



Escaping in 03

Aria Grace

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

ESCAPING IN OZ

By Aria Grace

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

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The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

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ESCAPING IN OZ

By Aria Grace

Photo Description

Two college-aged guys are taking a nap on a bed, holding each other.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It's just been me and my mom for as long as I can remember. She's great and I don't mind having to pitch in. I got a job young and studied really hard to get a scholarship to college. I never had time to date, but wasn't really tempted by anyone... until I started tutoring for extra cash in college. To my surprise, it was a guy that got me flustered. I looked at other guys and girls to see if I was just a late bloomer, but they did nothing for me. Just Xander, and I don't even think he likes guys that way.

No BDSM.

Sincerely,

Sara

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, new adult

Tags: college, coming out, family, fear of homophobia, fear of rejection (shunning), first time, religion (Mormonism), self-discovery, tutor

Word Count: 16,907

ESCAPING IN OZ

By Aria Grace

Chapter 1

Ozzie

Five more minutes. That's all I need. I'm so damn tired, but I've hit snooze at least seven times so I know it's time to get my ass out of bed and on the road. With one last loud squealing of my alarm, I roll out of bed and head to the shower. The cold water is exactly what I need to wake up enough to deal with school. Between a full load of business classes, my job at the library, and my tutoring jobs, I don't have much free time.

"Ozzie," my mom calls from the other side of the bathroom door as soon as I turn off the faucet. "I'm gonna work a double tonight so stop by the diner if you want dinner."

"Thanks." I wrap a towel around my waist and grab another for my dripping hair then open the door. "I'll be working late too so I might just grab something quick on my way home."

"You work too hard." Mom sighs deeply and places her palm on my cheek. "You need to eat, Ozzie."

I smile and duck out from under her hand. "I do eat. And I work just hard enough."

With a quick peck on her cheek, I pull away and rush into my room. "Have a good day," I call out to her before I close the door.

I love my mom. I truly do. It's always just been her and me. My dad left before I was born, and she vowed to always put my needs before her own. She never had a boyfriend and barely had any girl friends at all. That was fine when I was a kid that needed her undivided attention. She went on every field trip, attended every honor roll award ceremony, and made sure I always had a few bucks in my pocket.

But now that I'm a junior in college, I just wish she'd get a life of her own. I won't always be around for her to dote over. In fact, after graduation, I plan to get as far out of this shithole town as I can. Stockton, California is known for a lot of things, but some of the highest rates of foreclosures and unemployment in the country are among our claims to fame.

Mom just barely managed to hang on to our little matchbox house in Weston Ranch when most of our neighbors lost their houses a few years back. I

was only thirteen at the time, but I know how hard it was for her to keep things afloat. We ate almost all our meals at the diner she works at because we couldn't afford groceries. Every penny went to keeping the lights on and the mortgage paid.

That's the biggest reason I want to move to the Silicon Valley. I know I can make decent money at some start-up and help make her life a little easier. I just need to finish college without taking on any debt. Junior college was great for the past two years, and having an associate's degree is something I'm proud of. But I plan to get through my next two years at University of the Pacific with no loans and a bachelor's degree.

Although, if I'm going to do that, I need to move my ass and get to class on time. Professor Peterson is a jerk and will lock the door if you're not inside by the time he walks through it at exactly eight thirty-one. I'm about ten feet ahead of Peterson as he slams the door shut and turns the lock.

By the time I get through two classes and a three-hour shift in the library, I am exhausted. And it's only five fifteen. That leaves me exactly fifteen minutes to run to the nearest café for a sandwich and get back into a study room before my new tutoring client shows up.

I usually only tutor on Tuesdays and Thursdays because I need time to do my own studying, but since this new guy is taking a class I aced over the summer session, I decided to go ahead and take the job. God knows I need the extra cash. Forty bucks is forty bucks.

We can't reserve the small private study rooms spread throughout the library so I have to claim one before I run out for food. I put my backpack on one chair and set up my laptop so it looks like I just stepped away to use the bathroom.

As I jog across the courtyard to a deli, I send a text to Xander. We haven't met in person, but I told him I'd text when I had a room secured.

*Hey. I left my black backpack and laptop in the last study room.
2nd floor. East wing. Be there in 5. Oz. (your tutor)*

He doesn't immediately respond so I slide my phone into my pocket and order a peppered turkey with Swiss and a Coke. Just as I'm entering the library, I get a text back.

Running late too. Gimme 10.

Well, it's his dime. If he wants to waste it, that's fine by me. Gives me time to eat before he arrives. I'm just shoving the last bit of bread into my mouth when Xander Collins struts through the door.

He's got to be six three and two hundred pounds with biceps bigger than my thighs. I've never tutored a jock before. As a business major, the few people I've tutored this year were more like me. Studious, academic overachievers who wouldn't settle for anything lower than an A. The premed girl I've been working with for a month seemed suicidal when she showed up with a 92 percent on her first quiz.

I immediately hate myself for judging him. I don't like people to judge me based on my appearance. I'm not just a geek. I'm a person. And Xander is too. So, with a quick brush of my hand over my mouth and shirt to wipe away any stray crumbs, I stand and hold out my hand.

"You must be Xander," I say with a half smile, afraid there could be some pepper flakes in my teeth. "I'm Ozzie. Um, Oz."

He grabs my hand in a firm shake. I'm expecting the bone-crushing grip of most guys his size but it doesn't come. His palm wraps around mine with a reasonable amount of pressure to assert some dominance without making me flinch. "Hey, Oz. Great to meet you. Sorry I'm late."

"No worries." I move my backpack from the second chair and motion for him to sit. "I was just finishing up dinner so you're fine."

Xander drops into the chair and pulls out a notebook and his Data Analysis and Interpretation text. He looks at me as if he doesn't know where to begin.

With a reassuring smile, I pull out my own notebook. "Good news is, they didn't change the book since summer session. Where are you having the most trouble?"

"Everywhere." He pulls a blue book out from the middle of the text. "The last day to withdraw is next week, and I'm barely getting a C. I thought I understood it but obviously..."

He waves the big red grade at me then drops the book on the table.

"Let me see how you did." I cock my head to the side as I look over his essay. He has the basics of statistical analysis down, but his interpretations aren't exactly what the professor is looking for.

“This is probably a waste of your time.” He drops his head into his hands, not making eye contact. “I promised my parents I’d at least try to bring up the grade, but if I don’t understand this by Monday, I’m dropping the class.”

“No pressure or anything, right?”

He glances at me and smiles sadly. “Yeah, no pressure. I’m sure you can work a miracle in the next seven days.”

We review his last exam to see where things went wrong. For the next thirty-five minutes, we discuss the outcome of the data and how he would want to present it in a real business setting. That seems to help him focus on the questions he should be answering instead of what he thinks the professor is expecting.

My phone dings at exactly six forty. I usually give myself a few extra minutes in case we’re in the middle of a concept, but since we started late, it’s not nearly enough time.

“Shit,” Xander says, sitting back in the chair. “Time’s up already? I’m just starting to understand.”

“I have some time tomorrow if you don’t mind meeting kinda late.” I open my calendar app and scroll through my schedule. “Maybe eight fifteen?”

“Yeah?” Xander’s whole face lights up. “That’s perfect. I really appreciate you fitting me in on such short notice.”

“It’s fine.” I slide my laptop into the padded pocket in my backpack. “I could use the extra cash.”

This is the part I hate about tutoring. The students are supposed to pay me directly after each session, and it’s always awkward to ask for money. I wish I could just send a PayPal invoice or something less personal.

“Cool.” He pulls out his wallet and hands me a fifty. “Here ya go.”

“Oh.” I mentally calculate how much cash I have in my wallet. “Um, I’m not sure if I have change. Lemme check.”

“No change.” He shakes his head and laughs. “My parents are making me do this, so they can pay whatever I have in my pocket. I should pay you double just out of spite and because this is a waste of your time and mine. I’m never going to get this in the next few days.”

“Oh, um, okay.” I put the bill in my wallet. “Well, just take the extra ten off your session tomorrow.”

“Nope.” He winks and turns to leave. “Text me where to meet you tomorrow.”

Chapter 2

Xander

That wasn't what I expected at all.

Oz. Ozzie. Wonder what that's short for. He's definitely not what I imagined a business tutor to be like. Seems cool. And smart, but not in that holier-than-thou way a lot of brainiacs are. He didn't look down on me or treat me like some dumb jock that wouldn't be able to understand inferential statistics or exponential growth modeling.

Okay, I don't completely understand those concepts, but that's why I need him. As a tutor. And if he has an adorable dimple in his chin and the darkest blue eyes I've ever seen, well, you won't hear me complain. Mom and Dad would shit bricks if they knew I got hard during my tutoring session because my *male* tutor brushed his arm against mine and didn't move it for a good twenty seconds.

Pathetic, yes. But, that's probably as close to a guy as I'll ever get in my lifetime, so I might as well enjoy it. And making them pay a 25 percent premium for the pleasure is just gravy.

