

To Sean, who took me back to Vegas and never once complained about the four extra men tagging along behind us.



THE whole thing is Jared's fault.

Now, I don't wanna say I don't like Jared. What's not to like, right? He's cute as hell. He always smiles, never argues. Everybody fuckin' loves him. He's probably Zach's best friend, and he's practically married to mine. So I better love him too, right? The thing is, he's just so *good*. And I know, 'specially after what happened at New Year's, that he thinks I'm *bad*. And can I help it if sometimes I just want to punch him in the fuckin' face for it? Not that I ever would. I mean, Zach wouldn't know what to do, and Matt *would* know what to do. And stupid as I may be, I don't want Matt pissed at me. I may be tough, but I'm pretty sure Matt could kick my ass with his eyes closed. So when Jared smiles at me, I smile right back, and I keep my fuckin' mouth shut.

Still, I know he's had a bone to pick with me ever since New Year's. I guess I better start there....

...Angelo

MATT and Jared are havin' a New Year's party. Started out with Matt sayin' how they need to stay active in the community and maintain a positive image. What the fuck ever. Jared wasn't really into it, but then Lizzy heard 'bout it, and you can pretty much guess what happened after that. And 'course if Matt and Jared are havin' a party, Zach and I gotta be there too.

There's a few cops and their wives, a whole bunch ateachers, some of Lizzy's friends, and Brian's too. As soon as we walk in the door, Zach groans.

"What's wrong?" I ask him.

"I hate parties," he says. "I don't know anybody here."

I can't help but laugh. "What are you talkin' 'bout, Zach? We know everybody here!"

"I don't!"

"They all rent from us."

"Really?"

"Yeah, man."

"Who's that?" He points to a lady across the room.

"Susan Dahlinger. She works at the bakery in the grocery store. Likes action flicks."

"And her?"

"Ann Farraday. Teaches at the high school with Jared. Likes foreign films. Only one in this town who rents 'em too."

"And him?"

"Frank Jacobsen. He's a mechanic at that shop over on Fifth Street. He likes action flicks, too, but his wife likes dramas. Half the time, they compromise by rentin' romantic comedies. Guess they figure, that way, nobody's happy."

I look back at Zach, and the look he's givin' me actually makes me blush. Like I'm somethin' from another planet, or—I don't know—like I really am an angel just like he says, and he's just amazed.

"How do you do that?" he asks me. I don't have an answer for him. I just pay attention, and I know he doesn't.

Jared comes over then and drags me away. He's got it in his head now that I'm readin' more that I should join a book group. He introduces me to a couple of people: the chick who teaches English at the high school, and another lady who's a nurse. I'm not so sure 'bout a fuckin' book group to begin with, and he's found me one that's all chicks? Sometimes I think Jared doesn't get me at all. Then there's times like this when he proves it.

So I'm standin' there while those two ladies talk to me, and that's when *he* walks in.

I know right away this guy's not from Coda. First, just 'cause I never seen him 'round. And second, 'cause he's queer. And I don't just mean queer like me or Matt or Jared or even Zach. I mean queer with a pink flamin' capital Q. He's shorter than Jared, but taller than me. He's thin and has brown hair. His clothes aren't what you see 'round Coda much either. He's dressed sorta like a '80s punk rocker, 'cept with way more class. Like a rich kid's version of Sid Vicious. He's definitely got money. He's a little bit fem. Oh, and one more thing: he's fuckin' hot. I see him, and the first thing I think 'bout is how it would feel to take those rich-boy clothes off of him.

He comes in and talks to Jared—and he's flirtin' with Jared like crazy, and Jared's just brushin' him off. Not like he's bein' rude. It's more like he's used to bein' hit on by the guy, and he's not takin' it seriously at all, and I'm wonderin' what Matt's gonna think 'bout this. And then the guy turns around and looks at me.

Now, I sure as hell don't believe in love at first sight. But I do believe in lust at first sight. And that's exactly what this is. For a second,

he just looks me up and down, and then he smiles. It's not just any smile either—it's the kinda smile that's an invitation, and there's not a doubt in my mind that we're both thinkin' the exact same thing.

But I'm with Zach.

This whole "relationship" thing is still so new to me.

First guy I ever fooled 'round with was just before I turned sixteen. He and I had a few weeks together, gettin' each other off 'bout every night before his mom caught us. Never saw him again after that. Eleven years later, I met Zach, and we been together a few months now. But in those eleven years between Bobby and Zach, I never had any kinda relationship at all. Every sexual encounter I had—and I ain't gonna lie; there were lots of 'em—was quick and impersonal. Mostly just guys I met at clubs. Twice when I was younger, not even twenty yet, I went with the same guy three times. But there's somethin' 'bout the third time that makes people think you gotta start talkin'. Both times, it was that third encounter that made 'em start wantin' to know my name, where I was from. All that bullshit that I had no desire to share. So after that, I had a rule: twice max, with any one guy. Few years later, I decided even that was too much.

Up until Zach, that is.

I know there's sex, and I know there's love, and I know if you get lucky, there's sex *and* love. That's what I have with Zach. And I learned over the last few months how much better it is. So up 'til now, I haven't looked back. But all of a sudden, I'm wishin' I could do the quick and impersonal thing again, just one more time.

The new guy's talkin' to Lizzy now, but he never takes his eyes off me for long. I can feel him watchin' me. And right or wrong, knowin' he's watchin' me is turnin' me on. The more I try to tell myself not to think 'bout him, the more I find myself lookin' his way.

I finally look 'round and find Zach. He's in the kitchen talkin' to Matt, and he's lookin' right at me. I make my way over to him through the crowded living room. Matt leaves before I get there. I lean against the counter next to Zach, with my back to the guy I'm tryin' to ignore.

"Having fun?" Zach asks me, and there's somethin' funny in the way he says it. Not accusing. More like he's laughin' at me. When I look at him, he's just smilin'.

"Sure," I say.

"Who is he?" he asks.

"Who?" I ask, even though I think I know.

He gives me a pointed look, still sorta smilin', and says, "The guy you're flirting with."

I feel my cheeks turn red, and I look at the floor. "Don't know."

"He's still watching you." He doesn't sound upset, or jealous. He still sounds like he thinks the whole thing is kinda funny. "He's cute," he says.

"If you say so," I say, but I can't look at him.

"Angelo," he says in that voice that means he thinks I'm bein' an idiot, "you think I don't know by now when you're turned on?"

Now I *really* can't look at him. I feel 'bout two inches tall. I'm embarrassed, and I'm ashamed. I feel guilty. I love Zach so much. The last thing in the world I want to do is hurt him.

I'm just 'bout to open my mouth and tell Zach that I'm sorry, when suddenly he says, "Go ahead, Ang."

I look up to find his eyes on me. "What?" I ask stupidly. Not usually me who can't keep up when Zach and I are talkin', but I definitely feel behind right now.

"Go ahead," he says again, smilin' at me. "Have fun. Just come back to me when you're done."

For a second I just stand there, totally speechless. Is he sayin' what I think he's sayin'? Is he serious? Or is this some kinda test? Not like Zach to do that, but I still wonder. "I can't," I finally manage to say.

He looks surprised at that. He's lookin' at me, doin' that thing he does, like he's searchin' for an answer and if he looks hard enough, it'll appear there on my forehead or somethin'. And I guess maybe this time it does, 'cause he suddenly gets this look of comprehension on his face.

"We can't talk in here," he says quietly. "Come on." He takes my hand and leads me through the house and then out into the backyard. It's cold, and the only people outside are a couple of ladies smokin' on the patio. Zach leads me past them into the yard, where Matt and Jared have a picnic table. He sits down on it so he's my height. I'm havin' a hard time lookin' him in the eyes.

"Angelo?" He waits until I finally meet his gaze, and then he says, "I know you want him. I know he wants you. So, what's the problem?"

Now I really feel like this is some kind of trap. "I'm with you, Zach."

He reaches out and grabs one of my belt loops. He pulls me over to him. "I don't mind."

I think 'bout that for a minute. We never really talked before 'bout whether we were gonna be exclusive or not. Guess I just assumed we were. "You tellin' me it's okay if I sleep with other guys?"

"No." His gaze on mine is intense, and I know what he's gonna say next is important. "I'm telling you that here, *tonight*, it's okay if you sleep with *him*."

"Okay." I'm kinda relieved actually he's not sayin' we're gonna have a totally open relationship. But it's not gonna be one hundred percent monogamous either. Some gray area in between. And then I realize what that might mean. "I couldn't do that for you," I tell him. "Might not be fair, Zach, but I'm not sharin' you."

He smiles at me. "I doubt you'll ever need to."

"You won't be jealous?"

I see him thinkin' 'bout that for a second. Then, instead of answerin' me, he asks me a question. "Is there anything that can happen with him that would make you leave me?"

I don't even have to think 'bout that one. "No!" I grab him and kiss him hard. Wrap my arms 'round his neck, and feel his arms go 'round my waist. "Not ever leavin' you."

He smiles, but asks me another question. "Do you think there's any chance that what you'll have with him will be better than what we have?"

"No."

"But you still want it?" I don't have to answer him. He sees the answer in my eyes, and the way I start to blush again. "It's okay, Ang. I can't stop you from wanting other people. I certainly can't stop other people from wanting you. I guess I could take you home and try to make you turn all that energy my way. But really," he shrugs, "I think you know how to separate sex from your emotions." 'Course I do. It's what I did for eleven years. He pulls me close again and kisses me. "Let him have a little piece of you, Ang. As long as the rest belongs to me."

"All of me belongs to you," I say, and it's the truth. 'Cause even if I do fuck the guy, I'm not plannin' on sharin' any shred of my real self with him at all. "Are you sure?" I ask Zach.

He smiles. "I'm sure, Ang." And then he gets sort of businesslike. "Will you take him to our place?"

"No way." Never took guys home with me before. Sure as hell not gonna start now. "We'll stay here."

"Good," he says. He kisses my forehead and stands up. "Have fun."

I stay in the backyard for a few more minutes, freezin' my ass off and thinkin' 'bout Zach. I'm hopin' like hell neither one of us ends up regrettin' this.

I go back inside, and I spot the guy right away. Pretty clear, too, he's been watchin' for me. He gives me that smile again—the one that I know is an invitation—and nods his head toward the hallway. Toward the bedroom.

And this time, I smile back.

He waits for me where the hallway starts, and when I get there, he takes my hand and leads me down the hall. Jared's comin' out of his bedroom just as we get there, and he practically runs right into us.

"Where're you going?" he asks, looking back and forth between us.

"To the bedroom," the guy I'm with says. "You don't mind, do you, sugar?" It's the first time I heard him talk, and his voice is light and melodious and a little bit feminine. His tone is teasing, almost laughing. Like the whole world's a joke, and he's the only who gets it.

"What are you planning on doing once you get there?" Jared asks.

The guy laughs. "Sugar, you are *so cute* when you play dumb." He's still holdin' my hand, but he puts his free arm 'round Jared's waists and pushes up against him. "Why don't you come too?"

Jared brushes him off, like he's done it a million times. His cheeks start to turn red, and he looks right at me. "What about Zach?" he asks.

"What 'bout him?" I ask. Not 'cause I don't know what he's gettin' at, but 'cause it annoys me that Jared thinks he's gotta get involved.

"Have you thought about what will happen if he finds out?"

"He already knows."

"He knows?"

"Yeah, man. He's in the kitchen. Go ask him yourself if you don't believe me."

"I don't think you should—"

But the guy cuts him off. "Sugar, you know how much *I love it* when you go all small-town on me, but *really*. We're all consenting adults here." He pushes his way past Jared and into the bedroom, pullin' me along behind him. I close the door and lean against it, and he steps up close to me.

"I thought you were going to make me wait all night," he says, smilin' at me, and I can't help but smile back.

"I thought I was too," I say.

"I don't want to cause any trouble with your boyfriend. Were you telling Jared the truth?"

"I'm not lyin'. He said it's okay."

His smile gets a little bit sexier. "Good." He leans against me and kisses my jaw. His tongue flicks over my ear. His touch makes my pulse race, and I'm already mostly hard. I'm not thinkin' 'bout anything but what I want to do to him. But then he whispers in my ear, "Does he want to join us?"

Just a few words, but it's like a slap in the face for me. Not sure why I didn't think of that. Maybe it would be better. But then I think 'bout seein' Zach touch some other man, and I know I couldn't do it. Zach may not be the jealous type, but I am. I push him away just a little so I can see

his face. "You can't have Zach," I say, and I sound angrier than I meant to.

He just grins at me. "I don't want him, sugar. Just offering for your sake."

He leans forward to kiss me, and I pull away without even thinkin' bout it. This is just like the clubs. Same rules. Don't let them kiss me. Never let them fuck me. He looks a little surprised, but doesn't push it. He takes my hand again and leads me over to the bed. He opens the drawer on the bedside table. Not the top one, like I would've done if I was lookin' for the lube. He goes right to the second drawer and pulls out a tube, digs way in the back and comes up with a couple of condoms.

"You been with Jared," I say, surprised.

He smiles over his shoulder at me. "Many times, sugar."

It all clicks into place now, and I realize what an idiot I been to not figure it out sooner. "You're Cole."

"Oh my," he says flirtatiously, batting his eyes at me and giving me a wicked grin. "My reputation precedes me."

There's a sort of tongue-in-cheek edge to his flamboyance, and I can't help but smile. "What're you doin' here?"

He puts one hand on my hip. Just that little bit of contact, and my heart starts racin' again. "I'm in Colorado for the weekend. I hadn't talked to Jared since last year, so I decided to call, just in case."

"In case he and Matt split?"

"Can't blame guy for trying, right, sugar? Jared invited me to the party anyway. I thought maybe he and the big pissed off cop were into threesomes."

I almost laugh at that—the idea of Matt lettin' anybody touch Jared. "Not a chance in hell."

"Oh well," he says as he steps closer to me. "You're here. I'm here." He puts his arms 'round me and kisses my neck. "I hope Jared didn't say anything that's going to make you change your mind now," he whispers as his lips brush my ear.

I shake my head. "Wasn't Jared told me 'bout you. It was Matt."

His pulls back to look at me, and his eyes twinkle a little. "I'm sure *that* was an interesting conversation."

"He said he caught you with Jared, before they were together."

He just smiles. "Honestly, you make it sound so *tawdry*. By the time Matt showed up, we had all our clothes on and everything." He pulls my shirt off and pushes himself against me. His voice in my ear is soft and sexy. "So tell me, sugar, are we going to talk all night?"

"I hope not," I say, and he laughs. His hands slide down my back, then around to my belt. "I won't bottom," I say. Probably seems kinda sudden, but I figure now's as good a time as any to say it.

"That's just fine, sugar," he says, and kisses my jaw again. I put my arms 'round him, under his shirt. His skin is smooth and soft against my fingertips. He gets my pants unbuttoned, and one hand slides down my stomach, into my boxers. He bites my neck a little, moaning, as I thrust against his hand. His fingers are soft, gently exploring, moving down my shaft.

I'm definitely done talkin'. Besides Zach, I haven't wanted anyone this much in a long time. I pull his shirt off and push him roughly back onto the bed. He looks up at me in surprise, and I can tell he likes it that I'm bein' more aggressive now. I climb on top of him. I can't decide where to touch him first. He's skinnier than Zach—skinny like me. Our bodies are almost identical, really. We could be brothers. His skin is beautiful, just a little bit lighter than my own, and there's no hair on his chest at all. I run my hands down his sides and over his soft stomach. He wraps his legs around me and grinds against me, and I lock my mouth over one of his nipples. He moans and his fingers go into my hair. That's okay for now.

We grind together while I tease first one nipple, then the other. He tries to reach for my groin again, but I push his hands away and hold his arms down. He definitely likes that. His eyes close, and he moans and arches against me.

I move lower on him and unbutton his pants. He lifts his hips so I can slide them down. I'm surprised to find that he has no pubic hair. He's shaved totally clean. Never been with anyone who shaved before, and it's crazy sexy. He even smells different from other guys. Not musky.

Something sweeter and cleaner. Holy fuck, it's hot. I spend a long time just runnin' my hands and my tongue all over that smooth skin. I especially like the way it feels to suck his smooth sac into my mouth. He's breathin' hard, moanin' softly, his fingers in my hair. I push his hands away. "Don't touch my head while I'm doin' it."

"Sure thing, sugar," and his hands go to my shoulders.

I circle his head once with my tongue first before sliding down his length, sucking him in all the way. His breath catches. He puts his arms out to the sides and grabs hold of the sheets and his back arches toward me. I think for a second he's gonna come already. But then he gasps out, "Oh my God, you're good." He doesn't talk any more after that, but I'm glad there's music playin' in the other room, 'cause he's not exactly bein' quiet either.

Not even gonna try to guess how many blowjobs I've given over the years, but I'm pretty sure I've never given one like this. I'm all over him. My hands are grippin' his ass, helpin' him thrust deeper into my mouth. My fingers are slidin' up and down his crack. I'm so turned on, I'm not sure he's even gonna need to touch me. I could easily climax just by grindin' against the bed while I suck him off. Probably would, too, if I didn't still have my pants on.

I finally feel his muscles start to clench, and he moans out, "Fair warning, sugar." I actually laugh a little at that, which isn't easy with a guy's cock halfway down your throat. He cries out when he comes, and I let him stay deep in my throat until he's done.

Afterward, I move up so I can look down into his face. His eyes are half-closed, and he grins lazily up at me. "Can I kiss you now?" he asks.

"No."

He shrugs a little. He trails his fingers down my chest, into my pants, and he wraps his hand around my cock. "You want the same thing?" he asks quietly, and his grip on me tightens. "Or would you rather fuck me?" Just the thought of getting' him on his knees in front of me makes my breath catch in my throat, and my erection jumps a little in his hand. He smiles at me. "I was hoping that would be your answer."

I stand up so he can get his pants off the rest of the way. I don't take my pants off. Just push them down enough to be out of the way. I put on one of the condoms and spread some lube on myself. He gets on his hands and knees and looks back at me over his shoulder.

I gotta admit, pretty much all rational thought leaves my brain at that moment. I'm just lookin' at his ass, right in front of me, like an offering. I'm afraid to touch him. I know I'm gonna lose control.

"What are you waiting for?"

My mouth is dry, and I try to lick my lips. "Not sure I can be gentle," I say, and it doesn't even sound like my voice. Can't believe I want him this much.

"No need to be, sugar," he says, and there's laughter in his voice. He winks at me. "I'm not as fragile as I look." He wiggles his ass at me teasingly. I grab his hips, push against him. That first moment when I push past his rim almost undoes me. He leans back into me, pushing down all the way. I stop there, buried to the hilt in him, just reveling in that amazing tightness around my cock.

"Do it!" he hisses at me, and the last bit of my control goes up in smoke. Before I know it, I'm drivin' into him fast and hard, and he's givin' back as good as I'm givin'. He's panting hard. Our skin is slappin' together, and the bed is creakin', and I don't care if the whole fuckin' world knows what's goin' on right now. I know he's gonna be sore tomorrow, and he's probably gonna have bruises on his hips where I'm holdin' onto him, but I can't do anything to stop. Somethin' 'bout him just makes me wild. I think 'bout how it felt to go down on him. All that smooth hairless skin, and the way he smelled, and that's it. I lose it then, hold him down tight against me while I come.

