



Gambling  
On *Maybe*

Fae Sutherland

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

...Zach didn't pay much attention to the double takes and outright stares shot his way as he strode confidently up the steps to the 12<sup>th</sup> Precinct police station and through the doors.

Now, where to find his knight in not-so-shiny armor? He paused in front of the first desk he saw and gave the woman behind it a beaming smile. "I'm looking for Stephen Miranda?"

The only change in her expression was the subtle lift of one brow.

Undeterred, Zach shrugged, still smiling brightly. "That's okay. I'll find him myself!" He turned to traipse off.

The desk officer must have had visions of him twirling through the station leaving glitter in his wake and who would clean that up? Because she huffed a sigh and held up a hand.

"Hold on there, twinkledee. Second floor, ask for Sergeant Miranda at the desk."

Zach's eyes widened. "Oooh, *sergeant* is it? Thank you!" He saw her roll her eyes as he hurried off, but he didn't see any point in letting other peoples' negative attitudes affect his own. So he waved cheerfully over his shoulder as he stepped onto the elevator.

It wasn't that Zach didn't know what people thought of him. It was that he didn't care. He didn't imagine they lost any sleep at night worrying what the silly little fag in the fabulous Dolce scarf thought of them. Why be something he didn't like just to make people he didn't know comfortable?

Besides, who couldn't use more glittery goodness in their lives?

*Speaking of someone in desperate need of some sparkle...* Zach spotted his Officer Hotness standing by a desk with his back to Zach and, ugh, his aura just spoke of not nearly enough shiny people sharing their happy with him. Well, that was about to change!...

ALSO BY FAE SUTHERLAND

*Letting In The Light*

AND BY FAE SUTHERLAND AND MARGUERITE LABBE

*629 Miles To Love*

*Entanglements*

*Fortunate Son*

*The Mask He Wears*

*Taking Chances*

# GAMBLING ON MAYBE

---

BY

FAE SUTHERLAND

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.AmberQuill.com>

GAMBLING ON MAYBE  
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

This book is a work of fiction.  
All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the  
author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously.  
Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales,  
or events is entirely coincidental.

Amber Quill Press, LLC  
<http://www.AmberQuill.com>

All rights reserved.  
No portion of this book may be transmitted or  
reproduced in any form, or by any means, without permission in  
writing from the publisher, with the exception of brief  
excerpts used for the purposes of review.

Copyright © 2011 by Fae Sutherland  
ISBN 978-1-60272-554-6  
Cover Art © 2011 Trace Edward Zaber

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*For all the boys who are just a little bit “too much.”*

# GAMBLING ON MAYBE

Sergeant Stephen Miranda had never seen so much glitter in one place before. The clubs all up and down the strip in downtown Phoenix were closing and the sidewalks were rapidly filling with all manner of patrons, from the slightly tipsy to the staggering drunk.

Normally, that wasn't anything to bring the Phoenix Metro police to the scene, but there'd been a report of a disturbance in front of one of the nightclubs and he'd been on his way home and nearby, so here Stephen was, playing mediator between a six-foot tall, blonde-wigged drag performer and her apparently unfaithful boyfriend.

The boyfriend was the one sporting a black eye.

Halfway through trying to figure out whether either one wanted

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

to press charges, the boyfriend said what must have been just the right thing, and Stephen shook his head with a chuckle as the two made up at light speed and left him with no reason to linger.

He turned, tucking his notepad back into his pocket, to find he had company. In the form of a small, gamin-faced young man leaning against the side of Stephen's patrol car with a smile on his pink-glossed lips that seemed far too worldly for such an otherwise innocent-looking face.

"Can I help you?" he asked, glancing around briefly before settling his gaze on the young man again. Maybe five-six if Stephen counted the platform-style boots he wore, and he couldn't be a day over twenty-one. Was he even legal for any of the clubs down here?

The imp smiled wider. "I bet you can." Slim fingers waved in the direction the couple had gone in their cab of escape. "She was my ride."

Stephen's brows lifted. "The drag queen?"

That got him a roll of heavily lined and thickly lashed brown eyes. "She's not a drag queen. She's post-op."

"Oh. Sorry about that."

A quick lift of one bare shoulder—bare because the young man's shredded black mesh top didn't seem to feel like covering him completely—or at all, really—was in its job description. "It's okay. Not like she flashed her vajay at you so you'd know."

Stephen didn't have time to recover from that shockingly bald statement before he was favored with another sparkling bright smile, with just a touch too much *something* in it.

"Anyway, she was my DD, designated driver? And you're an officer of the law, right? Do good deeds and all that?"

Stephen chuckled. "I try."



## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

“Awesome!” the young man chirped, pushing away from the side of the car. “I live in Scottsdale.” He promptly opened the passenger side door and hopped into the patrol car.

Stephen blinked, brows snapping together as he reached down to stop the door from shutting. “Excuse me, young man—”

“Zach.” A wide, cheeky grin. “But you can call me anything you want.”

“I’m going to have to ask you to get out of the car...Zach.”

Slim legs, as bare as Zach’s shoulder, folded under him on the seat, apparently making himself comfortable for the ride...the one that wasn’t happening. “Well, I liquidated all my assets into the economy—code for did too many shots of peppermint Schnapps—so unless you want me to drive...” Zach tilted his head to look up at him with a cajoling look aided by alcohol-flushed cheeks and slightly too-bright eyes. “Come on...you ran off my ride, so the least you can do is make sure I get home in one piece.”

Stephen hesitated another few seconds, brows furrowing, before he sighed. Zach must have known what that meant because he beamed. Stephen shook his head with a sigh as he shut the door and came around to the driver’s side to climb behind the wheel.

“You should not just get in people’s cars that way, you know.”

Zach laughed, leaning forward to fiddle with the touch screen of Stephen’s onboard computer. “Please, you’re a cop. And you didn’t look all disgusted by Shayna, so I figure you’re not a queer-hating cop, either. So you’re pretty much my safest bet for a ride, you know?”

Stephen glanced over at Zach, reaching out to bat his hand away from the touch screen. “Don’t touch that.” It was a sad reality that worrying about “queer-hating cops” was a legitimate concern. He sighed and started the car. “Buckle up. What’s the address?”

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

Zach rattled it off. Stephen keyed it into the GPS and pulled away from the curb. The street, which just ten minutes earlier had teemed with crowds of patrons spilling out as clubs closed for the night, was already nearly deserted. He decided immediately that he was glad the young man had insisted on a ride. It wasn't the best place to be alone at one in the morning once everything shut down. The area went from a sparkle-doused party to a somewhat seedy ghost town after hours.

"I feel like I should check your ID. Are you even legal to be in those clubs?"

Zach turned wide eyes on him, then laughed, the sound adorably amused. "I think I love you. Nope, I know I do!" He laughed again and propped one foot on the dashboard. Stephen's mouth went a little dry as Zach slowly unzipped his knee-high boot. He was about to ask what Zach thought he was doing, when the other man produced a driver's license from inside the boot—good thinking considering his outfit consisted of approximately half a yard of shredded fishnet and less than that of shiny, skin-tight pleather—and held it out.

