dammit, Kylo," I moaned under my breath and bit my lip to stifle any more sounds.

"Like that, do you?" His voice was like velvet, dark and smooth. I nodded and barely managed to keep my composure when his pace quickened.

"More," I gasped and leaned forward. My elbows were on the table, my head bowed like I studied the menu. In reality, I was seconds away from shattering, my mind awash with the potent blend of desire and danger.

"Greedy girl," he scolded and his finger curled inside me, hitting spots that blurred my vision.

"Please," I whispered, the word escaping me like a prayer, and Kylo obliged, his skilled manipulation coaxing my body toward an explosive release.

The pressure mounted. Oswin Yorke could have been making his move any minute, and there I was, struggling to keep my moans as silent as the secret we harbored between us.

"Hard to concentrate?" Kylo's voice was a husky whisper, so close to my ear it sent shivers down my spine. "Just pretend you're really into the steak. You always were good at faking it."

I shot him a glare, but it melted into a gasp as he hit a particularly sensitive spot.

Damn him. And damn this game of pretend that felt dangerously real.

"Try harder," I managed through gritted teeth, my hand gripping the stem of the wine glass like a lifeline. I took a sip

but the rich red failed to quench the fire he stoked inside me.

“Your acting skills need work.” His thumb circled, slow and deliberate and a smirk played on his lips as he watched me squirm. “You look too... flushed for a woman simply enjoying her dinner.”

“Shut up,” I whimpered back and forced a smile for anyone who might glance our way. “Or you’ll ruin the mission with your damn ego. Remember, we’re just two lovebirds out for a fancy meal,” I reminded him, even as my body betrayed me, succumbing to the waves of pleasure he orchestrated.

“Of course, darling,” he played along and raised his glass to mine with a clink. But his other hand never paused, relentless in its pursuit, driving me towards the edge while the weight of our task pressed down on me.

“Kylo,” I breathed, barely audible. The intensity of the moment wrapped around me like the velvet shadows of the room. I needed release—both from his maddening touch and the burden of avenging my mother’s death.

“Almost there, aren’t you?” he teased, knowing full well the power he had over me.

“Almost...” I echoed, my focus fracturing as the pleasure built to a climax.

“Keep it together,” his eyes never left mine. “We can’t afford a scene.”

The murmur of posh chatter was like a lullaby compared to the symphony Kylo played beneath my dress. My back arched imperceptibly as his thumb grazed just the right spot, and he smiled at me with the calm of a man just having dinner with his wife.

“Shh,” he cautioned with a sly grin. “You wouldn’t want our audience to overhear your reviews.”

I bit down on my lip and tasted blood—a small pain that grounded me to this act. Each stroke was precise, intentional, driving me closer to the edge. I could feel every detail: the slight callouses on his fingers, the warmth of his palm against my thigh, the relentless pressure that promised release. He

found that sacred spot inside me and coaxed a silent scream from my lips. My vision blurred, the chandeliers above melting into a sea of golden light as pleasure coiled tight in my belly.

“God, I need—” I started, biting back the end of that sentence.

“What do you need?” he taunted, knowing full well the answer as he continued his maddening pace. “Come for me, Averill,” he demanded, and I did. My climax washed over me in a silent wave of ecstasy and my nails dug into the white linen tablecloth.

My breathing slowed and I dared to raise my eyes to meet his, finding nothing but smug satisfaction in his gaze. He withdrew his hand, now glistening with my cum, and before I could protest, dipped his fingertip into the leftover whipped cream from our dessert.

“Clean them,” he commanded, his voice gravelly and smothered with his own raw need. With a glimmer of mischief in my eyes, I wrapped my lips around his fingers, tasting myself mingled with the sugary rush of cream. Hunger in each slow stroke of my tongue as I lapped him clean, while he watched with an intensity that ignited fires within me. His gaze held a predator’s gleam, sharp and hungry.

“Good girl,” he praised and withdrew his fingers.

Just then, movement at the periphery of my vision caught my attention. Oswin Yorke rose from his table and his tall frame cut through the crowd like a knife. “Time to go,” I said and signaled the waiter for the check with a forced calm I didn’t feel.

We followed Oswin out of the restaurant, the night air crisp against the heat that still radiated from my body. But before we could make our next move, the cold metal of a gun barrel pressed against my forehead. Oswin’s silhouette loomed over us like an omen of death.

“Hello, Averill,” he said, his voice smooth and deadly. “Fancy meeting you here.”

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTEEN

My lashes fluttered open, and the world spun into focus, the edges smudged by confusion. I was tethered to a kitchen chair, wrists and ankles chafing against the cold restraints. The throbbing in my skull was a relentless reminder of the ambush, the kind of pain that crawls under your skin and sets up camp. I blinked away the haze and memories flickered like faulty street lights in the back alley of my mind.

Oswin's smug face.

Kylo—*shit, Kylo*—going down hard, his body crumpling to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. I should've seen it coming, should've been faster, should've—

“Yo ho, look at her go,” a voice trilled from across the kitchen and cut through my mental replay. It was Oswin, bastard extraordinaire. He bopped his head to a rap song blaring from the speakers.