When I'm done, he pulls away. He flops down on his back and smiles up at me. I lay down next to him, not touchin', and we both just work on breathin' regular again.

After a minute, he say, "I still don't know your name."

'Course one of my rules is to never tell them my name, but this seems different somehow. "Angelo."

"Angelo." He sighs. "I better get out of here. Jared's big bad boyfriend will rip my legs off if he finds me in his bed. I don't think it will matter who I'm here with."

I have a feelin' he's right. And I don't even want to think 'bout what Matt will say to me. I stand up, hold a hand out to him and help him up. We get dressed in silence. I follow him to the door. He starts to open it, then suddenly closes it again and turns around to look at me.

"It's gone now, isn't it?" he says in surprise.

"What's gone?"

"All that tension. I haven't wanted anyone so much in a long time. But now," he shrugs, "it's over."

He's right. Whatever I felt with him is already fadin'—like a match that flares bright at first, but goes out too soon. Now he just seems like any other guy. Like we could hang out forever and never fuck again. "Guess so," I say.

He smiles a little. "Your boyfriend must be a pretty smart guy." He puts his hand on my arm. "Take care, Angelo." And then he leaves. Goes back to the party. I see him walk up to Jared, and Jared glances back at me, lookin' like he wants to punch me.

I don't care. I don't gotta worry 'bout what Jared thinks.

I see Zach as soon as I walk back into the kitchen. He's leanin' against the sink, talkin' to Lizzy. His eyes land on me the minute I come into the room. They're curious, but nothing more. Not angry. Not jealous. Not sad. That's good, 'cause I can't take it back now, and I don't know what I would've done if he freaked out on me.

I stop and get a soda out of the fridge and drink half of it all at once. I won't go to him with Cole's taste still on my tongue. Then I turn to face him, and he smiles at me.

I step up to him and lean against him. His body is so safe and familiar. I run my hands up his chest, kiss his jaw. He shivers a little, then relaxes and puts his arms around me. All I want now is him. Don't know if it makes sense, but right at this moment, I want him more than ever. If we were alone, I'd already be undressin' him.

I put my arms around his waist and have to stand on my toes to whisper in his ear, "How'd you get so smart?"

He laughs. "I'm not sure I am. Jared spent the last twenty minutes telling me what a fool I am."

I look into his eyes and say, "He's wrong."

"You think so?"

I nod. "I know so."

He smiles down at me, and my hands are startin' to wander over him. Know there's all kinds of people 'round to see, but I don't care. I put one hand on the back of his head and pull him down to kiss me. I love the way his tongue moves over my bottom lip, and the way one of his hands slides up my spine to the back of my neck. I love that it's familiar. I know he's gonna do it, but it still turns me on every time. That's the way it should be.

"Zach," I say, while his lips are still against mine. "Take me home."

He pulls back just a little, and now he does look worried. "Is this because you feel guilty?" he asks quietly.

I shake my head. "No." And it's the truth. Maybe I should feel guilty, but I don't. I take a deep breath, make myself look into his eyes and say those words. They usually catch in my throat, but tonight, it's easier than it's ever been. "Cause I love you, Zach." The light and happiness in his eyes when I say it is worth everything. "Can't even tell you how much." I kiss him again. "Take me home, and I'll show you instead."

He smiles down at me. "Okay."

I was worried the drive home would be weird, but it's not. When we get there, I take him back in the bedroom. We undress each other, and then I put my arms around him and say, "Make love to me, Zach."

He smiles. "Anything you want, angel."

He pushes me back on the bed. We don't hurry. He touches me everywhere, kisses my stomach and my chest and my neck. Then one hand slides down my back, over my ass, and his fingers push against my rim.

And suddenly he stops. He pulls back and looks down at me in surprise. "You didn't...?" He lets the question trail away, but I know what

he's askin'. I always bottom with Zach, not 'cause that's what he expects, but 'cause that's what I like best with him. It's the most intimate thing in the world. It's when I feel closest to him. I'm not surprised he assumed that's what I'd done with Cole too.

"You're the only one in a long time, Zach. Almost five years." I pull his head down and kiss him, my arms tight around his neck. I trace my tongue over his lips. "This, too, Zach," I say, with my lips still touching his. "Only you."

And I can see in his eyes that it means a lot to him. He takes one of my hands and kisses my palm. "I love you so much, Angelo."

"That 'specially, Zach. Only you. Ever."

"I know."

"We're okay, right? You and me?"

He smiles down at me. "Angelo, we're absolutely perfect." And then he proves it.

Two months later, Zach and I are in our dinin' room, workin' on a puzzle. It's what we do most nights after dinner. I have a beer, and Zach has a glass of wine. We turn on some music—we have this completely ridiculous playlist we made special, half his music and half mine, and if you thought Asa and Cocoon couldn't live next to Pantera and KoRn on an MP3 player, I guess Zach and I are here to prove you wrong. And if it happens that I actually know every single word of half of Ellis's songs, I'm not admittin' it to Zach, any more than he'll admit to me that he listens to my Green Day CD when he's cleanin' the house. Don't ask me why. That's just the way we are.

So we're sittin' there like always workin' the puzzle together when Matt and Jared show up. We haven't seen 'em in a few days, and I'm happy to see Matt. I'm not so happy to see Jared. My encounter with Cole didn't change anything between me and Zach at all, but it definitely fucked up my friendship with Jared. It's not like he's an asshole or anything. Not really. But somehow he's a little more uptight with me now, and the smiles he gives me aren't quite so genuine. I try to pretend like

nothin' happened; like I don't know that he's still a little bit pissed. But even now, after two fuckin' months, things between us are weird. I know it annoys Zach and confuses and Matt, who has no clue what went down, but I don't know how to make it right.

They come inside, and Zach comes out of the kitchen with beers for both of 'em, and we all sit down in the livin' room. I can tell Jared's excited 'bout somethin'.

"What's up?" I ask him.

"Next week's spring break," he blurts out, all in a rush. 'Course that doesn't matter to anybody but him. He's a teacher, so it means he gets the week off.

"And?" I say, 'cause there's obviously more.

"I think we should go to Vegas."

"Next week?" Zach asks.

"Yeah! I found a great deal on rooms, and if we drive instead of flying, it won't cost us much at all. It's only about twelve hours if the weather's good, and between the four of us we could easily drive straight through."

"I'd have to close the store," Zach says.

Jared's smile gets bigger. "No, you wouldn't. We can leave early Monday morning and be home by Thursday night." That means Zach and I won't miss any of the nights when we're actually showin' movies in the back half of the store. "And during the week, we got that covered. We—" Matt suddenly smacks him on the back of the head. Jared looks a little sheepish, but goes on, "I already talked to Lizzy and the moms. They said they would take care of everything."

When we were in Denver, Zach and I covered the store ourselves. But now that we show movies on weekend nights, too, it's turned into a lotta hours for two people. We have part-time employees who help on the weekends, during the shows, but it still makes for a hella-long week. So a couple months ago, Lizzy volunteered to help. She decided she might like to work a few hours a week, just to get away from doin' the mom thing all day, every day, and 'course Zach let her. But for some reason, after that

Jared's mom Susan decided she'd like to help out too. And then Lucy, Matt's mom, decided to come along and keep Susan company.

None of 'em have regular hours—they just show up whenever it suits 'em. I think they like bein' able to hang out and gossip with whoever comes in the store. Zach tries to pay 'em, but only Lizzy ever bothers to clock in or out. Truthfully, it's sort of a ridiculous setup, and at first I hated havin' 'em 'round. Lizzy talks too much, and the moms just make me nervous. But it saves Zach money, and it gives us both a break from the store now and then.

Jared's still sittin' there, with a grin from ear to ear, waitin' for an answer. Matt's obviously amused more by Jared's enthusiasm than by the idea of Vegas, but I know he'll do whatever Jared wants in the end. Zach's thinkin' 'bout it, but I can't tell if he really wants to go or not.

And me? I feel like a kid who just found out Santa's comin' twice this year. I'm so excited, I can barely hold still. I never been to Vegas. Never been anywhere, actually, 'cept when I was in third grade and my foster family took me with 'em to Yellowstone. Other than that, I never even been out of Colorado. Jared could've said he wanted to drive to Kansas to sit in the middle of a fuckin' cornfield, and I would've been game. Still, I hate to look like a wide-eyed kid, so I'm doin' my best to play it cool and act like it's no big deal.

"I guess maybe we could go," Zach says, but he sounds skeptical. Then he turns and looks at me. Guess my poker face isn't as good as I think it is 'cause as soon as his eyes meet mine, he smiles, and then he says to Jared, "We're in."

We leave on Monday morning at five o'clock. Zach and Jared are both grumpy and complainin' 'bout it bein' too early. Matt and I ignore 'em. We stick 'em in the back seat of Jared's Bronco and they're both asleep again before Matt and I even finish our first cup of coffee.

Matt and I end up doin' most of the drivin'. I take the first leg. He takes over next. Zach and Jared wake up, and one of 'em pulls out a game of travel rummy.

"Watch out, Zach," Matt says, glancin' back at them in the rearview mirror. "Jared cheats." I laugh, 'cause Jared seems like such a fuckin' Boy Scout. I'm sure Matt's jokin'. But then he looks right at me and says, "I'm

serious. He cheats." Jared throws the cap of his Dr Pepper at him and actually hits him for once. "Hey! Don't mess with the driver!" Matt snaps. "You want to end up in the ditch?" And I think he's halfway serious 'bout that, too, and now I'm *really* laughin'.

"Honestly," Jared says innocently, "Matt caught me cheating *one time*, and he's never let me live it down."

"Are you saying you only cheated one time?"

"I said you only caught me one time."

"See?" Matt says triumphantly. "You can't trust him."

"What's that?" I ask. "The lesson of the day?"

"Sure is," Jared says. "Brought to you by the letter C."

"C for 'cheater'?" Matt asks.

"C for 'clever'."

Eventually we switch off, and Matt and I get in the back seat. He leans back and goes to sleep in 'bout five seconds flat. He can always do that. I think they teach it in cop school. I can't sleep. Not that there's much to see, but every bit of it's new to me. I feel like if I close my eyes, I'll miss somethin'.

We get to Vegas, and it's a good thing I'm not drivin' 'cause we'd definitely end up in an accident. I know my eyes are 'bout to pop out of my head. I'm tryin' to stare everywhere at once. We find our hotel and wait our turn at the check-in desk. "I have you down for two rooms, each with one king bed. Is that correct?" the lady asks us, not even battin' an eye at the fact that she's sayin' that to four guys.

"Yes," Jared says.

"No," Zach says. Matt and Jared's heads both whip in his direction in surprise. I look the other way so they can't see me blushin'. But Zach doesn't blush at all. He just says, "We need two beds in our room."

Our rooms are on the same floor but not exactly close to each other. We take our bags up then meet back downstairs.

"Dinner first," Jared says. "What should we do after that?"

"It doesn't matter to me," Zach says. "Whatever Angelo wants to do."

I have to shrug. "Don't even know what there is to do," I say.

We all look over at Matt, and he shrugs too. "The times I was here before, my friends and I spent all of our time gambling or going to strip clubs."

"Are you serious?" I ask.

"Of course. What else would you come to Vegas for?"

I shake my head and say jokingly, "You disgust me, Matt."

He gives me that half-ass smile he uses instead of a real one, with one eyebrow up, and says, "What's wrong with gambling?" and I have to laugh.

"I never gamble when I'm here," Zach says. "I can't afford to."

"I don't gamble either," Jared says.

"You guys know why Jared doesn't gamble, right?" Matt says to Zach and me. "It's because he can't cheat in Vegas."

Jared just smiles and doesn't say a word.

We get out onto the Strip and start walkin'. First intersection, there's a bunch of guys handin' out little cards. One of them shoves one in front of me, and I hear Zach say, "You don't want that," but it's too late. I already grabbed it, and when I turn it over, I 'bout drop it again.

"What the fuck?" I ask. "They can't hand out pictures of naked chicks!"

"Apparently," Jared says to me, "they can."

I hand it to Matt. "Think they meant to give this to you," I say, and he just laughs.

They decide we're goin' to New York, New York for dinner. Jared wants a hot dog. Zach and Matt give him a hard time 'bout comin' all the way to Vegas just to get a fuckin' hot dog, but he's made up his mind. I could care less where we go or what we eat. It's all new to me. I'm so busy lookin' 'round I'm not watchin' where I'm goin'. I keep bumpin' into people, and I've totally lost track of whatever the others are talkin' 'bout. I know they're laughin' at me a little. At this point, I don't even care. In the end, I grab onto the back of Zach's jacket and just trail along behind him like a little kid, with my eyes huge and unbelieving.

"Is that a roller coaster?" I ask when we get to New York, New York. I don't get a chance to ride roller coasters very often, but I fuckin' love 'em. "Can we ride it?" I ask.

"Hell, yes!" Jared says, but Zach looks skeptical.

"We better do that *before* we eat," he says, and he already looks a little bit green. So we ride the roller coaster first. I 'bout have a coronary when I see how much it costs, but we do it anyway. Twice. Then we have dinner and a couple of drinks.

"What now?" Jared asks.

"The Bellagio," Zach says, lookin' at me. "Now that it's dark, I want Ang to see the fountains."

I got no clue what fountains he's talkin' 'bout or how they can be that interesting, 'specially in the dark. But I follow 'em back north and we stop at The Bellagio. There's a little manmade lake in front of it and they all stop and lean against the stone railing there, just starin' at that stupid lake. I try to see what's so great 'bout it. I mean, yeah, the hotel is kinda cool, but I'm thinkin' the one behind us with the Eiffel Tower stickin' up out of it looks more interestin'. And I'm wonderin' if the fountain he's talkin' 'bout is inside or what.

Like he's readin' my mind Zach says, "Just wait."

So I wait.

Shoulda known Zach knew what he was talkin' 'bout.

The fountains start, and I'm in awe. It's that stupid song out of *Titanic*, and I always thought it was cheesy before. Kinda hate to admit that those fountains might make me change my mind. But there's jets of water with lights in 'em, and it's like they're dancin'. Don't know how somethin' so simple can be so beautiful, but it is. Even after it ends, I'm just starin' at that lake. I turn to find Zach smilin' down at me.

"This is my favorite part of Vegas," I say.

"It's the only thing you've seen."

"Doesn't matter," I tell him. "It's still my favorite part."

Eventually we get back to the room. I strip down to my boxers and T-shirt and lay down on one of the beds. The others all slept on the drive over, but I didn't. I'm exhausted.

At home, I still fall asleep in my own bed most nights. That's why Zach asked for two beds. He was tryin' to make sure I still had space if I needed it. Bedtime is when that stupid bird in my chest acts up the most. At some point in the night I always wake up and wander into Zach's room, like a little kid crawlin' into his parents' bed when he's scared. Half the time I don't even remember doin' it. Sometimes, I come home late from my job at the grocery store so tired I don't even get undressed. I just fall down on my bed and fall asleep fully clothed. Then I wake up after a bit and leave a trail of clothes down the hallway from my bed to his. He always wakes up enough to pull me against him. He fits against me just right. We usually drift off again for a while. An hour or two later I might wake him up by pushin' back against his groin, or goin' down on him. Or he might wake me up as he pushes me onto my stomach and pushes into me. However it happens, it's my favorite part of the day. We make love almost every morning.

I'm layin' there, half-asleep. Zach turns on the TV, sits on the foot of my bed and starts to rub my feet. That's another thing nobody'd ever done for me before Zach, and I'd had no idea how good it could feel. If my eyes weren't closed already, they'd be rollin' back in my head. He massages the right one, then the left while he watches TV. Then he trails his fingers from my toes up to my knees. A second later I feel his lips brushin' the inside of my ankle. I don't open my eyes, but I smile.

"What're you doin'?" I ask.

"I think I love your feet," he says quietly, and I have to laugh.

"You're so weird."

"Maybe, angel. But not for this."

He kisses my ankle again and starts to work his way up. He's almost reached my knee by the time I fall asleep.

Matt...

AS USUAL, I woke up before Jared. And as usual, I woke to find myself hugging the edge of the mattress, while he lay sprawled naked on his stomach in the middle of it, taking up most of the bed.

In his defense, I had all of the covers.

His head was turned away from me. His skin was pale gold, lightly freckled on his arms and shoulders. His body was hard and lean and absolutely amazing. I debated letting him sleep—but only for a moment.

Jared and I didn't fuck very often. It still made me a little uncomfortable, especially when I topped. In fact, he hadn't bottomed since that night on our living room floor, just before Christmas, more than a year before. It wasn't that I hadn't enjoyed fucking Jared—of course I had—but afterward I felt bad about it. It felt wrong to me. Jared was strong and hard and masculine in my mind. He was smaller than me, but he was tough as hell, and he could kick my ass on any mountain biking trail. Somehow, having him bottom made me feel like I had used him, or shamed him. I knew he didn't understand, but he let it go. We fooled around a lot, and when he asked, I would bottom for him. But generally, it wasn't something we worried about. There were plenty of other ways for us to get each other off.

I maneuvered past his outstretched arm and leg. I kissed his shoulder, and the tattoo between his shoulder blades. I ran my hand down his back and between his legs. He stirred a little, enough to roll onto his side with his back toward me.

"You awake?" I whispered.

"Mmmmm," was the only response I got. He teased me all the time that "you awake?" was my idea of foreplay. Jared wasn't exactly a morning person, even when it came to sex.

I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him tighter against me. I wedged my erect cock into that warm crease between the globes of his ass and his legs. I loved the friction of thrusting between his thick, muscular thighs. He settled back into my arms with a sigh as I pushed against him. I ran one hand down his stomach. He didn't move, but moaned quietly when my hand found his morning erection. I started to stroke him slowly while thrusting between his legs. He pushed back against me and put one of his hands on top of mine, urging me to go faster. I buried my face in his mess of curls. Even now, his hair smelled like the Colorado wind. My lips found his shoulder. I started out kissing him, but it wasn't long before it turned into something more aggressive, and I heard him moan again in response. I kept stroking him as my own thrusts sped up.

He came first, but I wasn't far behind him. I held him for a minute, kissing his shoulders and the back of his neck.

"No," he sighed sleepily.

"No, what?" I asked.

"No, I'm not awake."

I laughed and got out of bed. He pulled the covers over himself and nestled down into them. "You're going to stick to the sheets," I teased. He didn't answer, and he was sound asleep again before I even made it back with a towel for him to wipe off with.

I took a shower and called Angelo. I knew Zach would sleep late, and Ang would be awake and chomping at the bit to get out of the hotel. We met at the elevator and found coffee, then I took him to one of the cheaper casinos. We played a little bit of blackjack, and I taught him how to play craps. He finished with an extra thirty-five bucks and decided that was good.

We were just finishing breakfast when Jared and Zach called. We met up with them and decided to walk over to Caesar's and fool around there until it was time for lunch. Jared and I fell into step behind Zach and Angelo. Zach had his arm around Angelo's shoulder, and Ang had his hand in Zach's back pocket, and any time Zach said something to Ang, he would lean down and say it into Angelo's hair. Angelo would smile up at him, and sometimes Zach would even kiss him. It was a level of intimacy that Jared and I rarely displayed in public. Even in Vegas, some people

were turning around to watch them pass. The distance between them and us seemed to grow as we walked. Without even meaning to, Jared and I were distancing ourselves from them. I wasn't sure if it was him causing it, or me.

