



Cherie Noel

FLY

Like an Eagle

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

FLY LIKE AN EAGLE

By Cherie Noel

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two muscular young men kiss. One leans against the front of a spotless silver cooking range, white v-neck tee shirt rucked up and exposing the lower half of his chest. A medium sized ring hangs from his right nipple. His hair is short and dark. Though his face is clean shaven there is still a faint stubble shadow just beneath the skin along his sharply angled jawline. Both hands rest behind him on the stove. In the tilt of his head, the sliver of pupil visible between his thick, dark lashes, and the extreme upright posture of his body there is a clear air of authority. The other man is leaning ever so slightly forward, body angled out so they only touch pec to pec. The man on the right is shirtless. He has a thick silver chain around his throat and has one hand lightly resting on the dip of the first man's waist. His other hand dangles at his left side. The muscles of that arm are taut and the cheek we can see is flushed. His face has a day or two of beard scruff, and yet he still appears the more vulnerable of the two. His hair is also dark and short on the sides and back. On the white wall behind him, above the brown tile backsplash, lies an intertwined shadow of their kiss.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm the one with the white shirt. I was the younger brother, boy next door (yea, just strikes against me) I fell in love with him when I was 9. He was the only one for me. Unfortunately he didn't see me that way. So without telling him I left to go to college, never was able to get over him, in fact, I'm still a virgin, dammit! Every time I get close, I close my eyes and see him, in fact I hear him. How the fuck is that even possible? I am now graduated and ready to get on with my life. Mom has kept me up on his life, not that much going on, but I'm sure he keeps his lovers close to the chest.

Love tats and HEA, no non-con, no BDSM, love some hot m/m love, no more angst, because this poor boy has already lived through enough of that, soul mate a plus.

Sincerely,

Angelique

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, science fiction, alien-race shifters, first time, destined mates, coming of age

Word Count: 16,198

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Prologue

“Get in, Matty, the water’s nice today—don’t be a chicken!”

Matt narrowed his eyes at Marlon and Ryan’s baby brother. Huh. The kid was cute and all, but only Matt’s strict instructions to “blend” kept him from... he caught the thought back and warily eyed the big blue rectangle where Chase bobbed. Clicking his teeth together, Matt hummed at the back of his throat as he sought a particular English word. His... um... *Accipitridaehenis*. Dammit, he’d been here for ten Earth years and the English words, still so different from his native tongue, were hard to remember. His gut ached and his chest felt tight. Sometimes he shivered with the need to simply take wing, escape from the never-ending pressure. His *Accipitridaehenis* wanted him to appear human, though. They told him constantly, his father’s deep bass tones overlapping with his mother’s clear, lyrical soprano, and his cousin Adam’s wryly amused tenor. Even his dear Aunt Sophie always had something to add.

“Keep quiet, son, or sing as the lesser birds do, from the shadow of the hedge.”

“Blend in, my heart. Dim your plumes to join the flock.”

“Learn the language, cousin. You will never fit in unless you learn why the people you live among laugh, and what makes them trouble the sky with curses.”

“Make friends, but don’t get too close, nephew.”

Wait, he remembered... “Mother” and “Father” were the English language titles for those who cared for young hatchlings... They wanted so badly for him to fit in. Matt did not mind trying harder for them. Especially not after they gave up everything to offer him a better life here on Earth.

He sniffed. The harsh smell of the water Chase floated in burned Matt’s nose hairs. If Chase were not such an interesting human, well... Matt curled his lip before dipping his toe into the foul smelling water the younger boy floated in. He shivered as the cool sensation of water slipped over his skin. Why had the Simms put this overly deep bath in their yard? They did not have one last

year. What purpose could such a thing possibly serve, save to bring other predators, and necessitate strict patrolling of the resources in order to prevent a take-over? Matt shook his head. Foolishness. A glimmer off the water drew his eyes across the expanse of wet to where Chase bobbed, skin glistening above the water. Matt's breath caught in his chest. He had an audience. Chase waited, watching him, eyes bright, lips pulled back to show white teeth shining against his golden skin. Fine hairs at the base of his neck standing to attention, Matt forced his aversion to deep water aside.