I listened, and cringed, as he belted the verse word for word- but very obviously skipping over the n-word.

“Really? Censoring the lyrics?” I grumbled, my voice laced with disbelief. “What's the matter, Oswin? Not feeling gangsta enough to say it while a black person's in the room? Or is it because you know I'd kick you fucking ass if you did?”

“Darling Averill,” Oswin crooned as he turned down the music with a smirk on his lips, “I'm a mass murderer, not a

racist. There's a fine line between artistic expression and outright insensitivity. Even I have standards."

"Wow, how noble of you," I snarked and rolled my eyes so hard they threatened to lodge themselves in the back of my head.

"Besides," he continued and pirouetted around the kitchen like some deranged ballerino, "one does have an image to maintain. Can't be slinging slurs when you've got a reputation as the most stylish killer in the five boroughs."

"Call Vogue," I said dryly. "They're missing their cover psycho." My arms strained against the restraints, but deep down, I knew escape wasn't an option. Not yet. Not until I played this twisted shitshow of a game Oswin had set up.

"Patience, my petulant PI," he teased and reached for something in a drawer. "You'll be free soon enough. But first, breakfast."

"Can't wait to see what culinary bullshit you've cooked up to go with this delightful kidnapping," I muttered and eyed him warily. There was a method to his madness, there had to be. And I needed to suss it out before I could make my move. Because one thing was damn sure: Averill Winslow doesn't play the victim. Not for long.

"Do all serial killers take cooking classes, or is this just your special way of tenderizing the meat?" My voice was as sharp as the knife I wished I had in my hand. Oswin's back was turned to me as he fiddled with whatever stupid dish he was making, but I knew he could hear the ice in my words.

"Ah, Averill, always quick with a barb. It's part of your charm, really," he said without turning around. His tone was light, infuriatingly amused. "And it's not serial killing, darling. It's more like... selective chaos."

"Call it what you want," My voice was a low growl as my hatred for him bubbled up like acid reflux. "Doesn't change the fact that you're a murderer." The word hung between us, heavy and undeniable.

“Murderer” was too clean of a word for what he’d done. He’d carved a hole in my life that nothing could fill. He took her—my mother, the one person who’d made this shitty world bearable. And for what? Some twisted sense of time-traveling justice?

“Selective chaos,” I laughed and leaned into the bitterness that clung to my tongue. “Is that what you told my mom before you killed her? Made it sound like some kind of sick fucking favor?”

Oswin paused and the playful edge of his voice dulled for a moment. When he faced me, there was a shadow in his eyes that hadn’t been there before. “You think you’ve got it all figured out, don’t you?”

“Figured out? No. But I know enough.” I squirmed to test the strength of the restraints. “I know you’re tangled up in her death. And I swear on her grave, you’ll pay for that.”

“Whoa, love. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he said and turned back to his work, trying to brush off my accusation like crumbs from a cutting board. “Patience, Averill. All will be revealed in due course.”

“Revealed? Here’s a revelation for you—I hope you choke on your fucking secrets.” I wanted to hurt him, to make him feel a fraction of the pain he’d made me feel.

“Breakfast is almost ready,” he announced, oblivious—or indifferent—to the anger that raged inside me.

“Nothing builds an appetite quite like being tied to a chair by the man who ruined your life.”

“Ruined, or just... redirected?” he teased, but there was a flicker of something else behind those words. Regret? Doubt? Hard to say.

“Redirected straight to hell,” I seethed. “But don’t worry, Oswin. I’ll be dragging you down there with me.”

Oswin’s laughter fizzled into the air like cheap champagne and his body swayed to some internal melody as he shuffled around the kitchen. His feet seemed to glide over the sleek tile floor, hips swinging in time with the beat of a song only he

could hear. The bastard was dancing—literally dancing—while I sat bound and fuming.

“Music in my head,” he said, answering the unasked question, “makes for better company than most.” He shimmied past me with a rhythmic sway in his step that was infuriatingly graceful.

“Must be a lonely fucking concert,” I snapped, but he only grinned, the edges of his lips curling up like they held secrets too dark for daylight.

“Loneliness is relative, my dear.”

“Relative? Is that what we’re calling it now?” I spat. “Because I call it being a grade-A asshole.”

He laughed again, a sound that grated against my nerves, and then swept an arm dramatically over the countertop cluttered with breakfast fixings. “But even assholes need to eat,” he cracked eggs into a pan in a way that made me want to crack his skull.

“Looking forward to the day you poison yourself,” I muttered under my breath and watched as he pranced to the rhythm of his own madness.

“Ah, but today is not that day.” He winked at me, and I resisted the urge to vomit.

How could someone so vile manage to move like that?

“Where’s the goddamn spatula?” Oswin mumbled to himself and rummaged through drawers. A mild annoyance flickered across his features—a rare crack in his otherwise unfazed attitude.

“Maybe check your ego, plenty of room in there.” Bitterness oozed from my every word.

“Feisty,” he said without looking back. Then, with a dramatic pause, he rolled up his sleeve, revealing a myriad of ink sprawled across his skin. Tattoos danced along his arm: symbols, numbers, objects—all likely steeped in stories I didn’t give a damn about.