"They don't care at all, do they?" I asked.

"Zach doesn't even think about it," Jared said. "You know how he is. He probably doesn't even realize people are looking at him. Angelo knows, but you're right—he doesn't care."

"Does it bother you?"

"That they're like that?"

"That I'm not."

He looked over at me with a smile. "No. Not a bit."

Once we got into the Forum Shoppes at Caesar's, we ended up switching places. Somehow, I ended up walking with Zach. Jared and Angelo were a couple of steps ahead of us. I was watching the crowd around us, looking for men with other men.

"What are you doing?" Zach asked me.

"Trying to pick out other couples," I said, feeling embarrassed. "I never used to think about it, but now, every time I see two men together, I wonder if they're *together*." I could tell he thought that was funny. "Don't you wonder?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "I don't pay attention." Which, if I had taken the time to think about it, I probably would have known. Zach didn't really pay attention to much that went on around him.

"What are you trying to judge by?" Jared asked, obviously amused.

"Clothes."

"You think that's all it takes?" Angelo asked.

"Well, I think my basis for comparison might be skewed. I tend to think any guy dressed better than Jared is gay."

Angelo gave me his lopsided smirk. "That's half the guys in Vegas, includin' Zach."

"Yeah, but Zach is gay," I said.

"Right," Ang said, "but like those two guys," he gestured toward two men wearing suits, "they're dressed better than any of us, and they're straight."

"They're wearing name badges," I said.

"So?"

"They're here for a conference. They have to wear those suits, so that doesn't count."

"Okay, genius, then what you basin' it on?"

I shrugged, looking over at Zach for help.

"Shoes," Zach said.

"Coats," I said.

"Hats," Zach added.

Jared and Angelo looked at each other in amusement but didn't say anything. We kept walking and after a minute, Angelo nodded toward a man walking past us with a funny lopsided hat on his head. "So you probably think that guy's queer just 'cause of his hat?" he asked.

Zach and I looked at the guy and both of us nodded. "No way does any straight guy wear a hat like that in public," I said.

Jared shook his head. "I think he was just European."

Zach and I looked at each other again, and Zach laughed. "So a nice coat or a funny hat means either gay, *or* European?" he asked.

"Yeah man," Angelo said sarcastically. "Which makes all four of us straight as fuckin' rulers. Who's ready to hit the strip clubs with me?"

I actually wouldn't have objected to a strip club, but I knew Ang was joking, and Jared and Zach probably weren't interested, so I kept my mouth shut.

"What about those two?" I asked, gesturing toward two more men walking together. "Gay, or European?"

Zach watched them walk past, then said, "European."

"Gay," Angelo and Jared said in unison.

"How do you know?" I asked.

Angelo and Jared looked at each other, trying to decide who would answer. It ended up being Jared. "They were each carrying more than three shopping bags," he said, "and not one of them was from Victoria's Secret."

"Maybe they were buying gifts for their moms," I said.

Jared laughed. "Yeah, right. How often do you do that?"

He had a point there, so I didn't answer.

"Okay," Zach said a minute later. He gestured at two more men who were walking past us. "Gay, or European?"

"Gay," I said.

"European," Angelo said to me over his shoulder.

"How do you know?"

"They were speakin' French!"

"Okay," Zach said to me, smiling. "I suppose that should have tipped us off."

"Aren't you supposed to have some kind of sixth sense for this?" I asked him.

Angelo snorted. "Zach's gaydar sucks," he said, before Zach had a chance to answer. "Worked with him for two weeks 'fore he figured out I was queer."

That didn't surprise me, but Jared obviously found it funny. "Are you serious?" he asked, glancing back at Zach.

"How was I supposed to know?" Zach asked.

"I didn't know either," I said in Zach's defense. Jared and Angelo glanced knowingly at each other and didn't answer us. "Not until halfway through that first day at Folk Fest."

"Yeah," Angelo said over his shoulder. "That's different."

"So how did you know?" Zach asked Angelo.

Angelo looked back at him in surprise. "What, 'bout you bein' queer?"

"Yeah."

Angelo's eyebrows went up. "You're jokin', right?" He looked again at Jared, and they both laughed.

Zach slowed down, and I slowed down with him so that Ang and Jared pulled ahead of us a few steps. "I'm trying to decide if I should be offended," Zach said, low enough that only I heard him. I wasn't sure what to tell him. Angelo and Jared were still walking. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but they were both laughing, and I was pretty sure it was at us. On the bright side, they had at least found some basis for solidarity between them.

Zach walked along in silence next to me, looking at the floor. Angelo and Jared were slowly pulling out even further ahead of us. Angelo was still wide-eyed at everything he saw. I couldn't hear him, but I could tell he was talking a mile a minute, and Jared obviously found it entertaining. "What about that guy?" I said to Zach, trying to cheer him up. I nodded toward a man walking past us. He was our age, and dressed nice, wearing slacks and one of those old-fashioned looking wool coats with the double row of buttons. "Gay, or European?" I asked.

Zach looked over at the guy, just as he looked at us, and to my surprise, they both stopped dead in their tracks.

"Jonathan," Zach said.

Of course I had been expecting him to say "gay" or "European", so I was a little confused. "What?" I asked stupidly.

"It's Jonathan," Zach said.

"Zach?" the guy with the fancy coat said in pleasant surprise. "Is that you?" He walked over to us, beaming. Zach looked like a deer caught in the headlights; he obviously couldn't run, but couldn't seem to get his shit together enough to answer either. It didn't matter. The guy—Jonathan, apparently—was still talking. "Oh my God, Zach, it's been years." He started to put his hand out, like he was going to shake Zach's hand, but then at the last second he seemed to change his mind, and he grabbed Zach and hugged him. Zach was stiff in his arms, still looking shell-shocked. "I was thinking about you just the other day, Zach. It's so good to see you." He stepped back a bit, but still hanging on to Zach. "You look great," he said sincerely. "You haven't changed a bit."

"Yeah, you too," Zach managed to choke out. And then he stopped short, obviously unsure of what to say next.

Jonathan apparently wasn't surprised or offended by Zach's behavior. He let go of Zach and turned to me with his hand out. "Hi, I'm Jonathan."

"Matt," I said, shaking his hand.

"Nice to meet you." He glanced between Zach and I, and I knew what was coming. "Are you—?"

"No," Zach and I said in unison, and Jonathan's smile got bigger.

"What are you doing in Vegas?" he asked Zach.

"Ummm..." Zach stuttered and looked over at me for help.

"Just being tourists," I said, since Zach was apparently incapable of formulating a response.

"That's great!" Jonathan said, turning back to Zach. "We should get together. I'd love to catch up."

Zach didn't even manage to stutter this time. He just stood there with his eyes wide, and I had a feeling I was going to have to answer for him again. The problem was, I wasn't sure if I was supposed to say yes or no. Then all of a sudden Jared appeared at my elbow, smiling like always, and I could have kissed him. He was so much better at this shit than I was.

"Hi," he said to Jonathan, shaking his hand. They started doing the introduction thing, and I didn't miss how happy Jonathan was by the fact that Jared was with me, and not with Zach. I was starting to have a very bad feeling about this. I looked around for Angelo, but he was nowhere in sight. "Listen," Jared said to me when they were done, "Angelo and I will be in that gallery over there." He smiled and said quietly, like it was some kind of secret, "He really likes looking at all the art. It surprises me." It didn't surprise me, but I didn't have a chance to say anything, because Jonathan started talking again.

"Let's all have dinner tonight! I'll make us a reservation. How about six o'clock?"

"That sounds great," Jared said, before either Zach or I could answer.

Jonathan started telling Jared where the restaurant was. I looked at Zach, and could see a hint of panic in his eyes, but he obviously had no idea how to stop this particular train wreck from happening.

And then Angelo was there, grinning like I had never seen before, and I wondered if Jonathan noticed how relieved Zach looked when his eyes landed on Ang. Angelo didn't seem to notice Jonathan at all. "Zach, come on man. You gotta see this painting—"

"Ang, how do you feel about dinner tonight?" Jared asked, obviously trying to pull him into the conversation, but Angelo wasn't interested.

"Yeah man, what the fuck ever," he said with just a hint of annoyance in his voice. He was already heading back to the gallery, and I could tell Zach wanted more than anything to follow him. "Just hurry up, will ya?"

"So, five of us then?" Jonathan asked, and he was definitely a little less enthusiastic about it now.

"Yes," I said firmly. "Angelo's coming too."

Jonathan's smile returned. "Okay," he said. "I'll see you then." He turned to Zach. "I can't wait to catch up, Zach."

"Yeah," Zach said weakly. "Me too."

Jared was headed back to the gallery now too. Jonathan started to walk away, but then stopped suddenly and turned back to us. "By the way, the restaurant has a dress code: business casual. It's not too formal but," he glanced toward the gallery where Angelo and Jared had disappeared, "you might ask your friend to clean up a bit." I felt my heart fall inside my chest, and Zach somehow managed to look even more startled than before. Jonathan either didn't notice, or didn't care. "See you then." He gave us a little wave and walked away, leaving Zach and I in an uncomfortable silence.

I watched Zach, waiting for him to get his shit together. He was staring at the floor, his eyes moving back and forth. I had a feeling he was replaying the whole scene in his head, trying to make sense of it all. He finally looked up at me with frightened eyes.

"What the hell just happened?" he asked.

"We're apparently having dinner tonight," I said, "with your friend."

"Oh God," Zach moaned, putting his head in his hands.

"Is he that bad?" I asked.

Zach shook his head. "He's my ex."

All the pieces suddenly fell into place—Zach's stunned behavior, and Jonathan's obvious interest. No wonder Zach looked so worried.

"Let me get this straight," I said to him. "We're going to dinner tonight with your boyfriend, and your ex?"

"I think so."

"At the same time?"

"Apparently," Zach whispered, in obvious distress.

"You think Angelo's going to be okay with that?" I asked.

"No!"

I knew it wasn't Zach's fault. Not entirely. But I couldn't help but be a little annoyed at him anyway. "And you have to tell Ang to 'clean up a bit'."

"Oh God!" Zach moaned.

"You can say that again," I told him. "Better you than me."

... Angelo

FUNNY how Jared and I end up walkin' together. Not sure how it happened, but he's talkin' to me like he used to, and laughin' too. When I think 'bout how awkward things have been between us ever since New Year's, it's kinda nice to know we can be friends again.

We're walkin' along, both of us laughin' at how fuckin' clueless Matt and Zach are, when we spot the gallery.

I never really looked at art before, but this shit blows me away. They're paintings, and they're awesome. Crazy, and strange, but really beautiful too. Jared says they're like Salvador Dali. I heard that name before, but don't really know what his shit looks like, so I don't know if they look like this or not. All I know is, they're amazing. They're like snapshots out of a dream. Maybe they're little glimpses of another world. They fly around like butterflies, and nobody notices them, 'cept this artist. He catches 'em and puts 'em on canvas for everybody to see. For the first time in my life, I understand why people will drop a shitload of money on a painting. First time in my life I wished I could do it too.

I want Zach to see it. I know he won't get it. I know he won't see it the way I do. But I want him to see it anyway. I don't talk to him much 'bout real shit, like how I feel 'bout him. But I feel like if I show him this, he'll get to see part of me—part of me I haven't been able to show him before.

Jared's gone back out to look for 'em. I walk to the door of the gallery and see 'em talkin' to some dude. Jared's shakin' his hand, smilin' like he always does. Zach looks like he wants to get out of there fast, and when I walk up to him, the relief on his face is obvious.

"Zach, come on man. You gotta see this painting—"

"Ang," Jared suddenly says, "how do you feel about dinner tonight?"

Why's he askin' me 'bout dinner? It's not even ten o'clock yet.

"Yeah man, what the fuck ever," I say, tryin' not to be annoyed at Jared. Just a minute ago I felt like we were friends again, and I want to hang on to that. I head back to the gallery. "Just hurry up, will ya?" I say to Zach. I can tell he wants to come with me. Not sure why he doesn't.

Jared comes back a minute later, and then Zach and Matt come in. They're actin' weird too. Glancin' at each other, like they know somebody's 'bout to get hit by lightning, and they're just waitin' to see who.

I'm still lookin' at the painting. All the pictures are cool, but there's one 'specially that I love. One that seems like it must have been painted just for me. Zach comes and stands behind me, so I can lean back against him. He puts one arm 'round my neck. I know Jared and Matt wish he wouldn't be so obvious. I also know Zach doesn't even realize he acts different than they do. It never occurs to him to worry 'bout what other people think, and I don't care a bit. I'd never tell him to quit.

His lips are just above my ear. "This is the one you like?" he asks quietly.

"Yes."

He's quiet for a few seconds, while he looks at it. "It's really pretty," he says. That's more than I expected. Expected him to say it was weird. "I don't really get it," he says, "but it's nice."

"Wish we could take it home," I say.

He glances around. "No price tags on the wall, which is a dead giveaway that it costs more than you and I make in a year."

"I know. There's a book too."

"Why don't you buy that then?"

"It's a hundred bucks."

"Wow," he says, which is what I thought, too, when the lady told me. "I'm sorry, Ang," he says. And the thing is, he means it. That's why I love him so much.

We finally leave the gallery. Funny how hard it is to walk away. Zach promises me we'll come back and see it again before we leave. We wander 'round a bit more, then finally stop for lunch. Matt and Zach are still actin' weird, glancin' at each other every minute or two.

"What's up with you two?" I finally ask.

They both look a little startled. They clearly have no clue how fuckin' obvious they are, although in their defense, Jared looks surprised too. Like even he didn't realize they were actin' like two kids caught standin' over a broken cookie jar.

"What do you mean?" Matt asks, and I can't help but roll my eyes.

"Don't gimme that," I say. "What goin' on?" I'm tryin' not to laugh, but then I look at Zach. The look he's givin' me—I know right then it's somethin' I'm not gonna like.

"You remember the man we were talking to earlier, when you came out of the gallery?"

"Sure. Why?"

"We're having dinner with him tonight."

Seems kinda weird they decided to have dinner with some guy they just met, but what the fuck ever. Why should I care? "Okay," I say.

We all sit there for a second. Jared looks as confused as I feel. Matt's looking everywhere but at me. Zach's eyes are on mine, but he looks scared to death. And then I find out why. He takes a deep breath and says, "That was Jonathan."

It takes me a minute to process that. Zach and I don't talk much 'bout his past, mostly 'cause I can't fuckin' handle it. Can't stand to think 'bout the guys he was with before me. I know it's childish, but it's just the way it is. Still, I know 'bout Jonathan.

"Are you fuckin' kiddin' me?" I say, and I know my voice is louder than it should be, and they're all three motionin' for me to dial it down a notch. "We're havin' dinner tonight with him? The guy who left you? The guy who left Geisha?" Because yeah, not only do I have the boyfriend who used to be his, I have the cat who used to be his too. And how fuckin' weird is that?

"It was an accident—" Zach starts to say, but Matt interrupts him.

"Might as well tell him the rest too," he says, and the look Zach gives him is pure venom.

"You mean there's more?" I ask.

Zach looks back at me and says, "Did you happen to bring any nice shirts with you?"

For a second I can only stare at him. I don't even know what to say, and let's face it, that doesn't happen to me very often. But I finally find my voice again. "Zach, how long you known me? We fuckin' live together. You think I even *own* anything nicer than this? You think I been hidin' my 'nice' clothes in my closet, just waitin' for a special occasion or somethin'?"

"Maybe we can buy something—" Zach starts to say.

"Are you kiddin'? You seen the prices here? I can't afford to buy a shirt—"

"At another casino, Ang. They're not all as expensive as this."

"Why, Zach?" I ask, louder. "Just so I can try to impress your exboyfriend?"

"No--"

"I have a shirt," Jared says suddenly, drownin' out the argument between Zach and me. "I brought a couple in case we went to a show or something." He looks over at me, and I know he's tryin' to be nice. "I'm not that much bigger than you, Ang. It'll be good enough."

"Fine," I say. But I can't even look at Zach. There's a knot in my stomach that I hate. Suddenly even my lunch doesn't taste good, which sucks, 'cause like everything else in this place, it was expensive as shit.

We finish eatin' and leave the restaurant. Zach and Jared walk ahead, and Matt falls back to walk next to me.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Just can't believe it," I say. "We come all the way to Vegas, and run into Zach's ex? What're the odds?"

He shakes his head. "I wouldn't gamble any more if I were you," he says, "because as of this moment, you are without a doubt the unluckiest son of a bitch in this whole damn town."

Like I needed him to tell me that.

BY THE time we're gettin' dressed a few hours later, the knot of dread in my stomach has turned into a mountain. I feel that flutterin' in my chest again—that fuckin' bird. I haven't had to deal with him much lately, but he's there now, lettin' me know he's alive and well.

After a stupid amount of discussion, they all decide I'm okay wearin' my jeans, as long as I "dress them up" a little. What the fuck ever. I put on the shirt Jared gave me. It's a little big, but it could be worse. Zach's stuff is 'bout the same size, and I know he brought nice clothes too. But somehow, I'm wearin' Jared's shirt. It's just plain weird.

Then Zach pulls out a tie. 'Cause of course he brought not one of them, but two.

To Vegas.

Sometimes I wonder how we manage to live this life together.

He tries to hand me one, and I just stand there, starin' at it. "Really?" I ask.

He smiles at me. "It's only dinner."

I take the tie, but I don't put it on. I don't even know how to tie the damn thing. And stupid as it is, I don't wanna have to tell Zach that. He watches me for a second, and then he seems to catch on. He comes over and takes it from me. He puts it around my neck.

"I need you to put your chin up," he says gently.

I can't even fuckin' look at him. Don't ask me why. I don't know. I look at some spot over his shoulder while he gets it done, and then he turns me toward the mirror and stands behind me, with his hands on my arms.

"You look great," he says. I think he must be jokin', but when I catch his eyes in the mirror, I'm surprised at what I see. Thought for sure he'd be laughin' at me, but he's not. I've seen that look in his eyes before, lotsa times, and it's not laughter. Makes me smile. Then I look at myself.

"Christ. Get me some eyeliner and a little hair gel, and I'll look like Adam Lambert for you."

"Who?" Zach asks.

"Never mind." But I can see the interest in his eyes. "Why? You into that?"

He puts his arms 'round me from behind and puts his face in my hair. His voice is soft and sexy in my ear. "Are we talking something like Ziggy Stardust?" he asks as he pushes against me. "Because if so, then yeah, I'm into that."

I smile at him in the mirror. "No sequins or glitter, but I'll wear a little makeup for you anytime Zach." It's been a lotta years, but it's not like I've never worn eyeliner. I've done that scene before.

He's kissing my neck now, and I can feel his erection pressing against me. "Only if you want to, angel. For now, I'm just thinking how fun it's going to be to take that tie off of you when this is over."

"The sooner the better," I say, and he laughs. But I ain't kiddin'.

Jonathan's already waitin' for us when we get to the restaurant. Zach's got his arm 'round my shoulder, and I don't miss the look Jonathan gives me when he shakes my hand. He's sizin' me up, and I'm comin' up short. And I'm not just talkin' 'bout him bein' four and a half inches taller than me.