Sometimes I fantasize about what it would be like to ignore the path of righteousness and just kiss a guy. My parents are so ridiculously conservative they don't even want me to kiss a girl with tongue until I'm married, but I know they'd much rather I do that, than even entertain ideas about touching guys. Growing up in a strict LDS household was fine, but as soon as puberty hit, and I realized my interest was in boys instead of girls, it was impossible to maintain my faith.

But, I'm the oldest of us kids and my little brothers and sisters all look up to me. I'm paving the way for them to have some freedom when it comes time to go to college. Unless they all want to end up at BYU, I need to keep up the façade and make sure my parents never even suspect I've been anything but the pure and devoted Mormon son they raised.

I can look but I can't touch. Ever. Not that I would even know what to do if I had the opportunity to touch. But, since I don't, I'll focus on graduating and think about a love life later. Like when I'm forty.

When I get the text at seven thirty, I have to put my phone down and stretch before I respond. Don't want to seem too eager. I'd die of humiliation if Oz knew I spent the past twenty-four hours thinking about him. God, I'm lame.

I finally slide my finger across my phone to unlock it and read the full message.

Do you mind meeting off campus? I'm starving. If not, how about the Courtyard Deli?

I'm hungry too. Off campus is fine. Where/when?

Pacific Diner on Second St. 8?

See you there.

This is not a date. I'm paying the guy, for God's sake. If this were a date, that would make Oz a prostitute. I half laugh, half cringe at the idea. Definitely not a date. But I've never gone out to eat with a guy like this before.

Of course, I've had dinners with buddies, and sometimes it was just one-on-one. But this feels different because I hardly know him. Like how a date might be. But it's not a date. I don't know why I can't get that through my thick skull as I'm adding mousse to my hair and putting on my nicest T-shirt. Casual but tight enough to show a little bit of definition across my chest and arms. I normally don't wear clothes that put my body on display because I don't want to deal with the attention. So why am I flexing my pecs to see how they look under the thin black fabric?

Chapter 3

Ozzie

I get to the diner about fifteen minutes after confirming with Xander and head to the corner booth I like. It has a great view of the whole restaurant when I'm there alone, but will be private enough that we can work without distraction once Xander arrives.

I wave to Mom as she passes by with a salad in one hand and a glass of iced tea in the other. "Hey, honey. I'll be right back."

I nod and pull out my laptop to check my e-mail. Xander won't be here for a while so I've got some time to kill. Mom returns with a Coke and sets it down in front of me. "Burger or salad?"

"Oh, actually, I'm meeting someone so I'll order when they get here." I don't look her in the eye. I never bring friends around because she's always over interested in their lives. That need to control my world hasn't lessened as I've become an adult. She's just gotten slightly better at hiding it.

"Oh." Her hand drops to the tabletop and she taps a nail on the surface to get my attention. "Like a date?"

I almost choke on my Coke. "Nooo." I look around the diner. "I wouldn't bring a date here."

Her smile drops for just a second at the sting of my insult. But she recovers well. She knows it's a dive. But it pays the bills and she can work as much overtime as she can handle.

"You know what I mean." I offer an apologetic smile. "But, this is a tutoring session. I had to squeeze it in, and I'm hungry so we're just meeting here instead of the library."

"I see." She wipes a drop of Coke off the table and takes a step back. "Well, as soon as your guest arrives, I'll come see what you guys want to order."

"Thanks, Mom." I watch her walk toward the bar. There's a guy sitting at the counter, probably in his late forties or early fifties, watching her from the corner of his eye. Each time she passes by, he looks up and smiles, as if waiting to meet her gaze. It's a little pathetic.

My mom doesn't put a lot of effort into her appearance but she isn't bad looking. At forty-one, she's younger than all my friends' moms and definitely

thinner. She usually wears her light brown hair in a ponytail, but when it is down, it has a wave that makes her look even younger. I guess guys would consider her to be pretty. I wouldn't know. Not just because she's my mom, but also because I don't usually look at women in that way. I hardly look at anyone that way, but Mom has started teasing me about dating. She really wants me to bring someone around to meet her.

I already know I won't be bringing home any girls. And based on my oh-for-none track record, I probably won't be bringing any guys home either. Ever.

It's a little weird to watch this guy check out my mom. It must happen a lot but she never goes on dates or talks about guys. The man turns toward me and catches me staring. He gives me a small smile and a nod. Does he know I'm her son? Is there something more going on between them? Does he think I know about him?

I'm busy mulling over the possibilities of my mother having a love life of some kind when Xander drops into the booth across from me. "Hey."

Startled, it takes me a few seconds to spit out a response. "Oh, hey. Glad you could meet here."

"Yeah, it's perfect." He reaches for a menu from the back of the table. "I'm starved. Have you ordered yet?"

"No." I gesture toward my empty glass. "Just a Coke. I was waiting for you."

Xander's gaze shoots up from the menu and holds mine for a moment. He looks thoughtful as he gives me a half smile. "Oh, thanks."

He barely has a minute to read through it before Mom is back. "Are you boys ready to order yet?"

Xander smiles up at Mom and nods. He then turns to me. "I'm ready if you are."

"Yeah, I'll just have a cheeseburger."

Mom smiles and turns back to Xander. "And what about you?"

"I'll have the same... and a Coke." He points to my glass. "You need a refill, Oz?"

"Uh, yeah." I'm a little surprised by his question. I never order refills because Mom just brings them to me when she notices my glass is empty. Of course, he doesn't know that.

I look up to Mom. “Whenever you come by is fine. It’s not urgent.”

“No problem, honey.” She pats my shoulder and takes a step back to watch Xander. She’s just staring at him for a minute before he notices. He smiles politely, unsure what else to say.

“Sorry.” I laugh when I realize he’s just waiting for her to leave, and she’s just waiting for an introduction. “Xander, this is my mom, Emily. Mom, this is Xander. He’s taking the stats class I took over the summer, and we’re trying to get his grade up by the end of the week.”

Xander looks a little flustered as he connects the dots of our relationship. “Oh, God. That makes much more sense.” He laughs and stands up to shake her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Mason.”

“Please call me Emily.” Mom pulls him into a quick hug. Xander doesn’t seem bothered by it, but I’ve never seen her so affectionate toward one of my friends before. Or, really, anyone other than me. “And it’s a pleasure to meet you, Xander. I’ll get your drinks and let you boys get to work.”

She disappears before I can pick up my jaw and form any words. Finally, I’m able to speak to Xander as I watch Mom almost skip into the kitchen. “That was weird.”

“Naw.” Xander shakes his head as he reaches into his bag and begins to pull out books. “She seems really cool.”

Xander just finishes arranging his stuff on the far side of the table when Mom is back with our drinks. She rests her hip against the back of my booth and crosses her arms over her chest. “So, Xander, are you a business major too?”

He smiles and leans forward, twisting the straw between his fingers. “Yeah.” He looks over at me and cocks his head. “I’m surprised we haven’t had classes together over the past few years.”

“I just transferred in last summer.” I drop my eyes to my drink and take a sip. I’m not ashamed of being a transfer student. At least I didn’t think I was. But, I feel awkward mentioning it to Xander, like he’ll think less of me. “I was at a JC for the first few years.”

“Oh, that’s cool.” He looks back up to Mom. “Anyway, my dad wants me to take over one of his companies, so that’s why I’m getting a business degree. If it were up to me, I’d become a vet.”

“A vet.” Mom’s tone is impressed, and she nudges me in the arm. “Well, I’m sure your parents would be proud to have a doctor in the family.”

He shrugs and leans back. “Not really. They’re pretty set in their beliefs about what I should and shouldn’t be doing.”

In a move completely uncharacteristic of my mother, she slides into the booth next to Xander and puts her arm around his shoulder. “Even though I just met you, I can tell you’re a good person. Sometimes parents are too close to see what’s good for their kids, but I can tell you know who you are and what you want. You should follow your heart and do what makes you happy. Ultimately, that’s what every parent wants for their children.”

“Mom.” I can’t keep my mouth shut any longer. Her little soliloquy is completely out of line. She’s known him for about twenty seconds. “What are you talking about?”

She gives me a knowing look that pisses me off even more. “I just want you to be happy, honey. Don’t ever be afraid to be yourself.”

“Are you high?” I’ve never even seen her drink more than one glass of wine, but now I’m worried for her sanity. I know her love is unconditional, and when I finally meet someone interested enough in me to make a move, she’ll be happy for me. But this is just weird.

She laughs and stands up. “No. Just happy to see you happy.”

“What?” I stare at her in confusion as she walks away.

Xander breaks the tension by busting up in laughter. “Wow, she’s very friendly.”

“No, she’s not. That was totally weird.” I turn to him with burning cheeks. “I don’t know what the hell that was about but I’m so sorry. Maybe senility is setting in or something.”

He laughs even harder. “Maybe. But it’s cool. I wish my mom was like that. I would have had a lot more fun in high school.”

“What do you mean?” I watch as Xander drops his straw into his glass and takes a sip. I don’t know why I’m watching, but I can’t pull my eyes away from his lips as they close around the straw.

He shrugs and my eyes finally move up to his. “My family is really religious and has all these ideas about how I should live and who I should

spend time with. It was annoying when I was growing up. I hated bringing anyone home to meet them.”