He pressed a finger against a particular tattoo—a spatula etched near his elbow—and it shimmered under his touch. With a swift motion, like he was tearing reality itself, he plucked it free from his skin, leaving behind no mark, no blood, just the perverse magic that seemed to ooze from his pores.

“Magic spatula,” he announced with a magician’s flair and twirled it in his fingers. “Saves time.”

“Show-off.” I sneered, but inside, my stomach twisted with a cocktail of awe and revulsion.

“Jealousy doesn’t suit you,” he taunted and flipped an omelet with a flick of his wrist.

“Neither does kidnapping, but here we are.”

“Touché.” His voice remained light, but I caught the smallest shadow of something darker cross his face. For a moment, I thought I saw him for what he really was—a man haunted by ghosts of his own making.

“What else you got? A rabbit under your hat? Or maybe just more bullshit?”

“You’d be surprised what I can pull out when the need arises,” he said with a wink.

“Please.” I rolled my eyes. “What? Did you die in a fucking cooking accident? Is that why you’ve got that tattooed? Because that’s the only way we get these damned things, isn’t it?”

*Dying sucks enough without coming back branded by shitty household cutlery.*

“Ah, but it’s not about the object, Averill,” he said and slid the omelet onto a plate with. “It’s about the moment. The significance. And trust me,” he leaned closer and his voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper, “a spatula can be very significant.”

“Fuck significance.” I fought against the restraints and the leather bit into my skin. “And fuck your cryptic bullshit. You



think you're so clever, don't you? With your goddamn parlor tricks and your stupid, smartass grin."

"Language, darling," he chided, but the smirk on his face told me he loved every syllable of my anger.

"Go to hell. And take your fucking breakfast with you."

"Temper, temper," he tutted, but his eyes gleamed with something close to respect—or was it a challenge? "All this fire, and yet here you are, my pretty little phoenix. All tied up and nowhere to fly."

He slid the plate across the granite countertop and made my stomach growl despite my anger. The aroma of crispy bacon and perfectly scrambled eggs wafted up to me and taunted my senses. I watched, ravenous more for freedom than food, as he approached with a kitchen knife that caught the light like a wink from fate.

"Time to eat," Oswin declared, his voice smooth as the blade he used to saw through the leather straps that bound my wrists. My skin tingled with the return of blood flow. I rubbed at the red marks left behind and glared up at him.

"What's your angle, Oswin? Feeding the prisoner before the execution?"

He ignored my jab and moved to my ankles with casual precision. The clink of metal and leather seemed too intimate in the expansive space. "Eat, Averill," he urged and cut away the last of my restraints. "Or don't. But I'd hate for the story to go cold along with your breakfast."

"Oh, you're telling fucking bedtime tales now?"

"Only the ones with twisted endings."

I could barely hold in my angry cackle. "What makes you think I want to hear any story you have to spin? What's keeping me from snapping your neck right now and calling it a night?"

"Sit. Eat." He gestured to the chair I had been bound to moments ago, now just another piece of furniture. "And I'll tell you all about your mother."

The choice hung in the air, heavy and humid, and mingled with the scent of the breakfast feast. Seeking revenge or unraveling secrets—both fucked-up menu options.

“Revenge is a dish best served cold,” The hunger for truth gnawed at me more fiercely than the need to hurt him. “But I’m guessing there’s no doggy bag for later, huh?”

“Only one serving per customer,” Oswin replied and the corners of his mouth twitched with amusement.

“Fine,” I groaned and speared a piece of bacon with more force than necessary. “Serve it up then, Chef. Let’s hear this fairytale of yours.”

And with that, I braced myself for the tale that would either feed my soul or poison it.

## CHAPTER

# NINETEEN

I plunked down at the penthouse kitchen counter, a high-rise prison courtesy of Oswin Yorke. The plate in front of me was an Instagram-worthy breakfast—eggs done just right, bacon crisp but not burnt, and toast slathered with butter that was probably churned by angels or some shit. I forked a piece of egg into my mouth and cursed internally because goddammit, it was delicious. Oswin, the man who kidnapped me, played chef this morning, and every bite was another reminder that I was under his control.

“Enjoying it?” he asked. His voice oozed self-satisfaction from across the counter.

“Would rather choke on dry cereal,” I muttered and shoveled in another mouthful while I glared daggers at him. This guy was starting to chip away at my defenses, and that pissed me off more than the kidnapping itself.

Up close, he was unfairly handsome. His sharp jawline and piercing eyes were the kind that’d make you consider sinning if you weren’t careful. Annoyance prickled under my skin like static. I wanted to hate him—needed to—but the bastard made it hard.

“Look, Averill.” His tone shifted with a strange seriousness that replaced his usual theatrics. “Your mother, Annette, she framed me for her death...and your father’s imprisonment.” He leaned back against the fridge, arms folded, and watched me for a reaction.

“Is that supposed to be your twisted version of a sob story?” I scoffed and pushed the plate away. “Why the hell would she do that?”

“I wish I knew.” Oswin’s face darkened. “But there’s a bigger game at play here, and we’re both pawns.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m no one’s pawn,” My words were a blade aimed straight at his over-inflated ego.