Stephen took it, gaze flicking to watch as Zach re-zipped his boot, before glancing at the card. "Twenty-six?" He gave his passenger an incredulous look. "Is this real?"

Zach lifted one perfectly plucked brow. "Can't you tell?"

Of course he could. He handed the license back, but not before he'd scanned the rest of the information. Zachary, middle initial L, West. Age twenty-six, birthday June 4, 1984. Five-feet four-inches tall, weight one-fifty-five. Organ donor.

"What's the L stand for?"

"Lucas." Zach flashed him another of those impish grins. "Now you know all my details, what about you? Lemme see your

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

license.”

Stephen laughed. “Are you serious? No.”

“Why not?” He turned in his seat and held out one slim-fingered hand. “Lemme see.”

“Um, no.” Stephen gave him a sideways *are-you-kidding-me?* look.

“Got something to hide, officer? Not an organ donor?” He waggled his fingers impatiently, looking expectant.

For reasons beyond him, Stephen sighed and reached into his back pocket for his wallet, dropping it into Zach’s hand. “I know exactly how much cash is in there, just so you know.”

Zach laughed softly, tsking under his breath as he settled back in his seat and flipped open the wallet. “So distrustful, Officer...Miranda.” Zach’s smile was infectious. “As in Miranda rights?”

Stephen cut him a quelling glance at the stifled giggle. “Yeah, because you’re the first to make *that* joke.”

Zach ignored his testy tone, propping both feet up on the dash—which led to his already short shorts riding up to reveal even more of his slender legs—not that Stephen noticed—as he settled in to examine Stephen’s wallet. “Thirty-eight years old, born November 28, 1972. Hey, this says you legally need glasses!”

Stephen tapped just beside his eye. “Lasik. I need to get that changed, but just haven’t had time.” Why was he allowing a complete stranger to sit there peering at his private information, not to mention offering him more unprompted? He had no idea. But he didn’t snatch the wallet back.

Zach hmm-ed under his breath, brushing one fingertip across the license before abandoning it in favor of the series of plastic sleeves for pictures. Only Stephen didn’t have any pictures in

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

them.

Receipts, scraps of notes scribbled, a doctor's appointment card, but no photos. Zach turned curious brown eyes on him.

"No kids? Wife? Nieces and nephews?"

Stephen shook his head. "No. I'm an only child. Single. My parents are both dead." He had friends, fellow cops mostly, but no one who deserved a picture in his wallet.

"Mmm. That's kind of sad, Stevie."

Stephen's brows shot up. "Do not call me Stevie. My name is Stephen, but you can call me Officer Miranda."

Zach just smiled and handed him back his wallet. "Stevie suits you better." Before Stephen could protest, Zach gestured toward the road. "Next exit. My apartment's two blocks down on the left. Palm Village." He snorted and turned laughing eyes on Stephen. "Why they call it that, I dunno. This is the desert; palm trees don't belong here."

And yet they were everywhere. It was one of the things Stephen had found strange about Phoenix when he'd first relocated five years earlier. Why the hell were there so many palm trees in the middle of the desert?

He tucked his wallet back into his pocket as he exited the freeway and followed Zach's directions into one of the many huge, fairly impersonal apartment mega-complexes that flourished in the Phoenix metro area. For reasons he didn't care to examine, instead of pulling in and just letting Zach out and being done with this strange morning, he parked and shut off the car.

"I'll walk you up. It's really late."

Zach smiled, again a little knowingly, as he climbed out and peered at Stephen across the roof of the patrol car. "And this is a safe neighborhood."

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

Stephen shrugged. "Still."

"Mm-hmm. Okay. C'mon, Officer Gallant."

Stephen glanced around as he followed Zach past the outer edge buildings and along the sidewalk paths to one of the interior sections of the complex. Zach slowed and gestured.

"That's me...third floor. You can just leave me here," he said, turning to glance up at Stephen.

He nodded, fiddling with his keys. What was he doing? "Alright then. Well, have a good night, and next time save aside some of your Schnapps money to pay for a cab home, okay?"

Zach nodded, then, unexpectedly, reached up and fisted his small hands in Stephen's shirt, tugging him down to plant a kiss right on his mouth. Short, firm, brief, still it burned an impression into him and before he could figure out what had just happened or how to respond, Zach was flashing him a sparkling smile and waving before darting up the stairs.

It wasn't until Stephen was merging back onto the freeway that he realized Zach had said, "See you later!" and not "Goodbye."

*Oh, boy.*

\* \* \*

Zach didn't pay much attention to the double takes and outright stares shot his way as he strode confidently up the steps to the 12<sup>th</sup> Precinct police station and through the doors. In one hand was a bright pink plastic container and in the other was his very favorite Balenciaga satchel in signature sea foam green. Okay, so not only was it his favorite, it was also his only. It'd cost him nearly two months rent, but oh so worth it.

Now, where to find his knight in not-so-shiny armor? He

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

paused in front of the first desk he saw and gave the woman behind it a beaming smile. "I'm looking for Stephen Miranda?"

The only change in her expression was the subtle lift of one brow.

Undeterred, Zach shrugged, still smiling brightly. "That's okay. I'll find him myself!" He turned to traipse off.

The desk officer must have had visions of him twirling through the station leaving glitter in his wake and who would clean that up? Because she huffed a sigh and held up a hand.

"Hold on there, twinkleddee. Second floor, ask for Sergeant Miranda at the desk."

Zach's eyes widened. "Oooh, *sergeant* is it? Thank you!" He saw her roll her eyes as he hurried off, but he didn't see any point in letting other peoples' negative attitudes affect his own. So he waved cheerfully over his shoulder as he stepped onto the elevator.

It wasn't that Zach didn't know what people thought of him. It was that he didn't care. He didn't imagine they lost any sleep at night worrying what the silly little fag in the fabulous Dolce scarf thought of them. Why be something he didn't like just to make people he didn't know comfortable?

Besides, who couldn't use more glittery goodness in their lives?

*Speaking of someone in desperate need of some sparkle...* Zach spotted his Officer Hotness standing by a desk with his back to Zach and, ugh, his aura just spoke of not nearly enough shiny people sharing their happy with him. Well, that was about to change!

Zach had been thinking about Stevie, aka Officer Hotness, ever since he'd dropped him off and the poor guy had all but begged to be brought upstairs and let out of his sad little box. Zach had

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

almost done just that, but something had stopped him. If he knew anything, it was when to listen to his instinct, or the Universe, or whatever you wanted to call it. And last night his Universe had told him to wait.

Not a word he was good with.

But, nonetheless, he'd let Officer Hotness leave, looking for all the world like a stunned, disappointed, yet sort of ridiculously sexy puppy who'd just had a bone taken away from him. Zach stifled a giggle. *Bone.*

He reached the desk, hopping up onto it and reaching out to tap him on the shoulder with one finger. "Officer, I'd like to report a crime."