“Um, sure.”

Matt meant to sit down, ease himself over the scratchy concrete side of the pool and then hold on, with an appropriately white-knuckled grasp. Instead he stepped back abruptly. He'd have managed leaping forward, no time to second guess there, but jumping in from the side was ridiculously out of the question, since he didn't swim. Not a single stroke. This was another of those weird social things he still hadn't quite sussed out since they'd immigrated to Buffalo. He missed home violently some days, missed knowing what was acceptable in differing situations. It took years before he'd adapted enough to go to public school. His only friends back then had been Ryan and his little brother Chase. They had an older brother, Marlon, but as he'd left for college before Matt and Ryan even started high school, Matt had never been very close to him. Ryan's mother looked sad whenever she talked about him, and even happy-go-lucky Ryan refused to talk about why he never visited. The only thing Matt really remembered about Marlon from before he'd left was that the eldest Simms brother always stood with his back to a wall. Matt could completely relate. In large groups like the extended Simms clan, he felt uneasy as well. After ten years of living next to the Simms, countless backyard barbeques and holiday gatherings, Matt's stomach still burned with the constant unease of not quite fitting in around them. And he'd gotten something wrong again judging by the puzzled expression on Chase's face. Perhaps he'd lost too much time in thought. Chase's happy expression fell, eyes going serious and mouth drooping at the corners.

Damn. Matt liked Chase. The younger boy smelled right, when so much in this new place carried a vaguely wrong odor. Chase's lopsided smile warmed the edges of the part of Matthew that felt frozen still after the long, cold journey in cryo. Chase had been the first to approach Matthew, the first to extend warmth and welcome. From that first day eight years ago, when Chase raised his big green eyes worshipfully to Matthew's face, he'd hated to disappoint the younger boy in any way.

Swallowing down the acid taste of potential error, Matthew pushed himself forward to the water's edge. Perhaps if he'd been watching his feet, instead of the way light played in the glittering droplets of moisture on Chase's long black lashes, he wouldn't have slipped. There was no telling. One moment, his vision lasered in on the shimmer and gleam of Chase's hazel-green eyes, and the next, his mouth was full of chemical filled water, the back of his head exploding with a razor-edged wash of crimson pain, and his flailing hands found nothing but a cloud of rapidly descending blackness.

“Matt! Oh my god, Matt!”

Soft.

So soft.

Slick, warm flesh pressed to his lips. A burst of warm air filled his heavy lungs. Matt coughed. The back of his skull pulsed hotly, sending jagged shards of fire though every part of his being. Instinct rose in a twisted rush. Matthew struck out, arms winding rapidly around a slim body, mouth opening to mark what was his.

Mine. Protect. Bind, must bind. Mine.

Teeth closing over the flesh pressed to his mouth, Matt exerted enough pressure to part the skin, just enough to let through one vital drop of blood. Reaching a hand up, he swiped unsteady fingers against the throbbing epicenter of agony at the back of his head. A gasp sounded. Matt squinted up at the figure crouching over him. A flickering, silvery nimbus surrounded Chase's head, while Matt's temples throbbed in time with the pulsing sparkles. Letting go with one arm, he reached again to the locus of burning pain at the back of his head. Something hot and slick coated his fingers. A vicious pulse emanated from skimming his hand across the rapidly protruding lump at the back of his head. Chase made a low whimpering noise. Matt's heart beat pushed fire through his veins as Chase wrenched his mouth away. Drawing in a deep breath brought the scent of blood like the tumblers of a lock turning in his mind. He reached up, pushed his crimson-coated finger into the lush mouth opened above him in a perfect “O”, and rubbed his essence across the receptors there. The pupils of Chase's brilliant amber flecked green eyes flared. He jerked his head back slightly. Swirls of black and silver whirled madly at the edges of Matt's vision.

Mate. Mine.

The eyes widened above the wrinkled up nose. Matt coughed, water spewing from his mouth.

Mine.

