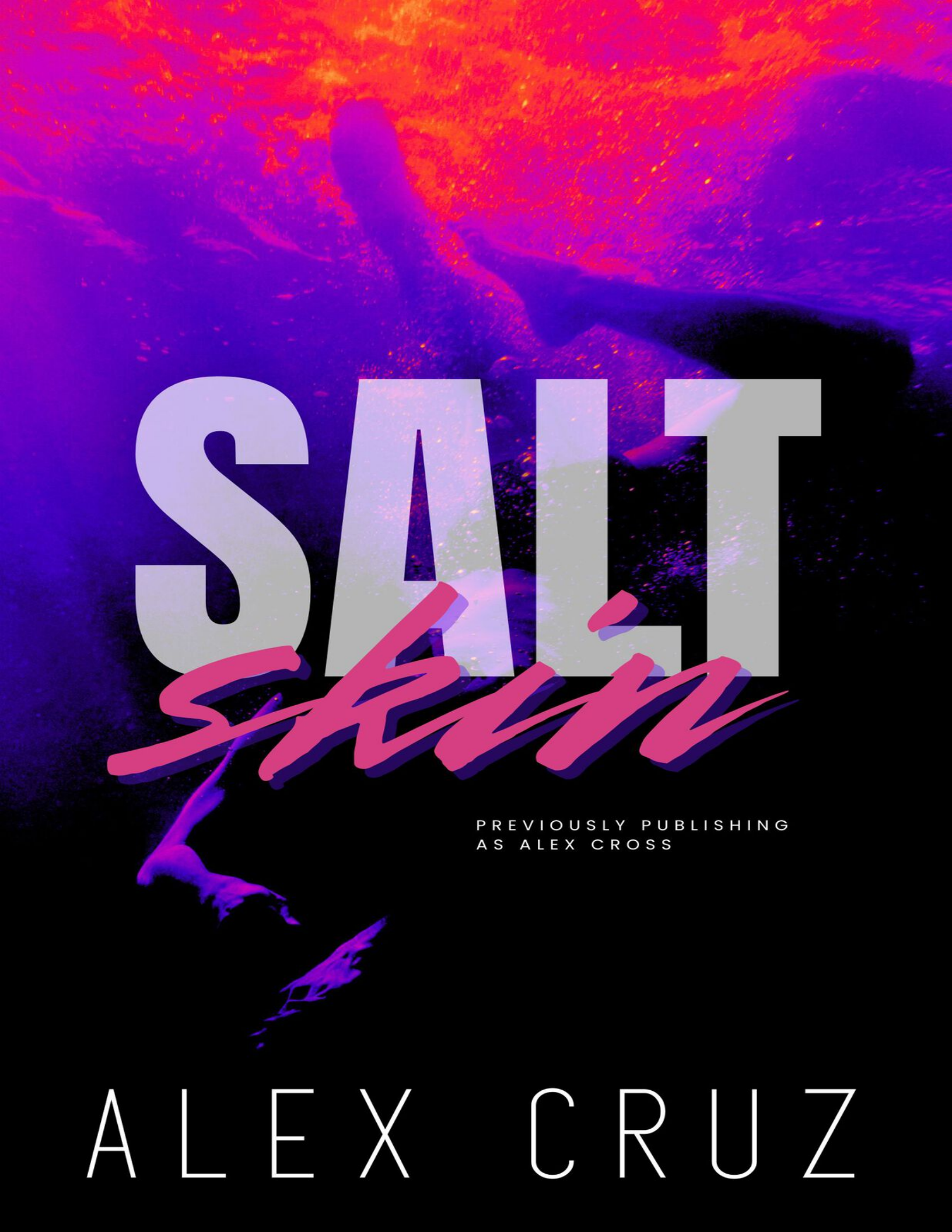


PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHING
AS ALEX CROSS

ALEX CRUZ

SALT SKIN

ALEX CRUZ

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To my anxiety-riddled baddies;
we've got this.
After all, we thrive in crisis mode.

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THE PLAYLIST



Short, sweet and very beachy.

frente al mar - Beéle
One In A Million - PHURS, Danna Max
Tattoo - Remix with Camilo, Rauw Alejandro
OrióN - Boza, ELENA ROSE

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CHAPTER ONE

JESSIE

Sunlight glinting off his bare skin… Salt thick in the air.

The alarm on my phone went off, the annoying chiming sound starting low and slowly picking up speed, but my eyes were already open. I reached for the screen, hit snooze, and stared up at the ceiling.

5 a.m.

Fuck.

The sun was still asleep beyond my window as I sat on the edge of the bed, breathing in slow, steady pulls, attempting to calm the tightness in my chest.

You can do this. You're a brave, ballsy motherfucker. You got this.

My stomach twisted anyway. I kept my eyes on the wall, fingers curled in the sheets. The seconds dragged by until the alarm chimed again.

"Jessie," came a rough, irritated mumble from the bed in the other corner of the room. "That fucking thing goes off one more time, and your ass is sleeping on the couch tonight."

A breathy laugh escaped me. "The event dragged on forever?"

Rory's hand shot out from under the covers, pointing at the door. "Get the fuck out."

He was usually charming as fuck—just not before sunrise… or coffee. As he kept muttering about the ass crack of dawn and never getting enough

sleep, I grabbed my clothes and slipped out, heading for the bathroom and closing the door as quietly as I could.

We roomed together for a reason, our schedules lining up just right. *Rory the bartender and Jay the grill master.* A match made in sleep heaven.

Not today, though.

When I stepped into the hallway, I caught sight of Lani and Trevor in the kitchen, hunched over the counter with mugs of coffee, their voices low and lazy with sleep—both of them heading into breakfast shift at the resort. The three-bedroom apartment housing four cooks and a bartender was usually loud and chaotic, but in these early hours, when one shift bled into the next, it felt calm.

For once, I got first dibs on the shower, which meant piping hot water—my usual preference, but it did nothing for me today. I needed something icy cold to snap me out of it, to make me face the day instead of hiding behind routine.

"Good luck," Lani called a little while later as I opened the apartment door, ready to leave. There was a knowing glint in her eyes. Meddling little minx.

I grumbled and stepped outside, drawing in a deep breath as the island's soft summer breeze brushed over my skin.

The drive was tense. I put on the classics—Queen, of course, because Freddie always managed to cheer me up—but my heart still beat a little too fast.

Nothing is ever going to change if you don't take a risk, Lani's voice echoed in my head. And she was right. After Sarah and I broke up, which had been the right call for both of us, I had thrown myself into work. A kitchen is the perfect place to hide when you don't want to feel anything. The more shifts you take, the better the pay, and no one questions it when you're pulling doubles, especially if you're a middleman on the line.

I'd already been at the resort for four years, but that last year I worked harder than I ever had. It paid off. A year later, I was still single, but now I was in charge of the grill.

The problem was that once I got there, I couldn't keep hiding behind extra shifts. Five years into this job, I finally had stability. Routine. A place that felt like it was mine. But all that free time meant I noticed when my bed was empty.

And then, of course, he had shown up at the resort.

So now my overactive brain had latched onto the one guy it had no business fixating on. First, because he was the son of one of the owners, which was a massive no. Then, because he was a he, and even though I had always known I liked guys just as much as girls, I had never actually been with one—a couple of makeout sessions a million years ago notwithstanding.

I really had to get a crush on the hot playboy whose smile looked like fucking sunshine. *Fucking perfect, Jessie. Stellar move.*

Since I couldn't ask him out, I made a desperate attempt to get over it by actually dating someone else. Lani had shown me this ad—*stranger sessions*, a photo shoot where you got matched with someone you'd never met before. I'd worked up the nerve, filled out the form, and now here I was, pulling into a parking space at Paʻakai Beach with my heart in my throat, minutes away from my first blind date. With a guy. Before the fucking sun was up.

I was white-knuckling the steering wheel, staring straight ahead at the line of palm trees blocking my view of the water, when a rap on my window startled me out of it.

"Oh, fuck," I breathed.

The woman outside was tall, with long, caramel-colored hair pulled into a messy braid that rested over one shoulder. Her skin was dusted with freckles, visible even in the early light, and she wore cutoff shorts and a loose tank, like she was ready to wade straight into the water if she had to.

I rolled the window down and gave her what was probably the world's most awkward wave.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just saw the car parked and figured it was you. Jessie, right? I'm Sadie."

"Hi, yeah. Hi." I swallowed. "I recognize you from the ad thing. The email. With the pictures and the… you know." My fingers twirled in the air, like that cleared up anything. *Great, man. You're really killing it right now.*

She smiled anyway. "Would you mind waiting for about ten minutes? The other participant is already here, and I'm almost done setting up."

"Sure," I said too fast. "Yeah. No. That's fine. I mean, waiting is good. I can do that."

"Great." Her smile widened. "Then we'll go straight into the reveal."

"The reveal?" My voice jumped about three octaves. "Like… a *big* reveal? Or just, like, you know… 'Hi, here is this guy.' Normal stuff."