Stevie turned, his green eyes widening in surprise. Zach beamed, tossing little waves of greeting to the other officers, who were all looking at him sort of like he might be a bomb that needed a squad or something.

"What are you...?"

Zach set his Balenciaga on the desk beside him and held up the pink container. "This is evidence." He urged Stevie to take it, nodding. "Be careful; it's delicious."

Heavy, black brows knit. The man had some serious frown wrinkles forming. "It's...what?"

"Delicious!" Zach grinned and peeled off the cover, gesturing. "I hope I made enough for everyone."

Stevie glanced into the container, where two dozen gorgeous, perfectly made, obscenely fattening doughnuts sat in neat rows.

"You made these? *You* did?"

Zach laughed and shrugged one shoulder. "Okay, so maybe that was a little fib. I bought them, though. And the container's mine! Plus I made it all the way over here still in time for

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

breakfast!”

“It’s almost noon.”

Zach took the container and set it on the desk. “Exactly! Here, guys, help yourselves.” He gave the box a little push in the direction of the other officers, who were eyeing it like it was a wee baby lamb in the midst of a ravenous wolf pack. He turned back to Stevie and smiled. “Hi.”

Instead of a smile and a “hi” in return, Stevie caught his wrist, tugged him down off the desk and began pulling him toward an office a few yards away. He frowned, glancing back over his shoulder. “But...my bag...” Stevie gave him an arch look, and Zach sent a sheepish one back. “Well, it *is* a room full of policemen, so I suppose it’ll be fine.”

The office door shut behind them, a little harder than necessary. Zach smiled and looked around. “Is this your office?”

“Yes. What are you doing here?”

Zach wandered over to the bookshelf, hoping to find some pictures in frames, a few fiction novels, something to tell him what kind of life his officer led outside work, but there was nothing personal. He spotted police manuals, awards for service and bravery, but nothing to give any clue about who Stevie was.

He glanced back over his shoulder. “I brought you doughnuts. With a ‘gh’ because the Dunkin’ way is just bad grammar.”

Stevie shook his head, like he was dizzy. If this were a cartoon, he’d have stars around his head or something. “Well, I mean I see that, but...why?”

Zach turned to face him. “You don’t know why?”

Stevie shrugged. “Not really.”

“Aww, that’s so sad, Stevie. I brought them to say thank you and because I wanted to see you again.” He plopped down in the



## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

chair, crossing his legs. “I like you.” His smile was a little bit sly. “And I know you like me.”

Stevie didn’t try to deny it, but the way his gaze flicked to the window and the other officers outside it, told Zach that he was most definitely not out of the proverbial closet. He hadn’t expected him to be. He stifled a twinge of pity. Stevie didn’t need his pity. The poor man needed his help.

Not to mention his kisses. Lots of kisses.

“You can’t be here. I’m sorry. It was very nice of you to think of me and all, but...”

Zach stood up, moving closer. He told himself not to be hurt by the way Stevie took a step back. Zach might never have been anywhere near the closet—he’d always been this gay, for reals—but he could sympathize with the fear that kept someone like Stevie there.

“It’s okay, Stevie. Come over when you finish your...rounds? Beat? Well, whatever, when you get done. Mm-kay?”

Stevie frowned and shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Nonsense! It’s one of my better ones. Trust me.” Zach beamed and resisted the urge to kiss him. “You’ll come by. Be hungry. I’ll order something fabulous and pretend I cooked it.” He laughed and tugged open the door, then strolled for the elevators on the opposite side.

He paused to grab his bag off the desk now occupied by a rotund, middle-aged man. “Thanks for watching it for me, gorgeous,” he murmured with a wink. The man choked and his ears went red as Zach slid the bag over his arm and headed for the door with every eye in the room on him as he did.

Just the way he liked it.

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

\* \* \*

It was around seven that night when he got a phone call from Officer Hotness—he didn't ask how Stevie had gotten his phone number since the man had major resources at his disposal—telling him he didn't get off until ten, and saying he understood if Zach wanted him to forget coming over.

As if! With his propensity for long, late nights and sleeping until noon, ten P.M. was pretty much normal dinnertime anyway. Which Zach cheerfully told his officer. He had a feeling Stevie had been equal parts disappointed he hadn't gotten out of it, and just as deep down glad he could still come over.

Stevie was a strange sort of animal, kind of skittish, primed to bolt at the first rustle in the bushes. Zach was going to have to approach him differently than he did his usual types.

All the sparkle and confidence, less of the slutty and trashy, he thought.

So, new approach in mind, he discarded the whorehouse version of a kimono he'd considered wearing—sort of *Big Trouble In Little China* meets *To Wong Foo*—and instead settled on a pair of minty green workout shorts with “yum” written across the butt in pink, and the matching hoodie, which was pink with minty green accents. He thought he looked like an adorable snow cone, and one could never go wrong with a descrip like that!

Bare feet and tousled brown hair looking vaguely like he'd just been *actually* working out and he was ready to knock Officer Hotness's uniform pants off. Or strip them off, whichever was easier in the end.

So when ten o'clock arrived with no knock at the door, Zach was a little disappointed, but told himself cops got busy and maybe

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

there'd been an emergency. He waited, fretting as the delivery Italian he'd ordered started to get cold.

Eleven o'clock...still no Stevie.

Eleven-thirty...Zach shut off the oven and put the food in the fridge.

Midnight...he wasn't coming.

Zach plucked at the fringed edge of one of his sofa throw cushions, the vibrant grape satin gleaming in the faint lamplight. This was unexpected. Zach had been prepared for lots of things, but Stevie just plain not showing up wasn't one of them.

He considered calling him, then realized he only had his number at the station, and he doubted Stevie was still there. He'd probably gone home, deciding he'd had enough of the strange little queer boy.

Zach sighed, reaching over to switch off the end table lamp. His super comfy futon got pulled flat into his bed and he opened the compartment underneath to pull out his fluffy comforter and pillows. This called for the big pity party guns. He was going to sulk for the rest of the night, watch the two episodes of *Project Runway* he had on his DVR and maybe make himself an appletini or two while he watched. Then in the morning he'd forget all about the closeted cop, who probably wasn't thinking about him at all.

Zach settled down on his futon, sprawled on his tummy, wrapped up in his electric blue comforter, with an appletini on the end table beside him. He'd just reached for the remote when he heard something outside. Footsteps or...like shuffling feet or something.

He eased off the futon, comforter still wrapped around him, and slinked toward the door, listening. Sure, he'd told Stevie last night this was a safe neighborhood, but that didn't mean people still

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

didn't try to break into people's houses. He glanced around, wondering what he could use for a weapon in case it *was* a burglar, then jumped with a squeak at the light knock on his door.

*A burglar who knocked?*

Zach tiptoed over to the door and stretched up to peek through the peephole.