I didn't really look at him before, but I do now. He's just barely taller than Zach, and built the same way, like a runner. I remember now Zach tellin' me they met on the track back in college. Jonathan changed his class schedule, just so he could run with Zach every morning. And isn't that just so sweet it makes your teeth hurt? His hair is lighter than Zach's, and his eyes are brown, and I don't know shit 'bout fashion, but I'm pretty sure the suit he's wearin' costs more than I make in a month.

"I ordered some calamari and a bottle of wine," Jonathan says, looking right at Zach. "I hope you still like Spanish reds." Zach smiles at him, obviously a little bit pleased that Jonathan remembered.

I pretty much decide then and there that I hate the son of a bitch.

They seat us at one of those big round booths, and Matt ends up across from me. He gives me that shit-eatin' look he gets, with one eyebrow up, but not quite smilin'. "You look good," he says, and he barely even winces when I kick him in the shins.

I open my menu, and it's all I can do to not let my jaw drop when I see the prices. This dinner's gonna cost more than all the others combined. Then there's the fact that I'm gonna need a fuckin' translator just to order. Half of it's in French, and I have to read the descriptions to know what the fuck the food is. Even then, not sure I know.

"What's a balsamic reduction?" I ask nobody in particular.

I figure Jonathan will be all over that, but it turns out to be Jared who answers me. "It's when you boil most of the liquid out of the vinegar. It intensifies the flavor and makes a sort of glaze." He's not even lookin' at me, so he can't tell how shocked I am that he knows the answer. He's still lookin' at the menu. "Where'd you see that?"

"How'd you know that?" I ask.

Jared just shrugs, but Matt answers me. "Because he watches the cooking channel all the time."

"Really?" I ask.

"Any time there's not football on," Matt says, and the way he's lookin' at Jared, anybody could see how crazy he is 'bout him. "The funny thing is he still can't cook worth a damn."

"I can cook," Jared says, although I know he's just bein' a smartass.

"Pop Tarts don't count."

"I made you breakfast just the other day."

"When?" Matt asks, genuinely confused.

"On Thursday."

I see Matt thinkin' back to last Thursday, and then he says, "We had toast!"

"I put cinnamon on it."

"Who did you learn *that* from?" Matt asks him playfully. "Paula Deen or Rachael Ray?"

Jared just looks back at his menu without even crackin' a smile. "I think it was Emeril."

The wine comes, and Jared, Jonathan, and Zach each have a glass. Matt orders a beer, so I figure it's okay for me to do the same. I'm wonderin' how much Jonathan dropped on that bottle, 'cause I can tell

Zach's impressed with it. He slides his glass my way and raises his eyebrows at me. I take a drink, and almost choke on it. Pretty sure I ate dirt as a kid that tasted 'bout like that wine. He must be able to tell by my face I'm not impressed, 'cause he just laughs and says, "More for me." He leans close to me when he says it, and his voice is soft and quiet, so only I can hear him. Like he's tellin' me a secret. I see Jonathan watchin' us, and it's so easy to lean closer and kiss Zach. Probably a childish thing to do, but I love the way Jonathan's face turns red, and he looks away.

'Course, Matt and Jared aren't much better. They're both lookin' at the ceiling like they might find the winnin' lotto numbers painted up there. Zach's just smilin' at me, and I can tell I made him happy doin' it. And that's more important to me than any of the rest.

We order dinner, and then there's an awkward moment, when everybody just waits for somebody else to say somethin'. 'Course it ends up bein' Jonathan who speaks first. And 'course it's Zach he says it to.

"Do you still live in Denver?"

"We just moved to Coda, at the end of last summer."

"Coda? Where is that?"

"In the mountains, not far from Rocky Mountain National Park."

"What made you move there?"

Zach smiles at me and says, "It was a business decision."

"Really? What do you do now? I assume you don't still work at that video store."

There's a pause, and Zach gives Jonathan a look that I know means "fuck you" and says, "I own 'that video store'."

Jonathan looks surprised at that for a second, but he recovers fast. Unfortunately, he turns to me next.

"What about you, Angelo? What do you do?"

Shit. If I could climb under the fuckin' table I would, but I can't. I'm debatin' right now whether gettin' shit-faced over dinner is a really bad idea, or a really good one. I'd say the latter, if the drinks weren't twelve bucks a piece. Jonathan's still lookin' at me, and I make myself say, "Work for Zach."

"Oh." It's not even a word, but the way he says it makes me feel about two feet tall. Like I just said I'm a felon who got out early on account of my good fuckin' behavior. He glances meaningfully at Zach, and I know he's thinkin' he just scored a point. I'm thinkin' maybe he's not wrong.

"Where are you from, Jonathan?" Jared asks, and I'd kiss him for it if I didn't think Matt would pound my face in two seconds later.

"Technically, I live in Phoenix. But I split my time between there and Vegas and L.A. We have enough clients in Vegas; I ended up buying a condo here. It works out well." He looks around at us all and asks, "Are you planning to see any shows while you're here."

"We hadn't decided," Jared tells him. "Is there one you recommend?"

"Most of the Cirque shows are worth seeing." Then he looks at Zach with a smile and says, "I guess I won't bother recommending *Phantom*."

"Why not?" I ask, and then wish I kept my mouth shut, 'cause it means Jonathan looks at me.

He gives me sort of a fake apologetic smile and says, "Zach hated that show when we saw it. He couldn't figure out why everybody was laughing during *Notes*."

"I didn't hate it," Zach says.

"You didn't get it, right?" I ask him, and he smiles at me.

"Sure I did," he says, but I tell he's just playin' along with me. "There's a guy in a mask, and he lives in an opera house."

"That's it?" I ask him.

"Isn't it?"

"No, man. It's 'bout makin' a deal with the devil, and havin' to choose between love and your dream. The Phantom loved Christine, and he thought she loved her career enough that if he made her a star, she would love him back. But in the end, she can't. Seems like mostly just 'cause the Phantom was ugly, which makes Christine a shallow bitch, if you ask me. But in the end, the Phantom loves her so much he lets her go." I suddenly realize everybody's listenin' to me, not just Zach, and I stop short. I know my cheeks are turnin' red. Zach and Matt are both

smilin' at me, and Jared seems halfway interested. But Jonathan is lookin' at me, too, and somehow, just the expression on his face is enough to make me wish yet again I kept my mouth shut. I bet it's the same look teachers give their students when they know they've only read the Cliff's Notes instead of the whole book.

"I take it you've seen it," he says, like he's doing me a favor.

And I have to say, "Only the movie."

"I'm sure it's just as good," Jonathan says in a way that makes it perfectly clear he thinks no such thing.

"You still go to the theater a lot?" Zach asks him.

"I have season tickets." He smiles again at Zach. "I think of you every time I see *West Side Story*." I can tell he thinks that will mean somethin, but Zach just looks confused.

"Is that the one that starts out in a Vietnamese whore house?"

"No," Jonathan says, with obvious disappointment. "That was *Miss Saigon*." Which of course makes me laugh. Jonathan obviously doesn't see what's funny. He looks at me like I've lost my mind, and I cut my laugh short and drink more beer.

"Do you still have Geisha?" Jonathan asks.

"Technically," Zach says, as he pours himself more wine. "She's Angelo's cat now."

I'm surprised how shocked Jonathan looks at that. "You didn't want her anymore?" he asks accusingly.

"She didn't want me."

"I don't understand."

"She hates him," I say.

And before Jonathan can say anything to that, Zach says, "Exactly. She loves Angelo. She hates me. So now she's his."

"She's a cat, Zach. I'm sure she doesn't hate—"

"You think you know more 'bout her than Zach does, when you haven't been 'round for ten fuckin' years?" I ask.

Matt kicks me, under the table, and Jared says, "Jonathan, are you a football fan?" and that's the end of that conversation.

The food comes, and they're all still talkin'. I just nurse my overpriced beer, and eat my overpriced dinner, and keep my fuckin' mouth shut. I wish everybody would stop talkin' and eat, 'cause the sooner we finish, the sooner we can get the fuck out of there, away from Zach's ex-boyfriend. I manage to avoid his attention through most of the meal, but then he says to Jared, "You've lived in Colorado your whole life?"

"Yep."

"Did you go to CU? We must have all been there at the same time."

Jared gives him this *look*, like he's tryin' to decide if he can give him a hard time or not. "Only rich kids from out of state go to CU," he says, with a smile. "Coloradoans go to CSU."

Zach and Jonathan both laugh at that, and Jonathan says, "The Aggies are always jealous of the Big Twelve kids."

Jared actually looks annoyed at that, and I think he's 'bout to say somethin' rude, but Matt puts his hand on Jared's wrist, and says to Jonathan, "Don't get him started! No need to bring the Rocky Mountain Showdown to dinner."

Jonathan sort of nods his head in Jared's direction in apparent acquiescence and says, "Fair enough. So, what about you, Matt? Where did you go to school?"

"Oklahoma State." But the way he says it, anybody can tell he doesn't want to talk 'bout his past. So then of course Jonathan looks at me.

"How about you, Angelo?"

No way am I gonna admit to him I'm a high school dropout. I want more than anything to just punch him in the face, but instead I smile and say, "Harvard Law. My job at the video store's just a cover so the rest of you schmucks don't feel bad."

I think they laugh, but I'm not sure 'cause I'm busy slammin' the rest of my beer, and then the last of Zach's dirt-flavored wine too. Wish like hell I believed in God so I could pray for this disaster of a night to be over.

Zach squeezes my knee, under the table, and smiles at me. I do my best to smile back, but it's a pretty fuckin' weak effort. His hand moves up my thigh. He's tryin' to cheer me up. Wish it was workin'.

Dinner finally ends, and I've never been so relieved in my life to find out that nobody wants dessert. But then Jonathan looks at everybody and says, "The night's still young. What would you all like to do?" Matt, Jared and Zach all just give each other blank stares, and Jonathan says, "It's too late to get tickets to a show. How about a club?"

"What kind of club?" Jared asks, looking skeptical.

Jonathan smiles at him. "Our kind of club. There's one just a block off-Strip."

Matt just shrugs. Zach looks at me. "Do you want to go out?"

And suddenly, I do. I been sittin' there listenin' to Jonathan, gettin' more and more annoyed by the minute. And a night out sounds like exactly what I need. It's been a long time since I really did the club scene. I mean, yeah, those last few years before Zach, I'd go there when I wanted to score. But even then, I didn't really work the club. Not like I used to.

I think 'bout how it feels to get out there in that mass of people. To have a couple of drinks. To flirt, and fool around a bit with an anonymous stranger. It's a good way to blow off a little steam. Not sure how Zach will feel 'bout it, but I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.

"Sounds great," I say.

"I don't think it's a good idea," Jared suddenly says, and I know the look I give him should be burnin' holes through him.

"Why not?" Matt asks him, surprised.

Jared gives him a pointed look. "It's not a good idea," he says again, slower, obviously expecting Matt to find some deeper meaning in it the second time, but I can tell Matt doesn't.

"I don't mind," he says.

"It's settled then," Jonathan says, beaming at Zach.

We take a cab to the club. It's a few blocks from where we were eating, but not far from the Strip. Once we get inside, they find a table. It's one of those high tables, where you have to sit on stools. They're lookin' round for a waiter. I know better. I go up to the bar and order two shots of tequila. Slam them both, and then go back to Zach. I stand on the other side of him, away from Jonathan, so that when he turns to talk to me, Jonathan can't listen in.

"I wanna dance," I tell him.

"Okay," he says, smilin'. "Go ahead." He starts to turn back to the conversation the others are havin', but I stop him.

"Zach." I wait 'til he looks at me. "Look at the dance floor, Zach." He looks amused, but he does what I say. "You see what's goin' on out there."

He grins at me. "I've been to clubs before, Ang."

I'm still not sure he gets it. "I'm tellin' you I wanna go out there and dance, Zach. I just wanna make sure you know exactly what I'm sayin'."

"You're telling me you want to fool around with somebody other than me." That surprises me for just a second. Then I realize how stupid I am. I should a known he didn't need me to spell it out for him. He ducks his head a little, so he can look right in my eyes. "Are you planning on leaving with somebody?"

"Only you."

"Okay." He puts his hand on the back of my neck and pulls me close. He kisses me, then whispers in my ear, "No sex."

"You know I won't."

"I love you."

"I know."

"Have fun."

I pull off the tie and hand it to Zach, who shoves it in his pocket.

"Where are you going?" Matt asks me.

"Gonna dance."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I'm serious," I say, grinnin' at him. "Wanna come?"

"No way in hell," he says, which makes me laugh, 'cause it's exactly what I expected.

I stop at the bar and do one more shot, and then I hit the floor.

Matt...

I THOUGHT at first that Angelo was joking when he said he wanted to dance. It just wasn't something I ever would have expected. Angelo was tough and eccentric and smart and sometimes wickedly funny. And although he had told me a little bit about his past, I had never really pictured him doing the club scene. But it immediately became apparent that not only could he *do* the club scene, he was good at it. I realized then what Jared had been worried about.

He was like a magnet. Or a flame, and the rest of them were moths. They zoned in on him like a pack of wolves stalking their prey. Except this prey would eat them alive.

For a minute, he was dancing alone, even though half the men around him were eyeing him. I'd seen the same thing happen at straight clubs, when a drop-dead-gorgeous woman walked onto the floor. There was a minute while they all just watched and waited—they were wondering, was he really alone? Who would make the first move?

Finally, one of them separated from the pack. He was young, with spiky platinum-blonde hair, taller than Angelo and very cocky. He danced up to Angelo, and Angelo let him come. Blondie wrapped his arms around Angelo and pulled him against him. Angelo went willingly, laughing. They danced for a minute, grinding together, but then Blondie whispered something in Angelo's ear. Ang threw his head back and laughed, pushing Blondie away. Blondie looked surprised, and annoyed, but retreated.

The next one was older, better dressed, and a tiny bit fem. He wasn't as cocky. He moved slower, waiting for Ang to rebuff him too. But Ang didn't. He unbuttoned Angelo's shirt, while Ang looked up at him with flirtatious eyes. Fem left the last few buttons done up, then pulled the shirt backward off of Angelo's shoulders, pulling it halfway down and then

gripping it tight, so that Ang's arms were pinned to his sides. Angelo laughed, his head back. Fem put his tongue in the hollow of Ang's throat, one hand on Angelo's ass, and they started to grind together. His lips moved slowly up Angelo's neck, and Angelo let him. They danced for a while. Right up until Fem tried to kiss him. Then Angelo spun away with a smile.

There were more guys after that. Angelo moved through them like a performer working the crowd, smiling and teasing, his eyes flashing and mischievous.

Jonathan had led Zach away from our table while I was watching Angelo, and I knew it was so he could talk to him without Jared and me overhearing. They were leaning on a railing not far from us, watching the dance floor. Jonathan was talking intently to Zach, but I could tell Zach was only half-listening. I wondered how he felt about what Ang was doing. I expected him to be angry, or hurt, or maybe not paying attention at all. What I saw surprised me. He wasn't concerned at all. He was watching Ang, a tiny smile on his face, looking for all the world like he found the whole spectacle mildly amusing.

I looked over at Jared. He was watching Angelo too. His cheeks were red, and I could tell he was torn between being turned on and being incredibly pissed off.

"I didn't realize," I said dumbly, and he looked over at me in annoyance.

"Of course you didn't," he snapped. "You may go to bed with a man every night, but for all intents and purposes, you're still straight. You don't see anything. You don't see Angelo for what he is."

"And what is he?" I asked, trying to not be offended.

"Sex, Matt," he said in obvious exasperation. "Everything about him just screams to be fucked. Look at him," he said, gesturing toward the dance floor angrily. "He looks like sex. He smells like sex. He even *walks* like sex."

"How does sex walk?" I asked with a smile, but he didn't smile back. Then I had another thought. "Are you saying you want to fuck

Angelo?" I asked, and regretted it immediately. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the answer.

Luckily, he ignored me. "Nothing good can happen here," he said quietly, turning his back on the dance floor.

Angelo was with a new guy now. He was only a little taller than Ang. His hair was almost the same, too, black and spiky. His shirt was off, and his upper body had more tattoos and piercings than I could count. He was tight up against Angelo's back, grinding his groin into Ang's ass. Ang had his head back on Tattoo's shoulder, and his eyes were closed. And the look on his face... it was a look I could have gone my whole life without seeing on my best friend's face, a look I had assumed until now was reserved only for Zach. One of Tattoo's hands was deep in the pocket of Angelo's baggy jeans, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on.

"How can Zach just stand there like that?" I asked quietly.

"I have no idea."

Zach and Jonathan were headed back to our table now, and Zach did look pissed. But to my surprise, it wasn't at Angelo.

"This is what I mean, Zach," Jonathan was saying as they reached our table. He gestured to the dance floor. Another guy had joined Ang and Tattoo, making a ménage of grinding hips and wandering hands. "You can't expect a relationship with a guy like that to last."

"You don't know Angelo," Zach said.

"I don't have to know him. All I have to do is watch him."

"He's just having fun," Zach said.

"And that's okay with you?"

"Not that it's any of your business," Zach snapped, and I was impressed to see that he actually could stand up for himself when he needed to, "but yes, it's okay with me." I glanced at Jared and saw my own disbelief mirrored back at me.

Jonathan took a deep measured breath, obviously deciding to change his tactics. He stepped closer to Zach and put one arm around his waist.

"Zach, all I'm trying to say is, I've missed you."

"Since when? Tonight?"

"Always. We were good together."

"So good that you left."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be. It was for the best."

"I've regretted it a hundred times. I wish you would give me another chance."

"It's too la—" Zach started to say. But he was cut short when Jonathan pulled him close and kissed him.

"Oh shit," I heard Jared say quietly next to me.

Jonathan wrapped his other arm around Zach and deepened the kiss. For a mere second, Zach was kissing him back—whether he meant to or not, I had no idea—and then all hell broke loose.

I didn't know when Angelo had stopped dancing and started seeing what was going on. Maybe he had been watching all along. Zach was just starting to protest, pushing Jonathan away, when Ang came flying out of nowhere. He shoved Jonathan hard in the chest, almost knocking him down. "Get your hands off him!"

Jonathan caught himself on the next table, a few steps away from Angelo. He recovered quicker than I expected, standing up straight and taking a step toward Angelo. "It's really none of your business—"

"You kiss my boyfriend, and you think it's none of my fuckin' business?"

"I figured you had an open relationship," Jonathan said smoothly, taking another step toward Angelo. "After watching you on the dance floor—"

"You sure as fuck didn't see me kissin' anyone!"

"Oh," Jonathan said, and for the first time, there was a nasty edge to his voice. "Is that where you draw the line?"

"Fuck you!"

Zach had finally recovered enough to intervene. I hoped he would diffuse the entire situation. Instead, he put his hand on Angelo's shoulder, and said the worst possible thing. "Ang, you're overreacting," he said quietly, and I could have strangled him. How could he be with Ang and not know better than to say something like that?

"I'm *what*?" Angelo yelled, turning on Zach. "Are you fuckin' kiddin' me? Your ex-boyfriend is stickin' his tongue down your fuckin' throat, and *I'm overreacting*?"

Zach had realized his mistake about half a second after the words were out of his mouth and was trying to back-pedal. "That's not what I meant—" but Jonathan interrupted him.

"So it's okay for a complete stranger to give you a hand-job on the dance floor, but Zach can't even kiss somebody if he wants to?"

"I didn't want to," Zach said, low but firm.