A flash of blackness. Matt was on his side, concrete scratching his side, patio table legs and the green edge of a lawn filling his vision. Feet slapped on the pavement, and then Chase's voice, panic spiking through until the edges cracked. Matt remembered Ryan teasing Chase even though at that point the teenaged Chase's voice hadn't broken a single time since he was fifteen. Matt certainly hadn't heard that uneven pitch for two solid years.

"I unlocked the front door... oh god, please hurry... I don't know... out back by the pool. His head. So much blood. Hurry. Just fucking hurry!"

Matt reached forward. The words in his head sounded so clear.

"No. Chase. M'okay. Don't—"

The outside echo, however, blurred and melted into an unrecognizable aural mush of yearning and sorrow. Chase should never worry. Chase. His. His. Another wracking cough shook his body. Matt spewed water as tremors raced through him, pain flared white-hot, and then darkness pulled him down into its soft embrace.

Four Years Later

Matt Altieren plucked at the frayed seam running down the inner thigh of his favorite jeans.

Leaning a thickly muscled shoulder against the weathered wood siding of his front porch, Matt swiveled his head to one side to focus on the battered silver van he'd caught a glimpse of in the periphery of his vision. The faded Cinderella carriage topping the radio antenna and the familiar, boxy, out-of-date silhouette of the vehicle declared Chase's presence louder than the echoing strains of The Steve Miller Band's classic song, "Take the Money and Run", which belted out of the van's wide open windows.

"You know you need to tell him."

The muscles in Matt's neck tensed. "Ryan, I... how do you tell someone something like this?"

Matt turned to gaze through the screen behind him at the man sitting in his living room with bare feet propped on the windowsill. His best friend and

business partner shrugged a shoulder even more heavily muscled than Matt's. "Hell, just tell him. You told me."

Matt made a high clicking sound at the back of his throat. Without moving his head, he turned his gaze to skewer his best friend. "You walked in on me in the middle of a shift, Ryan. Or should I say you kicked down a locked door and blundered into the room where I was trying to finish my lunch and shift back to human?"

Ryan's cheeks flooded with a rosy tinge. Wrinkling his forehead, he pointed the blunt tip of his index finger at Matt. His mouth opened, shut, and opened again. "Gah. Ass. Something screamed bloody fucking murder in that motherfucking unfinished room, and you hadn't been feeling well all day. The only reason you were even working that job was because that fuckstick Tony Silenzsky we hired called in sick at the last minute when we were already running behind schedule. And ewww. You were gobbling down a damn mouse."

Matt winced. "I was an eagle. Eagles are carnivores—"

Ryan cut him off, one hand waving imperiously. "Dude. That shit was nasty, and you finished gulping the critter down when you look just like you do now."

Matt bit his tongue, waiting for Ryan to finish his theatrical shuddering. The ass even gagged a couple of times for effect, but finally Ryan wiped a hand over his face, squinted and began to speak again. "I—my little brother has been into you since he was nine years old, man. If I can get past seeing you doing the weird feathery shit when I'm not even into you like that, you can bet your pointy beak Chase isn't gonna let a little thing like you getting all feathery slow him down."

Matt gaped at Ryan. Sometimes the guy was such a damn stereotype, it hurt to be in the same room with him. Opening his mouth to tell Ryan what an idiot he was proved to be a moot point when the squealing of Chase's driver's side door sounded less than twenty feet behind Matt. He bit the inside of his cheek.

"Get your ass out here, Ryan. He's going to run straight inside your parent's house and not come out until he's leaving for good again if you don't show your face."

Ryan flipped him off, dropped one foot to the floor and leaned forward, cupping his hand around his mouth like a makeshift megaphone. "Hey, Chase! Come over here. Matt and I were just having a beer. Why don't you join us?"

Matt froze, gut clenching and sweat beading at his hairline as his gaze locked on Ryan's smirking face. Ryan stood, finally ambling to the screen door and pushing it open. He sketched an indolent wave at his younger brother. "Come on, come on. Mom and Dad's 'date-nite' is tonight. You don't wanna get caught up in that terrifying shit. Seriously, man, you need to hang with us."