*Oh!*

He spun, heart racing. He was so not prepared for this anymore. The comforter got tossed onto the futon, no help for it since he didn't have time to hide it all away. He raked his hands through his hair, mussing it and wishing for a mirror. The worst part was he'd already changed out of his super-cute outfit and into his pajamas, which consisted of blue patterned satin brocade pajama pants and a plain white t-shirt with "OMGWTF?" across the chest.

Not his best look.

Well...maybe Stevie would think it was cute. Casual. Real. Oh, God, he hoped so.

Turning back to the door, Zach faked a yawn as he opened it, giving his best surprised, oh-my-goodness-what-is-this?" gaze, blinking up at a very sheepish, still oh-so-very-adorably-sexy Stevie.

"Hey," he murmured, leaning against the door with a little smile. "What are you doing here?" Another fake yawn. *Why no, Mr. Officer Hotness, I did not stay up waiting for you, see? I totes went to bed, unconcerned about your no-show. So there.*

\* \* \*

Stephen could tell right away Zach hadn't *actually* been asleep, or even close to it. He'd catalogued enough crime scenes to notice

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

small details like the remote and the appletini on the end table, as well as the lack of sleepiness in Zach's eyes and not so much as a pillow crease on his cheeks.

Still, he felt bad and couldn't blame the guy for pretending he hadn't been awake when Stephen had almost stood him up. Did that make this a date? Oh, God, what was he even doing?

"I'd say I got held up at work, which is sort of true, but it'd mostly be a lie. I stayed late on purpose."

Zach's brows lifted and he smiled a bit. "I admire your honesty. Most guys would make excuses. *Not* that I get stood up often, just so you know."

Stephen shook his head. "No, I bet you don't. I'm a special breed of stupid, I know."

The almost smile became a full smile and damned if Zach didn't have beaming down to an art form. How did he even maintain such wattage?

"Well, since you're aware of your problem and all, I should be supportive, right? My Officer Hotness, recovering dumbass." Zach stepped back a bit and waved him inside. "Is there a twelve step program for that? Shall I learn the daily affirmations?"

Stephen chuckled as Zach shut the door behind him. "You're quick, aren't you? Always with the perfect comeback, huh?"

Zach grinned, tilting his head with a slight shrug. "I try. Want a drink?"

Stephen shook his head. "No, thanks, I don't drink."

Zach looked somewhat surprised, then shrugged and plopped down cross-legged on the futon. "Well, come, sit. Hungry? I could reheat dinner..."

Stephen winced, sitting down on the futon. The apartment was very much how he'd expected it. Smaller, maybe, because he

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

hadn't expected a studio. But colorful. White walls, white carpet, and white furniture, but everywhere were vivid splashes of color from lamps to art to rugs and pillows.

"I'm sorry. You didn't actually cook, did you? Tell me you didn't so I don't kick my own ass even more."

Zach laughed and shook his head. "God, no. It's one thing I have in common with Carrie Bradshaw. I keep sweaters in my oven."

He didn't know who Carrie Bradshaw was or why one would keep sweaters in their oven, but Stephen was glad Zach hadn't gone *way* out of his way for him.

"So...why didn't you want to come?"

Zach's question, blunt and to the point, caught him off guard. The young man had a knack for it. Stephen wondered if Zach even knew how to bite his tongue on what he was thinking.

Well, maybe it wouldn't hurt to be a little more honest himself. *So...* "It wasn't as though I didn't want to."

Zach's smile was back to knowing. "It was because you did. I see."

Stephen wondered, but probably Zachary Middle-initial-L-for-Lucas West *could* see right through him. "What do you see?" he blurted, curious. Morbidly curious, more like.

"Men who want to be straight are afraid of me as much as—sometimes more than—men who are straight. I know you're not the latter, Stevie, right? So are you the former? Because if so, maybe you shouldn't be here with me...it can't look good for you if anyone found out, right?"

Zach was right. It wouldn't look good. He'd spent a lot of years being just one of the guys. Dating a woman here and there and developing a reputation as a confirmed bachelor so no one asked

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

anymore why he wasn't married, why he didn't settle down. Instead, they ribbed him and joked and clapped him on the back like it was some kind of accomplishment.

So why was he here now, sitting in this very flamboyant apartment with this very flamboyant young man who could bring the tenuous structure of his identity down around his ears with one flutter of his mascaraed lashes?

"You said you knew I liked you. You were right. Are right." Stephen let his gaze wander where it wanted to, landing, not surprisingly, on Zach's mouth. Soft, pink, lush...it was a mouth a man shouldn't let himself taste. Because he just knew it was sweet and willing and giving, and he'd be addicted with the very first exposure. Like some kind of candy drug.

Zach didn't say anything at first. The light in the apartment was dim, just a small lamp beside the futon, but it was enough to see the play of expressions across his face. Zach was so expressive. He didn't hide anything he felt or thought.

*What must it be like to live that way? So free?*

Then Zach's expression changed, and he gave Stephen one of those knowing smiles. Without a word, Zach moved, sliding over to straddle Stephen's thighs, slim arms winding around his neck. Big brown eyes locked on his, as if waiting to see if Stephen was going to toss him off and bolt, or stay and see where this led.

Like he didn't know where it was going to lead. And, oh, he wanted to go there so much he could almost taste it.

Before he even finished the thought, Zach must have read his mind because the next instant they were kissing, with a warm mouth against his own, a soft tongue teasing his lips. For a long second, Stephen froze. There was no turning back after this. This was ground zero, so to speak. Point of no return.

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

His hands made the decision for him, sliding up Zach's slim back, one cupping the nape of his neck, the other sliding back down to splay at his waist, holding him close as, with more confidence than he truly felt, he kissed the most beautiful young man he'd ever known.

It was like someone had lifted the gate and all those things Stephen had been holding back, hiding, refusing to acknowledge, came rushing out in a tumble. Passion, desire, need...all spilling from him, and Zach held on tight, seeming to tell him silently it was okay to let go, to let himself feel it all.

With a groan, Stephen turned, stretching Zach out beneath him and sliding his hands down, then back up his sides, this time under the young man's T-shirt, pushing it up as he went. The kiss broke long enough to remove the garment, and Stephen's breath caught, staring down at him.

His skin was smooth and pale, his waist narrow, the belly button pierced. The little blue jewel nestled in the center called to him, and Stephen grinned, sliding down to press his open mouth there.

Zach laughed, squirming a bit under him. "Careful, I'm ticklish!"

Stephen chuckled. It was tempting to linger and torment him with the new knowledge, but now that he had Zach spread out under him, there was more he wanted than just making him laugh.

He wanted to make him wild.

\* \* \*

Zach's heart was pounding. And Stevie hadn't touched him yet, not in any real way. What kind of madness was it going to be when



## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

his adorable police officer shed his hesitancy and *really* touched him? It made Zach faint just thinking about it.

He wanted to hurry him, to arch and grab his hands and show him where he wanted them most. But he didn't. He forced himself to relax and let Stevie take the lead. He wanted to know just what would happen when all hell broke loose and this man lost that tight control.