“Believe me or not, it’s the truth,” he said and his eyes held mine. It was infuriating how they seemed to glitter with secrets, daring me to dive in and uncover them.

“You’re telling me my dead mother, who I’ve mourned for years, framed you for her own death? And somehow involved my father too?” My voice dripped with disbelief.

The nerve of this ass hat.

“Look past what you feel and see what is real, Averill,” Oswin said. His voice was infuriatingly soft and coaxing, trying to slip past my defenses by rhyming like fucking Dr. Seuss.

“Real is a stretch.” I shook my head and tried to dispel the fog of his words. “I need proof. I need... backup.”

“Backup?” He raised an eyebrow and the corner of his lip twitched like he found my defiance amusing.

“Let me call Kylo and Ansel,” I felt a surge of power with their names on my lips. Their presence was like a shield, a reminder that I wasn’t alone.

“And why would I do that?” Oswin tilted his head, almost like he genuinely gave a damn.

“Because they’re part of this now, whether you like it or not. And because I’m not playing your little game without my cards on the table,” I planted my feet firmly. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” His tone was innocent, but the crooked smile told another story.

“Like I’m the next dish you want to devour.” The words tumbled out before I could stop them.

“Would you blame me?” He leaned in, close enough that I could feel the warmth of his breath against my skin.

“Back off, or I’ll—” I began, but faltered, trapped by the intensity in his gaze.

“Or you’ll what?” he challenged softly, dangerously.

“Just shut up and start talking before I shove this fork through your eye socket.” My eyes were already doing their fair share of throwing daggers.

“Fine.” Oswin sighed, “Your mother isn’t the saint you think she was.”

“Saint? Hardly.” I scoffed and crossed my arms defensively. “But she’s not here to defend herself, is she? Convenient for spinning your little tales.”

“They’re not tales, Averill.” He turned to face me and the kitchen light caught the sharp angles of his face. “Annette Winslow framed me. She and her damned henchmen have been on my tail through decades, centuries even. It’s like a sick game of cat and mouse across time.”

“Time traveling henchmen?” I echoed and raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like a shitty B-movie plot.”

“Believe what you want,” Oswin replied with an edge, “but those same henchmen would be after you if they knew about your... talents.”

“Which brings us to why you ‘kidnapped’ me.” The word tasted like vinegar on my tongue. “If you need my help so badly, why the hell didn’t you just ask?”

“Ask?” He gave a dry laugh. “You would’ve slammed the door in my face. Besides, we’re not exactly on friendly terms, are we?”

“Understatement of the fucking century.” I glared.

“Your abilities, they’re raw, untrained. But mine... I’ve honed them over lifetimes.” He rolled up his sleeve and

revealed ink-black tattoos that twisted and writhed like living things.

“Show-off,” I muttered, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

“Each of these marks,” he traced a finger over a dagger-shaped tattoo, “represents a death, a lesson learned. And now, I can summon them at will.”

“Handy party trick,” I said, but my mind raced. His control over time, over his deaths—it was something I’d never seen before.

“Stick with me, Averill,” Oswin’s voice was low and persuasive, like a devil tempting me with forbidden fruit. “And I’ll show you how to master your gift.” Oswin lounged against the kitchen island like he owned the place - which, infuriatingly, he did.

“Isn’t it a tad cliché?” I asked, my tone laced with venom as I eyed his nonchalant posture. “Kidnapping the damsel, penthouse prison... What’s next, tying me to railroad tracks?”

“But you’re no damsel, Averill. Far from it,” he reached for the coffee pot. The tattoos on his arms shifted with his movements, mesmerizing and maddening all at once. “I prefer your brutal honesty. It suits you.”

I snatched the mug he slid across the counter.

“Your mother played us both,” His voice took on a hard edge. “She’s more twisted than a pretzel in a tornado.”

“You’ve got a way with words.” I rolled my eyes.

“Among other things,” His scent, a mix of leather and rain, was a shock to my senses. I should have recoiled, but instead, I found myself leaning into it.

“Look,” I sighed and set the already half empty mug down with more force than necessary. “If we’re going to do this—whatever this is—I need transparency. No more games.”

“Games are overrated anyway,” Oswin conceded and straightened up. “Besides, I think we’d both rather to play for keeps.”

“Kylo and Ansel need to know what’s going on. They deserve that much.” I pushed away from the counter, the half-eaten breakfast a testament to my stubbornness. Because holy shit, it was delicious.

Oswin leaned back against the kitchen island with his arms crossed over his chest as he studied me with those infuriatingly intense eyes. “And you think they can waltz in here and fix everything?”

“Better than you’ve managed so far,” I shot back.

The nerve of this guy. He kidnaps me, turns my life upside down, and now he’s challenging my choice of fuckbuddies?

“Fine,” Oswin relented with a sigh and slid his phone across the surface towards me. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you when things get even more tangled.”

I snatched up the phone and my thumb hovered over the screen. A wicked pulse of heat threaded through me at his proximity.

“Thanks,” I muttered and punched in the numbers. I tried to ignore the way my skin buzzed where his sleeve brushed mine.