“That sucks.” I don’t know what else to say. I never had a lot of friends, but those I did have never hung out at my house. They were basically friends during the school day, but not on the weekends because I’ve been working since I was sixteen. That definitely cut into my social life. God, I’m not much better than Mom.

At the thought of her, she appears with two plates in her hands. She leans down and drops a kiss on the top of my head then squeezes Xander’s shoulder.

“Mom.” I shake my head and my eyes bug out, giving her a WTF look. “What is going on with you?”

She holds back a smirk and feigns innocence as she walks away in silence.

Xander is smiling again, even as he takes a bite of his burger.

Chapter 4

Xander

I should be horrified that Oz's mom seems to think there's something going on between us. At least I think that's what she thinks. Unless she actually is high. But the way she keeps glancing at me and smiling indicates one of two things. Either she thinks I'm hot for her son, or she's hot for me. I'm going to assume it's the former or else I'll have to puke.

I probably would be horrified if it wasn't for Oz's reaction. His complete mortification is hilarious. Every time his mom walks by, he turns red and looks like he wants to swat her away. By the time she clears our plates and brings us each a bowl of ice cream, I'm laughing out loud.

"I'm serious." The intense stare he's giving me is proof enough of his honesty. "She's never been like this. I know she's lonely... but gross... you're like half her age."

So that's the conclusion he came to. My stomach hurts from laughing so hard. "You think your mom is into me?"

"God, I don't know." He glares at her from across the room. "She's never so touchy. Maybe it's a menopause thing?"

I take a bite of ice cream and shake my head. "Your mom is way too young for menopause. My mom is like ten years older and she's not even in menopause yet."

"Well, it's something." Oz's eyes narrow on a guy at the bar. "Maybe he drugged her."

"What?" I turn around and check out the guy Oz has been keeping track of since I sat down. "Who?"

"Him." He nods with his chin. "He's been watching Mom all night. Maybe he slipped her some E or something to get her horny, and she's taking it out on you."

God, he's cute. And lame. "Oz, seriously?"

He looks at me like he doesn't know what I mean.

"I think she's just being friendly. She's happy you have a friend. Maybe you should bring people around more often." I unconsciously clear my throat

and twist the spoon in my hand. “Hasn’t she met any of your girlfriends before?”

Oz just shakes his head. “No, and now I’m glad I never brought people around before. I’m regretting letting her meet you.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure if he’s really that clueless or genuinely concerned about his mom, but the comment stings. “Well, maybe I should take off?”

“What?” He snaps out of his daydream and looks back at me then to the mass of books and papers on the table. “No, please. We haven’t even gotten much work done. I’m sorry. Let’s just focus. No charge for this session.”

“Whatever.” I shouldn’t be annoyed but I am. In fact, I’m kinda pissed, but I open my book and let Oz walk me through the concepts that are still a jumbled mess in my mind.

It’s almost ten when we finally decide to call it a night. Oz is yawning between every sentence, and I feel bad for keeping him out so late. “We have a quiz tomorrow. Either I’ll pass or fail.”

Oz breathes deeply. “I’m sorry I was so distracted earlier. We probably could have covered a lot more if…” He looks around, but his mom isn’t in the dining room. “Well, you know.”

“Don’t worry.” I pack up my stuff and reach for my wallet. “I’ll get my grade on Friday and let you know if I’m going to drop or not. If I don’t, I might want to keep seeing you.”

My breath stops when I realize what I’ve said, but Oz doesn’t miss a beat. Clearly, he’s not thinking of me as anything other than a client. That’s a good thing—even though I feel a little disappointed at the realization.

“Yeah, no problem.” He pokes at his phone and purses his lips in concentration. “If Monday is usually good for you, we can meet then. I don’t have any other tutoring appointments on Mondays or Wednesdays. Just let me know.”

I drop a hundred dollar bill on the table and slide it to him. “Thanks!”

He stills for just a minute then holds up one hand while his other reaches for his wallet. “I have change this time.”

“No change.” I know he needs the cash, and it’s not my money. I’d rather see it in his hands than my parents’. They’ll just give it to the church or donate it to some crazy hate-based organization. “You earned it.”

I grab my bag and exit the booth before he can protest any further. Just as I reach the front door, Emily's hand lands on my shoulder. When I turn to look at her, she pulls me into a hug. "I hope to see you again, Xander."

When she pulls back, her eyes are watching mine in a way that makes my stomach flutter. For a second, I wonder if Oz is right. Maybe she is into me. But then I recognize the same look I used to see on my own mother's face when I was a kid. Love. The unconditional kind that doesn't go away if you disappoint her or make a bad decision.

I can only nod, afraid my voice might betray me if I speak.

For the next few days, I can't stop thinking about Oz and that crazy conversation with his mom. When I get my quiz back and it's another C, I send a quick text to Oz. I know he probably hasn't given me a second thought, but I want to let him know I won't need his tutoring services any more.

Got a C so I'll probably drop. Thanks for trying.

He responds within thirty seconds.

I'm sorry. It's my fault for not giving you 100%. You can have your money back.

No way. You earned it. I just suck. I'll figure out a way around the requirement.

Or I won't. Either way, it's not his problem.

Free this weekend? We can try one more time. There's an extra credit project I can help you with. I did it last semester. It's not too bad.

I'm tempted to take him up on the offer. I'm not sure if it's because I want to stay in the class, or I want to spend more time with Oz. I try to take the high road, even if it's a half-assed attempt.

I hate to waste your time if I'm not going to stay in the class after Monday.

LOL. I love a challenge. Give me the next 2 days to change your mind.

If you say so.

Cool. Library at 10 tomorrow?

Yes. I should say yes. But Jake went home for the weekend so we could work at my place. Before I lose my nerve, I thumb out the text that could change everything.

My roommate is gone this weekend. Want to come to my place?

He doesn't respond immediately, even though I can see that he's read my message. Just as I'm about to suggest the library, my phone buzzes in my hand.

Sure. Send me the address and I'll be there at 10.

Chapter 5

Ozzie

I'm inexplicably nervous about going to Xander's apartment. It's really not any different from anywhere else, but we'll be alone. Completely alone. No students passing by large windows in the library study rooms. And, thankfully, no weird and inappropriate touching by my mother.

There's something about Xander that I just can't explain. He's a nice guy who's also smart, even though he's not picking up the stats concepts as quickly as I hoped. Not because I want to get rid of him as a tutoring client, but because I want him to do well. Obviously, I want all my students to do well, but Xander is special. Okay, special isn't the right word. Interesting. Attractive. Sexy. Shit, I need to stop thinking like this.

I've never thought about a student, or even a friend, the way I keep thinking about Xander. When I'm with him, I can't think straight. I shouldn't have accepted his money from day one. I haven't given him my full attention. Actually, that's not true. I've given Xander my full attention but only a small portion went into actual tutoring.

That first night when my arm brushed against his, I felt a tingle run down my spine that I've never experienced before. I was so caught off guard, I didn't even move it for at least thirty seconds. I'm lucky he didn't punch me right then. But he didn't. He seemed just as shocked as I was. And when I finally realized what I was doing and pulled away, the exhale of his breath matched my own.

And then there's my mother. She's been all over me since Tuesday night. I've even snapped at her a few times, and I never do that. Not with her. She's worked too hard to provide for me. It's not like I expect her to be a nun, but the way she was throwing herself at Xander was just disgusting. I keep telling myself I'm bothered by their age difference, but deep down, I don't think that's it. As much as I want to deny it, I think I'm most bothered by the fact that she was touching Xander in a way that I never will. In a way that I never thought I'd want to touch a guy.

Watching her squeeze his shoulder and embrace him as he left made me want to tear her off him. It made me want to pull him into my own arms. What the fuck? I've never thought about a guy that way. I've never even thought of a

girl that way. Although, if I'm honest with myself, it feels much more natural to picture myself hugging Xander than any girl I've ever met.

Going to his apartment is a bad idea. I should cancel. And even as I step into the shower to get ready, I know I won't. I want to see Xander again. Maybe I need to just focus less on school and work. This obsession I have with him is probably related to the fact that he seems to be everything I'm not. He's tall and muscular. His wide shoulders and chest fill out his clothes with rippling bulges that don't stop at his waist. Not that I've been looking, but the bulge behind his zipper is always prominently displayed when he stands to leave.

Fuck, now I'm hard. I shouldn't be hard thinking about the way his spikey hair always looks like he just ran his hand through it as he jumped out of the shower. The shower that he would have been naked and dripping with water in. Goddamnit. I close my hand around my cock and stroke a few times, hoping that'll be enough to ease the pressure. It's not. And my mind won't move on from the image of Xander dragging a towel across every inch of his tan body, gently running it over his balls and back between his ass cheeks.

My fist pumps harder as I picture his hazel eyes glowing at me as he smiles. The first genuinely happy smile directed my way from a guy that I've ever seen. Fuck. With just a few more quick tugs, I come into my hand, releasing some of the tension I've felt all week. I fondle my balls with the slick mess for a few seconds before cleaning off.

Whatever that was about, at least it's out of my system. Now I can go to Xander's and focus on teaching him everything he needs to know to pass his class. That's the plan anyway.