"I'm not going to break, Stevie...you can touch me." Hey, no one said he couldn't encourage.

Stevie smiled and nodded. "I know. I just...looking at you is good, too." His green eyes were amused when they met Zach's. "You know damn well how pretty you are."

Zach grinned, lifting one shoulder. "Maybe."

Stevie laughed out loud, shaking his head. "Maybe, my ass."

Zach's hands slid down to cup said ass through Stevie's jeans and squeezed with a little moan of appreciation. "And such a nice ass, too."

Then they were kissing again, and Zach wound his arms around Stevie's shoulders, one leg coming up to rub against his hip. Too many clothes. They were both wearing way too many clothes. But he wasn't willing to stop kissing him long enough to say so, so he did it silently instead, hands sliding down to tug Stevie's shirt free of the waistband of his pants, impatient to see him, touch him, feel his warmth.

Thankfully, Stevie got the message fast, and the next thing Zach knew, hands were everywhere, both of theirs, tugging at clothes, fumbling with buttons and zippers, fabric bunching around thighs and finally being kicked off until at last they were both naked.

And, oh, it felt good. Stevie was no fey thing, oh no. He was

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

strong and...well, the word burly came to mind. Broad shoulders and a barrel chest dusted with hair, strong stomach and long, thick, muscular thighs.

Zach let his hands wander and soon discovered Stevie's legs weren't the only things that were thick.

Stevie let out a choked sound, the kiss breaking, as Zach closed his fingers around the hard length of his cock.

"Sweet Christ, Zach!" Stevie sounded downright stunned. It was so cute.

Zach gave him an impish grin and a tight stroke. "You're going to have to get over this whole being shocked by everything I do thing, Stevie."

Stevie laughed, shaking his head. "I don't think that's possible. Bold as fucking brass, aren't you?"

"Mmm, fucking. Sounds perfect. Let's do that, hmm?" Zach lifted his brows with a light laugh and slid down under Stevie, shimmying his way until he was face to...well, cock with what he wanted most right then. Before Stevie could protest or act all scandalized again, Zach took the words, and the breath, right out of him by closing his lips around the head of Stevie's cock and sucking him deep.

Well...maybe not all the words. Stevie had plenty of cuss words left in him, as he exhibited while Zach worked every single trick he knew on the other man's gorgeous cock and blew Officer Hotness's mind.

He slid his hand up to Stevie's chest, giving him a push and, like he had no bones save for one, Stevie rolled onto his back. Zach followed, settling between his legs and able to get some momentum on Stevie's cock.

One hand wrapped around the base, stroking as he sucked; the

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

other slid down and under to feather his fingers over the other man's balls. Just to get a feel for what Stevie liked. Some liked it rough, but some would toss you across the room if you tried to give their berries a yank.

By the way Stevie jolted and then sort of melted into the mattress, Zach got the feeling gentle was the way to go. For such a big guy, Officer Hotness was a big softy. Zach smiled inwardly and pulled off to give the head of Stevie's cock a kiss.

"Stay right here," he murmured.

Stevie blinked, pushing up onto his elbows with a furrowed brow. "Where are you going?"

Zach stretched up to brush a kiss across his mouth before standing. "I want more than oral, Officer Hotness, and I'm a safety boy."

Understanding lit in Stevie's eyes, and Zach gave him a wink before darting to the bathroom to grab a condom out of the medicine cabinet. After a moment's pause he grabbed another, just in case, and a bottle of lube.

He was back before Stevie could have second thoughts and climbed over him, catlike, a slinky grin on his lips.

"Now comes the good stuff," he promised.

Stevie laughed. "That wasn't the good stuff?" he joked, voice breathless.

"Oh, no. That was good, but this... You ain't seen nothin' yet, honey."

Zach dropped the condoms and lube onto the futon and leaned down, chest against Stevie's, thighs straddling his stomach. He was so big, it made Zach all quivery inside. "Now, I'm guessing I'm not the first lucky boy you've ever fucked...you know how to do this, yeah?"

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

Stevie gave him an arched brow, and Zach laughed.

“Thank God. I was worried you might be *too* far in the closet.”

“Not quite, brat.” As if the slight to his prowess had spurred something in him, a light burned in his green eyes and made Zach shiver. The next thing he knew, Stevie had tossed him to his back and stretched his big, powerful body over Zach.

*Oh, my.*

“I know exactly what to do with a boy like you, Zachary,” he rumbled out, one hand sliding down the outside of Zach’s thigh and then hitching it high against his hip.

Zach moaned, arching, and found his mouth caught in a tangled, wet, wicked kiss that stole his breath and his senses. More than happy to put himself in this man’s hands, Zach wrapped himself around Stevie as best he could and held on for what was promising to be a hell of a ride.

\* \* \*

Stephen wasn’t thinking about being uncertain or what the consequences would be anymore. All he was thinking about was showing the gorgeous man beneath him that he damn well *did* know what he was doing. Zach was going to be lucky to be able to move by the time Stephen was done with him.

He heard the faint, whispered thought saying being done with Zach was maybe going to be impossible, but ignored it and focused on the sweet pleasure of his mouth, the willing, eager movement of his lithe body.

Blood roared through his veins with every sound from deep in Zach’s throat. Low moans, ragged whimpers, sharp gasps filled the air as Stephen touched, stroked and explored to his heart’s content.

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

When he broke the kiss, it was to slide his mouth down Zach's neck, the vibration of his sounds against his lips sending shivers through Stephen.

It'd been too long since he'd felt this way with anyone. He wasn't even sure he ever had. Slightly out of control, a little bit over the edge... Zach sent his willpower wobbling and made him forget who he was in favor of who he wanted to be.

He wanted to be free, like Zach. Able to touch and taste, not just the man beneath him, but the world around him. Stephen didn't even know what it felt like anymore—hadn't for years—and here was this wild creature offering him the chance to experience it all right there in his arms. It was too enticing an offer to refuse, which was why Stephen had showed up when he'd intended to ignore the offer.

When it came down to it, he hadn't been any more able to turn Zach down than he would have been able to turn down the chance to draw another breath.

There were no words, but none were needed as Stephen slid farther down, finding tightened nipples and the tender, sensitive flesh drawn across Zach's ribs. He traced his tongue over every ridge, every sloping plane, every sharp curve and, just like when he got on his motorcycle and took to the desert highway on the weekends, it was an exhilarating ride, leaving him breathless and wishing for more.

Except this time he could have more. He could taste the offer of it, whatever he wanted, however much he wanted. Zach was offering it all and damned if Stephen could refuse.

After a slick of lube, fumbling fingers were brushed aside by slim, expert ones guiding the condom into place without hesitation. One finger, two, like a wicked dance with each step synchronized

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

as Zach urged him on with frantic moans and hands stronger than they looked gripping him, pulling him closer.

*More, more, more.* Zach's body begged, and Stephen answered the silent pleading with a firm, deep thrust that sank him right into fucking heaven.