A pebble rattled against the sidewalk. Matt spun on his heel. Chase stood not five feet away, his mouth puckering as though tasting Chinese bitter melon for the first time. Shaking his head after shooting a narrow eyed glare at his parent's front door, Chase muttered just loud enough for Matt to hear. "Oh, hell no. Never, ever again."

He looked up, gaze sliding past Matt to rest on his brother. Matt's chest cramped. Chase was taller. Broader. Tanner. A silver hoop pierced his left eyebrow at exactly the same point where Matt's was pierced. The paper thin cotton of his tight white tee-shirt showed a clear circular outline originating from the hard point of his right nipple. Matt's mouth dried up in a millisecond. His hand twitched, fingers spreading apart and then clenching into tight fists at the sides of his thighs. Chase kept his eyes fixed on Ryan even as he climbed Matt's stairs. Sliding a sideways glance at Matt, he dipped his chin slightly.

"—'lo."

Then he brushed past Matt, topping him by a good inch, and every hair on Matt's body stood on end. Chase strode into the house, hips rolling with the predatory gate of a big cat. Matt sucked in a sharp breath.

Holy Summer Triangle.

Matt's mate had turned from gawky, off-limits teen into... a walking, breathing invitation to hot, sweaty sex. Ryan pulled his brother into a rough hug, pounding a lightly clenched fist against his back in a classic straight-guy hug. Then he pushed him out to arm's length away, shook him lightly, and pulled him in for another quick squeeze. This time Ryan did some funky pseudo-wrestling move before he pushed Chase away a second time. His smirk firmly in place he held the door of Matt's house open a touch wider. His green eyes laughed at Matt. They were a shade duller than Chase's and Ryan was laughing softly as Matt stood immobile, gaze yearning after Chase's retreating form. Ryan reached out, grabbed Matt's forearm and hauled him into the house. When they were shoulder to shoulder, Ryan released him, leaning close to whisper.

"Tell him tonight. He's got job offers lined up all over the world, man. If he takes off this time, you might not see him again."

And then Ryan walked out the door, down the front stairs and across the lawn. Calmly producing Chase's van keys from his pocket—he must have stolen them when he hugged his brother—he climbed into the silver monstrosity and drove off.

Chase heard the screen door slam in the background but the sight of his favorite beer, Sam Adams Winter Snap, caught his attention. “How the hell does he get this stuff out of season? I can never find Winter Snap in June.”

The sound of a throat clearing pulled Chase up short. With the skin on the back of his neck tingling, and his pulse beating low and steady in his groin, the throat clearer could only be Matt. “Where'd Ryan go?”

He didn't need to turn to know his brother wasn't there as well. Hell, he'd bet good money that Ryan wasn't even in the house anymore, the rat. Silence pressed against the tender backs of his knees, into the hollows beneath his ears, and tugged at the fine hair at the base of his neck. Sighing, Chase stepped back, letting the curved handle of the refrigerator slip from his hand. Pivoting around on one heel, he braced one hand on the brown tile of the counter adjacent to the fridge, and the other on the edge of the gleaming stainless steel surface of the restaurant-grade stove.

Four years of frustration and humiliation burned low in his gut. The last time he'd seen Matt this close had been at the hospital after the accident in his parent's pool.

God.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. Letting his eyes droop slightly closed, Chase pushed his hips forward enough to put his half-hard cock on display. He ran his tongue over his lips and then bared his teeth in a thin, hungry sliver of white that barely passed as a smile. Matt gulped, nostrils flaring as he pointed toward the front of the house. Chase was tired of being hung up on this man, sick to death of hearing his rumbling bass voice pleading for Chase to wait—every damn time Chase got close to scoring some tail, every single time he'd hear this man's deep voice pleading softly and he'd be unable to go through with it. No matter how hot the guy he'd picked out that night, they all left him cold once that voice started to murmur at the back of his brain. A snarl curled the edges of his smile into something almost mean. A shudder shook Matt's thickly muscled frame. Pointing toward the front of the house again, he spoke.

“Ryan took your van.”

Chase shook his head. "Doesn't matter. I'm fine here for now, aren't I?"

