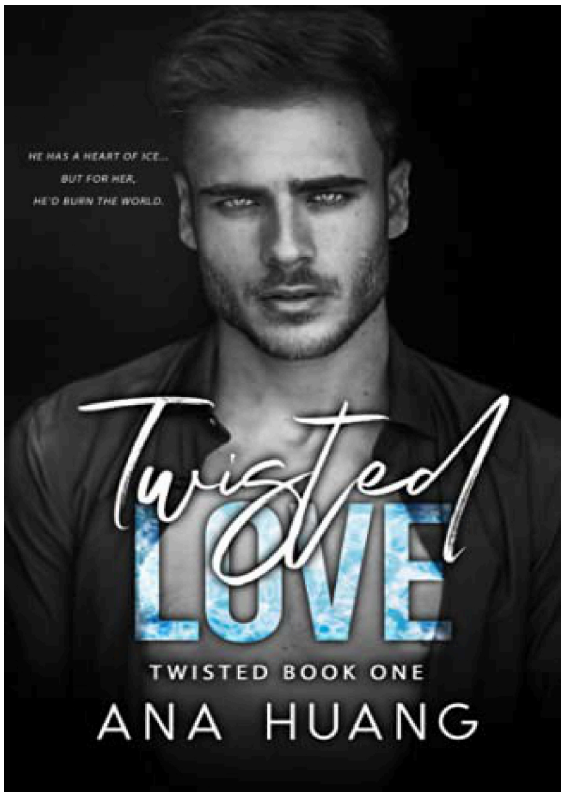


ebookbig.com

or scan the QR code to access the digital study portal.

CONTENTS

Playlist

Synopsis

1. Ava
2. Alex
3. Ava
4. Ava
5. Alex
6. Ava
7. Alex
8. Ava
9. Alex
10. Ava
11. Ava
12. Ava
13. Alex
14. Ava
15. Ava
16. Alex
17. Ava
18. Alex
19. Ava
20. Alex
21. Ava
22. Alex
23. Ava
24. Ava
25. Ava
26. Ava
27. Ava
28. Alex
29. Ava
30. Ava
31. Alex

32. Ava
33. Alex
34. Alex
35. Alex
36. Ava
37. Alex
38. Alex
39. Ava
40. Alex
41. Ava
42. Ava
43. Ava

Epilogue

Books by Ana Huang

Keep in touch with Ana Huang

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Playlist

“Twisted”—MISSIO

“Ice Box”—Omarion

“Feel Again”—One Republic

“Dusk Till Dawn”—ZAYN & Sia

“Set Fire to the Rain”—Adele

“Burn”—Ellie Goulding

“My Kind of Love”—Emeli Sandé

“Writing’s on the Wall”—Sam Smith

“Ghost”—Ella Henderson

“What Doesn’t Kill You”—Kelly Clarkson

“Wide Awake”—Katy Perry

“You Sang to Me”—Marc Anthony

He has a heart of ice…but for her, he'd burn the world.

Alex Volkov is a devil blessed with the face of an angel and cursed with a past he can't escape.

Driven by a tragedy that has haunted him for most of his life, his ruthless pursuits for success and vengeance leave little room for matters of the heart.

But when he's forced to look after his best friend's sister, he starts to feel something in his chest:

A crack.

A melt.

A fire that could end his world as he knew it.

***

Ava Chen is a free spirit trapped by nightmares of a childhood she can't remember.

But despite her broken past, she's never stopped seeing the beauty in the world…including the heart beneath the icy exterior of a man she shouldn't want.

Her brother's best friend.

Her neighbor.

Her savior and her downfall.

Theirs is a love that was never supposed to happen—but when it does, it unleashes secrets that could destroy them both…and everything they hold dear.

1

AVA

THERE WERE WORSE THINGS THAN BEING STRANDED IN THE middle of nowhere during a rainstorm.

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

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

Stop. Think positive thoughts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One ring. Two rings. Three.

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

"What's wrong?"

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

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

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

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

"Christ, Ava. Where are you?"

I told him.

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

"Don't be dramatic. I had an engagement shoot, and it's a thirty-minute drive. Forty-five if there's traffic." Thunder boomed, shaking the branches of nearby trees. I winced and shrank farther back into the shelter, not that it did me much

good. The rain slanted sideways, splattering me with water droplets so heavy and hard they stung when they hit my skin.

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

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

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

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

"Technically, no." Josh sounded unrepentant.

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

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

"Josh Chen."

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

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

My sarcasm went over my brother's head. For a straight-A pre-med student, he could be quite dense. "You're welcome.

Stay put, and he'll be there soon. We'll talk about your complete lack of self-preservation later."

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

Too late. He'd already hung up.

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

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

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

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

On the bright side, at least I wasn't afraid of rain. Oceans and lakes and pools, I could avoid, but rain…yeah, that would've been bad.

I wasn't sure how long I huddled in the tiny bus shelter, cursing my lack of foresight when I turned down the

Graysons' offer to drive me back to town after our shoot. I hadn't wanted to inconvenience them and thought I could call an Uber and be back at Thayer's campus in half an hour, but the skies opened up right after the couple left and, well, here I was.

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

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

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

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

Bad news? The person driving said Aston Martin was the *last* person I wanted—or expected—to pick me up. He wasn't an *I'll do my buddy a favor and rescue his stranded little sister* kinda guy. He was a *look at me wrong and I'll destroy you and everyone you care about* kinda guy, and he'd do it looking so calm and gorgeous you wouldn't notice your world burning down around you until you were already a heap of ashes at his Tom Ford-clad feet.

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

"Get in."

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