She laughed softly and rested her hand against the door. “Normal stuff. Promise it’s not as scary as it sounds. And if you ever feel uncomfortable, just nod in my direction, and I’ll stop everything.”

That helped. A little.

With one last reassuring smile, she headed back toward the beach.

My forehead dropped on the steering wheel. “Fuck…”



Ten minutes later, as the sun finally started to peek over the horizon, my bare feet sank into the sand as I walked onto the beach, my board tucked under one arm, the top half of my wetsuit hanging loose at my hips. My heart was still lodged firmly in my throat. Even more so when I spotted another board propped upright near the shoreline—someone already standing behind it, hidden completely from my view.

Sadie stopped me with a gentle press of her hand to my elbow. “So here’s what we’re doing. We’ll get your board set in front of his and take a couple of shots before you see each other. Then I’ll ask you to move them to the side, and we’ll go from there.”

I stared at her blankly.

“I’ll walk you through it,” she added. “But most of it is just you being yourself. If I suggest contact or a pose, just check in with each other first, make sure you’re both good, and then we’ll take the picture.”

“Okay,” I said, a little breathy.

Her body turned, already taking a step.

“Is he, like—”

She stopped, waiting patiently.

My gaze flicked toward the stretch of beach and then back to her. “Like… relaxed?”

“He’s a little nervous too,” she said with a soft laugh. “And that’s perfectly normal.”

My free hand brushed over my cropped hair, back and forth, like that might somehow calm me down. I nodded to where he was waiting, and we started walking again.

Sadie talked me through where to put my board and where to stand, the shutter of her camera clicking as she took a few shots of my back before moving around us.

It was incredibly nerve-racking, knowing there was a guy right in front of me. A real person. A real, breathing man who had signed up for this too, who was about to take a good look at me and decide… something.

I had checked all the boxes on the form. Yes to touching. Yes to closeness. Yes to whatever this was supposed to be. I just hoped we found each other attractive, because if we didn't, this was going to be awkward as fuck and somehow still intimate, which felt like the worst possible combination.

Sadie planted her feet at the edge of the water, waves brushing her ankles as she adjusted the camera so it framed both of us. "We're ready. Count of three, okay?"

I nodded, hands sliding to the edge of my board. I was supposed to move it left. I repeated that in my head like a mantra. *Left. Left. Left. Don't fuck it up.*

"One."

I rolled my shoulders back, tried to breathe.

"Two."

Oh *god*—

"Three—"

My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my ears as I dragged the board to the left. I had just enough time to register that I did, in fact, not fuck it up, and then—

There he was.

And my brain kind of shut off.

Gray-green eyes. Taut, muscled skin catching the early light. Short black hair tousled by the morning breeze. A face I'd already seen too many times around the resort—and way too many times on his social media, mid-jump off cliffs, sunburned and grinning like danger was his favorite hobby—now standing right in front of me, looking just as unreal out here on the sand.

Daniel *fucking* Harding.

Son of Thomas Harding. One of Kahua Kai Resort's biggest shareholders. The guy I had no business thinking about, let alone standing half-naked in front of before the sun was even up.

My mouth opened.
The shutter clicked.
And what came out was, “Fuck me—”

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CHAPTER TWO

DANNY

Wow.

This is *different*. This *guy's* different.

His lips parted, eyes going a little too wide, and then, "Fuck me—"

The laugh that bubbled up in my chest was half amusement, half nervous energy. "I mean, that's a little forward…" I shifted my feet in the sand, widening my stance.

Those thick lashes fluttered as he kept staring at me, something soft and startled in his eyes. "Sorry, no," his deep voice rumbled between us, low but still carrying over the sound of the waves. "I mean, hi. Nice to meet you." He held out his hand, a bit stiff.

I buried my board more securely before taking a step, then paused to glance back at Sadie.

"Don't worry about me!" she called.

The shutter clicked as I turned back to him.

"Daniel, but you can call me Danny." My gaze flicked to his outstretched hand and then back up, offering what I hoped was a charming smile as I opened my arms. "Do you mind?"

He shook his head, steadied his board, and stepped closer. I didn't quite stay where I was either, drifting forward without really deciding to until I felt the warmth of his skin.

“Jessie,” he said softly.

I smiled to myself before stepping back to get a better look at him. Where the hell had this guy come from?

He wasn’t a pretty boy. He had that slightly roughed-up look that worked in his favor. A sharp, solid jaw dusted with dark stubble, a nose just a little crooked, like it’d been broken once and never quite bothered to be fixed. Buzzed dark hair and warm brown eyes, his skin had that deep, even tan of someone who actually lived outside, not just vacationed here. His lips had a faint tilt that made him look approachable, even though the rest of him was a little intimidating.

He was toned, especially in his arms and legs; less so over his stomach. His neck was thick, shoulders broad and sturdy, and tattoos decorated his skin—full sleeves, a chest piece, a few creeping up his neck and across his hands. One peeked out right where his wetsuit started at his hips. Enticingly. He was about my height, maybe an inch taller.

He looked *nothing* like the guys I was used to dating. Not a pretty boy, but fuck, he was hot.

“So, how nervous are you?” I said, because silence suddenly felt too loud. “My heart is going about a mile a minute right now.” My mouth ran away, like it usually did.

It worked, though, because his serious expression softened, his lips tilting up just a little more. He took a deep breath. “Very fucking nervous.”

“Okay, good.” I swallowed, then laughed at myself. “I mean, not good. Just—same.”

His brows drew together, his eyes flicking over me, his mouth twisting like he was trying to figure something out. “Do you still…” He gestured vaguely between us, glanced at Sadie, then back to me. “Want to do this?”

Now it was my turn to stare, stunned. “What do you mean? Like, I took one look at you and changed my mind?”

His jaw ticked, and he nodded after a beat.

I blinked, my brain trying to catch up to what I was feeling down to my bones—my *soul*.

For some reason, I wanted to tell him everything. That I’d spent the last few years chasing the next rush, bouncing from one thrill to the next, hoping one of them would stick. That I’d thrown myself into stupid risks and distractions that burned too fast and faded just as quickly. And

somehow, none of it had hit me the way he was right now, just standing there in front of me.

But that felt like a lot to put on someone I'd just met.

"No," I said instead. "I'm into you."

Another small lift of his lips. Almost a full smile. "Cool. Me too."

My grin stretched wide at that. I rubbed my palms over my thighs. "Okay, so," I said, glancing back at Sadie. "What do we do now, ringmaster? Give us something to work with while we warm up to it?"

Sadie chuckled as she lowered her camera.

Jessie ran a hand over his hair, looking like he didn't know what to do with himself, and I found myself wanting to be the reason for that. Our eyes caught again, something unspoken passing between us.

Sadie cleared her throat softly, the sound pulling us just a little out of whatever bubble we'd slipped into.

"Okay," she said. "Let's start simple. Just the two of you and the boards."

Jessie and I both shifted as Sadie motioned us closer to the drier stretch of sand.

"Boards behind you. Let them frame you."

I lifted mine and moved where she pointed, Jessie doing the same, until we stood side by side, boards angled just slightly toward each other, close enough that I could feel his warmth without even touching him.

"Perfect," Sadie said, already lifting the camera. "Now just… relax. Look at each other. Forget I'm here."

I glanced at Jessie, a small smile tugging at my mouth despite myself, and the way he looked back made my pulse stumble.

The shutter clicked.

"Want to try touching?" Sadie asked. "Nothing too crazy. Just a hand on his waist, Jessie?"

Jessie pressed his lips together, clearly nervous, his eyes flicking to mine in a silent check-in. I nodded. His rough fingers brushed my waist, warm and tentative. His hands were big, but the touch itself was delicate, controlled in a way that felt intentional.

I stepped closer, wanting to make him feel more at ease, my hand coming up to his arm, my thumb sliding over the ink of a bird in flight there.

"That's beautiful," I murmured, still looking at it.

“Thanks.” His hand stayed at my waist, a little steadier now.

My thumb drifted lower as I took in more of the artwork until I noticed something else. Thin red lines, uneven, scattered in different directions over his forearms. They didn’t look like cuts, though.

“Can I ask about this?” I said before I could stop myself.

Jessie’s brows drew together as he glanced down, then back up. “Oh.” A quiet laugh. “Yeah, sure. They’re burn marks.” He shrugged. “Comes with the territory.”

At my puzzled look, he smiled. “I’m a cook,” he said. “Been on the line for years. You collect a few.”

Understanding clicked. “You’re a chef.”

“Not yet.” He cleared his throat. “I’m working on it.”

“That’s impressive. I can barely manage cereal.” I edged a little closer. “So—” I started, then laughed and kept going anyway. “Is it, like, standard to get burns? Wouldn’t it be the opposite if you did it for a living? I mean, I guess things slip, and it’s fast, right? I’ve seen kitchens. Well, from the outside. They look hectic. And I did watch *The Bear*, so there’s that. Is it really like that?”

Jessie stared at me like I’d switched languages mid-sentence, dark eyes fixed on my face, completely unreadable.