It was madness, wicked hot, liquid madness, and their lips met as they moved together. Hard thrusts, arching hips, teeth scraping lips and jaw and neck. He growled, and Zach answered with a throaty laugh, soft and dangerous in its seduction. Stephen could feel himself winding around one little finger and every movement drew him tighter, firmer, into Zach's grasp.

Fucking hell if he cared right then.

His throat was dry, their bodies slicked with sweat despite the faint, distant hum of the air conditioning, the cool air blasting over them, but doing nothing to lessen the overwhelming heat being generated.

Over and over, harder and harder. Zach shoved at his shoulders and the world shifted and Zach rode him like he was a goddamn trick pony. Dark eyes wild, pale cheeks flushed, small hands splayed on Stephen's chest as he worked his hips hard and fast, gazes locked.

Stephen's hands gripped Zach's hips, not to guide—God, the man didn't need help there—but just to touch, to hold, more to brace himself for what was coming than anything else.

What was coming was a torrential whirlwind, whipping closer and closer, with every sultry roll of narrow hips, every flick of a pretty, pink tongue across parted, gasping lips. Stephen couldn't look away and welcomed the oblivion hovering just out of reach.

And then it wasn't out of reach; it was right there and he managed somehow to have the presence of mind to reach down

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

and stroke Zach with him, biting back the completion that rattled his cage, unwilling to go there alone, by God.

He shouldn't have worried. Zach's eyes widened and went more than a little hazy at almost the same instant Stephen realized he couldn't stop the end anymore than he could have stopped the beginning. Like it was meant to happen and he was just a puppet in a play. Who held the strings, he didn't know, and in that moment didn't care.

His shout mingled with Zach's sharp cry, both bucking, and he dragged the young man down to claim his lips in the last seconds, as the waves crashed and cocks jerked and the scent of sex filled the air so Stephen thought he would never get the smell out of his mind. Permeating. Submerging. Covering him in Zach. And damn it was beautiful.

Long moments passed with the silence filled only with panting breaths and lingering moans, the wildness of the past moments gone and leaving only aching muscles and satisfyingly sticky skin.

"Holy shit."

Stephen's lips twitched at the hoarse, breathless comment.

"You weren't kidding."

He laughed then, turning his face to brush his lips against Zach's sweat-damp temple. "Told you."

"Mmm," Zach mumbled, nuzzling into Stephen's neck. "Mental note to challenge your manhood more often. Like...in ten minutes or so. Just let me catch my breath."

Stephen let out a rough, primitive sound, rolling to pin the other man beneath him and give his jaw a stinging bite. "I prefer you breathless," he whispered...and they put the second condom to very good use.

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

\* \* \*

“Oh, no...”

Beside him, Zach’s best friend Jordy looked up from his phone with a confused expression. “What?”

Zach glanced behind him, and Jordy turned to peer out the back windshield, wincing at the sight of lights flashing.

“Uh-oh...” Zach bit his lip as he pulled his car, an adorable little black and blue Cooper Mini, over to the side of the road, sighing. “Don’t say anything, Jordy. You always make it worse.”

Jordy laughed. “Like the time I promised the cop we definitely, for sure did *not* have Ecstasy hidden in the dash?”

“Yes, just like that, bitch. Now shush!” Had he been speeding? It was possible. Zach tended to take road signs, whatever they were, as suggestions more than actual rules. Nine times out of ten, though, he could talk his way out of it.

“Hey, just mention Officer Hotness! Isn’t there some kind of, like, code where cops don’t give tickets to other cops’ wives or something? Do booty calls count?” Jordy snickered at Zach’s hushing look.

He rolled the window down as the officer approached, a woman, which boded well for him. Women liked him; he was cute and non-threatening, like an animated gazelle. Zach turned a beaming smile on her as she came abreast of the driver’s side window.

“Good afternoon, officer!” he said cheerfully, tilting his head. “Is there a problem?” He made his eyes as wide as he could, his very best why-whatever-could-be-the-matter? look.

The only change in her expression was the subtle lift of one brow.



## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

*Oh, dear. It's her. From the front desk the other day. She hadn't seemed to like him at all. Crapdoodle.*

The officer pushed her sunglasses up onto her head and flipped open the little pad in her hand. "License, registration and proof of insurance, please."

Zach turned to open the glove box, giving Jordy a wide-eyed uh-oh look before turning back and handing her the papers and his license. The silence was heavy as she scribbled on her notepad, and Zach finally cleared his throat.

"I remember you!" he chirped, hoping his cheer didn't sound too forced. "You were at the front desk the other day at the police station. I'd stopped by to visit my friend, Stephen Miranda? *Sergeant* Stephen Miranda?" Okay, so he gave the title a bit of emphasis. *It can't hurt to jog her memory, right?*

Except when she lifted her gaze from the notepad to look at him, her expression was icy.

*Oh, boy. Bad idea, maybe.*

"Yes, I remember you."

"Oh. Okay. Well, hello again..." He pressed his lips together and glanced over at Jordy, who was trying his best not to laugh. So much for the friendly approach. Looked like this was one ticket he was going to have to pay.

"You were going sixty in a forty-five, sir, and I'm going to have to ticket you for speeding and reckless driving."

"Reckless driving?"

She smirked a little as she continued filling out the ticket. "Fifteen miles an hour over the speed limit in a residential area constitutes an additional fine for reckless driving."

Zach slumped. *Well, jeez.* Like anyone knew that little rule but cops.

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

She leaned over to hand him back his information, gaze flicking to Jordy, then back to him. "I'd like you to step out of the car, please."

Zach's eyes widened and he straightened, glancing worriedly at Jordy, then the officer. "I'm...um...what? Why?"

She didn't answer, just opened the door and gestured him to get out.

Zach's heart pounded, wondering what on earth was going on, but obeyed, sliding out of the car after shutting it off. His hands shook a little, not because he thought he'd done anything so wrong he could get arrested or something, but, well...it was nerve-racking anyway!

"Am I allowed to ask what's going on?" It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if he could get his Miranda, but he didn't think now was the time for a joke, however well timed.

The officer stopped at the back of his car and pulled off the ticket she'd filled out, handing it to him. "I want to tell you that I'm sure you're a nice kid and everything, but Sergeant Miranda doesn't need any hiccups right now. He's up for promotion and looking to retire in another fifteen years or so. He's a career cop, or plans to be."

Zach blinked, stomach dropping a bit. "What do you mean...hiccups?"

She dropped her sunglasses back onto her nose, tucking her ticket pad back into her pocket. "Like the brass finding out anything...unsavory about him. Controversial. If you give a damn about him, leave him alone. Just a bit of advice, from one friend of his to another."

Then she turned and walked back to her car, leaving Zach standing there with his palms sweaty, heart pounding and eyes

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

burning. After a moment, he gathered himself enough to trust he wouldn't burst into tears the minute he got back into the car and Jordy asked what happened.