Like most ridiculous plans, this one was bound to fail. I know it the second I round the driveway of Xander's apartment complex and see him shooting hoops into a basket. He's wearing nothing but a pair of low-hanging shorts and his sneakers. His back is glistening with sweat as he jumps up and takes a shot. The ball flies through the air and drops into the net, but I only see that in my periphery. My eyes are glued to the rippling muscles of Xander's back. I can even see the way his ass contracts with every step to reclaim the ball.

He turns to jog back to the free throw line when he notices me. "Hey, Oz." He glances at his watch. "Shit, I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was already ten."

Now that he's facing me, it's hard to look away from his chest and abs. The ladder of muscles that lead from his waistband to his small, dark nipples is

mesmerizing. I almost can't tear my eyes away even as he walks toward me. I swallow hard then force my gaze up from his chest. When they reach his eyes, I see a twinkle I've come to love. He's certainly in a good mood today.

"Hey, Xander." I take a step forward to meet him in the middle of the court. "It's fine. If you want to play for a few more minutes, I can hang out."

God, I hope that didn't sound desperate. I'd die if he knew how much I'd enjoy watching his sweaty body as he runs around for a while longer.

He laughs and puts his hand on my shoulder. "Nah, you came all this way to work some kind of miracle so let's get to it." He quickly drops his hand and sniffs his armpits. "Oh, sorry about that. I probably smell like a goat."

Now it's my turn to laugh. "Not at all. You smell grea... I mean—you're fine." Fuck. That wasn't lame or anything. I had noticed the light scent of cologne. In fact, I caught myself inhaling him as if he were some kind of dessert. I never had this kind of reaction to women's perfume. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

Xander turns and winks at me. "Yeah, right."

I can feel my face burning in embarrassment, but I don't respond. There isn't any safe way to respond to that.

I follow him up the stairs to a modern apartment. It's obviously new construction and must cost a fortune. I'm starting to feel less guilty about accepting his parents' money when I check out the sixty-inch flat screen and four video game consoles set up beneath it. "Nice place."

"Thanks." He motions to one end of the couch as he tugs on a T-shirt and drops into the other end. "My parents figured I'd be less tempted by coeds if I was off campus. And if they provided entertainment in my apartment, I wouldn't need to go out to find any."

"Yeah." I scoff at the idea of a guy like Xander being satisfied with video games and a big TV. "I'm sure that worked out well."

He laughs then notices my tone was more annoyed than it should have been. *Could I be any more pathetic?*

"It partially worked," Xander says quietly, folding a leg up on the couch and leaning back on the armrest so he's facing me.

"How so?" I mirror his body, and Xander's eyes immediately drop to my crotch. I shift as inconspicuously as I can. I'm not hard or unzipped, so I'm not

sure what he's looking at. I want to ignore him, even as my eyes unconsciously drop to his lap. With his legs spread, I can see up his shorts to the red boxer briefs he's wearing beneath. Shit.

"Well, I've never paid attention to the coeds." His voice is casual, but his body is tense. I can almost feel time stand still as I think about how to respond.

Words escape me so I just glance at his face. He's watching me, waiting for me to say something. Swallowing the lump in my dry throat, I croak out, "Cool." I turn my body toward the table and start pulling out books. "I guess we should get started."

Xander exhales loudly. "What is this extra credit project, anyway?"

"You need to come up with a realistic data set then create real life business applications for using the data to solve a problem. Each scenario is worth twenty points, and you can do up to ten."

"Two hundred points?" Xander rests his elbows on his knees and leans forward with both feet on the ground. "Seriously?"

"Yeah." I smile at his excitement. "You can bring your grade up an entire letter and a half just with that. As long as you don't completely bomb your final, you can easily pull a B."

"Okay, Mr. Wizard, let's see what you can do."

Chapter 6

Xander

It's easy to lose track of time when I'm working with Oz. This isn't the first time hours have flown by without either of us looking at the clock once. When I can't ignore the rumbling in my belly any longer, I finally check my phone. "Holy shit. It's already two thirty."

Oz glances to the corner of his laptop and raises an eyebrow. "No wonder I'm starving."

"We could head to the diner," I say with a straight face.

Poor Oz shakes his head and closes his eyes. "I still can't believe that happened. I might never go back there again."

I smack his knee and shift in my seat so I'm a few inches closer. "It's cool that she was so... enthusiastic. I really like her."

"Well," he slams the lid of his laptop down hard enough that it might not ever work the same, "she certainly likes you too."

I wait just a beat to see if he's joking, but when I realize he's not, I double over in laughter. "God, you're cute when you're being dense."

"What?" he asks quietly. Oz's blue eyes are big with bright white rims boring a hole into me.

I don't know which part of my statement he's reacting to, so I play dumb. "What-what?"

"You said I'm..." I can see he's warring with himself on what to say next.

His eyes are a mix of excited and terrified. Mine must mirror his. I don't know why I said that. I shouldn't have said it. Whether I feel the attraction or not, I can't be gay. My parents will disown me and my life will be ruined. Besides, I'm sure Oz isn't. He hasn't hinted in any way that he's interested in me as more than a tutoring customer. Maybe a friend. Hopefully a friend.

As we stare at each other, I realize how much I want to be his friend. I don't give a shit about the class. I just like hanging out with Oz. The inappropriate feelings I have for him can be ignored. I'll ignore the urge to touch his hand the way I have for the last week. I won't stare at his pink lips and imagine what

they'd feel like pressed against mine. And when he's trying to explain something to me, I'll focus on his words and their meaning instead of how good he smells and the coconut shampoo I want to get a deeper whiff of.

"Never mind." I finally give him an out. "Ignore what I said. Let's order a pizza and play some video games. I need a break."

Oz takes a deep breath then opens his mouth to say something but closes it again without a word. "Yeah, that sounds good."

I order a pizza and tell Oz to pick a game from my collection. Jake and I have epic battles that have lasted days at a time so our collection is pretty impressive. Oz holds up Halo and cocks an eyebrow.

"Perfect." I nod for him to set it up when my phone rings. It's Mom. I don't want to talk to her, but she will call over and over again until I answer, so I accept the call to get it over with.

"Hey, Mom." My voice is as pleasant as I can make it given my annoyance at her interruption.

"Hi, honey," Mom says over the speakerphone. She must be in her sitting room. "Daddy and I wanted to check in with you. Are you busy?"

"Hi, Dad." Great. Both of them are on the line and can gang up on me. Just what I need. "Actually, my tutor is here so I can't talk for long. We're working on some extra credit."

"What kind of extra credit?" Dad says in a suspicious tone. For someone who is so worried about me staying righteous, he can turn any word or comment into something dirty. "This tutor isn't a young lady, is it?"

"No, Dad." I clench my fist and try to control my voice. "My tutor is a guy."

"Don't get angry, Alex." My family still calls me Alex, even though everyone else has called me Xander since I was in middle school. "Daddy and I just worry about you. We don't want you to do anything you'll regret."

"I know, Mom." I blow out a breath. "I won't."

"Maybe you need to set up some time with Bishop Mallin. He wants to support you while you're away from home, honey."

No fucking way in hell am I spending any more time with that freak. He's like a bad cop interrogating me until I confess to some kind of sin. I had to

make up some shit about being tempted by alcohol just to get away from him. I met with him a few times when I first moved to California, but after a two-hour lecture on clinging to the iron rod, I vowed to never go back. If only he knew what kind of rod I wanted to hang on to. “Thanks but I don’t have time for that. If you want me to pass my classes, I need to study. I should be doing that right now instead of arguing with you.”

“We aren’t arguing.” Mom will never admit that she has anything less than a perfect relationship with all her kids. Of the six of us, I’m the one she tries hardest with. That’s mostly because my brothers and sisters are all still under her thumb. “I just don’t want you to think we’ve stopped caring about you because you’re so far away.”

“I know that, Mom.” I count to three then fake a smile that I hope translates to my voice. “I’m fine, and I know you care. I’ve got to get back to studying, but I’ll call during the week. Love you.”

I hang up before they can say anything else.

“Everything okay?” Oz asks, glancing nervously at me from his crouch in front of the entertainment system.

“Yeah.” I toss my phone on the couch. “You want a beer?”

“Sure.”

Oz seems surprised I have alcohol. I don’t drink much, but Jake is twenty-one so we always have a six-pack in the fridge. And nothing drives me to drink more than my parents and their non-sinning ways. The irony is not lost on me.

I return with two open bottles of Fat Tire and a bag of chips. Where the fuck is that pizza?

“Thanks.” Oz accepts a bottle and takes a drink without looking at me. As if that one swig included a dose of courage, he slides back onto the couch and gives me a smirk. “So, I was being dense?”

“Huh?” I raise an eyebrow before remembering the comment. “Oh. No. I was teasing you.”

“About what?”

Oz doesn’t seem offended. In fact, his body is relaxed for the first time since I said it so I give it another shot. “Well, I don’t want to upset you, but I think your mom thought, well, that we were *together*.” I make a show of air-

quoting the word *together* to lighten the moment. I'm not sure if it worked based on the way his jaw drops.

"No way?" His head cocks away from me, staring toward the blank TV screen. "You think?"