“Sorry,” I said. “I know I’m rambling.” And then my mouth kept going anyway. “I’ve dated guys who couldn’t even boil water, so this is—”

The camera shutter clicked.

Oh. Right. Photoshoot.

I straightened a little, grinning despite myself. “Forgot we were being documented.”

A faint smile pulled at his mouth. “It’s a good frame of reference. That show.”

Heat crept up my neck at the way he was looking at me.

“So,” I said, trying again, softer this time. “Where do you work?”

Jessie hesitated. Just a beat too long. “A… resort.”

“Yeah?” I tilted my head, curiosity sparking once again. “My family’s in the hotel business. I might know it. Which one?”

He licked his lips, eyes flicking away, mumbling something the waves swallowed.

“Sorry,” I said, stepping a little closer. “Didn’t catch that.”

He took a breath. “The Kahua Kai Resort.”

I barked a laugh, eyes going wide as I nudged his shoulder. “Get out of fucking town. That’s my dad’s hotel. I’ve been staying there all summer.”

Jessie’s hand slipped from my waist, his posture tightening, gaze skimming my face like he was bracing for impact.

And there it was.

The other shoe.

“You totally know who I am, don’t you?”

It took him a second, but then he nodded guilty.

“Oh,” I said, more to myself than to him. “That’s why you’re so shy.” That was a little disappointing. I’d hoped it was just me having that effect on him.

The tops of his cheeks flushed. “I mean… it’s one of the reasons.”

That helped. A little.

“So… if you don’t want to keep going, we could just—”

I stepped in before he could finish, my hand catching his wrist and guiding it back to my waist. “Would you stop saying that?” I laughed softly. “I want to do this. With you.”

“But I kind of work for you—”

I laughed again. “Man, you don’t work for me. I have nothing to do with my dad’s businesses.”

He nodded slowly, like he was letting that sink in.

“Can I get you a little closer together?” Sadie called.

Without thinking—again—I cupped his face and drew him in, smiling when his eyes widened. His other hand landed on my waist to steady himself.

“That’s great,” Sadie said. “Danny, relax your hands. One at his neck, the other on his chest.”

I followed her instructions.

“Perfect.”

The sun was higher now, and the way it caught his face made me realize his eyes weren’t brown. They were hazel, little sparks of green and gold dancing in his irises. Beautiful.

Jessie licked his lips, tension still humming through him. “What do you do?”

“Like for work?”

He nodded.

“I don’t,” I said, and I hated how small that sounded next to him. “I graduated in the spring. Now I’m just kind of… waiting.”

He frowned. “On job applications?”

No. On life, I guess.

I shrugged.

“How old are you?” Those captivating eyes drifted over my face and down my neck and chest, making me feel exposed in the best way.

“Twenty-two. You?”

Looking at his face was already addictive. He might not have been very talkative so far, but his expressions gave everything away. Tiny shifts, fleeting tells, like his thoughts kept leaking out before he could stop them.

Right now, he looked a little surprised. Maybe apprehensive. Older, then.

“Twenty-six.”

Called it.

“Where are you from?”

“Visalia, in Cali.” He cleared his throat. “I moved here five years ago. Probably staying for the long haul.”

My stomach dipped at that. It shouldn’t have. I’d known him for minutes, and my heart was already getting ahead of itself.

“Okay, guys, let’s move into another position,” Sadie said as she walked closer.

We stepped apart, still glancing at each other, my hands suddenly cold despite the hot summer morning.



The next set of pictures had us sitting on our boards in the sand, knees brushing, leaning in close. The sun was higher now, warm on my shoulders, the air thick with humidity and the soft hiss of waves rolling in beside us. The shutter faded into a gentle, steady rhythm as I asked him about his family, needing to know more.

An only child, too. He’d lived with his mom until he left for LA for culinary school and work, which somehow led him all the way here. He told me how he learned to cook in their kitchen as a kid, standing on a chair

while his grandmother showed him how to season by smell instead of measurements; how his mom trusted him with the stove long before she probably should have. Cooking wasn't just a job for him—it was history. Muscle memory. Love passed down and carried forward.

I tucked each detail away like it was precious. The more he told me, the more real he felt. Like he was trusting me with something private.

I almost told him then—about the cliffs, about how I liked places where no one knew my name, about my real life beneath what everyone else saw—but that moment felt too full to interrupt.

Then we walked into the water together. Just the two of us, hands linked, the sea cool around our ankles and calves, sunlight glinting off the surface and into his eyes. It was harder to talk like that, but I didn't want to stop. I caught bits about his chaotic apartment, his roommates, the way he laughed when he talked about them, and it all felt… right. Lived in.

When we climbed back onto the boards, first side by side and then awkwardly trying to share one, we laughed so hard it hurt. The summer heat wrapped around us, the ocean breeze cutting through it, and everything felt bright and unreal in the best way.

That was when he really started to open up. Longer stories. Small jokes. Touches that weren't prompted, just natural. He told me he loved the island. Loved surfing. How he used to come out every morning when he first moved here, before work took over. How he was planning to get back to it now.

I wished this shoot had been at the start of summer. I would have followed him out here every dawn just to hear him talk about the things he loved.

By the time Sadie called us back for the last part of the shoot, people had started to trickle onto the beach, but it still felt like we had our own little pocket of the world. We lay on the sand near the water, facing each other, skin still humming from the cold water and sun, everything painted bright around us.

Jessie's wetsuit was half down again, grains of sand clinging to his skin, the tattoos on his body dark against the glow of the morning. We'd ended up half tangled in each other, laughing and shoving and slipping in the sand as Sadie kept snapping pictures, until the motion finally slowed and we were left facing each other, chests rising and falling.

He looked wild. Like something out of a movie. Or a fantasy. All I could think about was how every detail of him felt like something I wanted to keep. Part of me knew it was irrational, this level of connection so early in the game, but it didn't *feel* like it. It felt real.

"Do you want to try for a kiss?" Sadie asked, and my stomach flipped.

Jessie's hazel eyes didn't leave mine. His lips parted, just a little. "Yeah."

My gaze dropped to his mouth, my hand already sliding to his waist… but then I shook my head.

His face fell instantly, confusion and hurt flashing there.

I moved closer, my hand rising to his neck. "I don't want to kiss you *yet*," I said softly. "But I want to get as close as I possibly can without doing it."

His shoulders relaxed, eyes still searching mine, looking for discomfort or repulsion he wasn't ever going to find there.

We were both propped on our elbows on our sides, facing each other. The air felt charged around us, more so with every inch of space we closed. Sadie was standing nearby, not too close, but close enough that she could get the right composition. I wondered what we looked like through her lens.

My lips curved into a smile as I moved in, showing him what I wanted. Until I could feel the puff of his breath against my lips, sending tingles over my skin and lighting fireworks behind my ribs.

"Like that?" he whispered.

"Yeah…"

His eyes were on my lips, almost magnetized to them, and as the shutter continued to click, I melted more and more into this. Into *him*. Then he tilted his head, and my breath caught in my chest.

He didn't kiss me—just brushed his nose over my cheek, lips soft against my jaw, the barely there scratch of his stubble making it real. My eyelids fluttered closed. One hand came up to my neck to keep me there as his nose trailed close to my ear, his lips sliding along the column of my throat. Goosebumps erupted over my skin.

"Can I kiss you here?" his rough, low voice rumbled, his thumb brushing over a spot that suddenly felt unbearably sensitive.

I nodded.

His hand tightened as he pulled me in, still gentle, and his lips closed over my neck.

God—

That felt *amazing*.

At first, his kisses were light, barely there, before growing slower, deeper, until I felt the warm brush of his tongue.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “The salt on your skin…”

The words hit me like a spark to dry kindling. The intimacy of them.

I squeezed my eyes shut, the sensation washing over me, my body humming with it, and I was a second away from begging him to take more of me, to let me know exactly how I tasted.

Then the shutter clicked again.

Reality came rushing back. I was painfully aware that the erection I’d been fighting every time he touched my bare skin was now fully there. On the beach. While we were still being photographed.

My eyes flew open, searching for Sadie.

She met my gaze immediately, reading it, and lowering her camera. “That was great, guys.”

Jessie lifted his head too, blinking like he was coming back to himself, then cleared his throat.

“That’s all we need,” Sadie added. “We got some beautiful shots.”

I bent my knees and sat up, slipping out of his grasp. Jessie did the same beside me, still looking a little flushed. Sadie knelt in front of us and turned her camera around, scrolling through a few of the photos, and my heart refused to slow.

But then I looked. Really looked, and they were incredible.

We were.

The scenery was beautiful, sure, but it was what was happening between us that stole my breath. The way we looked at each other. The way we fit. The way something quiet and electric sat in every inch of space between us.

My pulse was still racing as I glanced at him. His attention stayed on the screen, a soft, almost dazed smile on his lips, still half caught in whatever we’d just shared.

I didn’t want it to end.

I wanted more.

I wanted to know what he tasted like.