Angelo ignored Zach. He turned on Jonathan, his face dark and furious. Angelo may have been half a foot shorter than me, but if he had turned that look my way, I would have backed up a step. I think almost anybody would have. But Jonathan stood his ground.

Next to me, Jared hissed, "Do something," and pushed me toward them.

"We had a good life, Zach," Jonathan said. "We could get that back. I know we could."

Zach started to protest, but Angelo didn't give him a chance. "He's with *me*!"

Jonathan looked at Angelo. The look of disdain on his face was painful to see, and the malice in his voice when he spoke again was even worse. "What do you have to offer him?" he asked. "Somebody to bag his groceries?" He stopped for a second, and I was thinking maybe we had dodged the bullet. But then he said what I knew he had been thinking all night. He flipped his hand dismissively at Angelo and said with a sneer, "You're nothing but an easy lay."

Nobody better ever say that Angelo is slow. I was only a step away from him, and he still got in one good punch before I managed to grab him. Bouncers were moving in on us from every direction, and Ang was fighting me hard. It was all I could do to hang on to him, and the string of profanity coming out of his mouth was enough to take the paint off the walls.

Jonathan looked triumphant, holding a cocktail napkin to his bleeding lip. Zach looked stunned. Jared just looked annoyed, and so did the bouncers.

"We're leaving," I said to them, before they could tell us they were kicking us out.

Angelo had turned his rage from Jonathan to me, and I barely managed to get him to the door. Jared was right behind me, pushing me, and Zach and Jonathan were somewhere behind him, still arguing. We spilled onto the sidewalk in a heap. As soon as I loosened my grip on Angelo, he pushed me away. But to my surprise, he didn't take a swing at me, or make a move toward Jonathan. Instead, he turned his back and started walking down the sidewalk, away from us all.

"Angelo, wait," Zach called, and started to go after him.

I put my hand out and shoved him back, a little harder than I meant to. I heard Jared's quiet voice saying, "Matt, don't," but I ignored him.

"You've done enough," I said to Zach.

"Don't you see, Zach?" Jonathan said. "You can't possibly believe—"

He stopped talking when I stepped up to him. I intentionally stepped in too close. He was smaller than me, and it was easy to bump into him enough that he had to take a step back. I glared down at him. "You better shut your fucking mouth, or I'll shut it for you." Maybe he wasn't so stupid after all, because he did what I said. "You two," I was still looking at Jonathan, but Zach and Jared knew I meant them, "go back to the hotel." Zach started to protest, but I said simply, "I'll find him." Zach sighed, and Jared grabbed his arm, turned him around, and they started walking back toward the hotel. "You," I hissed down at Jonathan, "better not follow."

Jonathan hesitated for just a second, and I knew he was debating how far to push me. Luckily for him, he decided on "no further". He ducked his head and took a step back, away from me. "Okay," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to cause trouble."

"Bullshit. That's exactly what you meant to do."

He looked at me with wary eyes for a second, then without another word, he turned and walked back into the club.

Now I just had to find Angelo.

In Las Vegas.

Great.

I had an idea where he would go, and fortunately for me, it turned out to be right. He was standing in front of the Bellagio. The fountain wasn't on, and he was leaning against the stone railing, staring out at the silent manmade lake. He didn't even look at me.

"Go away, Matt."

I had expected that, but I ignored him. I put my elbows on the railing next to him, and we both watched the lake, as intent upon it as if the fountains really had been running. I waited him out, and after a few minutes, he sighed in resignation.

"Not gonna leave me alone, are you?"

"No."

"Don't wanna talk 'bout it."

"Okay."

I knew Angelo well. Probably better than he knew himself. I waited.

"I mean it, Matt!" he said, more forcefully this time.

"I didn't say a word."

I waited a little longer, trying not to smile. I knew he was about ready to break. Finally he said, "Fine!"

"Fine, what?" I asked innocently.

"Fine, I'm listenin'. Say whatever the fuck you came here to say."

"Okay," I said. "Just this: Zach's crazy about you."

"Sure he is," he snapped at me. "That's why he was makin' out with his fuckin' ex-boyfriend right in front of me."

I didn't respond right away. I let that one just fall to the ground between us and flop around for a bit, before saying sarcastically, "Yeah, that's *exactly* what happened."

He slumped a little, and just like that, all the fight went out of him. "Fuck off, Matt," he said, but there was no strength behind it.

"Come on, Ang. Quit acting like an asshole and talk to me."

I thought he'd snap back at that, but he didn't. He actually thought about it for a few seconds before answering. "Jonathan's right. I have nothing to offer. He has a college degree. And a career. He has a condo in Vegas, and a nice car, and tons of money."

"How do you know he has a nice car?" I asked. I was wondering if I had missed something.

He rolled his eyes. "Just a hunch. He has season tickets to the goddamn theater, for Christ's sake."

"So what?"

"So, I can't compete with that. Why would Zach choose me over him?"

I looked over at him in surprise. "We're talking about the same Zach, right? The guy who hates musicals and thinks *Play Misty for Me* is artsy, and only likes happy endings?" He smiled at that, just a little. "You think Zach gives a rat's ass about the theater? Or the condo? Or even the money?"

A tiny pause, and then, "No."

"Then what's your problem?"

He sighed, then said in quiet resignation, "When I look at him, I see the guy Zach's supposed to be with, you know? I see the guy he deserves."

"You think he deserves Jonathan?"

"I think he deserves someone better than me."

"You know what I see when I look at Jonathan?" I asked.

"A guy who spends too much money on shoes?"

I bit back my laugh so he would know I meant what I said. "I see the guy Zach didn't care about enough to fight for."

His head dropped, but there was no other response. I put my hand on his shoulder. "Come on. Let's go back to the motel."

He shook his head. "Can't go there yet."

"You know Zach's probably so worried he can't think straight."

"I know."

"Are you trying to punish him? Because if you are, it's a shitty thing to do."

He shook his head. "That's not it."

"Then what?"

"Just can't, Matt," he said quietly. "Not yet."

"Okay." Of course I knew he sometimes had to be alone. He had crashed on my couch more than once, when he needed time away from Zach. But I was thinking about the club—about all of those men with their hands on him—and about the way I knew he used to live. "Don't do anything stupid."

He didn't look at me, but I knew he understood what I meant: don't go out and get laid. "I won't," he said. He wasn't looking at me, and I couldn't tell if he meant it or not. But there was nothing else I could do.

I walked back to the hotel alone.

When I got to our room, I found that Jared had changed out of his nice clothes. He was wearing only a pair of sweatpants. His hair was out of its ponytail and sticking out every which way. All I wanted to do was get my own dinner clothes off and get my hands into his curls, but he didn't give me a chance.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked as soon as I walked in the door.

"I was just—"

"You can't order me back to the room!" he said, louder, as he stepped closer.

"Jared, I—"

"Are you gonna try and ground me next?"

"No--"

"I *told you* we shouldn't go to that club—" He was only a foot away from me now.

"I know—"

"You never listen to me!"

"I'm sorry—"

The very next instant, his arms were around my neck, and he was kissing me hard. His hands tore at my shirt, and at least one button went flying. It was such a rapid change, from chewing me out to ripping my clothes off, it took me a second to catch up. He undid my pants. They were looser than my jeans and fell easily to the floor.

"Jared—" I started to say, but he cut me off again.

"Shut up, Matt." He pushed me backward onto the bed.

It was unusual for him to be so aggressive, but I certainly wasn't going to object. He took off his pants sitting across my thighs. We had stopped using condoms long ago. He put some lube in his hand and put his fist against the head of my cock. He pushed just a little, smiling down at me. He knew I couldn't help but thrust up, into his hand.

"Oh Jesus," I groaned as his slick fist slid down my shaft, and his smile got bigger.

"Just wait," he said, and moved up so he could straddle my groin.

I hadn't realized until then exactly what he was planning.

"Jared—" I started to say.

"Shut up, Matt," he said again. And then he pushed himself down onto me.

I quit trying to protest after that. I couldn't have even if I had wanted to. Truthfully, I'd forgotten how good it felt to be inside of him. I'd forgotten how tight, warm, and intense it was. There had only been three other times, all more than a year before, and it had never been like this, with him on top of me. It was amazing—almost overwhelming—and I knew immediately I'd never be able to last long enough. I gripped his thighs with my hands, and felt hard, thick muscle, built from years of bike riding, rippling against my palms as he moved up and down on me.

His hands were on my stomach, his fingers tracing that line of hair just below my navel. He didn't open his eyes much during sex, but I knew how much he loved to feel my chest and my stomach and that trail of hair he'd always been obsessed with. He was moving slow, and the look on his

face was heaven to me. His eyes were closed, and his lips just barely parted. I loved to watch his face while he got off.

The lube was still on the bed. I put some on my hand, and did what he had done to me: I put my fist against at the head of his cock, and when he lifted up off of me, I let his shaft push up through my fist. It made him lose rhythm. For a second he froze in that upward position, poised right on the end of my cock, his own cock deep in my fist, and then he moaned—I loved the look on his face when he did that—and started moving again, faster than before.

Watching him, it was all I could do to keep from coming right then. He was speeding up, slamming down on to me harder and faster, moaning a little when my cock reached the deepest point inside of him. The sounds he made were soft and low, but mine were plenty loud. The bed was creaking like crazy, pounding against the wall, and at least in Vegas, nobody was going to complain. His movements became almost frantic, and I knew he was close. I kept my hand moving, trying to match his rhythm, even as it grew more erratic.

I tightened my grip on him and his eyes snapped open. They locked on mine for just a second, before sliding down my chest and over my stomach. He looked down at my hand, pumping his shaft, and groaned low in his throat.

I knew that sound. I knew he was about to come. He threw his head back, put his hands behind him on my thighs and arched his back. He came so hard that his first shot landed on my shoulder, and he cried out as he did. I finally quit fighting my own climax, and if the people next door didn't hear the bed hitting the wall, they had to be able to hear me when I finally let go.

When I could think again, I opened my eyes to find Jared grinning down at me. "Can we do that again?" he asked playfully, which was exactly what I had said to him after the first time I had ever fucked him.

I laughed, and followed along. "What, already?"

"God no. I mean, when you can move again."

And I realized then that for the first time, I didn't feel weird about what had just happened. Yes, it had been me fucking him, but what he had done had in no way been submissive. Somehow, that made a difference.

I reached up and grabbed a handful of his hair, and he let me pull him down. I stopped just before his lips touched mine.

"I love you," I said.

I loved to watch his face when I said those words too. He did the same thing every time: his eyes would close, and he would cock his head to the side and smile just a little. It was like he had a little box somewhere deep in his mind, where he kept all his favorite things. And each time I told him how I felt, he would close his eyes for just a second, while he tucked that moment away in that secret place.

His eyes opened again and he smiled down at me. "I loved you first."

I had to laugh. "What does that have to do with anything?"

He just smiled. "It means I win."

"Okay," I said as I kissed him. "You win."

He went in the bathroom and brought a towel back so I could wipe up the mess he'd left on my chest and stomach. I still had my shoes on and my pants around my ankles, and I had to laugh as I took them off.

"You couldn't let me get undressed first?"

"Are you complaining?" he asked jokingly as he got into bed.

"Not a bit," I said, and climbed in behind him.

"At least you were awake," he teased.

"Are you complaining?"

I couldn't see his face, but I knew he was smiling. "Not a bit."

Once I had his hair tucked out of the way so it wasn't tickling my nose, I used my finger to trace a line between the light freckles on his shoulder.

"Are you gonna tell me?" he asked after a couple of minutes.

I didn't answer at first. Jared and I saw eye to eye on almost everything, but the one thing we definitely did not agree on was Zach and Angelo. I loved Angelo like a brother, but I also knew that he wasn't

exactly Jared's favorite person. Ever since our New Year's party, Jared had noticeably cooled toward him. I wasn't sure what had happened, and when I asked Jared, he wouldn't say a word. He was non-confrontational to a fault, and I knew he didn't want to put me in a position of having to choose sides. We seemed to have an unspoken agreement to not talk about them at all. But now he was asking, and I had to answer.

I chose my words carefully, to not imply blame on either side. "Angelo thinks he doesn't deserve Zach."

"And you think Zach doesn't deserve Angelo."

It wasn't a question. "I think sometimes Zach doesn't think about what Angelo needs."

What followed was a pregnant silence. I knew he disagreed, but he wasn't saying anything because he didn't want to argue. I poked him in the ribs. "Speak," I said, and he sighed.

"I don't know how you can say Zach doesn't think about Angelo. Angelo's the only thing Zach *does* think about." I knew what he meant, and I wondered how it was that we could both be right. "No matter what Zach does, it's never enough. Do you think *Angelo* was thinking about *Zach* when he was out on that dance floor?"

"Zach didn't seem to mind."

"And you think it's fair that he can behave like that but then fly off the handle when anybody pays attention to Zach?"

"Jonathan isn't exactly 'anybody', and he wasn't just 'paying attention' to Zach. He's Zach's ex, and he kissed him. So yeah, I think Angelo had a right to be pissed."

"I think Zach did too."

What could I say? I couldn't deny that I could never have sat back and watched another man touch Jared the way those men had touched Angelo. But Zach had barely blinked an eye. "They're not like us," I said to myself as much as to him.

"Holy fucking understatement of the year, Batman."

He was getting annoyed now. I ran my hand down the not-quitesmooth skin of his arm, and kissed the patch of freckles on his shoulder. "You were right," I said gently, trying to make him relax again. "We shouldn't have gone to the club."

"Of course I was right," he said, but the edge was gone from his voice. He elbowed me playfully in the ribs. "Say it again."

I laughed, and slid my hand off of his arm and across his stomach. "You were right," I said quietly into his ear, and he smiled. "You know what else?"

"What?"

"If I ever see you dancing like that with another guy, I'll go nuts."

"If you ever see me *dancing*, you'll know I'm *way* beyond drunk and it's time to take me home." For a few minutes we just lay there, silent and content. I let my hand wander over him. I knew every inch of him by heart: the exact texture of his skin, the smooth flat plane of his stomach, the curve of his hip, the hard muscles on his thighs. My fingers traced familiar paths through his freckles, over contours I had memorized long ago. He sighed as he relaxed against me. "Will they be okay?" he asked quietly.

"They better be."

"Why?"

"Because if they're not, it's going to be one bitch of a drive home."

... Angelo

I STAY out another two hours. I don't leave that spot in front of the Bellagio, though. I know what Matt was thinkin', but I'm not lookin' to score. The last thing I want is to screw things up more.

Despite what Matt said, I know Jonathan was right. What the fuck do I have to offer Zach? The rest of 'em, they all have degrees. They all have real jobs. I don't even have a fuckin' high school diploma. I'll spend the rest of my life workin' for Zach, or baggin' groceries. Just like Jonathan said.

And the part 'bout me bein' an easy lay—that was true once too. It's been a few years, but I know what I am. I know what I been. Sex was the only thing anybody ever wanted me for, 'til Zach. I try to tell myself now that I've changed, just 'cause I have Zach, and Matt, and even Jared. But is it true? I don't know the answer.

I know I should go back. I know Zach'll be worried sick. I just gotta get my bearings again. I stand there watchin' the fountains 'til I finally decide I can face him again.

I can tell as soon as I walk in the door Zach's been pacin' the room the entire time. The look of relief on his face makes me feel even worse. Wish he could be pissed at me. Make this all easier if we could scream and yell at each other and then fall to the floor and fuck each other's brains out. Isn't that how it's supposed to work?

He crosses the room and wraps his arms 'round me before I even get two steps into the room.

"I'm so sorry, Ang."

"I'm sorry too."

"I didn't want that to happen."

"Can't stand to see him touch you, Zach."

```
"It won't happen again."
```

He hesitates for a second, which he's never done before. I wonder if it's 'cause he thinks we should talk more or 'cause he really is pissed or 'cause he's thinkin' 'bout Jonathan. But then he takes my face in his hands, and his lips find mine. His tongue slides over my bottom lip, like it always does, and it still turns me on every time.

We get undressed, and I push him backward onto the bed and climb on top of him. "Tell me what you want, Zach," I say.

He looks up at me, and I can tell it bothers him. Usually, he's the one sayin' that to me.

"I just want you, Ang," he says in confusion.

He still doesn't understand. I kiss his chest, flick my tongue over his nipple. He's obviously turned on, but he's still hesitant. "I'll do anything you want, Zach," I whisper. "Just tell me what."

He goes stiff at that—not in a good way—and I know I'm doin' somethin' wrong, but I still don't know what. "Why, Angelo?" he asks.

"Cause he's right, Zach. It's the only thing I have to give you. At least let me do it right."

There's a flash of somethin' on his face—anger or betrayal or shame—and then before I know what's goin' on, he pushes me off of him, hard enough that I almost fall off the bed. I've never seen him so mad. He

[&]quot;You pissed 'bout me dancin'?"

[&]quot;Not at all."

[&]quot;Doesn't mean anything, Zach. I was just foolin' 'round."

[&]quot;I know. It's my fault. If Jonathan hadn't kissed me—"

[&]quot;I'll fuckin' kill him if he touches you again."

[&]quot;He won't."

[&]quot;I'm sorry I was gone so long."

[&]quot;I knew you needed to be alone."

[&]quot;Zach?"

[&]quot;Yeah?"

[&]quot;Shut up and kiss me."

doesn't say a word, just goes to the other bed and climbs in. He turns his back on me and pulls the covers up to his ears.

"Zach?" I say, confused.

"You must not think much of me, Ang, if you think I'm only in this for the sex." He reaches out and hits the switch on the bedside lamp hard enough that it slams into the wall. The light goes out, and the room goes dark.

"Zach—" I try to say again, but he doesn't let me finish.

"Goodnight, Angelo."

I lay there, alone in my bed, tryin' to figure out how I managed to fuck things up so much.

I WAKE up early the next mornin', just like always. Normally, I would move to Zach's bed. Normally, he would pull me against him, and we would doze a little longer, cuddled together. Normally, I would wake up again later to him pushin' me gently onto my stomach, his weight on my back, his lips on my neck, and his finger or his cock between my legs.

But not today.

I wonder what would happen if I got in bed with him anyway—if I pretended like nothin' was wrong. Would he still wrap his arms around me and make love to me? Or would he turn his back? I'm too scared to find out. My head's still a mess from last night, and the truth is, I'm afraid I'll just end up doin' somethin' to make things worse.

I need to get away.

I get dressed. I find a pen and pad of paper in the drawer. Then I have to think 'bout what to say.

In the end, I write, "Spend the day with M and J. Don't worry. Just need some time." I want to finish it by telling him that I'm sorry or even better, that I love him. But I can't. I drop the note on my empty bed and leave the motel.

I get onto the Strip and realize I got no clue where to go. Yesterday we went south, so today I go north. Not really thinkin' much 'bout Zach

yet. I know that'll come. Right now, I'm just tryin' to get back to that place inside that feels like *me*.

Turns out six in the mornin' is a strange time to walk 'round Vegas. Almost nobody out. Certainly none of those guys handin' out the little cards with naked chicks on 'em. The sheer emptiness of the place makes the sound blarin' out of the speakers by the cheesier casinos seem way too loud. There's empty bottles and glasses everywhere. The magic of the place is wearin' thin, and you can see the bullshit and lies underneath if you look too close.