Sliding back behind the wheel, he put on his over-sized Prada sunglasses with shaky hands and didn't say a word. Jordy didn't either, and Zach would have thought it very strange if his friend hadn't reached over and squeezed his hand. Jordy had heard. Zach's throat tightened and he shook his head with a shrug.

"Not right now."

Jordy nodded. "Okay. Shopping?" It was their go-to therapy.

"Abso-fucking-lutely."

\* \* \*

"Hey, this is Zach. You know what to do!"

Stephen frowned as he hung up, yet again, on Zach's cheerful voicemail message. Stephen had already left three messages, but over the last couple of days Zach hadn't returned any of them.

He was beginning to think he was being given the brush-off.

Okay, more than "beginning to think," he *did* think it. Common sense told him. At first, he'd thought maybe something had happened, but he was a police officer. He had access to every crime in the city, for God's sake. Zach was fine; he just wasn't answering and wasn't calling back.

Which left Stephen with brush-off as the logical conclusion.

Only it wasn't exactly logical. Three nights ago, they'd spent hours together, not just fucking, but touching and kissing and talking and cramming into Zach's tiny shower together to make out some more under the pretense of getting cleaned up the next morning.

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

And it'd been good. Really good. It'd felt like... Well, it'd felt like a beginning, not an end. He'd had one-night stands, plenty of them, and he knew what they felt like when they were over. Slightly awkward, both of you trying not to say you'd call because you knew you wouldn't. Followed by a sense of relief when you got out the door without anyone getting hurt or getting weird.

This hadn't felt anything like that. They'd had breakfast—Cocoa Puffs and soy milk—and made out at the door as long as they could without one or both of them being late for work.

Zach had given him a beaming smile and a chipper wink and told him he'd better call or he'd be showing up with breakfast for the boys again.

Never once had Stephen gotten the impression he'd only been saying it not to hurt his feelings and it hadn't seemed insincere in any way. So why was Zach avoiding him now? Was Stephen's dating sense so off-kilter he couldn't even recognize when a pretty boy lied to him to spare his pride?

No, he didn't think so. Not even a little.

So that left him with—what to do now? Let it lie and go back to where he'd been a few days ago? Surely it wouldn't be too hard. How much of an impact could one man make in such a short amount of time?

Stephen already knew the answer, though. A big one. Maybe it was just the new bloom of infatuation, maybe not, but Zach was all Stephen could think about. He wasn't stupid. He didn't think he was in love or anything, but, you know, maybe it was a possibility. Maybe there was something there that could become something real, something life changing. *Maybe.*

Was he willing to gamble on maybe? He'd never been a gambling man. But damn it, hadn't he, the other night with Zach,

## GAMBLING ON MAYBE

thought about how he wished he could be like Zach, could really live and taste life and the world?

*What would Zach do?*

He was halfway to the door before he finished asking himself the question.

\* \* \*

It was a sad day when even the new fall collections coming into the boutique where Zach worked couldn't get him excited. He'd had half a dozen people already ask if he was sick, if maybe he needed to go home. He couldn't blame people; his co-workers and regular customers had to be looking for the pod right about now with how off he was acting.

Stevie had stopped leaving messages. He hadn't stopped calling completely, and Zach's heart tripped every time he saw the precinct number come up on his phone, right before he hit ignore. He'd stop calling. Eventually.

Zach wasn't even trying to fool himself into thinking he was looking forward to that day.

Jordy had asked him the night before, while watching *Steel Magnolias* and drinking dirty martinis, why he had listened to that bitchy cop. Why was he avoiding someone he liked because of what some bigoted asshole had to say?

Normally, Zach would agree. He never hid his sparkle, he never tried to hide it and he damn sure never apologized for it. But that was him. His choice. He took the consequences for it, and there *were* consequences. He got laughed at, he got shit from strangers on the street, he got hassled by people he didn't know for no reason other than he didn't hide his little light under a fucking

bushel.

But while he was willing to take responsibility for who he was, willing to be himself and fuck the world, take what they dished out...he didn't have any right to ask that of anyone else.

There were a hundred different ways to be a gay man in this world. From the straight-acting, butch, manly men like his Officer Hotness, to the twinkiest twinkies who ever lived, like himself, and everywhere in between. He didn't have any right to tell anyone how to "be gay," nor did he have any right to expect anyone else to be willing to shoulder the burden Zach willingly carried in order to be himself.

Which meant he had no right to ask Stevie to become someone he wasn't in order to be with him. Zach didn't have any problem being anyone's secret boy-toy. It was kind of sexy if you asked him—all hidden liaisons and very undercover lover. But the fact of the matter was that, unless they never went anywhere together, there was no way to keep people from finding out about them. People who could damage Stevie's career.

Phoenix wasn't as big a city as the population said it was. You ran into people you went to high school with, people you knew from the gym, from the clubs, from work. And with a job like Stevie's, it'd be even more impossible to hide completely.

Eventually, someone would know and someone would tell.

He did give a damn about Stevie, more than he'd thought he could so fast. He wasn't going to fuck up Stevie's plans for his life. Zach might be a selfish diva at times, but coming out was one thing he wouldn't ask anyone to do. Not for him.

So he'd told Jordy he was just doing the right thing for once. Jordy knew him well enough to let it drop, even though Zach could tell he didn't agree. Well, it wasn't his decision; it was Zach's.

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

And he'd already made it.

So there he was, getting a bunch of scarves ready for the display wall, when he heard the bell over the door ring. He didn't glance up since he wasn't on floor duty right then. He just kept folding scarves and sulking. Normally, he'd have several of the colorful beauties wrapped around him in various ways just to enjoy the feel of the fine fabric and the vibrant colors, but today he didn't bother. He'd just splurged on a pair of Blahniks, so he couldn't afford one of the scarves anyway. Just another reason to sulk, as far as he was concerned.

"You know, they say if Mohammed won't go to the mountain, the mountain must come to Mohammed."

Zach's head snapped up, and up and up, from where he sat cross-legged on the floor, eyes widening. "Stevie!"

Stevie grinned. "So you do remember me. I was beginning to wonder." Behind the smile was a bit of sadness that wrung Zach's heart, making his chest tight.

He started to apologize, then remembered why he'd stopped taking his calls in the first place. He couldn't break now, even though Stevie had come all this way and looked so hopeful and... Oh, God, he'd missed him.

When Zach didn't say anything else, Stevie's smile faded. That hurt worse than the earlier tinge of sadness in his forest green eyes.

"So it wasn't a mistake, then. You didn't...say, just get back into town from an emergency trip." It wasn't a question.

Zach shook his head, setting down the scarf in his hands before he wrung it to death and had to pay for damaged merchandise. He pushed up to his feet, swallowing hard. "No, I didn't just get back into town. I never left."

Stevie nodded, looking uncomfortable. "I suppose it's poor

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

one-night stand etiquette to be here then, when you've made it clear—" He broke off and sighed. "I just thought...that is, I wanted to ask why? So I know not to do it next time I meet a beautiful man who makes my heart pound." He gave a rough, humorless chuckle. "I'd hate to run him off."