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CHAPTER THREE

JESSIE

The photos were still glowing on Sadie's screen. She was talking about edits and timelines, about when we'd see the final versions, but my brain couldn't hold on to any of it. I hoped Danny was listening, because all I could think about was him.

Those intense green eyes. The way his stare almost felt like too much when it was fixed on me… and how I craved it the second it was gone.

This felt like something. I didn't know what yet, but it wasn't just attraction. There was more there. You could see it in the pictures, and it was coming from both of us.

So why did he pull away?

He'd asked me a million questions. He'd listened. He'd offered pieces of himself, only to refuse a kiss. It didn't add up.

Maybe it was me. Or my job. Or the fact that I worked for his dad. Maybe I was just stuck in my own head. Nervous about my ridiculous crush on a twenty-two-year-old that was growing way too big now that I'd actually met him.

Fuck. This was stupid.

Danny brushed the sand from his shorts as he stood, leaning in to hug Sadie goodbye, and I shot up, dragged back into reality.

"Thank you for signing up," she said. "I loved meeting you."

“Same,” Danny replied, smiling. “I can’t wait to see them.” His gaze flicked to me before he shifted his weight.

After I said goodbye and thanked her too, I watched Sadie walk away from us, her retreat quietly marking the real end of the date.

Everything felt off-balance.

What now?

Were we just supposed to go back to our lives, like nothing had happened, after spending the whole morning with our hands on each other?

“Do you have to go back to work?” Danny’s voice pulled me out of it.

“No,” I said too fast. “No, I… I got the day off. For this.”

Hope bloomed in my chest as he glanced down at his feet. Then he looked back up, lips curving into that devastating, playful smile. “Wanna hang out?”

I couldn’t stop my own smile from breaking through. “Where?”

He scratched the back of his head, his nose scrunching in an absurdly endearing way as he thought it through. “The hotel is a no, right?”

I grimaced. “It’d be weird.” I was on friendly terms with half the staff and could already picture the looks, the questions. And wasn’t there some rule about not dating guests?

“So no hotel room,” he said.

My stomach dipped at the way he’d phrased that.

That little grin was back. “What about your place?”

“Oh—really?”

He shrugged, bouncing slightly on his feet. “We’ve been out in the sun all morning. We could go there, talk. A shower would be nice too.”

Oh. Right. Reasonable. Although…

“You’ve got a full house?” he guessed correctly.

“Not really. Rory might still be there, but everyone else is working.”

“Perfect,” he said. “We can order in. I’m starving.”

I grinned as we picked up our boards and started toward the parking lot, sand still clinging to our ankles. “I can cook, you know.”

“Yeah?” His eyes lit up. “You’re going to cook for me, Chef?”

Heat crept up my neck that had nothing to do with the sun. “Yeah, I’ll cook for you.”

He slowed just enough to really look at me, that intense, curious stare settling back in. He shook his head a little, letting out a sound that was half laugh, half frustrated groan.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He pointed ahead. “Is this your car?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be right over.”

I grabbed his board, getting both of them up and strapped across the roof while he jogged off. Once they were secure, I wrapped a towel around my waist, stripped out of my wetsuit, pulled on my shorts, and tossed the damp gear into the back before climbing inside. The air was thick and warm, still faintly scented with salt and sunscreen. I cranked the AC, tossing a dry towel over the seat for him.

A moment later, the passenger door opened and slammed shut, and suddenly he was right there beside me—close enough that I could still feel the heat radiating off him. He dragged a white T-shirt over his head, the cotton clinging to his damp skin, then leaned back in the seat and set his bag on the floor. “Ready.”

I put the car in drive, checking the mirror as I pulled out. “It’s about a half-hour drive.”

“Cool,” he said, his hand drifting to the radio.

The drive back felt entirely different. My stomach was still spinning, but for new reasons now. Danny hummed or sang along to whatever played between us, breaking off now and then to smile in my direction. Wind rushed through the open window, ruffling his hair as his sun-kissed skin glowed in the light. He seemed relaxed, even as he kept shifting every few seconds, that restless energy was clearly part of who he was—not just nerves.

When I pulled into the parking lot, self-consciousness crept back in.

The apartment was clean—there was no way it wouldn’t be, considering what we did for a living—but it was modest. Housing near the resorts wasn’t exactly generous on our salaries, especially at our level. And Danny… well, he probably wasn’t used to modest. Not when it came to anything, especially where he stayed.

But when we walked in, he looked at ease. Those green eyes took everything in without judgment, just open, genuine curiosity.

“Give me a second,” I said, dropping my things by the door. “I’ll check if Rory’s still here.”

He nodded, that easy smile still in place.

I cracked our bedroom door as quietly as I could. The lump beneath the blankets told me everything I needed to know. Still out cold. I sighed silently and closed it again.

“He’s here, but you can still—” The words died when I turned and found Danny right in front of me. “Hey.”

He stepped closer, and my back hit the wall, my heart slamming hard enough to knock the air from my lungs.

“Do you think we can pick up where we left off in the shoot?” he asked, eyes locked on mine, unblinking.

My stomach flipped. “What do you mean?”

His hands came up to my neck as he leaned in. We were close enough now that our noses nearly brushed.

“I want to kiss you,” he whispered, his gaze dropping to my mouth.

Oh. Fuck.

“I thought you didn’t…”

He did that restless thing again, rocking slightly on his feet. “I wanted it to be ours,” he said, quieter now. “Not for the camera.”

That hit me square in the chest.

He wanted to kiss me.

I couldn’t get words past the tightness in my throat—not with him this close, not with my brain short-circuiting like this. My hands slid to his waist, solid and sun-heated under my palms even through his shirt, and I pulled him in before I could overthink it. Tilted my head. Closed the distance.

His lips were warm when they met mine.

We broke apart on a shared breath, then came back together again, slower this time. Softer.

The way he kissed—fuck—it was careful, unhurried, like he wasn’t trying to take anything I hadn’t offered. It left me unsteady in the best possible way.

More soft presses. More stolen breaths. That low, charged hum building between us.

And when our lips parted again and our tongues brushed for the first time, it felt like an explosion. Heat shot through me, all the way to my fingertips.

How could anyone taste this good?

My hands slid over his back, up between his shoulder blades, pulling him in. He was solid under my palms, all muscles and coiled tension. Danny's arms looped around my neck, keeping the pace slow, drawn out. Every brush of his tongue, every press of his lips, every scrape of his barely there stubble against my mouth scattered my thoughts until there was nothing left but him.

When he finally rested his forehead against mine to breathe, I didn't quite stop. As he eased back, my mouth followed, soft kisses along the edge of his lips, his cheek. I felt his smile against me.

"That definitely works," he murmured.

I let out a quiet laugh. "Definitely."

His fingers traced the short hair at my nape. "So… how about that shower?"

I froze, my mouth still against his jaw.

"I wasn't implying anything," he added quickly, laughing under his breath. "Just a lonely shower."

I pulled back enough to look at him. "It's not that I wouldn't want to," I said honestly. "Because I would."

His arms tightened again, just a fraction.

"I'm just not the fastest guy with things like this."

Something flickered in his eyes—hopeful and uncertain all at once.

"You don't do casual." It wasn't a question.

I shook my head, hoping to God this wasn't going to make him bolt.

But he only grinned as his hands fell away, leaving the air between us suddenly colder. "Yeah. I figured." His gaze softened. "You don't seem like the type."

I wasn't sure how to take that.

My hand stayed at his waist, unsteady, my eyes dropping to it. "How about you?"

When I looked up, his expression had gone still, making my pulse trip over itself.

"I'm not that type either," he said.

That surprised me enough that I opened my mouth to ask more—but he stepped back before I could.

"So," he said lightly, already turning. "Shower. Then food."

I stood there for a second after, the echo of his mouth still on mine, my body slow to catch up with reality. My lips felt warm, touched. It wasn't

just the kiss—though, fuck, it had been good—it was the way he'd looked at me.

As I led him down the hall, my pulse still off-kilter, I knew something had shifted. Even if I didn't know what it meant yet.



By the time we were both clean and dry, the air in the apartment felt different. More comfortable. Lived in. But it wasn't the place—it was us.

Danny sat on the couch, hair still damp, one leg tucked under him, the sandwich balanced in his hands like it was something fragile. He glanced up once, excitement practically vibrating off him, before digging in.

His eyes went wide as he chewed. "Fuck," he said around the bite. "That's really good."

A laugh slipped out of me as pride settled in my chest. "Yeah?"

Another bite, followed by a nod. Watching him eat made me take a second look at my own food, appreciating it through his reaction. Most days at home meant grabbing whatever was quick and ready—the curse of a cook—but this meal had been a fixation for months. Croissant rolls. Homemade smoked pork. Camembert. A tomato jam that leaned just a little too spicy. Perfect.

"Did you make all of this?" he asked when he was halfway through.

"Everything but the rolls. Lani made those. We keep them frozen, ready to go."

"Handy." He took another big bite, little flakes clinging to his lips and fingers, making a mess as he went.