"Well, it seemed like it." Should I play dumb? It could freak him out to the point of him not wanting to be alone with me. And, I do need him to keep tutoring me. Actually, I don't give a shit about being tutored. I'm just curious how he'll react. Either way, I'll make it clear I'm not interested. It's a lie, of course, but we can't let anything happen. "I'm no expert on the matter, but that was the vibe."

Oz's face is red, and he won't make eye contact. "God, you must hate me."

"No." I muss the top of his head as I would with Joshie, my little brother. "I think it's cool that she wouldn't care if we were. She really loves you and just wants you to be happy. My parents would never be okay with something like that."

"You mean, if you were into guys?" Oz finally tears his eyes away from the wall and meets mine.

I just nod, staring at him, wondering what he's thinking. He's deep in thought, but his gaze is unwavering.

"I never thought about it before, but I guess it's good," he says quietly.

"What's that?" I ask, keeping my tone casual even while trying to understand the new tension in the air.

"That she'd be cool if I was into guys." He looks away suddenly. "I don't think I am, but it's good to know she wouldn't care."

He doesn't think he is? What does that mean? I've never heard a straight guy describe his sexuality that way. I've never talked much about sexuality with guys, because it's always just been a given that the guys I hang out with like girls. Period. Nothing more to discuss on the matter.

But if he *might* be into guys, doesn't that mean he is?

I finish my beer in two chugs then turn my head to belch. "Excuse me." I laugh a little at my crude behavior, but he just chuckles too. Before I lose my nerve, I go for it. "Yeah, I sometimes think I am, but I'd never do anything about it."

“Really?” Oz tenses but doesn’t recoil from me. “You think you’re... gay?”

I run my finger around the rim of the bottle. “Maybe.”

“Cool.” The stiffness of his word makes it sound anything but cool, but I don’t have time to retract my comment before the doorbell rings.

I leap from the sofa and answer the door. Returning a minute later, I set the box on the coffee table that Oz has already cleared of our books and papers. “Smells great.” He opens the box and peeks in. “What do I owe you?”

“My treat. I’m hijacking your weekend so it’s my responsibility to feed you.”

Oz just shakes his head and accepts the paper plate and napkin I hand him. “You don’t have to feed me, but thanks.”

Chapter 7

Ozzie

Within just a few minutes, we've each finished one slice and are reaching for a second when I can't keep my mouth from saying what my brain knows it shouldn't. "Why don't you think you'll do anything about it?"

Xander holds the pizza a few inches from his face then sets it back down on his plate before letting out a deep breath. "I wouldn't even know where to begin."

I can tell it's hard for him to reveal this about himself, and I'm honestly not sure why he's doing it. I'm just his tutor. I'm not even sure he'd call me a friend since he's paying me to be here. I'd like to think we're friends, but this doesn't seem like something he would say to a friend. Maybe he considers me to be like a therapist with some kind of tutor/student confidentiality clause. Regardless, I sit quietly and give him a moment to gather his thoughts.

"There aren't gay people where I come from." He laughs and bobs his head at the absurdity of his statement. "Okay, I guess there are, but I don't know any. It's not like here where guys can hold hands or call each other baby. We don't do that."

"But you want to?" I ask so quietly I barely hear my own words, but Xander hears me and nods.

"Yeah, I think so." He turns suddenly to me and raises one hand with his palm out. "But don't worry. I'm not going to try anything with you. I swear."

I can't stop a frown from curling my lips downward. I feel like I've been slapped in the face. My stomach roils as I tuck my chin to my chest and turn away. "Yeah, I know."

God, what's wrong with me? Why do I feel sick at his rejection? Why am I even considering it rejection? He's a guy I'm tutoring, and he's gorgeous. If he ever did come out as gay, it wouldn't be for me. And I don't think I'm gay. I mean, I've never really felt a strong attraction to a girl before, but that doesn't mean anything. I really like Xander, but would I want to kiss him? Touch him? See him naked?

My dick starts to fill up at the images in my head, and I feel stupid for letting my mind go there. He just said he's not interested in me, yet I'm thinking about him naked.

“I don’t mean it like that.” He puts a hand on my shoulder. “If you wanted me to, I would. Want to, I mean.”

I cock an eyebrow and look at him. “What?”

He huffs out a breath. “You know, if you were interested in guys... and in me... I’d be interested too.”

Xander suddenly looks vulnerable in a way I never imagined he could. He’s usually so confident that seeing his eyes full of doubt makes me want to pull him into my arms and hold him. “You would?”

He smiles shyly and nods. “But if you aren’t, then I promise it’s cool. I won’t try anything.”

I take a moment to just look at Xander. His thick muscles are still pumped up as if he just came out of the gym. When the urge to brush my finger across the bulge of his bicep becomes too strong, I let it happen. His taut skin is smooth over firm muscles. Goose bumps appear in the wake of my touch as I slide my hand down to his wrist.

“You can.” I finally meet his gaze again and smile shyly. I don’t know what I’m doing here, but I can’t stop myself. I want Xander. And I just admitted it. With a steady breath, I attempt to be as honest as he’s been. “I don’t know where to start either, but it’s okay if you want to.”

The uncertainty in his gaze is quickly replaced with something... *feral*. Hungry. Xander’s brown eyes darken as he lifts his hand to my cheek and brushes a thumb over my chin. He drags it across my jawline, stopping just below my ear. “You’re so smooth.”

I stare into his eyes, trembling from the sensations of his gentle touch. Not daring to look away, even though I’m a little embarrassed about his comment, I try to smile. “Is that okay?”

Xander leans a few inches closer. His palm grips around the back of my neck, and he just holds me there, resting his forehead against mine. My eyelids feel heavy as I try to catch my breath. “It’s great.”

His other hand lightly grazes my knee then rests on my thigh. “What about this?”

I nod and tilt my head toward him. There’s something about his scent that makes me want to get closer. He smells like a man. I want to nuzzle into him, roll around, and let it cling to my clothes the way a dog would.

His heat gets closer, and I hold my breath. Xander's face is just a breath away before his lips find mine for just a second then his cheek presses against me. I lower my head so my nose is tucked into his neck and take a deep breath, inhaling Xander deep into my lungs. And my cock. It reacts instantly, pushing angrily against my jeans as it lengthens.

"I don't know what I'm doing." Xander's voice is a strained laugh as he wraps his arms around my back and holds me to his side.

"You're doing good so far," I say, letting my hands explore the tight muscles of his belly. Xander moans and leans forward while pressing me back so I'm forced to recline onto the sofa.

Before I realize what we're doing, Xander's body is hovering above me. His chest is just inches above me as he stares into my eyes. "Yeah?"

I nod as my hands tentatively grip his hips then slide around to the swell of his ass. "Yeah."

Xander relaxes on top of me, his weight a welcome pressure as I tilt my face up to meet his. Hot breath caresses my ear and my cock jolts to life. "I guess it's okay. Just this once."

Before I can process what he means, his mouth is on me. Xander's soft lips graze my cheek before coming back and pressing onto my mouth. I've never kissed anyone, so I'm just following his lead. He starts out with even pressure on me then sucks my lower lip into his mouth. The tip of my tongue instinctively juts out to taste him as I release a soft whimper.

Feeling his hard body on mine is better than I ever imagined it would be. I want more. I want it all. I take in a quick breath, and Xander's tongue sweeps inside me, exploring my mouth like he can't get enough. His erection is poking straight out of his loose shorts and against my own. When his tongue swirls in my mouth, I pull the back of his head against me. Our teeth knock a few times as we get into a comfortable rhythm of licking and sucking and tasting.

I could come just from kissing Xander, but I don't want to. I want to feel his skin on mine for hours. Forever. I just want more of this feeling deep inside me that I can't name but don't want to lose.

There aren't many things worse than premature ejaculation, at least according to the sex sites I've been visiting since I turned fourteen. To avoid that embarrassment, I boldly move my hand from his ass to his dick and grab it. Through his shorts, I take his impressive length into my fist and pull up and

down. Xander moans and grinds his crotch onto me. With my hand trapped between our heated bodies, I can't stroke it. I just squeeze and release his dick, milking it in a way I hope feels good.

Xander pumps up into my hand a few times before realizing what he's doing. With lightning speed, he leaps off me and to his feet. "Fuck, I'm sorry."

"Why?" I stand up and take a step toward Xander. "What's wrong?"

He runs his hand through his spikey brown hair and turns his back to me. "We shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have done that."

"Why?" The reality of rejection makes my stomach drop. Again. I wanted this to happen but he's come to his senses. I place a hand on Xander's shoulders and step in front of him. "I liked it."

Xander turns and stares me right in the eye. The lust that was there just moments ago fades to anger. "Well, I didn't. You should go."

I pull my hand away as if it's on fire and stumble backward until I hit the wall. "Oh."

I've never felt so betrayed. Hurt. I want to dissolve into the wall, but I'm just standing there like an idiot. He hated kissing me and wants me to leave. And I'm just standing here. Fuck.

Without looking at him again, I walk to the table and start collecting my stuff. I can feel tears of humiliation welling in my eyes, but I won't let them fall while I'm still here. I turn my back and march to the door, leaving without another word.