I keep walkin' and end up at the Venetian. I stop at that one 'cause even now, in the harsh morning light, it looks serene. It's kinda beautiful. The magic's stronger here. I walk in the door that leads to the shops, and I'm a few steps in before I look up. And then I just stop.

The ceiling is amazing. It's covered with paintings: all kinds of pictures, with elaborate gold frames. I don't know if it's supposed to be like anything in particular—the Sistine Chapel, or maybe somethin' else—I got no clue. Whatever it is, it's beautiful. Wish Zach was here with me to see it. Never really thought 'bout goin' to Europe, but now all of a sudden, I wanna go more than anything. How fuckin' stupid is it that it's Sin City makes me feel that way? I spend a long, long time just standin' there, starin' up at that ceiling.

I finally start walkin', just lookin' 'round. The shops are all closed, but I look in the windows at other people's lives. Five-hundred-dollar scarves and five-thousand-dollar suits. Silk ties, and artfully ripped jeans that I couldn't afford to sit down in. None of it makes me feel any better.

A few of the restaurants are servin' breakfast, and I'm startin' to think 'bout gettin' some coffee when my phone rings. 'Course it's Matt. Shoulda known. Zach and Jared will probably sleep 'til nine at least. Maybe ten. I shoulda realized Matt would be lookin' for me.

"Where the hell are you?" he snaps.

"At the Venetian."

"Stay there. I'm already on my way."

"Do I get a choice?"

"No." I knew he was gonna say that. "I went to your room...."

```
"Yeah?" I say, when he doesn't finish.
```

I can't fuckin' deal with that right now. "You gonna tell me anything I don't already know?"

He sighs, and then says in a softer tone, "You want to get something to eat?"

```
"I'm not talkin' 'bout Zach."
```

We pick a place to meet, and then find a restaurant that's servin' breakfast. He's good. He doesn't mention Zach at all until after we're done eating. Then he says, "Jared was talking about going to a show today, and Zach will probably go with him."

```
"What about you?"
```

"If you're not going, then I don't have to go either."

```
"What we gonna do then?"
```

He grins at me. "The Stratosphere. The roller coaster is kind of lame, but there are a couple of other rides there."

```
"Are they good?"
```

"You'll scream like a little girl."

I almost smile at that. "We'll see, tough guy."

Wish I could say we have fun, but the truth is I'm terrible company the whole day. Can't stop worryin' 'bout Zach, and whether or not he's

[&]quot;Zach looks like shit. He's pretty upset."

[&]quot;Okay."

[&]quot;I'm not talkin' 'bout last night at all."

[&]quot;Okay."

[&]quot;Yeah."

[&]quot;Yeah, what?"

[&]quot;Yeah, I wanna get somethin' to eat."

[&]quot;Just once, could you not make things as complicated as possible?"

[&]quot;Maybe," I tell him, "but guess it won't be today."

[&]quot;What do you want to do?"

[&]quot;Any more roller coasters?"

still mad. I worry 'bout Jonathan and the things he said. I start wonderin' what's happened today while I been gone. What if Jonathan came to see Zach? What if Zach realized Jonathan was right? I imagine goin' back to the motel to find Zach gone, only a note on the bed tellin' me where he's gone. I imagine them makin' up and makin' out and makin' love. I imagine goin' home to Coda alone. Part of me knows I'm bein' an idiot, but it doesn't stop my mind from dredgin' up all the worst possible ways this could end.

Matt's like a fuckin' saint. Even though I'm miserable and snappin' at him all day, he just keeps bein' himself, sometimes tryin' to cheer me up, sometimes just leavin' me to sulk. Several hours and a few manly screams later, he finally says, "We should go back. They'll be waiting for us."

"I know."

We start walkin', and the closer we get, the less I talk. Every single step we take toward the hotel makes that knot of dread in my stomach heavier. Matt's lookin' at me outta the corner of his eye.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?" he finally asks.

"Yeah."

"You aren't even going to tell me what happened last night?"

"No."

"Okay." He's quiet for 'bout half a block, but then he says, "Did you and Zach have a fight?"

"Guess so."

"Did you break up?"

"No."

Another couple of minutes, and then, "Please tell me you didn't do anything stupid last night."

Obviously I did, but not what he's thinkin'. "I didn't."

"Then what—"

"Told you I don't wanna talk 'bout it, Matt."

"Okay." We go about another block before he starts talkin' again. "You want to know something?"

"No, but I bet you're gonna tell me anyway."

"Jared told me once that he has a compass inside of him, but instead of pointing north, it points west."

"No wonder he gets lost so easy."

"Zach has a compass inside of him too. You know where it points?"

"Toward Thai food?"

"It points at you."

"That supposed to mean somethin'?"

"Yeah," he says, smackin' me on the back of the head. It hurts, but I'm not gonna let him know that. He just grins at me. "When you pull your head out of your ass, it will."

I'M A little nervous walkin' back into our room. It's still light outside, but the curtains are closed and the room is pretty dark. Zach's sittin' on the edge of the bed starin' at the TV, but I know him. I can tell he's not really seein' it.

He doesn't acknowledge me, and I don't say anything either. I take off my coat, and my boots. I sit on my bed and look down at the floor, like maybe somebody left some cue cards down there for me to go by. No such luck. Zach's watchin' me outta the corner of his eyes, 'bout the way a mouse watches a cat. He's waitin' to see if I'll pounce on him or just scamper away.

We've had fights before, but always Zach's the one who makes it right. He'll come over to where I'm sittin', and get down on his knees in front of me. He'll put his head in my lap and tell me how much he loves me. And that's usually the end of it. But this time, it's pretty fuckin' obvious he has no intention of makin' the first move. It's gotta be me.

I take a deep breath and go stand in front of him. He looks up at me, wary, ready for another fight.

I got no fuckin' clue what to say. My instinct is to attack: to blame him for bringin' us to Vegas or for makin' that stupid dinner date with Jonathan. I could say it's his fault for kissin' his ex, or for not arguin' when Jonathan called me an easy lay. I could say so many things to hurt him or to piss him off. Those are the things I know how to do.

I don't know how to make amends.

I just want to touch him. I want to know he won't push me away. I make myself reach out, and I put my fingers in his hair, my palm against his cheek. He tenses up. His jaw clenches, and his eyes close, like he can't stand to have my hands on him. And it hurts more than I can say. It makes my chest so tight, I'm not sure I can even breathe.

"Zach?" I barely manage to make myself heard. I barely manage to keep my voice from cracking. I can't stop it from shaking. I want to get down on my knees and put my head in his lap, the way he does to me. But I know if I do, I won't be able to stop myself from burstin' into tears and cryin' like a little kid. "Zach, tell me what to do. 'Cause I have no idea how to make things right."

For a second, I don't think he's gonna answer. He just sits there with his eyes shut tight and doesn't move. Then he sort of sighs, and some of the tension goes out of him. My hand is still against his cheek, and he puts his hand on top of it. He turns toward it and kisses my fingers.

"That's twice now," he says quietly. His lips are against the palm of my hand. He's not lookin' at me. "Twice you've implied that the only thing you have to give me is sex." The first time was months ago, at home, the day I finally broke down and called my mom. The day I told him I loved him. I knew it had bothered him then, too, but not like this time. "You're breaking my heart, Angelo. Don't you know how much you mean to me? Don't you know how much I love you? Because if you don't...." He trails off, but he finally looks up at me, and I see in his eyes he's as upset as I am. "I don't know what else to do. I don't know how to make you believe."

Right now, I don't care if I believe. I only care that we go back to how we were. I want to wake up in the dark of night and move into his bed. I want to make love in the mornin' like we always do. I want to know that tomorrow he'll want me to touch him again. "I can't stand to have you mad at me," I whisper.

"I can't stand to *be* mad at you." He stands up now, and steps up close to me. But he doesn't touch me. "Promise me you won't ever say it again."

I still think I'm right. I don't know if he's foolin' himself or just lyin' to me to make me feel better. But I don't care. He doesn't want me to say it out loud again, so I won't. "I promise," I say.

"Good." And then he pulls me tight against him and kisses me. And I know it hasn't been that long—only since yesterday—but it feels like it's been ages since he kissed me like this.

He pulls me over to the bed, his arms 'round me. One of his hands goes under my shirt and slides up my back. I start to unbutton his pants, but he stops me. "No sex, Ang. I just want to touch you."

I know he's tryin' to make a point with the "no sex" thing, but I don't mind. We undress each other. He kisses my eyes and my cheeks. His hands never go below my waist, but they caress my stomach and my back and my arms. They're so soft, and he's so gentle. I guess it's been a while since I realized just how good it feels to have him touch me. And then he pulls me down on to the bed with him. I put my head on his chest and try to swallow the lump in my throat.

His hand slides up my back, stops on the back of my neck. His voice is low and coaxing, like he's tryin' to keep from scarin' me away. "Talk to me, Angelo. I can't make it better if you don't tell me what's wrong."

I know exactly what I want to say. I always have a hard time with the words, but this time, I make myself say them. I take a deep breath and force them up out of my chest, make them take form. "I love you so much, Zach." It comes out pretty quiet, but I know by how still he is that he hears me. And then I say somethin' else. Somethin' I hadn't planned on. "Please don't leave me."

There's a moment then—just a heartbeat—while he absorbs it all. And then his arms are 'round me, squeezing me so tight I almost can't breathe. I can't keep the tears out of my eyes. I hate how I always seem to be cryin' in front of him, but he doesn't let on that he knows. He kisses my forehead and says in a gentle voice, "Angelo, I don't understand how you can be so smart, and still be so damn stupid."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't you know by now? There's nothing and nobody in this world that could make me leave you. You're my whole life, angel. And I like it that way."

Some of that dread that's been in my gut all day goes away when he says that, but the lump in my throat gets even bigger. I wait until I can keep my voice from shaking to answer. "He's everything I'm not."

"But you're everything I want, Angelo. Not him."

I'm everything he wants? A high school dropout with nothing to offer? I try to believe him. I try to understand how he could choose me.

"Matt and Jared will be here in less than an hour," he says gently. He knows I'll want to get my shit together before they show up. No way I want either of them seein' me like this. Zach nudges me. "Let's go take a shower." He knows me so well.

"Okay," is all I can say.

I let him pull me up from the bed and lead me into the bathroom. He starts the shower, pushes me gently into it, and then gets in behind me. He wraps his arms 'round me. I close my eyes, lean back against him, and try to let it all go. I try to let all my anger and all my tears wash away in that steaming hot water.

I don't know how long we stand like that, him just holding me. After a bit, his hands start to move on me. He washes my back, then slowly moves down my chest, over my stomach, between my legs. The next thing I know, he's turning me, pushing me against the wall. I keep my eyes closed and let him lead. I realize he's on his knees in front of me when I feel his lips on my stomach. And then his tongue moves over my slit, and I have to grab onto him to keep my knees from giving out.

He said "no sex", and I'm wonderin' if I should stop him. Not sure it's really right to let him do this. Not sure it's fair for me to take more. But then his mouth closes over me, and I stop wonderin'. I stop thinkin' at all. For the first time since my eyes opened that mornin', my mind shuts off, and it's such an amazing relief. No fear, no worries, no shame. No ridiculous scenarios playing like a bad movie in my head. It's all lost to

that silent, sensual oblivion. There's nothing but me and him and pure physical sensation.

The tile wall is cold and smooth against my back and the water is scalding hot on my chest. My hands are tangled in Zach's thick brown hair, and his mouth is warm and sweet and giving. Always giving. Because that's what Zach does. One of his hands slides up the inside of my thigh, then I feel his fingers, slick and soapy, pushing against my rim.

I moan a little, and it surprises him enough that he actually stops sucking. I don't make much noise during sex. I don't know why not. Never even thought 'bout it 'til Zach told me. But I know how much he loves it when somethin' slips out. He says in a low, husky voice, "Oh God, Ang, please do that again."

I don't even have a chance to think about it. As soon as he says it, his mouth slides back down my length, and his fingers push past my rim—but only a little. It's just the tiniest bit of penetration, and he knows it won't be enough. He keeps sucking, keeps moving the very tip of his finger in and out, teasing me until I clench my fingers in his hair and manage to whisper, "More, Zach."

"Anything," he says quietly, and then his mouth is on me again, and his fingers slide slowly into me. It feels so good, I really do moan then, and so does he. His fingers massage me, and his tongue circles the head of my cock and flicks over that spot just below my slit. I can't help but grab him tighter and pull him further down my shaft as his fingers move deeper. Then he touches that wonderfully sensitive spot inside, and that's all it takes. I may even cry out when I come this time. I don't know for sure. All I know are his fingers filling me and that wonderful, thoughtless release. He lets me hold his head as far down my shaft as he can go, all the way to end.

He never stops giving.

Even still shakin' from my climax, I think 'bout that. He always gives. Do I really give him anything? Is it possible that *lettin*' him give is the same as givin' back? I wish I knew.

I feel him stand up, and then his soft hands on each side of my face. "Ang?" I open my eyes and look into his. They're gorgeous blue, and I

can see by lookin' in 'em that he's worried. But I can see how much he cares 'bout me too. "Ang, please tell me we're okay."

We love each other so much. Why did I think that wasn't enough? I put my arms 'round his neck and pull him down to kiss me. "Zach," I say, "we're absolutely perfect."

WE HAVE dinner with Matt and Jared. Things start out awkward. They're walkin' on eggshells, glancin' at us sideways, obviously worried we're gonna start fightin' any moment. But it doesn't take them long to figure out that we're not. If anything, we're probably gonna embarrass 'em by tearin' each other's clothes off right there in the restaurant. Dinner ends up bein' fun.

We get back to the hotel, and there, in the bar closest to the elevators, is Jonathan.

He's obviously been waitin' for us, and we stop short when he approaches us. I'm sure as hell not happy to see him, but I am a little bit glad to see the bruise I left on the side of his face. Still, I can't believe he's come, and I'm hopin' like hell he's not gonna do somethin' to fuck things up between Zach and I again.

Like he's readin' my mind, he says, "I'm not here to cause trouble." I'm thinkin' he might cause it whether he means to or not, and I'm tryin' hard to keep my temper in check. Zach steps in front of me—whether it's to protect me or Jonathan, I don't know. "I was hoping we could talk for a minute," he says to Zach.

"I have nothing to say to you," Zach says coldly, and starts to push past him.

Jonathan puts a hand on Zach's chest to stop him, and that pisses me off even more. I want to tell him to get his fuckin' hands off of Zach, but before I can, Zach knocks his hand away. "Don't touch me again!"

I can tell Jonathan is sad 'bout that, but not surprised. He holds his hands up in submission. "Zach, truly. I'm sorry." He holds his hand out to Zach. "I just wanted to say goodbye."

Zach looks suspicious, but after a second, he shakes Jonathan's hand. All he says is, "Goodbye, Jonathan." And then he walks away. He never looks back.

It's pretty anticlimactic, and Jared, Matt and I are all still standin' there, in sort of a stunned silence. Jonathan turns to Jared first. "It really was nice to meet you. I hope I didn't ruin your vacation too much," he says. He holds out his hand and 'course Jared smiles and shakes it.

"You know, I have a friend in Phoenix." Matt gives him a dirty look when he says that, but Jared ignores him. "I think I'll tell him to look you up."

Jonathan smiles and says, "I'm always up for a blind date."

He holds his hand out to Matt next. Matt hesitates a second, but then they shake too.

And then Jonathan turns to me. I'm wonderin' if maybe he's too good to shake hands with me, but when his eyes meet mine, there's no challenge in 'em like I've seen every other time. He looks tired, and wary. And I'm surprised as hell when he says, "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Why the fuck would I want to talk to you?"

He's starin' at the floor, and it takes him a second to answer. "There's no reason in the world you would want to," he says quietly. "I don't blame you for hating me. I would feel the same way if I were in your shoes. But I would really appreciate it if you would give me just a moment of your time." He sounds sincere, and the truth is, he's got my curiosity up now. "Please," he says.

"You wanna talk to me just 'cause you think I'm an easy lay?" I ask.

His cheeks turn bright red, and he says, "No."

"You gonna tell me how I'm no good for Zach?"

"No."

"You gonna tell me how you deserve him more than me?"

"No."

"Yes."

He looks confused at that. "Yes? What do you mean? Yes, what?"

"Yes, I'll talk to you for a minute."

Jared heads for the elevator, but Matt stays where he is, standin' next to me. I look over at him, and he says, "I'm staying."

"I don't need a babysitter," I say, but we both know I'm not makin' any guarantees.

He gives me that half-ass grin he gets, with one eyebrow up, and says, "We'll see, hothead." He walks over to the other end of the bar, out of earshot, and sits down.

"All right, man. I'm listenin'. What the fuck you want?"

To my surprise, he looks sheepishly at the floor. A second later, his eyes come up and meet mine, and what I see there isn't judgment or disdain. It's shame. "I want you to know how sorry I am about—" he stumbles for a moment, then says, quieter, "about what I said."

"Bout sayin' I'm only good for baggin' groceries or callin' me an easy lay?" I ask, and he winces. I'm glad. I got no desire to make this easy for him.

"Both," he says quietly, "but especially the second one. It was a terrible thing to say, and I hope you can forgive me. It was jealousy speaking. I know that's a terribly lousy excuse, but the truth is, it's the only one I have." I actually feel a little off balance now. Last thing I was expectin' was an apology. I kinda want to still be pissed at him, but it's harder now. "Really," he says, his voice real quiet, "I'm not usually...."

He lets his sentence trail away, and I say, "You're not usually a ragin' asshole?"

He smiles at me, just a little. "I like to think I'm not."

And as much as I hate to admit it, I know it's probably the truth. 'Cause Zach wouldn't have been with him for so long if he was.

"Can't exactly say I'm happy you saved up all your dickhead moments for me," I say.

He smiles a little more, still lookin' sheepish. "I'm not happy about it either. And I truly am sorry," he says again.

"Yeah, okay." Not used to havin' people apologize to me, and I'm not sure what to do. "Forget about it." I'm thinkin' that's my cue to leave, but he stops me.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he asks.

I can't help but be suspicious and I ask, "Why?"

He shrugs. "I'd just like to talk to you for a bit."

It's fuckin' weird, but what've I got to lose?

We sit at the bar next to each other, and he orders a glass of wine for himself and a beer for me. He's the kinda guy who pays attention to details. He orders the same kind of beer I had the night before, without havin' to ask. For a minute we just sit there, and I'm wonderin' what the fuck I'm doin' there. Then suddenly he says, "I never meant to let him go, you know."

"The way I heard it, you're the one who left."

"You heard right," he says with a sigh. "I thought I would be back. That's why I left Geisha behind. I knew she didn't like him. I didn't think I was leaving for good." He's not lookin' at me. He's messin' with the cocktail napkin under his wine glass, foldin' it up over the bottom of the glass, round and round 'til it's all wrapped around the base of the glass, then smoothin' it out and doin' it again. "I was just trying to make him wake up. I wanted him to get his shit together, you know? Quit drinking so much and getting high every night and sleeping around. I wanted him to grow up and quit drifting." He stops and drinks some of his wine. He's still not lookin' at me, and after a bit he starts talkin' again, quieter now. "I thought he would call. I thought he would realize we were worth fighting for. I waited and waited, and by the time I realized he wasn't going to call, it was too late." Not sure what to say to that, but it seems like maybe he doesn't expect me to say anything. Like maybe he just needs somebody to hear it. And for some reason, that somebody is me.