That made me smile. I loved people who ate like this—no hesitation, no fuss, just enjoying the hell out of it. My leg stretched closer to his along the couch. Danny didn't even look, just shifted naturally, moving closer too.

After wiping my hand on a napkin, I found the back of his neck. When his mouth curved into a smile, my fingers stayed there, absently playing with his hair as I finished eating.

"You're a touchy person, right?"

For a second, I almost pulled my hand away—but one look at my face made him scoot closer instead, hooking his ankle around mine.

“That’s a good thing,” he said. “In my book. I’m like that too.”

Something in me eased. My fingers skimmed his skin, my thumb brushing behind his velvety-soft earlobe. He made a low, content sound, and I wasn’t sure if it was still about the food.

As soon as he finished, he jumped off the couch and into the kitchen, taking the dish right out of my hand. Water started running behind me. I took a sip of my soda and watched him over my shoulder.

“Everything’s so neat in here,” he called. “You should see my room. Or—actually—don’t. I’d be very fucking embarrassed right now.”

“We’re used to cleaning up after ourselves,” I said. “Kind of necessary when this many people live here.”

“Close to the resort, too. Smart. I’ve heard most people commute, like, an hour.”

The water shut off.

“Yeah. That’s usually how it goes.”

By the time I wiped my hands, he was already bouncing over the couch and settling in beside me again.

Danny grinned—and then his hands were on my neck, his mouth back on mine. I dropped the napkin and kissed him back, letting him set the pace. My hands slid over his thighs to his hips, my mouth opening as the kiss shifted from asking to demanding.

“Come here,” he said against my lips.

He leaned back into the cushions, and I followed, fitting myself between his legs, chasing his mouth like I didn’t know how to stop.

“Hey,” he said softly, breaking away. His forehead stayed pressed to mine, just enough to keep me from diving back in.

“Yeah?”

“I feel like I need to tell you something.”

The smile was gone now, and that alone made my stomach knot.

“What is it?”

“I want to keep kissing you—for hours, if I can,” he said, fast and honest. “But…” He shrugged.

“What?”

“I’m leaving the day after tomorrow.”

Oh.

Oh.

My heart sank.

“I get it if you want me to fuck off now,” he rushed on. “I know you don’t do casual. But fuck, I really hope you don’t, because I like you, Jessie. And I wasn’t expecting that. I wasn’t expecting you. I just—” He looked up at me, helpless. “I want to drink it all up.”

I stayed there, breathing over him, trying to think. Of course he was leaving. I’d known that—guests always leave. I’d just thought we had more time.

And I wanted this. Him.

Images flashed through my mind—him laughing outside the restaurant, the way my neck always strained when he passed, the drop in my stomach every time I almost got caught staring.

He liked me.

That could be enough.

“I don’t want you to fuck off,” I said. “Stay.”

His lips curved. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Let’s have today.”

He was already nodding when I closed the space between us again.

The kiss shed its patience almost immediately. Danny’s hands slid from my neck to my shoulders, my waist, searching like he needed something to hold on to. His lips parted, tongue asking for more, and I gave it to him without thinking.

And I wanted everything. To take him in. The way he moved under me, the heat of his skin, the rough edge of his breath when it slipped out.

Our bodies pressed closer, heavier. When the sound he made shifted—rougher, less controlled—my thoughts scattered completely. It wasn’t just his undeniably masculine scent or the sharp angles of him fitting against me.

It was his hard cock, pressing into my stomach.

Pleasure shot through me.

“Do you want to—” he started, then trailed off.

I checked my watch. Almost noon. Rory could be up any minute. Could get called in early.

Fuck it.

“Yes,” I said, and kissed him again before doubt could catch up. I lined myself up with him, our bodies rubbing together through our shorts, friction building fast.

“You’re such a good kisser,” he whispered against my mouth.

The praise hit low, right at the base of my spine, heat flooding my body as he took my face in his hands and showed me exactly how much he meant it.

He felt so fucking good. It had been so long since I'd felt anything like this—hell, nothing had ever felt like this. Everything about him turned me on to an alarming degree, and whatever restraint I'd had dissolved completely with him.

His hands slid down, over my ribs, my back, until they caught at the hem of my shirt. My hips ground into his, keeping the motion going, and one rougher push tipped him over the edge, his hands slipping under the fabric, grabbing my ass hard.

"So fucking hot," he said.

The friction between us climbed fast—a little too fast. His desperate kisses, the firm grip on my skin, the way his hands urged me to move more and more—everything blurred together, fanning the flames between us.

Then he rolled his hips up into mine, just a fraction quicker, and that was it. Pleasure crashed through me before I could even think to stop it.

"Oh, f-fuck—"

Squeezing my eyes shut, I tried—and failed—to hold back as I came against him. My hips stilled, and I buried my face in his neck, teeth clenched around a groan that still slipped out.

I stayed there, panting against his skin, while my body slowly caught up with reality. Thoughts crept back in one by one.

And with them, mortification.

Danny's hands slid out of my shorts. "Did you just…"

Kill me.

"Come?"

Absolutely fucking end me.

A strangled groan tore out of me, my face burning as he chuckled.

"Hey, come here," he said, fingers brushing my jaw, trying to coax me up.

I shook my head.

Another chuckle—softer this time. It helped that he still sounded a little out of breath.

"Please?" His voice dipped, gentle enough that I couldn't make myself deny him.

I leaned my weight on my forearms and looked down at him, his hands warm on my cheeks. He didn't look disappointed. Just flushed. Amused.

"Don't be embarrassed," he said. "I was about two more grinds away from coming myself."

My jaw clenched as I looked away.

"I wouldn't lie to you." He nudged my chin until I faced him again. Those green eyes were open, earnest. "And it's really hot how into me you are."

The grin he gave me almost pulled a smile out of me too, my breathing finally starting to slow—

When my bedroom door burst open.

We both froze.

Rory stood there, one hand still on the handle. His pale blue eyes took it all in—Danny, our flushed faces, me still lying between his legs.

His lips twitched.

"Rory—" I hoped he caught the warning in my tone.

He didn't. The twitch turned into a full grin. "Oh my fucking *god*," he said, before bursting out laughing.

"Okay, yeah," I said, starting to push up, then stopping short, painfully aware of my shorts. "We're kind of—"

"Yeah," he cut in, hands on his hips. "No. I can see that." He paused, tilted his head, and took us in like he wanted to memorize the moment. "Wow. *This* is what happens when you finally go on a date after a year of celibacy, huh?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake—"

"I'm just saying," he went on, spreading his hands. "We were all rooting for you. Like. Emotionally invested."

My face burned hotter, my eyes begging him to shut the hell up for once.

"And then you come home," he continued, "with *him*. Daniel. Fucking. Harding." Rory glanced at Danny, then back at me. "So." A beat. "How does it feel to finally hook up with your crush?"

My mouth fell open, horrified.

Fuck.

My.

Life.

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CHAPTER FOUR

DANNY

After a quick, not-so-discreet change of clothes, Jessie was still arguing with his roommate outside. His muffled grumbling still sounded furious from the other side of the door, while I sat on the edge of his bed, elbows on my knees, doing a terrible job of keeping the grin off my face.

He was unbearably cute when he was flustered. And, wow, did I have ammunition now.

Not to be cruel about it—never that. Mostly I wanted to tease him a little. And maybe let him know just how much everything his friend had said had lit me the hell up. Because, fuck, if he wasn't the most perfect man I'd ever met.

I loved the contradiction of him. How, at first glance, he could read as rough—guarded, intimidating, even—but if you actually looked, really looked, the softness was right there. His cropped hair felt less like an edge and more like a habit. Neat. Practical.

That same care showed up everywhere else too. In his short, clean nails. In the order of his room—his bed perfectly made, photos framed on his nightstand, and a Queen poster hanging above it, like something chosen with affection rather than irony.

And the tattoos.

They weren’t threatening in the slightest. Birds in flight. The sea. Waves, turtles, fish. Then a knife, kitchen measurements, ingredients. A quiet map of the things he loved, etched into his skin. It was intimate in a way that made something flutter in my stomach.

And now this.

Yeah. We were absolutely going to talk about this.

Another irritated sound, then the door finally opened. Jessie stepped inside, eyes still wide, shock clinging to him like static. “Sorry about that,” he said immediately. “About him. He’s a good guy, but he has zero filter. Like, none.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “People love him, though. Tips are great. But fuck, he can be inappropriate.”

I just smiled and patted the bed beside me.

He paused, took a deep breath, hands braced on his hips. “Can we pretend you didn’t hear any of that?”

Not a chance. I shook my head.

He closed his eyes and groaned, long and miserable.

Laughing softly, I reached for his hand, tugging him down beside me. He came without resistance, shoulders tense, still bracing for impact.

I leaned in and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Sorry,” I murmured, letting my lips linger. “I’m afraid that ship has sailed.”

“Right, so I should probably explain—”

“You don’t have to,” I cut in gently. “But I’m dying to hear about this crush.”

“Oh, fuck me.” He slumped back against the bed, hands covering his face.