Chapter 8

Xander

I can't believe I let that happen. Everything was great. We were blowing through the extra credit projects and having a great time then it all went to shit.

One minute, I'm telling him I'd never do anything with a guy, the next I'm humping his fist. What the hell was I thinking? Not only did I promise myself I'd stay chaste until I finished college, but I probably ruined any hopes of a friendship with Ozzie.

And now he hates me. Worse, he thinks I hate him. I practically said those words when I told him to leave. I've never seen a more anguished look of rejection in someone's eyes before. I never want to see anything like that again. He trusted me and I blew it. I fucking blew it.

I pick up my phone to call him but don't know what to say. What can I possibly say to make things right? I gave him mixed signals and then got mad at him for not understanding what I wanted. Hell, I don't understand what I wanted.

I know I wanted to kiss him. And I wanted to touch him. But when he did it back, that made things more real. More... gay. And I can't allow myself to be gay. My family will never understand. Giving up my piece of the company and my place in my family for sex is selfish and disgusting. It isn't right.

So why did it feel so good?

Why do I get a warm longing in my belly when I think of Ozzie? And when he opened up his mouth to let me in, I wanted to cry out in joy. I've never felt so alive before. God, I wanted him to keep stroking me. One or two more pulls and I would have come in my shorts. Just remembering what it felt like to have his hands close around my ass and pull me into his body is enough to get me hard again.

My thumb scrolls through my contact list and hovers over the phone icon. I want to call him. I should call him. But I can't. I'm a weak fucking coward, and I can't admit to him that I'm more afraid of losing my family than of hurting him.

I toss my phone across the room and watch it shatter against the back wall. Good. Now I have an excuse to avoid my parents for a few more days.

By the time Monday rolls around, I look and feel like death warmed over. I spent the rest of the weekend trying to finish as much extra credit as I could since I no longer have a competent tutor.

Professor Thompson accepts my projects and gives me an additional hundred points so that brings my overall grade up to a B minus. Not great, but not enough to warrant dropping the class so I stick it out.

“Professor Thompson,” I ask at the end of class, “do you have a second?”

“Yes, Mr. Collins.” He leans against the desk at the front of the room. “What can I do for you?”

“Can you recommend a few other tutors?” I fidget with the straps of my backpack, avoiding eye contact with the man who recommended I call Ozzie. “I’ll need some additional help to keep my grade from slipping.”

“Why aren’t you continuing to work with Osborne?”

I take a deep breath and meet his gaze. “Our schedules aren’t going to work out so I need to find a new tutor.”

Professor Thompson just stares at me for a few moments before finally reaching for a pen and jotting down some names. “You’ll find their contact information with the tutoring center. I’m sure one of them will be able to work with your schedule.”

“Thanks, sir.”

I take the note that has three names scribbled on it and hurry out the door.

Chapter 9

Ozzie

“I’m not hungry.” I pull a pillow over my head and squeeze my eyes shut. The light streaming in through the slit in the curtain is too much. I just want a few more minutes or hours in my warm bed where I’m safe and alone. No risk of humiliation or being hurt by people I think are my friends. No risk of running into Xander if I stay in bed. I scoff at the thought. He made it clear, a few times, that he’d never be within a hundred feet of my bed so as long as I stay here, I’m fine. I’m safe. I’m alone.

“Can I come in?” Mom cracks the door before I have a chance to respond.

“I guess so.” I pull back the pillow enough to see her drag over my desk chair and sit on it.

“Honey, what happened?” Her hand covers mine, and she gives me a squeeze. “Please talk to me.”

“Nothing happened.” I want to pull the pillow over my head again, but the childish gesture won’t make her go away. I learned that when I was about four. “I’m just tired.”

“Did you get in a fight with Xander?”

My eyes lock with hers and I stare hard, debating whether now is the time to have this conversation. When she doesn’t budge, I sit up and face her. “Why would you think this is about Xander?”

Her eyes soften and her other hand wraps around mine as she scoots closer to the side of the bed. “Honey, I saw how you were together. It’s obvious there’s something special there. I know you feel awkward talking to me about this but you shouldn’t. There’s nothing you can say that will make me love you any less, so please don’t be afraid to be honest with me.”

I turn toward my window, wishing the curtains were drawn so I could look outside. Anything would be better than making eye contact with my mother during this conversation. “You think I’m gay?”

“Are you?” she asks quietly.

I shrug. “Maybe.” That’s still a lie. She knows it as well as I do. “Okay, yes, I am.”

“Okay, so you are.” Her warm hands rub mine. “Now, tell me what’s up with you and Xander.”

I give her the short version of our week. Starting with the tutoring and ending with the one magical kiss that made me change my entire perspective about coming out. It wasn’t a conscious decision to not date, but no guys had come on to me so there wasn’t ever an opportunity.

Until Xander.

If his reaction is any indicator of my skill, it’s a damn good thing I never tried kissing before. I wouldn’t have survived high school if I was the focus of any cruel rumors. Fading unnoticed into the shadows had worked well for me then and would have to continue to work for the next year and a half.

“If his family is very religious, it might take some time for them to come around. That doesn’t mean you can’t be together now.”

I shake my head and pull my hand from hers, tucking it under my knee. “He’s not interested in me like that. But it’s cool.”

“I doubt that’s true.” Mom brushes her fingers through the cowlick at the top of my head. She’s done it for as long as I can remember, but the stubborn hairs never stay where she puts them. “I know what I saw. Just give him some space.”

“Yup.” I don’t believe it for a second, but it’s the only way I’m going to get rid of her. I reach for my phone and check the time. “Shit. I’ve got to get up.”

“I’ll make your breakfast to go.” She leans over and gives me a kiss on the forehead. “I love you, sweetie.”

All day long, I check my phone to see if Xander sent a text. Each glance without a message notification is another stab in the gut. He hates me. He would have said something if he didn’t hate me. Even just a note to cancel all future tutoring sessions would be better than the silent treatment. I let myself get caught up in a moment of lust, and now he’ll probably never speak to me again.

On Tuesday, I take the long way to my first class to see if I can catch a glimpse of Xander coming or going but it doesn’t work. I want to just stop thinking about him. I want to forget about what it felt like to wrap my arms around his muscular back and hold on like he might float away if I let go. Dammit, what I really want is his lips to meld with mine just one more time.

The only good that has come from the whole fiasco with Xander is the relief of not keeping my secret anymore. As soon as I admitted to Mom that I'm gay, I officially admitted it to myself. It's like a switch was flipped, and I went from denial of all things sexual to checking out every guy I pass on campus.

Knowing Mom will love me no matter what makes it so much easier to consider dating. I still don't have the balls to go up to a guy and start a conversation, but I'm no longer terrified that someone might pursue me. In fact, I'm kinda excited by the idea.

While walking to the library for my shift, I pass a bulletin board covered in flyers. A rainbow-colored sheet plastered to the center of the board catches my attention.

*UOP LGBTQ Mixer 1st & 3rd Thursdays of every month at 8pm
in Martin Center.*

My tutoring clients are on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but if I ever have a free night, I want to attend. I won't lose my v-card by hanging out with my mom in the diner or working day and night. I need to have a little fun now and then, and if meeting a guy that might be interested in me could be part of that fun, I'm all in.

Chapter 10

Xander

Tutors suck. They are patronizing and boring and not as fucking smart as they think they are. For the past two weeks, I've been working with all three names on the list from Professor Thompson and none of those idiots make any sense. They basically criticize the work I've already turned in, and stare at me while I work on exercises from the text, but they aren't explaining shit.

They aren't like Ozzie. He uses relevant and interesting examples of how to use captured data and all the different ways to extrapolate it into meaningful information to explain shit. I think I understand it less since working with these people than I did two weeks ago when I last saw Ozzie.

After getting a D on a paper, I swallow my ego and give Ozzie a call.

"Hello?" His voice is soft when he answers, like he's unsure whether he should speak at all.

"Hey, Oz." I hope my plan to pretend as if nothing happened works better than my plan to forget anything *ever* happened. Because I remember every second of my time with Ozzie. But I need help if I'm going to pass, so I have to make this work. "How's it going?"

"Um, good." He clears his throat and speaks louder. "How are you?"

"Not so great," I say, feeling guilty about only calling when I need something. "I'm still struggling with Stats."

"You are?" He sounds surprised. "I thought you were working with a new tutor."

"I was." Damn, no way to avoid some kind of apology now. "Sorry, but I just thought it would be better after the way I treated you."

"What way?"

Why does he always ask the questions that should remain unasked? He knows what I'm talking about but is going to make me say it out loud. I guess I deserve the torture, so I take a deep breath and count to five before releasing it. "I'm sorry I was such an ass when you were at my place. I told you one thing then did another and that wasn't fair to you."

“It’s fine,” he whispers. His voice sounds deep, and I can almost picture him with the phone cradled to his ear and his eyes closed. I hate that I fucking hurt him.

“No, it’s not.” I swallow the lump in my throat and focus on a proper apology. “It’s not that I regret what happened. It’s just that I shouldn’t have let it happen. But after it did, I had no right to be upset with you when I was the one with the problem.”

“You were right about my mom.”

“Which part?”