"Why didn't you call him?" I finally ask. "I think he woulda been glad to have you back."

He shrugs a little. "Because I didn't want to go back if he hadn't changed. And I was afraid if I called I'd only find out that he was happier without me. It seems so stupid now, but...." He lets that sentence trail

away. "All that time we were together, it just seemed like he never knew what to do with his life. Like he never had a direction. He never had a purpose. Even in bed, he didn't know what he wanted."

He stops short, and I know he wishes he hadn't said that last part.

"The only thing Zach ever wants in bed is to please the guy he's there with," I say. He looks a little surprised at that. He's still not lookin' at me, but I can see that he's thinkin' 'bout that. "You think he didn't know what he wanted? What that really means is, he couldn't figure out what you wanted."

He's quiet for a minute, lost in thought. Then he says, "I guess, when I saw him again, I thought, 'Here's the Zach I was waiting for', you know? I could tell he finally had a purpose. He had a *direction*." He stops again for a second, and then, "I didn't realize until later that his purpose was you."

"Me?"

He looks over at me in surprise. "Zach's never bothered to fight for anything in his life. Not for his degree. Not for a job. Certainly not for me. But there's not a doubt in my mind he's ready to fight for you."

And the crazy thing is, I think maybe he's right.

We finish our drinks in silence, and then he gets up and holds his hand out. I shake it, and he smiles at me. "I hope if we meet again, we can start over, Angelo. I would like to think we could do better."

"Sure couldn't do much worse."

And he actually smiles at that. "Take care, Angelo."

Matt's been sittin' at the other end of the bar the whole time. Once Jonathan leaves, he comes over, and we head for the elevators.

"What was that all about?" he asks me.

I don't answer him. My mind is elsewhere. I'm thinkin' 'bout what Jonathan said: that I'm Zach's purpose. I think 'bout Zach earlier that day saying, "You're my whole life." I think 'bout what Matt said to me the day before.

"You really think Zach's compass points at me?" I ask.

Matt looks surprised for a second, but then he says, "I'm positive. You are his north."

We don't talk the rest of the way to our rooms. He's lookin' at me funny, tryin' to figure out what's goin' on in my head, but I'm not ready to tell him. I'm not sure I even could. Not sure I understand it yet myself.

Is it possible that I give somethin' to Zach just by bein' there?

When I walk into the room, Zach's sittin' on the bed waitin' for me. I stop short when I see him. Tryin' to figure out how to ask him the question in my head.

He comes over to me and tips my chin up so he can look in my eyes. "Is everything okay?" he asks me.

"Fine." He's lookin' at me, like he's searchin', tryin' to decide whether I'm tellin' him the truth.

"What did Jonathan want?"

"Mostly, he wanted to apologize."

He looks relieved at that. He wraps one arm around my waist. His other hand is still against my cheek. "He's not a bad person," he says gently.

"Wouldn't have believed that last night," I say, "but now, I think I do."

"He apologized, and that's it?"

"Says he never meant to let you go. He thought he was comin' back. He thought you would call. That's why he left Geisha."

His eyes close for a second, and he takes a shaky breath. I can tell it hurts him a little, realizin' that maybe they could have made it work if he had only tried. But then he opens his eyes again and looks into mine, and his voice is steady when he says, "I never loved him the way I love you."

He's still lookin' in my eyes, tryin' to find somethin', but I'm not sure what. I'm thinkin' 'bout whether it can be true that I've been givin' him somethin' all along, and not even knowin' it. "Zach, am I your north?"

He blinks at me once, confused, 'cause of course my question makes no sense. But then he says, with a sincerity that can't be mistaken, "You are my everything."

"Zach?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up and kiss me."

He doesn't hesitate this time at all. His lips are so soft against mine, and I know I've really come home now. I know we're gonna be all right.

After a few seconds, he pulls back again. He's lookin' down at me, and I can tell there's still somethin' on his mind.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Not a thing."

"Then what's up with you?"

He gives me a nervous smile. "You want to go out for a bit? Just you and me?"

"Sure."

Zach hardly ever blushes, but he's blushin' now. There are spots of color high on his cheeks. He hesitates for just a second, but then he asks in a quiet voice, "Will you do something for me?"

"Depends on what it is," I say.

Those spots of color are even brighter, but I can tell he's not backin' out now. He pulls somethin' out of his pocket and offers it to me, lookin' scared but hopeful at the same time. I look down at what's in his hand, and I laugh.

It's eyeliner.

"Is that all?" I ask, and I see both relief and excitement in his eyes.

"I bought the hair gel too," he says, smilin' at me.

"You really thought this through, didn't you?"

He pushes me back against the wall. His lips are against my neck, and his groin pushes into me. His voice is low and breathless. "I want to go back to the club."

"You do?" I ask, surprised.

"I want to watch you dance. I want to watch all of those men try to make you theirs. And then," he says, pushing against me even harder, and there's no doubt how turned on he is just thinkin' 'bout it, "I want to bring you back here and prove to myself that you're mine."

"You're actually a tiny bit kinky, aren't you Zach?"

He's still rubbin' against me, his hands wanderin'. His lips against my neck are becoming more insistent. "You can say no," he says.

I know I can. And that's why I don't.

It's been a lotta years since I did this, but it's not like I don't know how. I slick my hair back on the sides, but spike it up on top. Black all around my eyes, and smeared over my lids. Have to admit, I'm glad I don't have to face Matt like this. He'd never stop laughin'. But for Zach, I'll do it. When I come out of the bathroom, Zach's eyes get huge. I can tell he likes it.

"As good as Ziggy Stardust?" I ask him, smilin'.

"Better," he says, and I laugh.

At least in Vegas, hardly anybody looks twice at a guy wearin' makeup. We walk out of the hotel and catch a cab to the club. Zach finds a stool near the dance floor. I go up to the bar and order two shots of tequila.

The bartender gives me a wary look as he puts them on the bar. "No trouble tonight," he says.

"No trouble," I say, and slam both shots. "I need a glass of wine too. You have any Spanish reds?"

He looks at me like I'm an idiot. Guess maybe I am. "Yeah right, buddy."

It was worth a try. "Whatever red you got."

I take the glass back to Zach, and the look he gives me when I hand it to him is worth lookin' like an ass in front of the bartender. He kisses me once, deep and slow, and then whispers in my ear, "No sex."

"I know."

He smiles at me. "Have fun."

When we were here before, I didn't have time to find good partners—guys who are there for the same thing: not necessarily to get

laid right away, but just to get turned on. Tonight I find them: the tattooed guy from before, and two others. The four of us trade off a lot.

I find out that dancin' for Zach is different than dancin' for myself. It's better. I love knowin' his eyes are on me. It's the best aphrodisiac in the world.

I never let them kiss me, but one guy sucks my neck hard enough, I know I'm gonna have a mark. I slide my hand down his pants. I wrap my hand around his shaft and rub my thumb over the wet spot on his tip, 'til he says in a hoarse, teasing voice, "You better stop if you don't want a mess on your hands." I laugh, and we switch partners again.

I keep one eye on Zach. He's cute as hell, and to anybody watchin', he looks like he's alone. Several guys talk to him. One buys him a drink. He flirts a little, but he's always watchin' me. He never lets any of them get too close. There's one I can tell he likes. He flirts with him more than any of the others. He even lets the guy put his hand on the small of his back. The guy leans close and whispers somethin' in Zach's ear. Zach smiles, but then he says somethin' to the guy, and points my way. I don't miss the look the guy gives him then—disappointed, but a little bit impressed too—and Zach just beams at him.

I end up with the tattooed guy a lot. We go up to the bar to get a drink together once. "You here with that guy?" he asks, pointin' over at Zach.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Just curious."

"How 'bout you?" I ask.

"The one who left that mark on your neck," he says, smilin'. "We've been together five years."

I can't help but smile back. "That's great, man."

He follows me back to the dance floor and wraps his arms 'round me from behind. He rubs his hand between my legs, then slides it into my pocket. He slowly strokes me as he grinds into me. I put one of my hands behind me and squeeze the bulge in his pants. I close my eyes, put my head back on his shoulder, and get lost in the sensation of it all. I think 'bout the guy I'm dancin' with, and his partner, whose suckin' on

somebody else's neck right now. I think 'bout what they'll be doin' together when they get home tonight. I think 'bout Zach, and how excited I know he's gettin'. I don't know how long we dance like that, just grindin' and strokin' each other, but then suddenly he says in my ear, "Your boyfriend wants you."

I look at Zach, and he nods his head toward the back of the club, where the bathrooms are.

"You coming back?" Tattoo shouts at me as I start to walk away.

"No idea," I yell back, and then go to meet Zach on the edge of the dance floor.

I can tell just by lookin' at him how turned on he is. Not just by the bulge in his pants, either. It's all in his eyes. He wraps his arms 'round me, pulls me tight against him. His voice in my ear is breathless. "I can't believe how much I want you right now."

"You wanna go back to the hotel?" I ask.

But to my surprise, he shakes his head. "No."

He turns me 'round and pushes me toward the bathroom. I go. By the time we get there, he's right behind me. He has one arm 'round my waist, and I can feel his erection pushing into the small of my back. There's a line of guys at the urinal, and one stall. It's occupied, and it's pretty obvious based on the sounds we hear that there's more than one guy in there. There's another couple ahead of us waitin' their turn. They're makin' out against the wall.

Zach's voice is ragged and desperate in my ear. "If you have a problem with this, Ang, I need you to tell me right now."

My heart's racin', but it's more from nerves than from arousal. Zach and I have had sex 'bout every way you can think of—sometimes it's gentle, and sometimes it's rough. But always, it's him thinkin' 'bout what I want. Always, his first thought is pleasin' me. This is the first time ever he's thinkin' 'bout himself first. I can't exactly say I'm turned on, but there's no way I'm tellin' him no. "I got no problems," I say.

He pulls his wallet out and says to the guys ahead of us, "I'll give you fifty bucks to let us go first."

They look at each other, and they both shrug. "Knock yourself out," one of 'em says as he takes Zach's money. Then they go back to makin' out.

Zach's grindin' against my back, bitin' my neck, one hand between my legs, and I'm hopin' like hell that stall opens up soon, or every guy here might get to watch me get him off. It feels like an eternity, but it's probably only a minute or two before it's our turn.

Zach shoves me in ahead of him. I assume he wants a blowjob, so as he's lockin' the door, I undo his pants and get 'em out of the way. But then he grabs me hard and turns me around. He puts his hand on the back of my neck and bends me over, pushin' me down so my forehead's against the top of the toilet tank, the top of my head against the wall. He's unbuttoning my pants, pushin' them down, and I'm tryin' to tell myself this is fine. I close my eyes, and make myself breathe deep while he fumbles around. My hearts racin' faster than ever. I feel him pushin' against me. I have a moment—just a flash—of sheer primal fear. One horrifying heartbeat of near panic when I think he's gonna do it dry. I almost start to fight him, based on instinct alone. But then the head of his cock pushes easily past my rim, and I realize he thought this out more than I knew. He must have had a tube in his pocket. I take a deep breath and make myself relax.

He moans as he pushes into me. He goes slow, sliding all the way in, then stops. For just a second, he stays there, deep inside of me, but not movin'. I start to think maybe he's changed his mind. He pulls out once, almost all the way, and slides back into me a little faster than before. And then, like somebody flipped a switch, he just lets go. He lets his needs take over, in a way I've never seen him do before. He starts poundin' into me fast and hard. He's still holdin' me down with one hand. My head is slammin' into the wall, and my hands are searchin' for somethin' to grab on to—anything to give me a little leverage. In the end, I just brace myself against the wall itself and hang on.

I don't quite get off on it, but it's not unpleasant. Zach's bein' rough, but it's nothin' I can't handle. Nobody else in the world I would do this for, and he knows it too. I think that's why he wants it so much.

I know it won't take him long. I arch my back, push back against him, and get a low moan in response. He grabs my hair and turns my head sideways, so my cheek's against the tank. So he can see part of my face, and that thick black liner around my eyes. And then he comes like he's never come before—not with me, at any rate—and everybody in that bathroom's gotta know it too.

There's laughter from the two guys waitin' for their turn in the stall, and one of them says, "I guess it was worth fifty bucks."

Zach leans down 'gainst my back. He's still breathin' hard. He kisses my cheek and says quietly in my ear, "I sure hope you're okay with what I just did."

I don't even have to think 'bout it. "Am I really your north?" I ask him.

"You are my everything."

"Guess that means I'm your Ziggy Stardust sometimes too."

Matt...

AS USUAL, Angelo and I were awake before Jared and Zach. I called him, and we met at the elevator.

"What the hell happened to your neck?" I asked him when he showed up, because there was no missing the huge hickey he had.

He looked at me sideways, a slight blush creeping up his cheeks. "Burned it on my curlin' iron," he said as he hit the button to call the elevator.

I laughed. "I take it you guys made up?"

And to my surprise, he blushed even more. "We're good," he said. He wasn't looking at me, but it wasn't his usual flippant tone, either. His voice was quiet and a little bit hesitant. He was being as genuine with me as he knew how to be. "Even better than before, I think."

He glanced my way for just a second, then looked away, like he was expecting me to laugh. I made sure I didn't. "I'm glad."

We grabbed some coffee and took the tram to Paris, where we wandered around aimlessly for a while, then down to New York, New York. We were headed back north again when Jared called to say that he and Zach were finally up, and I told him to meet us in front of the Bellagio.

"Wish we could see the fountain again," Angelo said as we stared out at the lake, waiting for Zach and Jared. It wouldn't start running again until three, and we had planned to leave by noon.

"Maybe we should leave late," I said. It was something I had been thinking about already. "We could leave around five. We'd have to drive through the night, but between the four of us, it wouldn't be so bad. Jared and I are both off tomorrow, and it would still give you and Zach a few hours before you had to open the store."

He smiled over at me. "Already thought of that, but didn't wanna be the one to say it. You guys've laughed at me enough this trip already."

Zach and Jared showed up then. Zach stood behind Ang like he always did, with one arm around his neck, and Angelo leaned back against him. Zach whispered something in his ear, and Angelo smiled. They looked as happy together as I had ever seen them.

"Jesus Zach," Jared suddenly said. "What the hell did you do to his neck?"

Angelo blushed again, and Zach said jokingly, "What makes you think I did it?"

I laughed, but Jared didn't. I looked over at him, and what I saw surprised me. He was glaring at Angelo, looking more pissed off than I had seen him in a long time.

"Then who did?"

Zach and Angelo both turned to look at Jared. Angelo looked wary. His normal cocky attitude was nowhere to be seen. But Zach looked indignant. I was trying to catch up. It had never occurred to me that anybody other than Zach would have left that mark on Angelo's neck. I hadn't taken Zach's response seriously at all. But I could see now that I was wrong.

"Let it go, Jared," Zach said, and there was no mistaking the quiet threat in his voice.

Jared ignored him. "You did it again, didn't you?" he asked Angelo. "You wanted to get laid, and so you did."

"Stop!" Zach said. He had both arms wrapped around Angelo, and even though Angelo wasn't fighting, I could tell Zach was braced for it. Jared didn't listen.

"All you think about is yourself, and what *you* want. You never think about Zach at all!"

"Jared," I said, trying to interrupt him. I put my hand on his shoulder, but he brushed me off and continued raging at Angelo as if I had never spoken.

"You think just because Zach can't tell you 'no', that makes it okay? You think you can do whatever you want to do, and fuck whoever you

want to fuck, and Zach has to put up with it? Well, you're wrong! It's still a selfish thing to do, and one of these days he's gonna wise up and leave you, and you'll wonder why you're completely alone again!"

Angelo's eyes were closed, but whether he was fighting back tears, or sheer blind fury, I didn't know. I could tell that Jared's words were hitting home in a way I never would have anticipated. But I was pretty sure that part of him was pissed, too, and if the pissed-off side of him ended up winning, things were going to get ugly. Jared was tough, but I was pretty sure he had no experience fighting, and as much as I hated to admit it, my money was on Angelo if things turned violent. I also knew that maybe Jared deserved a good punch in the face for what he was saying. But all logic aside, there was no way in the world I was letting *anybody* lay a hand on him—not even Angelo, and not even if Jared was asking for it.

Zach was hanging on tight to Angelo. His head was down, and he was whispering into Angelo's ear. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I could tell that Angelo was listening. After a second, Angelo nodded. Zach loosened his grip around him. Ang stayed there for just a moment, then he pushed free. I started to step in front of Jared, to keep Angelo away from him, but I didn't need to. Angelo didn't even look at him. He just put his head down and walked away.

Now I really didn't know what to do—follow Angelo, or stay with Zach and Jared. Zach solved it for me by saying to me in no uncertain terms, "Don't." Then he turned on Jared, and the look in his eyes actually made Jared back up a step. "I don't know what makes you think you have a right to judge us, but I'm telling you right now, Jared, it better stop."

"I'm not judging you," Jared said defensively.

"Right. Because apparently in your mind, I'm nothing more than a doormat for Angelo to wipe his feet on. You'll excuse me if I'm not exactly flattered by that estimation." Jared hung his head at that, but it didn't slow Zach down at all. "Do you have any idea what's been going on in his head this week? I'm pretty sure you don't, and I'm sure as hell not going to tell you. But I will tell you this: *you're wrong*, about *everything!*" He took a step closer to Jared. "And as for last night—you're wrong about that too. If you had *any* idea what actually happened, *any* idea what it cost

him—" He stopped short and closed his eyes for a second. He was obviously trying to get his temper back under control. I had never seen him so angry. I had never even imagined Zach could get so angry. He opened his eyes again and took one more step toward Jared so they were only inches apart. "What you think of him is your own business, but I'm telling you right now, you better not *ever* say *anything* like that to him again, Jared. If you can't learn to mind your own business, the least you can do is keep your goddamn mouth shut!"

Jared had his head down, and his cheeks were red. He knew he had screwed up. He didn't necessarily know how to go about fixing it yet, but he knew he was the one at fault. Zach stood there for a minute, looking at him, waiting to see if he was going to argue back.

"I'm sorry," Jared said.

"Not good enough," Zach said. And then he left too.

We were both silent after he left. Jared wasn't looking at me. I leaned against the stone railing and stared out at the silent lake of the Bellagio, waiting for him to start talking.

"I did it again, didn't I?" he finally asked.

"If you mean you opened your mouth and started spouting off before you had all the facts, then yeah, I'd say you did it again."

He looked over at me, his eyes wary. "Do you know what happened last night?"

"No. I have no idea. Angelo and I don't talk about that kind of thing. The difference is I can accept that how he and Zach get off is none of my business. And you, for some reason which I absolutely cannot comprehend, cannot." He turned his back on me, but not before I saw the flash of anger in his eyes. "Tell me what happened," I said.

"Well Matt," he said sarcastically, "I think we've just established that *I don't know* what happ—"

"Stop!" I hadn't been angry before, but I was now. I didn't yell. I kept my tone low, my speech slow and measure. "I am not talking about last night, and you know it." He slumped a little at that. "I am talking about New Years. *Something* happened that night, and you and Angelo have been at odds ever since. I know you've told me it was 'nothing', but

that obviously is not true. So I'm asking you again now, Jared, and I would appreciate an answer: what happened?"