“Anytime, detective,” he drawled and the corners of his mouth turned up in a smirk that should’ve been illegal. My heart did a little skip, and I wanted to hate it, hate him for making me feel this way—conflicted, anxious, and hell, if I wasn’t careful, attracted.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY

The pounding on the door was like a goddamn marching band set up camp outside Oswin's penthouse. His glorified lair felt more like a prison than any place with velvet sofas had any right to feel. I was halfway through calling him out on his cryptic bullshit when Kylo and Ansel burst in.

I watched Kylo's eyes blaze as they took in the scene—me, unrestrained, thank fuck, and Oswin, looking like the cat that ate the canary.

“Are you okay, Ave?” He was at my side in a flash. His hands ghosted over me and searched for injuries that weren't there.

“Chill, I'm not the one who looks like he's about to pop a blood vessel,” I muttered, but I let myself lean into his touch for just a second.

Before Oswin could open his mouth to probably spout some infuriatingly vague nonsense, Kylo's fist connected with his face. The crack echoed off the walls, and I couldn't help but wince. Not out of sympathy for Oswin, hell no, but because punches like that tend to hurt the giver too.

“Ow! My, my, Kylo, such passion.” Oswin wiped a trickle of blood from his busted lip with an exaggerated gesture of grace. “We must spar more often. It's quite invigorating.”

“Shut up, Oswin,” Kylo snapped, and I silently agreed, even though a part of me found Oswin's flamboyance oddly entertaining. It was like watching a peacock fight a rooster—



colorful, ridiculous, and bound to end with feathers everywhere.

“Kylo, dial down the testosterone,” I said and placed a hand on his arm. “I have this under control.”

“Control is an illusion, darling Averill,” Oswin chimed in, still with that infuriating smirk plastered across his too-pretty face. “But if you must persist in this aggressive hospitality, do remind your caveman here that I bruise like a summer peach.”

“Next time aim for his throat, Kylo. It might improve his singing voice,” I groaned and earned a snort from Ansel and a warning glare from Kylo.

“Let’s focus,” I had to take charge before these two started measuring dicks or whatever. We had a snake to interrogate, and as much as Oswin’s dramatics grated on me, I needed answers more than I needed to watch him eat his fancy drapes or whatever the rich did when they got bored.

“Answers, Oswin,” I demanded and fixed him with a stare that had made grown men squirm. “And no more games. Or the next punch won’t be coming from pretty boy over there.”

“Promises, promises,” he replied, but the flicker of exhaustion in his eyes told me he knew I meant business. I always do.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Kylo growled. His voice low and dangerous when he reached for my arm, but I shrugged him off.

“We can’t blow this popsicle stand until we’ve got what we came for.” But goddamn, I had to admit he looked hot with protective rage etched into every line of his body. The way those muscles tensed under his shirt...

*Focus, Averill.* Every time Kylo went into protector mode, it sent my pulse racing like a damn teenager with a crush. And standing there, looking like he wanted to murder someone for me, was doing all sorts of things to my self-control and my panties.

“Ansel, you’re the brain-whisperer. Can you do your voodoo on him?” I jerked my chin towards Oswin. “I want to

know if he's full of shit about my mom."

Ansel's face had taken on a paleness that didn't sit right with me. He was always the steady one, but now his eyes flickered with something close to fear.

"Look, Averill," Ansel's voice was laced with caution, "I'm not saying I *can't* do it. I can mind-dive like a champ, but this... This could have consequences we're not ready for."

"Consequences?" My tone was sharp. "You think I don't know about consequences? My whole damn life is a twisted web of them."

"Sure, but this is different," Ansel countered and ran a hand through his hair.

"Spit it out then. What's got you so spooked?"

He hesitated, and it took all I had not to snap at him to hurry the hell up. Patience wasn't exactly my forte.

"It's just...if Oswin isn't feeding us a line of bullshit and Annette—your mom—is actually alive..." He trailed off and left the implication hanging like a noose.

"Go on," I prodded and felt the room spin slightly around me. The idea that she could be out there, after all these years, felt like a sucker punch to the gut.

"Then she must have some serious tech at her disposal," he met my gaze. "Tech that can detect surges of paranormal activity. If we all dive into Oswin's head, it's going to send up a flare. A beacon with our exact location. It's one thing to take three people like before, but four? It's too much to hide. Are you sure it's worth the risk?"

"Am I sure?" My laugh was bitter, a sound that carried the weight of years spent chasing shadows. "Hell yes, I'm sure. Knowing if my mom's alive trumps playing it safe. I've been in the dark long enough."

"Alright then." Ansel's jaw clenched as he resigned himself to my decision. "Just remember, I warned you."

"Warnings are for people who have something to lose," I muttered and thought about the trail of destruction my life had

become. “And let’s face it, I’m not exactly holding a winning hand here.”

Kylo watched me, his expression hard to read. Was it concern? Disapproval? Whatever it was, it stoked the fire in my belly, a reminder that he was there, with me, in this fucked-up moment.

I shot a glance at Ansel, who looked like he’d rather dive into a pool of piranhas than crack open Oswin’s skull with his mind. But this wasn’t about comfort zones; it was about digging up the skeletons that had been buried under layers of deceit.

“Get ready, Oswin,” I warned. “You’re about to become an open book.”