I shifted closer, propping myself on one elbow so I could look down at him. “I’m, like, properly crushing on you right now,” I said. “So you don’t have to be shy about yours.”

Lifting my knee over his thigh, I hooked my leg around his. Close, but not trapping. An invitation.

He dropped his hands, though his gaze still stayed just off to the side. “I noticed you when you came into the restaurant,” he said. “The guys in the kitchen noticed too. They liked teasing me about it.” A pause. “That’s all.”

Jessie had told me earlier at the shoot that he worked at ʻĀina Grill, where I ate more often than I probably should have—sometimes with my dad, sometimes alone. Still, I couldn't remember seeing him. The thought made something in my chest dip. How many times had I walked past that

open kitchen, eyes fixed on moving hands and plated food, and missed him completely?

“I’m sorry I didn’t notice you,” I said.

Jessie let out a short, humorless chuckle. “Why would you?” The words came easily. Dismissive. Like it made perfect sense that I hadn’t.

It didn’t sit right.

My hand came up to his cheek, thumb brushing his skin until he finally looked at me. “Here’s the thing,” I said. “I know I can be a lot. I get told that constantly. And knowing full well this could absolutely kill your crush instead of fueling it—which is what I want—I’m going to let you in on something.”

His eyes stayed locked on mine.

“If I weren’t leaving in two days, I would’ve asked you to be my boyfriend after I kissed you.”

His lips parted on a soft inhale.

“I’m like that,” I went on, the words coming fast now. “I move too quickly. Fall hard. I get my heart stomped on, and then I do it all over again.” A small shrug. “But this doesn’t feel impulsive. There’s something about you—I don’t even know what it is—but it feels like your soul is calling out to mine.” I let out a quiet, breathy laugh. “Maybe it’s just attraction. Maybe we’re compatible. But the fact that you saw me first? Wanted me first?” My thumb brushed his cheek again. “That makes it feel like fate. And I fucking *love* fate.”

I held his gaze, unapologetic. “So I’m about to get weird with you, man,” I said. “Hope you’re ready.”

He stayed quiet. Long enough that my chest tightened. Long enough for doubt to creep in—for me to think I should take something back, soften it, make it less… me.

Then—

“I would have said yes,” he said, stopping my spiral cold. “If you’d asked, I would’ve said yes.”

And there it was again. That sense of alignment. I threw my mess at him, and he met it without flinching.

“We should stay in touch after I leave,” I said quickly. “We can do that, right?”

My heart kicked when he nodded.

“Yeah. Let’s do that. I want that.”

A laugh broke out of me—not humor exactly. Relief. “Why me?” The question slipped out before I could stop it. Because I needed to know if this was fleeting or if I was already falling headfirst.

His hand found purchase on my hip, tentative at first, then firmer.

“You’re so gorgeous,” he said. “More than I could probably put into words. And it’s not just—” He faltered, scrunching his face. “Not just how you look.”

I waited.

“It’s like there’s this light coming off you,” he said finally. “When you laugh. When you’re serious. When you smile.” His fingers tightened on my skin. “You look like sunshine, and I can’t make myself look away.”

“Wow…” The word came out soft, awed—and something *clicked* in my brain. Whether he was ready for it or not. Whether it was insane or not. He was it.

I’d always loved that idea—that when you met your person, you just *knew*. It was so fucking romantic. And now, lying here with him, my heart already too far ahead of me—

I just knew.

And I didn’t want to waste a second of it. I leaned down and kissed him deeply, not bothering to ease us into it. Jessie kissed me right back, in that perfectly soft way of his. In one quick motion, I straddled his hips, keeping his face between my palms as I showed him exactly how much I wanted him, our mouths parting over each other again and again.

Then a tiny alarm bell rang in my head, making me break away just enough to breathe. “Do you want to slow—”

“No.” Jessie pulled me back down by my neck, rougher than before, keeping me right where I was for a second longer—then he flipped us, pushing me onto my back and climbing over me. “Your lips are perfect,” he said between kisses.

“Yeah?”

He nodded, fingers digging into the hair at my nape to keep me close. “I could spend the rest of my life kissing you.”

Fuck—*let’s.*

As things picked up, I lifted my hips, urging him to drop his weight back onto me, chasing the friction I was still craving from earlier. But he did the opposite, breaking the kiss and settling beside me instead. Still, his lips hovered a breath away when he asked, “Can I touch you?”

“Fucking everywhere,” I said without hesitation.

His hand slid from my nape down my ribs, his mouth hungry against mine as his fingers slipped past the waistband of my shorts and closed around my already hard cock. The firm grip dragged a groan out of me before I could stop it.

He looked shaken by the sound, pleasure threading through his features. “You like to make noise, baby?”

Baby.

This guy was going to fucking annihilate me with sweetness.

I nodded as his hand stroked my cock, my whole body tilting toward him, instinctively offering myself up. I wanted all of him, wanted to give him everything.

“I like that,” he whispered, his mouth sliding from my jaw down to my neck. I groaned again when his hand tightened around the head of my cock, and he sucked at my skin. “Fuck,” he breathed. “The sounds you make.”

My hand slipped into his shorts, grabbing his firm ass, loving the solid heat of him under my palm. “Make me make more of them,” I said. “Make me feel good, *baby*.”

His body shivered against mine. He liked that too.

Jessie moved his hand, pushing my shirt up and out of the way. I did the same with him, needing a glimpse of his bare skin before I had to say goodbye to it. We were clearly on the same wavelength, because he went for my shorts next, nudging his out of the way too at the lightest request.

His hand returned to my cock, and I forced my eyes to stay open. There were tattoos on his thighs too. Fucking gorgeous. Even his cock was pretty—thick and hard for me. I wanted to suck him off desperately, but I knew he wasn’t going to let me lead this time. He wanted one thing—to take me right to the edge, to prove that he could. He didn’t need to. I was already gone for everything he did to me.

Then he let go, only to press a hand to my shoulder and turn me away from him. I almost complained at the loss of his mouth, but his cock slid into the space between my cheeks, the angle of his grip on my own turning more certain. Pleasure rippled through me at the change.

“Wait,” he said, moving his hand again, and I almost begged him not to stop—until he leaned over me to open his nightstand and pull out lube, effectively silencing me.

“Just to make it feel better,” he added, his tone almost shy, like he thought I’d been expecting something else.

“I’m vers, baby. You can fuck me if you like,” I said. “But I’m fine waiting too.”

His hand came back slick around my cock, and my eyelids fluttered closed at the sensation. He rocked against me again, the same slow friction, and I almost wished he’d do it—right now.

“Let’s wait.” His hips kept moving against mine anyway, like he couldn’t quite help himself. “I want to know all of you. Savor it. I don’t want to miss anything.”

So fucking perfect.

I pushed back into him, and the tortured groan he let out was beautiful. One of my hands found his, still working my cock—not to stop him, just to make it more real, to feel him in more ways than one. My other hand slid to his nape, pulling him closer.

His mouth was on my neck, kissing—soft, then starving, then soft again. The roll of his hips, the drag of his cock, was maddening. My balls were drawing up, the edge starting low and spreading everywhere.

“Gonna come,” I said on a moan.

“Yeah?” His hand sped up; his hips followed.

“Yeah, baby. You’re gonna make me come.”

He groaned again, deep and rough, a sound I was already learning meant he was close too—and that he liked my mouth for more than just kissing. Perfect, because I’d never been good at shutting up, and sex only made it worse.

His cock pressed harder, and I couldn’t help picturing it—how good it would feel to have him rock into me instead of just against me.

“Fuck,” I gasped. “I want that cock inside me.”

His hand went frantic—pulling, stopping, picking up again in a rhythm that was about to send me over. One last twist of his grip over my crown, and I was done.

“Ah—fuck—” I closed my eyes and rode it, his hand still stroking me as my cock spilled into his palm, over and over. My body shook with the aftershocks, and then I felt it—the heat of his own cum against the small of my back, the sharp inhale he couldn’t quite hold back. His chest was hard against my own, his heartbeat frantic against mine, our rhythms falling back into sync.

And then he didn’t pull away. Didn’t roll off me.

He wrapped an arm over my chest, fitting his body close, not minding the mess one bit, and pressed kisses to my nape.

“Danny,” he whispered between them.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He nuzzled my neck, kissed me again. “Just wanted to say your name right now.” His arm tightened around me. “Like this.”

Fuck—this guy. How had anyone ever let him go?

“Did you have a bad breakup?” I blurted, because I couldn’t fucking help myself.

He tensed behind me, then relaxed a second later, wiping his hand on the sheets before bringing it back to trail his knuckles over my chest. “Not really. We just wanted different things. She wanted to go back, and I—”

And he wanted to stay here.

The air shifted, thickening with something uneasy this time.

I shook my head and turned in his arms, catching his mouth immediately. Nothing was pulling me out of this moment. Nothing.

“I’m going to live in LA,” I said. “I used to travel a lot, but I’ve got an internship now. A regular job. I have to stay put.” I swallowed. “It’s only a two- or three-hour time difference. That’s nothing.”