He turned back toward me, but not all the way. I could at least see his face in profile now as he stared out over the lake. "Angelo slept with Cole."

"What?" I wasn't exactly logical when it came to Jared's old fuck buddy, and my instinctual outrage was directed more at Jared than at Angelo.

"You heard me."

"And what?" I asked, my tone like ice. "You're jealous?"

He turned on me, his face livid and angry. "No!" he snapped. "That's not it." He hesitated for only a second, then said, "I think we both know *I'm* not the one who's jealous of Cole."

He was right, of course. My assumption that he wanted Cole for himself was purely a product of my own imagination. I knew, once I took my emotions out of the equation, that Jared didn't feel anything for him other than a fondness born from years of friendship. I took a deep breath, and made myself calm down. I needed to stop reacting as his lover, and start listening as his friend. I made myself think again about what he was telling me, without my own biases coloring it.

"Angelo cheated on Zach?" I asked. I was calm now, the anger gone. My voice was back to normal.

"Not exactly," he said, and the challenge had gone from his voice too. We were done snapping at each other. "Is it cheating if Zach lets it happen?"

I had to think about that for a bit. "You're not jealous of Cole," I finally said. "You're jealous of Angelo. You wish I would give you the freedom Zach gives to him."

I was trying to imagine what it would be like, to know that Jared was with another man. I was wondering if I could stand knowing that somebody else was touching him, or kissing him, or fucking him. But to my relief, he said, "No." His voice was gentle, but firm. When I looked at him, I found his gaze level on mine. "Not really. I can't say the thought of

sex with other men has never crossed my mind. We're both male. I'm sure it's crossed your mind too."

"Not so much with another man."

He laughed. "I should have known." He looked back out across the lake. "I like what we have, Matt. I don't want to change a thing."

"Are you sure?"

His gaze met mine again, and he said, "I'm positive."

"That's the best news I've heard all day," I said sincerely, and he smiled. His dark blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail. As usual, it wasn't cooperating. Curls were sticking out all over the place. The sun on his face made the light freckles across his nose stand out. His eyes were blue and shining as he looked out across that stupid manmade lake. And right at that moment my heart seemed to swell inside of my chest, so big I wondered how it didn't come bursting out of me. We lived our life together day to day. I was always happy with him, but it was a quiet, comfortable happiness built on friendship. And then seemingly out of the blue, I would have these sudden flashes of just how much he meant to me. Angelo called them my "amazed moments". They always took my breath away.

I stepped closer to him. I pulled the rubber band out of his hair, setting all of those unruly curls free. I grabbed a handful of them and tipped his head away from me so I could kiss the side of his neck.

I didn't care at that moment who saw us. I didn't care if the whole world knew.

"I love you," I said as I kissed that soft spot just below his ear. He sighed a little, and I knew if I could see his face, I would find his eyes closed, as he tucked this moment away in his box too. He relaxed against me, and I wrapped my arms around him.

"Say it again," he whispered.

This time I looked in his eyes when I said it. "I love you."

He smiled at me. "That's the best news I've heard all day."

I kissed him, and even though we were standing on a public street, he responded enthusiastically. I loved the feel of his arms tight around me and his strong, hard body pushing against mine. But it was only a second before he playfully pushed me away. "Stop," he said teasingly. "I'm supposed to be feeling guilty."

"You're right," I conceded as I reluctantly let him go. "So if you're not jealous of Ang, and you're not jealous of Cole, what exactly *is* the problem?"

"I guess I thought that Angelo was just doing what he wanted to do, regardless of how Zach felt about it. And I assumed that Zach was only letting him because he thought it was the only way to keep him."

"So you assumed Ang was a selfish asshole and Zach was a spineless pushover?"

He grinned at me sheepishly. "When you say it that way, you make me sound like an asshole."

"Is there a way to say it so you *don't* sound like an asshole?"

He laughed, just a little. "Point taken."

"You're not giving either one of them enough credit. Our way works for us, but it's not the *only* way. I can't say I understand their arrangement. Hell, I don't even know exactly what their arrangement is. But...." I shrugged. "You and I don't have to understand it, Jared. They're happy together. That's all that matters."

He was quiet for a moment, but then he said softly, "You're right."

"I think you should apologize to Angelo."

"I know."

"Before we leave."

He rolled his eyes at me. "I know. Where do you think he went?"

"There are only two possibilities, and we're already at one of them. Where does that leave?"

"The gallery?"

"I'd bet money on it." I tugged on one of his curls. "Say it again."

He looked at me sideways, a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. "You're a manipulative bastard."

"That's not it."

Marie Sexton

He turned to me and put one arm my waist. "You're right," he said. His eyes were sparkling as he looked up at me. "You know what else?"

"What?"

"I do cheat."

"Every time?"

"Every time."

...Angelo

GUESS I should seen it comin'. Jared's had me in his sights ever since New Year's. Still, why's it gotta be now?

It's been a great mornin', mostly 'cause I had such a great night. After the club, we'd gone back to the room, and Zach took me to bed and whispered in my ear, "Anything you want, angel." And for only the second time ever, I was the one pushin' him onto his stomach, and afterward I went to sleep right there with him, not in the other bed, and that bird in my chest didn't make a peep.

Can't really explain it, but I know now we're gonna make it. I know for sure we're really meant to be. Sounds silly, but it's true. And I never felt happier.

So I'm havin' a great mornin' with Matt, and if I'm a little embarrassed 'bout that big fuckin' hickey on my neck, well, it's not like there's anything I can do 'bout it. So I put up with him teasin' me. And when Zach and Jared show up, Zach puts his arm 'round my neck and whispers in my ear, "I've been thinking about you all morning." The only reason I don't turn 'round and kiss him right then and there is 'cause I know Matt and Jared will get all flustered and embarrassed again.

Then outta the fuckin' blue Jared opens his big mouth and asks 'bout that hickey. And I know Zach's not even thinkin' when he answers him. Who would thought Jared would take him seriously anyway, even if he was tellin' the truth?

And then before I even know what the fuck's goin' on, Jared just tears into me.

His words hurt, 'cause he's sayin' exactly what I been thinkin'. But part of me is just pissed. And I'm not sure which way to go. I'm not stupid. I know if I make a move toward Jared, I'll have to deal with Matt. I

don't wanna fuck things up with him too. So I'm tryin' to just breathe deep and keep cool.

Zach's arms tighten 'round me, and his voice in my ear says, "Don't you dare listen to him, angel. He doesn't know a thing about us. I'll make sure he knows it too. But I don't want you to do anything, okay? I want you to trust me. Just walk away, and I'll be right behind you." The truth is I can't believe how relieved I am to hear him say that. I can't believe how good it feels to know I don't have to deal with Jared. 'Cause I'm just so tired of fightin'. "Can I let go?" he asks, and I nod.

His arms 'round me loosen. I stay there for a second. I want to thank him, but this isn't the time. I don't look at Jared. I can't look at Matt either. I just walk away.

Zach calls only a few minutes later, and I tell him I'm headed for the gallery. I only beat him there by a minute or two. The gallery has little benches all 'round, and I sit on one where I can see the picture I like. He comes in and sits next to me, straddling the bench so I'm between his legs.

He leans close so he can talk quiet and still have me hear him. "I'm so sorry, Ang."

That surprises me. "For what?"

"That was my fault—"

"It wasn't, Zach. No reason for you to apologize."

"It was my fault we went out. It was my fault you ended up with that hickey on your neck. It was my fault that I didn't just say it was me—"

"Stop," I say and put my fingers on his lips to make sure. "I don't want either of us to be sorry 'bout last night, Zach. I got no problems with what happened, and I feel good 'bout us. I don't want to let him ruin it."

He takes my hand then and kisses my palm, like he always does. "I love you so much, Ang."

"I know."

"We really are great together, aren't we?"

"We're absolutely perfect." He kisses me then. Really, truly kisses me, right there in that gallery. And the lady workin' there turns away in disgust, and I don't care a bit.

After a minute he gets up and starts walkin' 'round, lookin' at the other paintings. I can tell he doesn't dig 'em like I do, but that's okay. Not long after that, Jared comes in. He heads straight for me, and I can tell just by lookin' at him he's come to apologize. The truth is I'm not even mad at him anymore. I just want to go back to all of us bein' friends again. Still, Zach heads him off. They have a quiet but pretty fuckin' intense conversation for a minute, and then Zach nods, and walks out of the gallery.

Jared comes over and sits down next to me. He doesn't say anything at first. We sit there for a long time, just starin' at the painting on the wall in front of us. I wait and wait, and still he doesn't talk. I start thinkin' maybe he's waitin' for *me* to apologize. I finally look over at him, and he's just sittin' there, with a ridiculously goofy grin on his face.

"What's so funny?" I ask, and he actually jumps a little, like he was lost in thought.

"I was thinking about Cole."

"Why?" I ask, although I'm not sure I wanna know.

"I've known him for more than ten years now. Did you know that?"

"No," I say, and I'm wonderin' where the hell he's goin' with this.

"It's funny, you know? After we graduated from college, he moved back to Phoenix. I'd see him maybe three times a year, never more than one night at a time. I've only seen him twice since I met Matt, and that was almost two years ago."

"Yeah?" I'm still not seein' where this is goin'.

"Have you ever noticed that I can't even say his name without Matt practically turning green with jealousy and steam coming out of his ears?"

I have to smile at that. "I noticed."

"And he spent, what? Twenty? Maybe thirty minutes with you?"

"Wasn't exactly watchin' the clock."

"And it caused all of this trouble between us."

"Seems like it."

"It's like somehow, without even trying, he became this major player in our lives." He turns and looks at me then, with a funny smile. "Do you have any idea how happy that would make him? He'd say something like, 'I *always* make an impression, darling." And I have to laugh. I don't know him like Jared does, but I can picture him sayin' exactly that.

We sit there again for a minute, and then finally he says, "I'm sorry, Angelo. I wish I had a better way to say it, but—"

"I'm sorry too."

He looks at me in surprise. "Why?"

"Not sure," I say, 'cause it's the truth. "Guess I'm sorry I fucked things up."

"You didn't fuck anything up. I was just being an asshole."

"Only person I had sex with last night was Zach."

I can tell that surprises him, too, but then he says, "It's none of my business."

"You're right," I say, "but I guess I want you to know anyway."

He's quiet again for a minute, and I know he's tryin' to decide if he should say more, or just leave things alone. But in the end, he takes a deep breath and says, "I don't understand how you can do it." He glances at me warily. "I don't mean *you*. I mean both of you. I guess that was what did it. I kept thinking, under what circumstances would I allow Matt to fuck somebody other than me? And the only things I could come up with was, if I had no other choice."

"We're not like you," I say, and he gets a funny smile on his face.

"Yeah, that seems to be the lesson of the day."

"Brought to you by the letter Z."

He laughs. "Z for Zach?"

"No," I say. "Z for Ziggy." He looks confused at that, and I don't mind a bit. I find myself smilin' at him. "I'm starvin'," I say. "Let's go get some lunch."



One month later

IT'S Zach's birthday, and he's fuckin' hatin' it. Thirty-five. Guess that's a big deal to him. We do the dinner thing with Jared's whole family, and Matt and Jared have a moment that's so damn sweet it'll make your teeth hurt—but that's another story.

We get back home, and we do what we usually do: we turn on some music and sit in the dining room workin' on a puzzle. Zach's actin' kinda funny, glancin' at me sideways. I wait for him to say somethin', but he never does. Not 'til we're gettin' ready for bed. I just finished brushin' my teeth when he comes in the bathroom. He stands next to me, lookin' down at me, and his cheeks are turnin' red.

"What's up with you?" I ask.

He takes my hand. He leans over and kisses my palm, then puts something in my hand, looking up at me with a question in his eyes.

It's eyeliner.

I just laugh. "Is that all?" He puts his arms 'round me, pulls me close so I can feel how excited he is 'bout it. "Gonna have to go a long way to find a club," I say jokingly, but he shakes his head.

"Not like last time," he says. "Just the eyes. You can say no."

But I don't. I put that black liner all 'round my eyes, and smear some over my lids. And then I go to bed with Zach. And maybe it's him givin' to me. Or maybe it's me givin' to him. I finally realize it doesn't matter. Whatever it is, we're both happy. That's the only thing worth worryin' bout.

Like I said at the beginning, the whole thing is Jared's fault.

I almost think I should thank him for it someday.

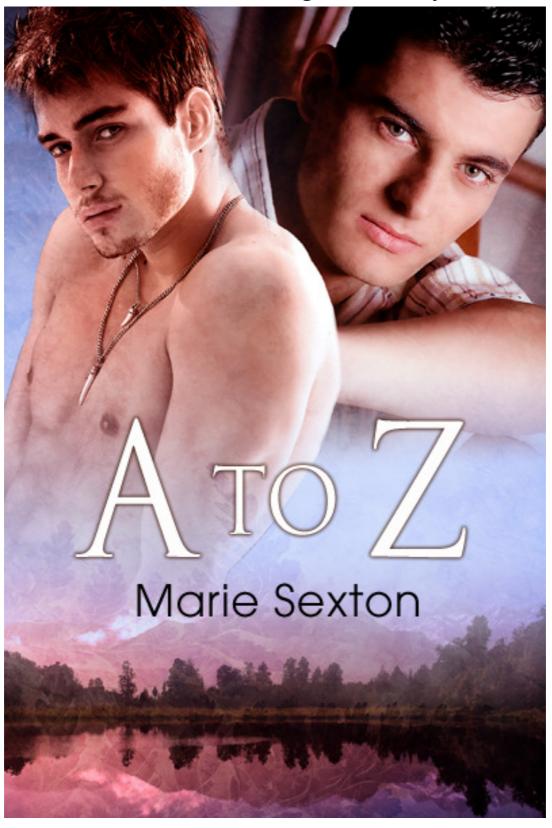
I probably should. We all know I won't.

MARIE SEXTON was always good at the technical aspects of writing but never had any ideas for stories. After graduating from Colorado State University, she worked for eleven years at an OB/GYN clinic. She quit the clinic at about the same time she started reading M/M romances. At some point in the ensuing months, the static in her head cleared, and her first story was born.

Marie lives in Colorado. She's a fan of just about anything that involves muscular young men piling on top of each other. In particular, she loves the Denver Broncos and enjoys going to the games with her husband. Matt and Jared often tag along. Marie has one daughter, two cats, and one dog, all of whom seem bent on destroying what remains of her sanity. She loves them anyway.

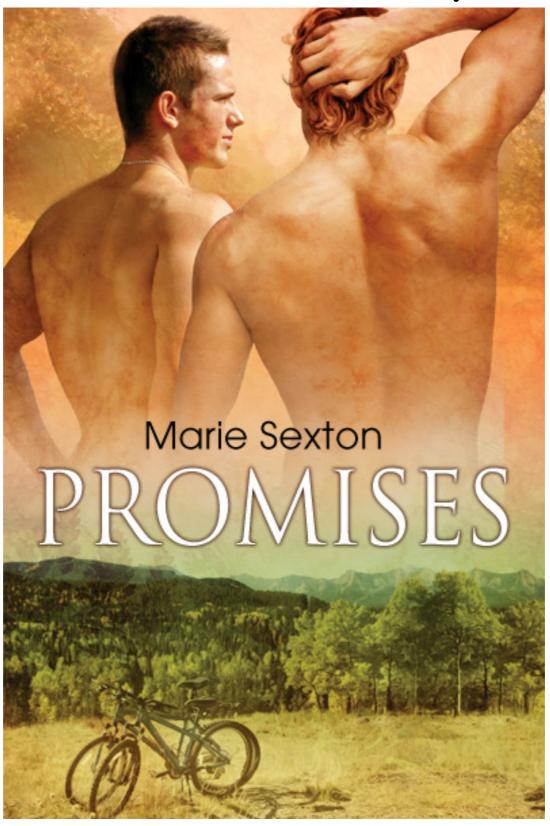
Visit Marie's web site at http://www.MarieSexton.net or find her on Facebook.

Read Zach and Angelo's story in



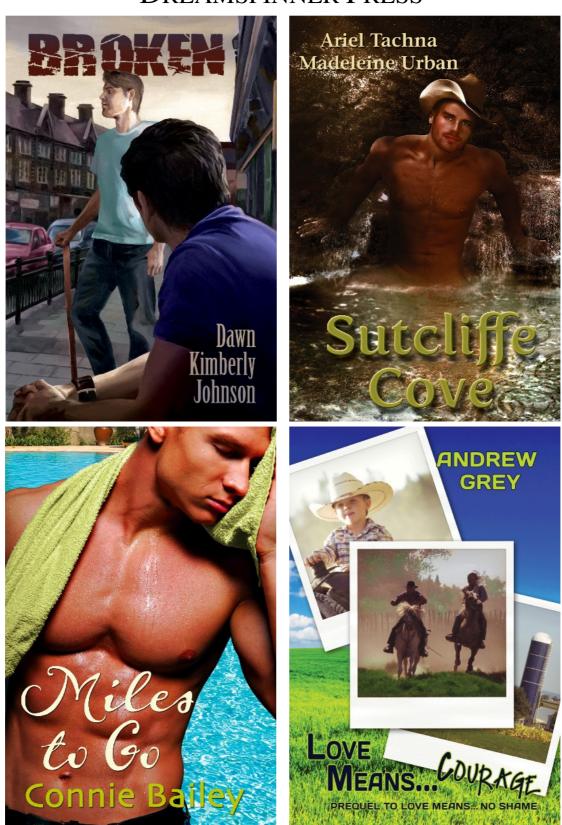
http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com

Don't miss Matt and Jared's story in

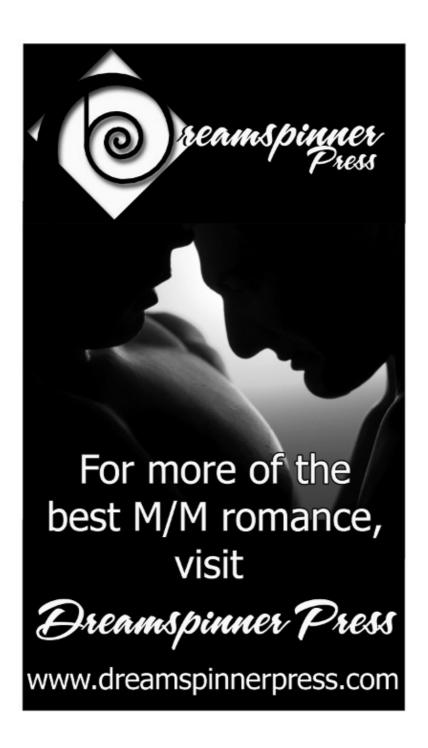


http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com

Contemporary Romance from DREAMSPINNER PRESS



http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com



The Letter Z ©Copyright Marie Sexton, 2010

Published by Dreamspinner Press 4760 Preston Road Suite 244-149 Frisco, TX 75034 http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Art by Anne Cain annecain.art@gmail.com Cover Design by Mara McKennen

This book is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via any means is illegal and a violation of International Copyright Law, subject to criminal prosecution and upon conviction, fines and/or imprisonment. This eBook cannot be legally loaned or given to others. No part of this eBook can be shared or reproduced without the express permission of the publisher. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Dreamspinner Press at: 4760 Preston Road, Suite 244-149, Frisco, TX 75034 http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/

Released in the United States of America May 2010

eBook Edition eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-460-2