“Thrilling,” Oswin cooed. “Do try to keep the drooling to a minimum while you’re rummaging around in there.”

Ansel shifted uncomfortably and looked anywhere but at me. “We’ll remember that when we’re dodging bullets or whatever shitstorm we’re calling to our doorstep.”

“Invitations are for tea parties and pity fucks, neither of which we’ll be engaging in tonight boys.”

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-ONE

“A lright, Ansel, let’s see if your parlor tricks are worth a damn,” I eyed him dubiously while Kylo gave me a reassuring nod and Oswin... well, he just smirked, the same way a cat does before it pounces on a particularly stupid mouse.

Ansel stepped closer, his brow furrowed. “You asked for this, Averill,” he warned, his tone somber like he was about to perform a fucking exorcism instead of some mental hocus-pocus.

With a deep breath Ansel’s lips parted, and from them flowed a cloud of mystical green smoke. It swirled around us, thick and smelling like a mix between eucalyptus and something way older, and way more strange. The smoke surrounded us, tingling against my skin like static, and the world shifted underneath our feet.

Suddenly, the air was colder, and the scent of antiseptic stung my nostrils. Harsh fluorescent lights flickered above and cast long, ominous shadows across the concrete walls of what appeared to be an underground government facility—a memory, a slice of hell from Oswin’s childhood.

“Jesus—” Kylo started to curse but choked off when we heard it—the sound of a child’s cries, high and desperate.

“Help! Please, someone help me!” The voice was unmistakably Oswin’s, younger but just as distinctive. Each scream, each plea, felt like a punch to the gut, and despite myself, I wished some adult had been there to rescue the kid.

“Ah, to be young and tortured again,” Oswin smirked from beside me, his voice bizarrely light. He watched his younger self with a detached amusement.

I watched him, really looked at him, and it clicked—this flamboyant, funny act was his armor. Underneath lay a man fractured by his past, pieced back together with wit and sheer willpower. I understood then why Oswin was absolutely crazy, and I felt a twinge of empathy for the guy. Not that I’d ever admit it out loud.

“Can we focus, please?” Ansel’s voice cut through the tension and pulled us back to the grim reality that played out before us. “We’re here for answers.”

“Right, the truth about Mommy Dearest,” I muttered, but the sight of little Oswin strapped to a chair with instruments looming ominously overhead, made my stomach churn. It was like watching a horror movie with the added bonus of knowing the victims personally.

Yay me.

“Remember, I’m one of the good guys,” Oswin said and met my gaze.

“Your definition of ‘good’ needs work,” I grumbled, but somewhere deep inside, a seed of understanding had taken root. Maybe Oswin wasn’t the villain of the story after all. Or maybe we were all just fifty shades of fucked up.

“Here’s one for the family album,” I breathed as she walked in—my mom. The woman whose lullabies were supposed to have shielded me from monsters was suddenly cast as the lead scientist in this twisted play.

“Progress report, Doctor,” my mother demanded. She coolly flipped through a clipboard like she was discussing the weather instead of children being prodded and poked like lab rats.

“Remarkable resilience,” replied a voice that was little more than a shadow to me. It belonged to a man obscured by the dark edges of the memory, his stature indicating authority, but his face lost to time.

“Is that so?” My mother’s eyebrow quirked with clinical interest. Her gaze scanned over Oswin, who writhed against the restraints with insanity etched into every line of his young face.

“Indeed. And we have another subject ready for comparison.” A lab assistant wheeled in a sight that made my heart stop—a little girl, no older than six, strapped down, her eyes wide with terror.

“Sweet Jesus, is that...?” Kylo’s voice trailed off and the unspoken realization hung heavy between us.

“Looks like someone’s been keeping secrets,” Oswin sang the words with his usual flamboyance.

“Shut it, Yorke,” I snapped, unable to tear my gaze away from the miniature version of myself. The same black hair, the same stark white stripe; it wasn’t just a coincidence. That was me. She was younger, scared, and utterly clueless about the role she played in this sick production but she was still me.

I tried to make sense of it all, to piece together this alternate childhood that clashed violently with the memories I clung to—of my mom’s gentle touch, my dad’s strong embrace, the warmth of home. This cold, clinical place couldn’t have been where I grew up.

“Careful. We don’t want them damaged...yet,” my mother instructed, her voice a scalpel slicing through my heart.

“Damaged? What the hell did they think we were? Fucking toys?” I growled under my breath and watched as the younger me squirmed against the straps. Her small body shook in pathetic efforts to break free.

“Easy, Averill. Breathe,” Ansel murmured beside me and his hand found mine in an anchor to the present.

But everything in me wished *she* had that- the scared little girl beside me. I may not have remembered it, but it was obvious all she needed was someone- anyone- to give a fuck about her.

“Breathing’s a luxury at this point,” I replied tersely but I squeezed his hand back. Grounding or not, I hated feeling

helpless, especially when it was my own past betraying me.

As the scene continued, my past self and Oswin were injected with something that made their struggles sluggish and their bodies eventually went limp. They looked like broken dolls discarded by a cruel child.

“Is this what you wanted me to see, Oswin?” My voice came out strangled, my insides a boiling mess of anger and confusion.

