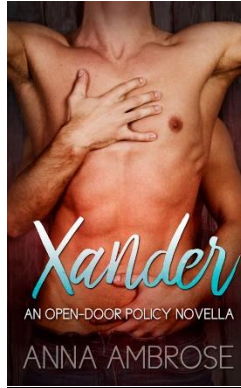


CHAPTER EXCERPT FROM *XANDER: AN OPEN-DOOR POLICY NOVELLA*

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CHAPTER 8

“We all have demons we are trying to fight; mine just happens to be you.”
— Unknown —

It was late spring, but still cool at night. Xander shivered, swiveling his head to search for Liam. A dull, quiet voice said, “I’m over here, but I don’t know why you followed me. Just go back inside. I’m sure the girls are missing you.”

Following the sound to the side of the house, Xander stepped into the shadows. Liam’s head was down, his back against the wall. He stared at the ground, his hair hiding his face. Xander swallowed, not knowing what to say. He was still very much buzzed, and his mind went blank.

He cleared his throat. “Becca’s upset, but the girls are talking to her.”

Liam’s head snapped up. “You came out here because *Becca* is upset? Are you kidding me? Why haven’t you answered the phone, Xander? Why are you drinking when you told me you weren’t ever going to again? Conveniently forget that problem you had with alcohol our first year... when I had to drag your ass home night after night of you getting stupid drunk after your mom’s diagnosis? What the fuck were you thinking?”

Xander winced, thinking about that hellish time. He’d lived in the dorms his first year. Liam had, too. When his mom told him about her diagnosis, he’d went a little—okay, a lot—crazy. He drank every night, sometimes all day, missed classes, and did a bunch of stupid shit. Liam had kept him from fucking up too badly. He’d been a rock.

Since he'd been a fairly new friend, Xander hadn't expected him to stick around, but he had. If not for Liam, Xander was convinced he would have flunked out. Actually, Liam telling him about ODP was partly responsible for him stopping, too. It had given him something to look forward to, an escape and release, and since no one was allowed to drink there, it had given him an incentive to stop. His mom, thank God, was now in remission.

"I didn't know what to say, okay? I didn't answer because I didn't know what to say to you."

The sadness on Liam's face felt like a punch to the gut. "Three years of friendship, and you couldn't answer the phone long enough to tell me you were all right? If you had listened to my voicemails, you would have known I was just checking to see if you were okay, since you tore out of ODP like you were possessed. But apparently, you aren't, seeing as I can smell the alcohol from here."

Xander bristled at the censure in his voice. "I'm twenty-one, Liam. Pretty sure I'm allowed to have a few drinks. What about you? Change your mind about breaking up with Becca, only to drag her out here and embarrass her in front of everyone?"

Tipping his head back, Liam sighed. "Low, Xander. You want to go there? Okay, so what—you needed three girls and what smells like a whole bottle of alcohol to convince yourself you aren't attracted—more than attracted—to a guy?"

The anger started brewing in him again—white hot and out of control. "I wasn't trying to prove anything to anybody. I told you what I thought about your asinine idea."

Liam shook his head. "No, you lied to me. You can keep lying to yourself if it makes you feel better, but I won't be around forever, Xander."

Xander's laugh was harsh. "You won't? You mean, you'll be around with Becca, right? Probably end up married to her after graduation, because I just can't see you breaking up with her."

Liam's eyebrow rose. "The thought bothers you, doesn't it? Otherwise, why bring it up?"

Xander crossed his arms, trying to pretend the chills he'd gotten were from the air instead of the thought of Liam married. "Doesn't bother me. As you could see in there, I have more than enough to keep me occupied."

Liam straightened from his slouch, pushing his hair behind his left ear. Xander had the sudden urge to back up, but he stood his ground when Liam slowly prowled closer to him. His eyes were bright, hard even in the dimness, and determined.

"I'm flattered it took three of them to *attempt* to get me off your mind... and yet, even with that many, you couldn't seem to take your eyes off me when I was in the room. Let's not even bring up the fact that you scrambled after me as fast as possible, not even bothering to grab a shirt or put on shoes, leaving all that warm, wet, and willing pussy behind, instead of sending Becca out here so she could get me and leave."

Xander gaped, not able to form a coherent thought. Liam only came closer still, crowding into his space.

“Want to explain that one to me, Xander?”

He opened his mouth to retort, but Liam was too close. Xander’s breathing picked up as he stared at him, and Liam smirked.

“Not so unaffected now, are you?” Liam whispered, reaching up and cupping the back of his neck.

Xander closed his eyes at the sensation, swallowing hard. He needed to back up, but he couldn’t make his legs work. Liam tugged, and Xander resisted for only a moment before giving in. Between the craziness of the last two days, not sleeping more than a few hours last night, and the alcohol, he felt adrift. Lost. And Liam was offering him an anchor.

When their lips touched, Liam’s ragged exhale made his heart hurt. Liam brushed his mouth over his, and Xander stayed perfectly still, not moving away but not kissing him back either. He had to force his hands to stay at his sides so he didn’t do anything stupid, like tuck the stray lock of hair in Liam’s face behind his ear.

God, he smelled good. Xander didn’t know what it was—soap, shampoo, or maybe something that was uniquely Liam—but it tortured him. It made him think ‘home,’ which was ridiculous. How could Liam be his home?

Liam teased Xander’s lips with his tongue, pressing into the seam, asking to be let in. Involuntarily, Xander opened for him, biting back the moan when Liam slipped inside. With no hesitation, Liam wrapped an arm around his waist, keeping the other on the back of his neck. The slight pressure brought them flush against each other, and Liam deepened the kiss, coaxing him to participate. Giving up, giving in, Xander felt the tension leave his body. He brought a hand up, sliding it into Liam’s hair, cupping the back of his head so he could get deeper inside. The hardness of their bodies together didn’t feel strange—it felt right. And that scared him more than anything else.

A door opening and slamming shut had him groaning. The accompanying, “Liam?” was fucking déjà vu. He started to pull away, but Liam yanked him deeper into the shadows, pushing him against the side of the house.

Liam’s kiss was fast and hard, and then he lifted his head to stare at him, his whisper fierce. “You can deny this. You can go back in there and fuck all three of those girls. But I’m going to leave you with this thought...” He slammed his mouth onto Xander’s once again in a bruising kiss, bringing an arm up between their bodies. When he shoved his hand into the front of Xander’s unbuttoned jeans and wrapped slightly chilly fingers around his impossibly hard cock, Xander’s whole body stiffened, a shockwave of pleasure flooding him.

Liam brought his mouth to his ear, his breath making goose bumps erupt all over him. “Just remember, Xander, that you were harder after one kiss with me than you were with three naked girls all over you...” He squeezed his cock once, brushing his thumb over the tip. Xander gasped, rocking into his closed fist, but Liam only worked his hand out and turned away. “Night, Xander.”

Xander sagged, watching him walk away. He was so fucked in the head. He stood there for what felt like forever, trying to breathe normally, before heading back inside.

Liam was right. For the rest of the night with the girls, every time he closed his eyes, Xander saw his face.