Zach flinched. Just the thought of some other guy climbing all over his Officer Hotness made his inner bitch screech in outrage, but he shoved it down. "You didn't do anything."

"Bullsh—" Stevie all but barked the cut-off word, jaw flexing as he glanced around the little boutique. "Can we talk somewhere private?"

Zach bit his lip. That was a bad idea. Already it was all he could do not to pounce on him and beg his forgiveness for not calling and leaving him hanging and hurting his feelings. But he couldn't say no either because that'd mean sending Stevie away and he wasn't ready, he realized, never to see him again.

So he nodded. "Sure, come on to the back room." He gestured for Stevie to follow him, and in another minute he was shutting the door behind him and they were alone.

"Don't give me a line, Zachary. There has to be some reason you haven't taken my calls since the other night. So what did I do?"

Zach shook his head. "Nothing, I swear. It isn't you..." God it sounded so trite, so lame in the face of Stevie's hurt look, and he couldn't bring himself to tell him lies to his face. He'd never been any good at lying and he hated doing it. "I just...you're up for a promotion and you want to retire eventually and if people find out you're...that we're..."

"Fucking? Dating? Together?"

Zach winced and nodded, looking up at him. "Yes. All of the



above. It'd ruin your life, your plans. Everything you've worked for." He gave Stevie a pleading look. "I don't want to do that to you, I just—"

"Wait a minute!" Stevie shook his head and held up his hand. "How do you know I'm up for a promotion?"

Zach bit his lip again, shuffling one booted toe against the carpet. "Well..."

"Who?" His voice was sharp, the word bitten off. "Who and what did they say to you? Is that why? Tell me, damn it."

"I don't... Hold on; I have it in my bag." He held up one finger and hurried across the room to the employee lockers, grabbing his bag and rummaging through it for the ticket he'd stuffed inside. He pulled out the crumpled paper and held it out to Stevie. "I ran into one of your co-workers a few days ago."

Stevie took the ticket from him and scanned it, jaw tightening until Zach worried it would break. "Goddamn it." This time, when Stevie lifted furious green eyes to him, Zach knew instinctively it wasn't him the other man was furious with. Oh, no.

"Stevie, don't... You can't say anything. She was just trying to protect you, I think, and she's right. If it gets around we're together or messing around or anything..." He trailed off, shrugging. "Trying to hide me is like trying to hide a giraffe in your office. It's useless to try. It'd get out, and I know you're not ready, maybe don't ever want to be ready for it. That's okay; that's you and I respect your choice, but—"

Stevie apparently decided he'd talked too much—not the first to say so—and the next thing Zach knew he was being kissed silent, lifted off his feet and kissed completely senseless. God, the man was good.

He didn't even try not to kiss him back, arms winding around

## *GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

his neck to cling to Stevie and kiss him for all he was worth. He tasted so good and felt so good and... Zach suddenly didn't think he was strong enough to push him away, or try to, a second time. Look how quickly he'd caved this time.

When the kiss broke and their eyes met, both of them were breathing harder, and Zach didn't say anything at first. He just looked at him. Waiting. Hoping, if he was completely honest.

"Listen to me. I'm aware of the risks. I'm aware of the potential losses." Stevie didn't put him down, just kind of held him with one strong arm around his waist so they remained eye level. "But you don't know what'll happen. I don't know what'll happen. But I do know one thing."

He didn't elaborate right away and, after a few long seconds, Zach lost his patience. "What do you know?"

Stevie smiled. The beautiful, open, wide smile that lit up his whole face and his eyes and made Zach forget his own name.

"I know I want pictures in my wallet. And on my desk. And in my life. I want pictures and I never did before. I never cared. Well, I damn well care now. And it's worth taking a few chances for, I think."

Zach's heart thumped hard, and he didn't know what to say. He shook his head sharply and gave Stevie's shoulders a shove. Stevie frowned, face falling as he set Zach on his feet.

Zach didn't go far. He grabbed his bag and dug in it for his own wallet, hands shaking as he snapped it open and turned back to Stevie. He looked up at him and held out a small, wallet-sized picture. "Here."

Stevie took it, glancing down and when he smiled it was maybe a little shaky. "You carry pictures of yourself in your wallet?"

Zach laughed and sniffed a little, one shoulder lifting in a

*GAMBLING ON MAYBE*

shrug. “You never know, right?”

Stevie nodded, reaching around to pull out his wallet and there, amid the old receipts and scraps of paper, he slid a picture of Zach into one of the sleeves. Then he looked up at him, his smile steadier now. “It’s a good start.”

It totes was.

## FAE SUTHERLAND

Fae Sutherland has always dreamed of being a published author, starting off her writing career at age 11 with a horrific ‘Monkees’ fan fiction that will, luckily for all, never see the light of day. At age 34, she has since progressed to more serious writing, though always keeping that dash of irreverence and fun.

Fae tells the stories that the muses give her, but though she is multi-published both solo and jointly, she truly does prefer writing with her co-author Marguerite Labbe best. When she’s not working hard on writing new stories to make her readers sweat or slaving over edits for completed work, she spends her time on website and graphic design, being with her closest friends and playing The Sims 2 until the wee hours of the morning.

Find out more about Fae (and Marguerite Labbe, her occasional co-author) at their website: <http://chasethedream.net>

\* \* \*

**Don’t miss *Letting In The Light*  
by Fae Sutherland,  
available at [AmberAllure.com](http://AmberAllure.com)!**

*When Rowan Lee arrived in the small, liberal Provincetown, he heard tales of the eccentric, brilliant, possibly insane Finnegan*

*Clark. A world-famous mystery writer, Finnegan's been to the top of the bestseller list more times than anyone can count. It's about the only place he goes, sequestered away in his mansion by the sea.*

*Enter Rowan. The free-spirited lovechild of aging hippies, Rowan believes all anyone needs is love, and when he makes a delivery to Finn's mansion and meets the man himself, it's infatuation at first sight. Not to mention lust. Never mind that Finn's twice his age and snarls at him more than he speaks to him.*

*All Rowan wants is to make the world a better place, one person at a time, but all Finn wants is to be left alone. Sparks fly, and if Rowan can't break Finn's walls down, he'll burn them down...one sizzling encounter at a time...*

# AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

## THE GOLD STANDARD IN PUBLISHING

QUALITY BOOKS  
IN BOTH PRINT AND ELECTRONIC FORMATS

ACTION/ADVENTURE

SUSPENSE/THRILLER

SCIENCE FICTION

DARK FANTASY

MAINSTREAM

ROMANCE

HORROR

EROTICA

FANTASY

GLBT

WESTERN

MYSTERY

PARANORMAL

HISTORICAL

**BUY DIRECT AND SAVE**

[www.AmberQuill.com](http://www.AmberQuill.com)

[www.AmberHeat.com](http://www.AmberHeat.com)

[www.AmberAllure.com](http://www.AmberAllure.com)