“Part of it,” he admitted and his eyes never left the past that unfolded before us. “I wanted you to know the truth.”

Truth was a double-edged sword—cutting deep and leaving scars that no amount of sarcasm could ever hide.

The sterile scent of antiseptic hung in the air, a stark contrast to the acrid fear that coated my throat. I watched in disbelief as they wheeled in a third child—a boy with a mop of unruly hair and an uncertain look in his eyes. My heart clenched painfully in recognition.

“Ansel?” The name was a whisper torn from my lips, a ghost of sound in the cold room of memory.

“Tell me again, what am I supposed to do?” Young Ansel’s voice was tentative, a far cry from the assured tone of the man I knew.

“Make her believe the narrative we’ve constructed,” my mother’s voice cut through the fog of confusion, authoritative and chilling. “Her mother is dead and never coming back.”

Betrayal surged inside me and bile rose in my throat.

That’s the lie they implanted? That she had died when, in reality, she had been there all along, orchestrating this madness?

“Is that even possible?” The skepticism in young Ansel’s tone was met with impatience.

“Your powers are beyond what you can imagine,” the scientist insisted. “Do it.”

The scene before me wavered as young Ansel approached our unconscious forms, his expression conflicted. He reached out, and I felt the echo of his power brush against my mind—an invasive thought weaving a story that wasn't mine.

“Mom,” I murmured in unison with my younger self, the word tainted with the sting of deceit.

“Shh,” Oswin’s voice was close, a hand on my shoulder grounding me in the present. “We need to see this through.”

“See this through?” I snapped back and jerked away from his touch. “I’m watching my life being rewritten like some sick bedtime story!” My tirade was cut short as the illusion dissolved, the green haze dissipating like smoke on the wind.

WE WERE BACK in Oswin’s penthouse. The expensive furniture and modern art clashed violently with the turmoil inside me. My gaze snapped to Ansel, my betrayal sharp like broken glass.

“Did you know about this?” My voice held an edge, each word a dagger aimed at his heart.

“Partly,” he admitted, and oh, how I wanted to hate him for it.

“Partly?” I echoed, my laugh hollow. “That’s a convenient piece of selective fucking memory, Ansel. What else are you hiding?”

“Let’s just take a second,” Ansel stepped forward with open palms.

“A second?” I snarled and the pain of betrayal morphed into fury. “You want a second after playing fucking puppet master with my memories?”

“Everything I’ve done—” Ansel began, but I wasn’t ready to hear excuses.

“Save it!” I cut him off, rage thick in my voice. “Just save your breath. Right now, I can’t decide who I despise more—the woman who gave birth to me or the asshole who played God with my mind!”



The silence was a living thing, thick and suffocating, as Ansel's plea hung in the air. I could barely digest one revelation before another sucker-punched me in the gut. How much of my life had been orchestrated by people pulling strings from the shadows? My fists clenched at my sides, nails digging into my palms.

Before anyone could answer, a strange noise pierced the tension—a low hum that seemed to vibrate through the penthouse walls. “Do you hear—” I was cut off by a thunderous explosion that rocked the foundation of the building.

The shockwave sent us flying like rag dolls. Glass shattered, and I felt myself hurtling backward before I slammed hard against something solid. Pain exploded in my shoulder, and stars danced across my vision.

“Down!” Ansel shouted over the ringing in my ears. Shards of glass and chunks of marble rained down around us. I rolled and felt the sharp bite of debris cut into my skin, a stinging reminder that this wasn't just another nightmare.

“Everyone okay?” Kylo's voice was strained, concern laced within every syllable.

I coughed and brushed dust and splinters from my hair. I tried to push myself up, but a weight pinned me to the floor. Panic flared in my chest, a wild thing clawing its way out.

“Can't... move,” I grunted and wrestled with the slab of wall that held me captive.

Then she appeared.

“Mom?” The word was a ghost on my lips.

She stood there, unfazed by the destruction, her icy gaze locked onto mine. Behind her, a SWAT team fanned out, their guns trained on us with mechanical precision.

“Hello, darling.” Her voice was the same tender caress from my childhood, now twisted into something dark and mocking. “Did you miss me?”

“Miss you?” I the sound was bitter and hollow as I tried not to choke on the dust cloud in the air. “Hard to miss someone you thought was dead. You know, because they were supposed to be dead.”

“Death is such a... flexible concept, isn't it?” She stepped closer and her heels clicked on the rubble-strewn floor like the ticking of a clock that counted down my final seconds.

“Your sarcasm won't save you.”

“Neither will your SWAT team,” Oswin chimed in like a fucking jester even with guns pointed at his head. “We've survived worse parties than this.”

“Bravery or stupidity?” she mused aloud and her eyes narrowed. “I always did wonder.”

“Let's call it a family trait,” I shot back and struggled against the weight on my chest.

“Family,” she echoed a smirk played on her lips. “Such a quaint notion. But we're beyond pretenses now, aren't we?”

“Beyond?” I wheezed. “Lady, we're so far beyond, we can't even see the line anymore.”

She reached into her jacket, and the world seemed to slow as she drew a gun, leveling it at me with dispassionate ease.