His eyes moved quickly over my face, lips parting. His cheeks were still flushed, a sheen of sweat on his skin. “Why are you—”

“I want to stay in touch.” I licked my lips. “I wasn’t kidding about that. We’ll figure out dates. I’ll come back. Maybe not right away, but—fuck, I don’t know. We’ll figure something out.” I held his gaze. “Do you want that?”

He started nodding before I even finished. “I want that.”

I laughed, bright and unguarded.

His grin spread wide in response.

We were together the rest of the afternoon, into the night. His roommates came and went, but we stayed wrapped up in the bubble of his room, talking about everything.

I told him about the jumps—how much my parents hated them, how much I loved them.

I told him about my friends back home.

I told him I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with my life… even though that wasn’t entirely true.

Because even if I didn’t know exactly what I wanted, I knew *how* I was going to find out.

Because of him.

At midnight, he dropped me off at the hotel. We kissed like maniacs before we finally had to let go. When I shut the car door, the window was still down, and I leaned in for one last look, our fingers tangled together. “This is the best first date I’ve ever been on.”

He smiled. “Me too.”



Dinner was already halfway done when I finally told them.

“I had a really good day yesterday,” I said, cutting into my food. “A good date.”

My mom froze first, fork hovering midair. Since I was leaving soon, we weren’t down at the restaurant tonight—we were having dinner in my parents’ cabin instead.

“A date?” she echoed, careful not to sound overeager. Even though she totally was.

I nodded, pressing my lips together to stop myself from grinning too wide.

My dad glanced up from his plate. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Really good.”

They exchanged a look—the quiet, married kind—and my dad leaned back slightly in his chair. “That’s good, son.”

I took a breath. “It actually made me think about something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Now they were both focused on me.

“I still want the internship,” I said quickly, before they could make the wrong assumption. “But I don’t want to do it somewhere everyone already knows me.”

My dad didn’t interrupt.

“I was thinking LA,” I continued. “Nobody cares who I am there. I’d have to earn it.”

My mom reached for her glass, listening carefully.

“And I was wondering,” I said, steady now, “if you’d be okay holding my trust for a little longer. Not forever. Just until I figure out what I actually want to build with it.”

Silence settled over the table.

My dad was the first to break it. “You want to learn how to work for it.”

“Yes.”

“Not hide behind it.”

“No.”

He studied me for a long second, then nodded once. “That’s a good instinct.”

My mom smiled—soft, proud in a way that made my throat tighten. “You sound sure of yourself.”

“I am.” And it was true.

I’d still do the jumps every once in a while. Not because I needed the danger, not anymore, but because they centered me. Because standing at the edge, feeling the wind, choosing when to step off reminded me that I was in control—that fear didn’t get to decide for me. I knew my limits. I knew my body. I trusted myself to walk away when it stopped being about joy and started being about escape.

But this way, I could focus on work too. On building something that lasted longer than a rush, something that didn’t disappear the second my feet hit water.

And it didn’t hurt that LA was closer to him.

I smiled to myself—because what was getting my blood going right now wasn’t adrenaline or chasing the next drop. It was planning for a future that might actually be mine.

Funny, right? How life can change on you like that.

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CHAPTER FIVE

JESSIE

"Fire two steaks, medium," Malia called from the pass. "I want sides walking with them—Tony, one sashimi, full set. Two miso noodle salads. One ahi tartare. Heard?"

"Yes, Chef!" The calls bounced back from the line.

Malia's voice cut through it again. "Jay—medium rare on sixteen. You got it?"

"Yes, Chef," I called back, flipping the steaks, brushing them with butter before sliding them to rest on the board. The heat was brutal tonight. I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand, eyes flicking over the tickets clipped to the rail before reaching into the lowboy for more cuts.

And then Danny's smile popped into my head uninvited but very appealing. The memory of his mouth followed, and I caught myself grinning like an idiot.

"Ohhh, look at this guy," Trevor sing-songed from sauté. "Someone's in loooove."

"Fuck off," I muttered, but it was too late.

The kitchen pounced—elbows, laughter, a chorus of assholes sweating through their aprons and living for the distraction.

"Full board, guys, keep it tight," Malia snapped without even looking up.

"Yes, Chef!" we answered in unison.

It didn’t stop them. Not the ones close enough to me, anyway.

Trevor was one flame away, already asking about wedding invitations. Rory had obviously been the one to spill—even if he’d been decent enough not to mention who it was. I tried my absolute best to stay dismissive, but fuck, that smile kept creeping back onto my face.

I hadn’t seen Danny around the resort yesterday, but when I woke up, there was a message waiting on my screen, and we’d spent the day texting back and forth. He was probably leaving soon. Just thinking about those texts made the hit a little easier to take.

I set fresh cuts on the grill, the sizzle roaring up around me, then turned to finish the two steaks heading out.

“Jay,” Malia called.

“Sixteen walking in one, Chef,” I said, eyes still on my board.

“Good—but that wasn’t it.” There was a slight lilt to her voice.

I glanced over my shoulder, my heart doing a small, stupid flip.

Danny stood at the pass, no longer a figment of my imagination, leaning just off to the side with that familiar grin aimed straight at me.

“Fuck me…” I muttered, knife still in my hand. “Thirty seconds,” I said to both of them.

I shot Trevor a look—his station was mostly clear. “Can you cover me? Just a minute.”

His grin turned feral as he nodded.

I pressed my lips together, plated fast, and slid the food onto the pass for Malia.

“Hey,” Danny said, lowering his voice. “Sorry—I know you’re busy.” He leaned his elbows on the counter, eyes flicking briefly toward Malia. “I just wanted to say goodbye. Again.” A small, self-conscious laugh followed.

I wiped my hands down as best I could and leaned over the counter too, hoping to give us some semblance of privacy while I felt the eyes of the entire kitchen burning into the back of my head. “Are you heading out now?”

“Yeah. Car’s waiting.” He gave me a sympathetic shrug. His eyes dropped to my lips for a second—long enough to make my stomach flip—before he shifted back a step. “I’ll let you know when I get there, though. If you want.”

“I want—tell me everything,” I said quickly.

Danny smiled, and I swear the whole space brightened. “I’ll tell you everything. Promise.” His hand drifted forward, and I didn’t hesitate, our thumbs hooking as we pulled our hands together. “Is it weird that I miss you already?”

“Probably,” I teased, then shrugged. “I miss you already too.” I kept my voice low, leaning closer over the counter.

He gave me a look that was hard to read even now—even with him this open. Then, in one soft, reckless move, he bumped his forehead against mine, eyes closing as he stayed there for a second. His hand tightened around mine before he pulled away. “Bye, Jessie.”

I tried to smile, but I’m pretty sure it came out a little sad. “Bye, gorgeous,” I whispered.

Danny bit his lip, gave me one last helpless look, then let go of my hand and backed away. He stopped to grab his bag, slinging it over his shoulder. When he finally turned, my heart dropped, already bracing myself to watch him walk out.

“Are you kidding me right now?” Malia’s voice snapped me back.

“Sorry, Chef. I’ll get back—”

“No,” she cut in. “That’s how you say goodbye to him? After staring at that boy with heart eyes for the past two months? That was it?” She looked at me like I’d personally offended her.

My heart thudded. I swallowed thickly.

“Jay, go the fuck after him, man,” Trevor yelled. “Don’t be an idiot,”

The whole kitchen joined in—my team, all of them hollering, nudging me away from the line, telling me off.

“I have orders,” I said with a nervous laugh.

“I’ll cover. Just fucking go, Jay!” Trevor shot back.

I looked to Malia. She rolled her eyes and waved me off, already calling out another order.

Okay. Let’s run after him.

I washed my hands as fast as I could, yanked off my apron, and shoved through the line as hands thumped encouragement against my back. The second I cleared the kitchen, I broke into a jog toward the front desk, silently praying he was heading out through the main entrance.

I cut through the service hallway and into the main lobby, my heart still pounding with adrenaline. The space opened up all at once, sunlight filtering through the arches, greenery everywhere. Danny stood near the

front desk, bag slung over his shoulder, mid-conversation with one of the receptionists. He looked like he was just about to leave, so I picked up my pace, nerves crashing into me all at once.

I was still in my chef jacket, still shaking a little, because this was public—too public—and for a split second I wondered what I'd do if he pulled back. It didn't feel like he would. Not after showing up at the restaurant. Not after everything we'd already shared. But you never really know.

Then he looked up.

And all that doubt just… evaporated. Right there, in that moment, I just knew.

I couldn't let him leave yet.

I didn't give myself time to think. I crossed the distance and caught his shirt, pulling him in to kiss him right there in the middle of the lobby, in front of staff and guests and anyone else who happened to be looking. Somewhere behind us, a voice dropped, a laugh cut short—the lobby didn't stop, but it shifted.

His hands came up instantly—not pushing me away, but gripping the fabric of my jacket and holding me there as his lips parted for mine.