Ozzie laughs, making my stomach flutter. Even a soft chuckle creates a visceral reaction in my body. I like when he’s happy. It makes me want to do something funny just to hear it again.

“She thought there was something going on with us. Like we were together.” His laugh sounds more like a forced bark this time. Definitely not from humor. “At least now I know she’s not a homophobe.”

“So she knows?” I ask, surprised... but not.

“Yeah, I told her I’m gay,” he whispers.

“Damn.” I don’t know what else to say. “Why now?”

I can hear him breathing across the line but it takes a minute for him to speak. “She was asking about you. Like, if we had a fight or something.”

“I’m sorry if I put you in a position where you were forced to tell her.”

“No.” Ozzie clears his throat, and I can hear paper shuffling in the background. “It was time. I’m glad it’s out there. It’s actually liberating. I’m officially out.”

“Oh yeah?” I smile at the lightness now in Oz’s voice. Even just saying the words to me seems to have relaxed him. I miss joking around with the guy. “So you going to enter a parade or something?”

“Maybe,” he says seriously.

“What?” I sit forward on my couch, resting my elbow on my knee. “What do you mean?”

“Well, not a parade necessarily, but I’m gonna go to some of those LGBT mixer things. Maybe meet some people. I don’t know.”

“You want to meet guys?” I ask quietly. Just saying it makes my stomach drop. He’s looking for a boyfriend, and I’m looking at a life of celibacy. Awesome.

“Not necessarily,” Oz says shyly. “But I guess that wouldn’t be so bad.”

“So I guess you don’t have time to tutor me anymore?” I ask with more bitterness to my tone than I intend.

“What happened to your new tutor?” he asks in a confident voice, probably as confused by my reaction as I am.

“They just didn’t work out. Can you do it or not?”

“Um, I guess.” I don’t like the hesitation in his voice. As if he doesn’t even want to see me. I don’t blame him, but I’m still surprised he’s ready to go after someone so quickly after coming out. I guess he wasn’t as far in the closet as me. “How about tonight or Wednesday?”

“Can we do both?” I ask, sounding hopeful. At least he isn’t ditching me completely.

“Yeah, that’s fine. Let’s meet at the library around seven. I’ll text the room number.”

“Thanks.” I hang up before I say anything I’ll regret. I don’t want to be a dick, but I’m pissed. Not pissed at him as much as I’m pissed at myself. Pissed I don’t have the balls to tell my parents to fuck off if they don’t like who I am. I should be the one Oz is looking for, not some random guys at gay mixers. Who the hell even goes to those?

I go online and pull up a website for the UOP LGBTQ mixers. There’s one on Thursday at eight. I wonder if Ozzie will go to it. It says all are welcome, including “straight allies.” I’m not sure what that means, but I can be one of those.

Chapter 11

Ozzie

Tutoring Xander is awkward, but the first night goes smoothly. It's not until Wednesday night that we're no longer able to pretend we don't care about each other.

"Can we do this again tomorrow night?" Xander asks as he's putting his stuff away.

"Oh, actually." I stand up and slide my laptop into my bag without making eye contact. "I'm not available tomorrow but maybe on the weekend."

"Are you tutoring tomorrow?" Xan watches me, waiting for an answer.

He's never grilled me before about my schedule so it's annoying, but I respond anyway. "No, actually." I zip up my bag and take a step toward the door. "I'm going to that GSA mixer."

"Oh, right." Xander doesn't look surprised, but his jaw ticks slightly. "Maybe I'll go too."

I'm just stepping through the door when I stop short, and he walks into me. His hard body plows into mine, but a protective arm wraps around my waist, holding me upright. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay," I whisper. "That was my fault."

"It's at eight, right?" Xander says into my neck before stepping away and turning toward the escalator.

"Why would you want to go?" I look around the quiet library to make sure no one is in earshot. "You said you're not gay, so why do you care?"

He shrugs and keeps his head focused on the exit door. "Moral support, I guess."

"For me?" My voice squeaks in shock. Why would he do that for me?

"Yeah." Xander puts a hand on my shoulder and gives me a friendly shake. "My friend is IPOing so being there to support him is the least I can do."

"What is IPOing?" My brows furrow as I wonder if he's messing with me.

"Initial public outing. It'll be your first, right?"

I nod. "Definitely my first."

"Cool." He laughs. "Besides, I don't have anywhere else to be since all my other tutors are idiots."

"Oh, well, thanks." I smile to myself as I push through the swinging door and step out into the cool autumn air. "I guess I'll see you then."

The next night, I walk into Martin Center at exactly eight fifteen. There are signs and rainbow flags on the floor and walls to guide me into the right room. The ball in my stomach feels like it might burst through my chest at any moment as I walk into the small banquet room reserved for the meeting. At least fifty people are gathered in large and small groups as I stop at the registration table.

"Welcome!" A pink-haired girl with tattooed arms is sitting at the table. "Is this your first time here?"

I take one more look around to make sure I want to stay before nodding at the girl. "Yeah. Is it that obvious?"

"Not at all." She shoves a blank name tag and a Sharpie at me. "Write your name on this and help yourself to snacks in the back."

"Okay." I write my name on the sticker and affix it to my shirt. "Thanks."

"Of course. I'm Poppy, by the way. I'm so happy you came." She waves toward a guy passing by. "Johnny, come here."

The guy walks over and gives me a big grin. "Hey, man."

Johnny is about six feet tall with dark brown hair like Xander and light blue eyes. I feel a little guilty for checking him out, but he's pretty hot. Not Xander-hot, but definitely in the same league.

"Hi." I offer a slight head nod then glance back at the girl. "It was nice to meet you, Poppy."

"You too." She motions to Johnny. "Johnny, this is Oz. Will you show him around and introduce him to some people?"

"Oh." I look up at Johnny, wondering if this is part of the welcome process or if he's hearing the plan for the first time. "You don't have to do that."

"It's no problem, Oz." He puts a hand on my shoulder and pulls me toward a table in the back. "Let's start at the food, and we can go from there."

Johnny and I each fill a plate with appetizers then he introduces me to several people. Mostly guys but a few girls too. I can't tell for sure who's gay or straight, but it doesn't matter. Everyone is nice and welcoming, so I feel comfortable walking around with him.

We cross the room and join a group of three guys playing some kind of icebreaker game. One guy is holding up a phone to his forehead with the word SPELUNKING on it. The other guys are giving him clues about what the word is.

"What Jason used to do when you got drunk enough to bottom," a dark-skinned guy says, causing everyone to laugh.

"Fuck?" the guy with the phone on his head asks.

"No, like when you squeeze into a dark cave in search of treasure," a red-headed skater guy says. Then with a completely straight face, he adds, "And by cave, I mean your ass and by treasure, I mean your p-bump."

I almost choke on my nacho, coughing and covering my mouth to catch any stray chunks. These guys are definitely open. Johnny laughs and pats my back. "You okay there, Oz?"

Everyone glances my way so I nod and clear my throat. "I'm fine."

The guy with the phone waves his arm. "Oh, spelunking?"

Everyone nods as he passes the phone to the next guy.

"Hey, guys." Johnny pulls me deeper into their circle. "This is Oz. This is his first time so try not to scare him away."

I can feel my face heat up when Johnny gives me a wink and a wiggle of his eyebrows. "Although, I think Oz can hold his own with you guys."

I smile even though it's completely untrue. These guys would eat me alive. I can't even make eye contact with the guy now holding the word VAGINA on his head.

"That's Alex," Johnny says, pointing to the black guy with the phone. Then he looks to the guy who had "spelunking" as his word. "And that jack-off is Brody."

Brody turns to me and shakes my hand. "Good to meet you." He doesn't miss a beat as he turns back to Alex. "Smells fishy."

"Too easy." Alex tosses the phone to the third guy. "Vajayjay."

“Hey, I’m Scott.” The skater guy holds his right hand out to me while positioning the phone on his head with his left hand. “So, what’s my word?”

The word is PENIS, but I can’t bring myself to come up with any clues, so I just shrug and look to Johnny for help.

“Something you’ll never touch unless it’s attached to your own body.” Johnny and Alex fist-bump.

“Don’t be a dick,” Scott says to Johnny and everyone laughs.

“Exactly.” Johnny grabs me by the elbow and leads me away. “Smell ya later.”

Chapter 12

Xander

I arrive at the party just after nine and immediately spot Ozzie in a group of guys. They must be playing a game or something, because they are laughing and passing around a phone. When one guy grabs Ozzie's arm and leads him to a table in the corner, I start to sweat. I begin to walk toward them with my fists clenched while I try to come up with a plan to deal with this in a reasonable way.

It's not like Ozzie's my boyfriend and I can just go steal him from the arms of this dude. Ozzie can't be my boyfriend because I can't have a boyfriend. Ever. My life will consist of loneliness and frustration as I run my dad's company. Yippee.

Why am I holding back again? Why do I have to be a martyr?

When I think of the way Ozzie's blue eyes light up when he laughs or how he tucks his chin to his chest when he's feeling shy, it's easy to forget about my parents and their stupid beliefs. If wanting their son to find love and happiness isn't their number one belief, then they have issues. Not me. So, again, why am I holding out on this thing with Oz?