“Mom, wait—” My plea was cut short.

“Silence,” she hissed, her finger tightening on the trigger. It was the coldness in her eyes that scared me the most—not anger, not hatred, just an icy void where love should have been.

I'd faced death more times than I could count, but staring down the barrel held by my own mother, that was a new kind of hell. My heart hammered against my ribcage. Each beat screamed that this wasn't how it was supposed to go down.

“Always with the dramatics,” I managed, my voice cracking like a teenager's.

“Goodbye, Averill.”

And then Kylo lunged. His arm swung wide, and a glint of steel sliced through the chaos. His knife buried deep into her stomach with a sickening squish, crimson blooming out like a deadly flower.

“Kylo!” I screamed, half in horror, half in relief.

“Go! Move!”

Oswin wasted no time. He grabbed my arm, pulling me from the debris with a strength that defied his slender frame. Gunshots rang out as bullets whizzed past us and embedded into walls and shattered glass.

“Stay low!” Oswin shouted over the noise, his voice steady despite the madness. “This way!”

“Kylo?” I called back, unwilling to leave him behind.

“Right here,” he grunted, and a wave of relief washed over me.

“Cover me!” I yelled and drew my own weapon. We returned fire, our shots punctuated by the sound of splintering wood and shattering tile. The air was thick with gunpowder and vengeance.

“Car’s this way!” Oswin directed and pointed to a service exit.

Kylo faltered, his breath ragged, and I felt a surge of panic. “Hey, you good?”

“Never better.” He shrugged me off.

We burst through the door to the garage. “Car!” Oswin barked, keys already in hand.

“Ansel, come on!” I shouted and the car idled like a caged beast eager to flee. My voice was a desperate pitch against the storm’s howl. My eyes met Ansel’s as he stood in the doorway, his feet planted firmly in place.

“Ansel!” I called again, my heart breaking a little more with every millisecond that passed by.

“Did you really think he was yours to command?” The words slithered from my mother, standing defiantly despite the

blood staining her clothes. “Ansel has always been under my control.”

“Is she right?” I demanded, my grip white-knuckled on the steering wheel. Each second stretched taut, a wire ready to snap.

“Awe, poor thing. You really thought opening your legs and playing family for a day meant something to him?” She spit out the word family like it murdered her firstborn child-me.

“Apologies, Averill,” Ansel murmured and a conflicted look etched on his rain-soaked face. “I never wanted—”

“Save it!” I snarled and betrayal sliced through me sharper than any knife. My heart thudded, a drumbeat of fury and hurt. Trust, once more, had proven to be a fool’s currency.

“Go!” Kylo groaned from beside me, his voice laced with pain. “He’s made his choice.”

The car lurched forward and the tires screamed in protest against the slick pavement. Oswin clutched the backseat, his usual flamboyance now just a shadow in his wide eyes. I could still hear the echo of my mother’s mocking laughter, a vile serenade to our retreat.

“Your little band of misfits is falling apart,” she taunted from the shadows, her silhouette framed by the jagged ruins of what was once a sanctuary.

“Shut up!” I yelled into the night, but the wind swallowed my words, and left only the bitter taste of rage on my tongue.

“Where to?” Oswin asked again, his voice calm, a stark contrast to the chaos of my thoughts.

“Far away from this mess,” I focused on the endless stretch of road ahead. The city lights blurred into streaks as we raced away from the penthouse, from the lies, the ambush...from Ansel.

Kylo’s breaths came in shallow gasps, a rhythmic reminder of the urgency that thrummed through my veins. Guilt gnawed

at me for dragging him into this, for being the eye of the storm that now threatened to consume us all.

“Stay with me, Kylo,” I whispered and dared to glance at his ashen face.

“Always,” he managed, a ghost of a grin on his lips, but his eyes were heavy, weighed down by pain and loss.

“I can’t believe I fell for it,” I muttered and anger simmered beneath the surface. “For him.”

“Love makes fools of us all,” Oswin serenaded me but there was no humor in his tone, only cold truth.

Lightning forked across the sky, a fleeting glimpse of the danger that surely pursued us. I pushed the car faster, urging it to defy the storm, to outrun the night itself. But the dread that curled in my stomach knew better—it was only a matter of time before they caught up.

“Watch out!” Oswin yelled and pointed ahead.

I jerked the wheel as something loomed in front of us, a dark shape that materialized from the rain. A crash, metal on metal, the world spinning—a symphony of sound and fury that drowned out everything else.

And then, there was darkness.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Storm Song is the New Adult author of diverse paranormal books that will melt through your kindle. Believing that words are the closest thing to actual magic that humans possess, she chooses to use hers to cast dimensions filled with stories where the pleasures of diverse women is not only found to be powerful, but a down right magical force to be reckoned with.

Whether it's Native American Vampires, Black pirates, or mixed mermaids-page by page she picks up the pen and fights back against the myth that the romance genre is meaningless. Her colorfully worded stories prove the only way that could ever be true is if LGBT, emotional, and female empowerment itself holds no true value to you.

When she isn't writing or kicking the patriarchy's ass she can be found in her natural habitat- playing video games and huffing the devils lettuce while Panic At The Disco blasts in the background.