My stomach went absolutely feral as I kissed him, every nerve lighting up, and I had to fight the smile breaking across my face because—fuck—it was perfect. A movie-star kiss if I'd ever seen one.

When I pulled back, I stayed close, my forehead resting against his.

"I'm not as good as you at putting myself out there," I said. "But you make me want to change that."

His hands tightened in my jacket, the smile on his face bright. "You're doing pretty great right now."

He kissed me again, slow and lingering, like he was savoring it, and I let my heart get away from me without the least bit of resistance.

He could have it.

Own it.

Do whatever he wanted with it.

And maybe I could have him in return.



Later that night, my phone pinged as I stepped out of the shower, steam following me as I clutched the towel at my hips and hurried toward the sound. I knew it wouldn't be Danny—he was still mid-flight—but some irrational part of me hoped anyway.

It wasn't him.

SADIE

I know we're not supposed to have favorites

but this one's mine

There was a photo attached. I tapped it, setting my phone on the bed as I pulled on my shorts, waiting for it to load.

When it finally appeared, my grin broke free before I could stop it.

There we were—Danny and me—walking hand in hand into the ocean. I was laughing, eyes on the water curling around our feet. Danny's light green gaze fixed on me with unmistakable, full-on heart eyes.

It hadn't been in my head.

He'd felt it too.

And just like that, all the insecurities I'd built over the years—the walls I'd learned to raise with every almost and every failed relationship—started to crumble.

With one look.

With one picture.

Seems like it doesn't take much for life to do a one-eighty on you.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alex is a professional daydreamer with a knack for overanalyzing and creating drama out of thin air. A Colombian writer who's passionate about diving deep into the whys of her characters and making sure they feel real and relatable, hopefully translating that into character-driven, chaotic romance stories that have you staring at a wall at 3 a.m., wondering why you keep doing this to yourself.

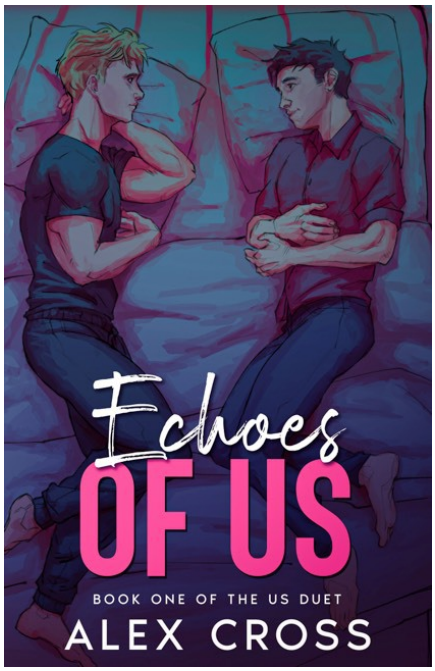
When she's not chauffeuring her kids around or growing increasingly frustrated with brownie recipes that never yield the exact result, she's listening to music, hurting her own feelings, and drawing inspiration for her next story.

If you want to know all about new releases or are just in the mood for some random author thoughts, follow her on TikTok or Instagram.

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ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Echoes of Us



Atticus King had his life all mapped out—train hard, play volleyball, keep to himself. That is, until Noah Rossi burst onto the scene, charismatic and impulsive, a storm that blew through Atticus's carefully built walls and set his world on fire. They didn't fit—Noah was everything Atticus wasn't—but somehow, they found a rhythm in their shared love for the game and an undeniable pull toward each other. It was everything Atticus never knew he wanted.

But just as quickly as Noah entered his life, he disappeared. No explanation. No goodbye. Only silence that left Atticus drowning in confusion and pain.

Two years later, Noah walks back into Atticus's world as if nothing ever happened, stirring up old feelings that Atticus has tried to bury. The bond they shared is undeniable, but so is the hurt that lingers beneath the surface. Why did Noah leave? And can they rebuild something out of the shattered pieces of their past?

No one said love was easy. But for Atticus and Noah, it might be the only thing worth fighting for.

This isn't a fairy tale. This is a story of real love, messy and complicated—about addiction, toxic relationships, and the struggle to claw your way out of the trenches. About facing the truth, even when it's ugly. About second chances that may or may not come with new heartbreak.

Becoming Us



Noah Rossi met Atticus King in the worst year of his life.

While everything around him was falling apart, Atticus stood out like a lifeline. They were nothing alike, but Noah was drawn to him, to the quiet warmth he never believed he deserved.

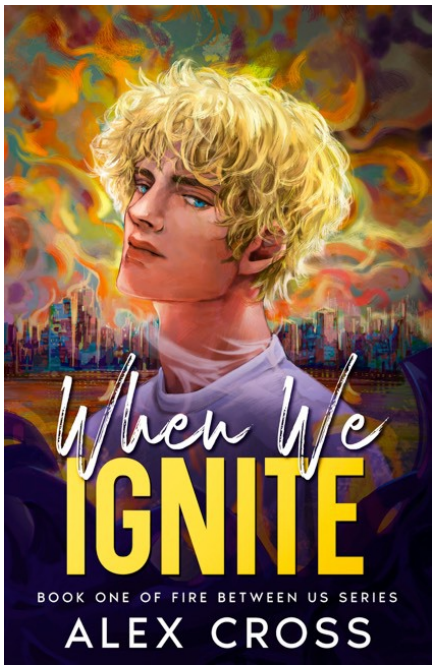
Now, two years later, they're finally finding their way back to each other. Picking up the pieces of a love that never really ended, Noah and Atticus are trying to move forward. But rebuilding trust doesn't erase the wreckage left behind, and Noah's past still lingers in the shadows of everything they're trying to become.

As their relationship deepens, the story shifts between present day and the past, revealing the grief, trauma, addiction, and emotional scars Noah has spent years trying to outrun. Slowly, piece by piece, he begins to heal, not just for Atticus, but for himself.

A companion novel to Echoes of Us, Becoming Us is an MM story about recovery and redemption. About choosing love in the aftermath of destruction. About learning that you can be broken and still be worthy.

And that sometimes, the hardest person to forgive is yourself.

When We Ignite



They were never supposed to happen.

From the moment their paths cross, the attraction between them is undeniable but completely forbidden.

Ash Langley is the heir to an empire built on luxury and wealth, a man trapped between a father who refuses to loosen his grip and the crushing weight of his own expectations. As if that weren't enough, his younger brother, Oliver, is about to marry Charlotte Bennett, further complicating his standing within the company.

Ethan Bennett is just beginning to taste freedom, still drifting as he tries to figure out what he wants from life—who he really is. He's spent years keeping his emotions at arm's length, speaking softly, avoiding strong opinions, and unwilling to face the fire burning inside him.

But when Ash looks at him—really looks at him—everything changes.

Ash is dangerous, not just because he's fifteen years older or because their relationship could spark a scandal that would destroy everything, but because he awakens a desire in Ethan that he's never been ready to admit.

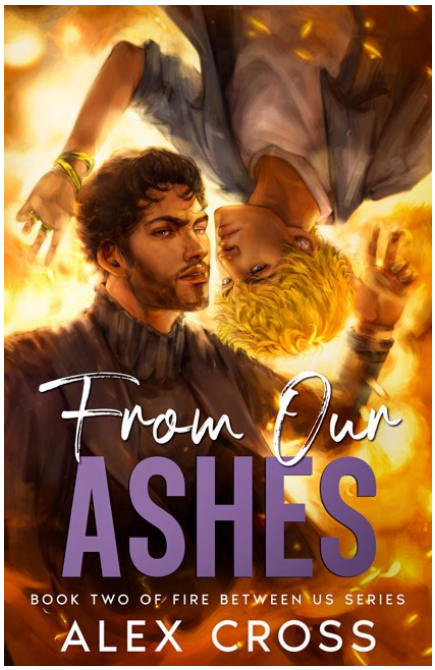
For Ash, Ethan is an escape. For Ethan, Ash is the spark that forces him to confront what he truly wants.

Between secrets, stolen moments, and a battle for control, their relationship becomes a dangerous game where the lines between right and inevitable begin to blur.

How long can they play with fire before it consumes them completely?

This is book one of a duet. While it offers a complete emotional arc, it does not end with a happily ever after and concludes on a cliffhanger.

From Our Ashes



They burned everything down.

Four years ago, Sebastian Langley walked away from the only man who ever made him feel real. He told himself it was for Ethan's good. For his future. For all the reasons that made sense in his head, even if they shattered Ethan's heart.

Now Ethan is back… whether Sebastian is ready for it or not.

Ethan has learned how to survive without him. How to be sharper. Stronger. How not to fall apart every time Sebastian Langley's name crosses his mind.

But some things don't stay buried.

The pull between them is still there. So is everything that was left unsaid. Between complicated families, buried resentments, and lives that have only grown more tangled in their absence, loving each other isn't just about what they feel. It's about what it costs.

These second chances won't come gently. They will come with truth, reckoning, and the risk of losing everything again.

From Our Ashes is the emotional conclusion to Ash and Ethan's story, a second-chance MM romance about love, regret, and choosing each other when the world around you is still on fire.

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