I know what I should do. What I want to do. What I don't know is what Oz would want me to do. The way he's chatting with this dude makes me wonder if he's into him. Ozzie seems comfortable with the guy. I've only seen him that relaxed with me a few times. What is this guy doing that I didn't do? Oh, right. This guy didn't reject him. He didn't send Oz home with a shattered ego.

I've been staring at the dude long enough that he finally looks at me. My eyes bounce to Ozzie and notice he's watching me too. Fuck. What do I do now? Should I leave? I probably should, but I don't want to. I don't want to leave Ozzie here with this guy. With any guy that isn't me.

My feet are moving toward them again. When I arrive at the table, Ozzie's stare is unreadable. The other guy stands and offers his hand to me. "Hey, I'm Johnny. Are you a friend of Oz's?"

Friend? I don't even think I qualify as an acquaintance at this point. But I don't want this guy to know that, so I nod. "Xander."

“Good to meet you, Xander.” Johnny looks back at Oz and notices his slack-jawed expression. “Hey, you want me to get us a couple of waters?”

Ozzie looks to Johnny and gives him a small smile. “That’d be great. Thanks, Johnny.”

As soon as we’re alone, I drop into the empty chair and slide it close to Ozzie. My knees rest against the side of his thigh, and when I lean forward, I’m close enough to kiss him. Close enough to smell the faint cologne he’s wearing. He never put on cologne to hang out with me.

Dammit. Maybe I’m too late. Maybe while I was sulking and being an asshole for the past few weeks, Oz was falling for this Johnny guy. Fuck!

I take a deep breath and think about what I want to say. There are so many places to begin, but I say the first thing that comes out of my mouth. “I’m sorry about everything.”

Ozzie nods without making eye contact. His hands are laced together on the table, and he’s staring at them. I put one of mine on top and hold them. “I was wrong.”

Ozzie’s breath catches as he glances up at me. “About what?”

This isn’t the time or the place, but I can’t wait a minute longer. If I don’t say it now, Johnny could come back and ruin everything. Ruin my chance for happiness. Maybe my only chance.

“About what I want. I was more worried about my parents’ happiness than my own. And I’m too fucking old to let them rule my life.” I squeeze his hands and brush my thumb across his wrist.

Ozzie finally meets my eyes and really looks at me. “So what do you want?”

I hope he sees the sincerity in what I’m saying. “I want you,” I whisper. “If, you know, you still want me.”

He gives me that shy smile I love. “I might.”

“Might?” My free hand lands on his knee and nudges his body around so he’s facing me. “Well, maybe I’ll need to convince you.”

“I’d like to see you try.” Ozzie raises a challenging eyebrow.

“Will you come back to my place?”

Ozzie nods, and we both stand to leave. I push back my chair, and Johnny is suddenly beside me. “I guess you guys won’t be needing these?” he says playfully, holding up two bottles of water.

“Sorry, Johnny. Um, we’re gonna head out.”

“No worries, Oz.” He puts his arm on Oz’s shoulder and pats him twice. I try to hold back a growl that’s threatening to escape. “I’m glad you came. Both of you.” He smiles and turns to me.

“Me too,” Ozzie says, looking around the room. “This is pretty cool.”

“I hope we’ll see you guys back here again.”

“Definitely.” Ozzie waves to the guys he was talking to earlier as I drag him out of there.

Chapter 13

Ozzie

My nerves are shot by the time I finally step into Xander's apartment. As soon as the door is closed behind me, he reaches for my hand and pulls me toward his room.

"Is your roommate here?" I ask as we pass a closed door.

"Probably." Xander steps into his bedroom, guiding me in and locking the door behind us. "Don't care."

The reality of what we're about to do finally sinks in once we're alone and in a private space. "I'm glad you came tonight."

Xander gives me a sexy smirk and raises an eyebrow. "I haven't come yet, but you're welcome to change that."

I laugh at his cheesy line and look around the room. "It's neater in here than I expected."

"Did you think I was a slob?" He laughs and steps toward me. As soon as he's within reach, his hands move to my hips, and his smile drops. Xander's gaze is smoldering as he leans forward and presses his lips to mine.

I'm not going to be timid this time. I want more, and I'm going for it. My mouth opens immediately, and I seek the warmth of his, taking over the exploration of tongues. Xander moans in my mouth, and my dick jumps at the sound. When he steps in to me, I let out a whimper of my own. *God, I want more.*

My arms close around Xander's wide back, and I hold him to me, comforted by the strength of his muscles. I let my hands roam up his spine then down before pulling his shirt out of his waistband. As soon as my fingers slide across his hot skin, Xander takes a step back and yanks my shirt off.

It happens so fast—I don't even realize he's pulling his shirt off too. Then his mouth returns to mine, licking my jaw and nipping at my ear. "I've been thinking about this moment since I met you," he pants against my mouth before devouring it. Sucking in my tongue then darting his in every corner of my mouth. He pulls back for air then comes right back in. If he could climb inside me, I think he would. I wish he could.

I can't even form words as his hands caress my chest, lightly pinching my nipples before one hand slides down my belly and under the zipper of my jeans.

"Can I touch you?"

Instinctively, I tilt my hips forward so the head of my cock hits Xander's fingertips. "You just did."

The growl that emits from Xander's throat makes a shiver pass through my body. I lay back on the bed and suck in my belly. His hand slides all the way down to my balls while I tear at the button and zipper to give him better access. Once my jeans are open, he slides them completely off, underwear and all. "You're perfect," he says, staring down at me from his position just inches above me.

My hand reaches for the tips of his spikey hair. "Thank you. But, you're a little overdressed, aren't you?"

He stands above me and gives me that smirk. "What, you want to see the goods?"

My belly quivers at the thought. "Uh huh."

He slowly unzips his jeans and lets them drop to the floor. With his boxers still on, he lifts a knee to climb back on the bed. I lift my socked foot and place it on his chest. "Not quite."

With a soft chuckle, he steps back, pulling my sock off as he goes, then drops his boxers. Falling to one knee, he lifts my other foot to his chest and slowly pulls off that sock too. Once my foot is bare, Xander lowers it and climbs on top of me.

He hovers for just a second before his hard dick brushes against mine. The sensation of our skin meeting in that way is too much for either of us. Xander's mouth crashes down on mine as his hand reaches for my cock. I inhale Xander's breath then hold it as he gently strokes me from root to tip. My hand moves to his rigid length, and I stroke him to the same rhythm.

Xander's tongue glides across my lip then over my teeth before we're fighting for dominance of the kiss. I want him to dominate me, but I can't relax my overstimulated body enough to let him. Every nerve is on fire, waiting for an explosion as we jack off together. When his breathing becomes fast and his pace on my dick picks up, I know he's close. Thank God because I am too.

Without speaking, we close the gap between our hard cocks and press them together, interlacing our fingers to form a cage around them. Feeling his

velvety-hard dick on mine is too much. I can't hold back any longer. Without loosening my hold on Xander's hand, I come first. My cream spreads across our hands, slicking us both, and pooling on my belly.

"Fuck, Oz." Xander pushes against me, holding his body weight there. His climax seems to last forever as his hips continue to buck into my hand, mixing his seed with mine. If I had anything left in me, I'd come again just from watching his dick explode in my hand.

"Whoa." I finally find the strength to create one word. It's not an impressive word or multisyllabic, but it conveys everything I'm feeling.

Xander just smiles and drops his head into the crook of my neck. "Yeah."

Chapter 14

Xander

One month later.

“I’m picking you up tonight,” I say as soon as Ozzie answers the phone.

“Um, okay.” I can tell he wants to argue, but he doesn’t. “If you really want to.”

“I do.” I pull a load of clothes from the dryer and start walking to my room. “It’s what boyfriends do.”

“Oh really,” he says playfully. “Since when did you become the authority on what boyfriends are supposed to do?”

“Since I got one.” We haven’t officially labeled our relationship, but after a month of fooling around, I want to take things to the next level. I want to declare to our little world that Ozzie is mine and I’m his. And calling him my boyfriend is the first step in getting there.

“Is that so?” His voice is quiet. Thoughtful. He’s always so thoughtful in moments like this. Moments of significance.

A small wave of panic rushes through me at his hesitation. Then I remember that it’s Ozzie. And he loves me. He hasn’t said it and neither have I, but we both know it’s true. So, I give him a minute to process what I’m saying.

I should just ask him to be my boyfriend, but that’s too direct. Too mature. Not at all like me. So I wait. As the seconds tick by, the small wave of panic threatens to reach tsunami status while I wait for Ozzie to respond.

Finally, he takes a deep breath and exhales with a huff. “You’re right. My boyfriend should pick me up for dates.”

A breath of relief escapes me and I grin, wishing Ozzie was in front of me so I could pull him into my arms. “I’ll be there at seven.”

The End

Author Bio

Born and raised in Los Angeles, California, Aria enjoys the year-round sunshine and laid-back environment of the west coast. She lives with her husband and two children on a quiet hill that gives her lots of time to read and write. Once she ventured into the exciting world of gay romance, she never looked back. She loves to hear from readers so please feel free to drop her a note or visit her at www.ariagracebooks.com.

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