Matt nodded, stepping forward with shoulders back and spine arched as though Chase had hooked an invisible line right through his center. Chase's gut tightened at the sight of Matt's pupils blown wide, a flush crawling up his neck and his shaft hardening behind the fly of his worn jeans. The whole wanting, craving picture of gimmee-gimmee-gotta-have-it sent a thrill zinging through Chase's chest. Then Matt was close enough to touch, and Chase slipped a finger through a small hole low on the faded red tee Matt wore.

"Take this off."

Matt's lips parted, a whisper of air escaping with a rushing sound. The flush climbed past his throat to his cheeks. Chase let go, deliberately placing his hand back on the counter, letting his hips jut forward a hair more. Matt's grey gaze dipped, sweeping the front of Chase's tight jeans and rising again so full of heat his irises seemed to be made of molten silver.

"I have to tell you—"

Chase cut him off. "Take it off, big man. I'm not a kid anymore, Matt. I want to see your skin. Now."

His voice shook after the first sentence, and something broke in Chase, stripping away the frail remains of the last wall his pride had to hide behind. No one else made him shake like this. At school the whole campus called him the Ice Prince. They bragged about sleeping with him even though none of them ever had, and when he spent enough time to get them hot and bothered before fleeing, some even felt as though he'd paid them a compliment. Chase never denied the rumors of his prowess, nor the ones about the ridiculously high number of conquests he was reputed to have tossed out before their muscles could stop shaking from cataclysmic orgasms. He never told a single soul he could only get hard when he imagined touches from Matt.

Now, the man stood in front of him, the one who'd patted his hand and called him "a good kid" after Chase saved his life. The memory of Matt's condescending tone in the hospital was as bitter now as on the day it happened. Four years of anger coiled in his gut. Matt's lips parted, words trembling on the tip of his tongue. Chase's long-simmering rancor flared, lacing his voice with thin whip strands of cruelty.

"I'm a man now Matt. One that wants to get laid tonight. It can happen here or I can get a cab down to Marcella's. I don't actually give two shits where it happens. You want it to happen with you then take the fucking shirt off."

If his voice still shook a little, the meanness inherent in those acrimonious words would balance out that weakness. Chase spread his legs, tipping his chin up as he did so, settling down to look Matt square in the eye. Matt's chest rose with a quick breath.

"I-no. Here. Y-you can't go. Stay. I'll take the shirt off."

Matt's voice shook too, and his hand trembled as he reached down to pull the hem of his shirt up. In seconds, he had the material over his head and dropping to the floor. His already deep voice grew husky.

"You too."

He drifted closer, one hand hovering at his side, the other reaching behind Chase to pull the back of his thin white tee up. Matt's hand slid around to the front of Chase's torso, lifting the shirt's hem above Chase's chest. A drawn-out, shuddering sigh escaped him.

"We need to talk—"

Chase put his hand over Matt's mouth.

"No. I don't want to hear any of that angsty, need-to-be-polite crap tonight. You can tell me how hot I make you. You can get poetic about my cock and ass and the curve of my lips. You can beg me to fuck you into tomorrow—oh, you thought I hadn't figured out how much you'd rather catch from me? I told you I'm not a boy anymore. So. We can fuck. You open your mouth for anything else and I'm out of here, got it?"

Before Matt's lashes dropped down over his eyes there was a flicker of something raw there, but he nodded, and really? That was all Chase cared about in this moment. He lowered his hand back to the counter, tilting his chin enough so Matt would have to go on tiptoe to kiss him. The way Matt couldn't stop staring at his lips, there would be kissing soon. Chase wanted him to work for it.

Matt rose up, swaying on his toes, mouth sipping at Chase's while his hot hands pushed and pulled at Chase's shirt. Murmuring low in his throat, making nonsense sounds, his humming and growling interspersed with short, stinging bites and sucking kisses only increased Matt's feverish motions. A sense of power curled through Chase. Matt's questing fingers finally found Chase's nipple ring. He pulled back, a gasp echoing through the kitchen.

"I thought I saw a nipple ring. Oh. Holy gods above. When, uh, when did you get this?"

Matt slid a finger slowly, with what felt damn near like reverence, over Chase's nipple ring. Chase shivered, familiar tingles racing from his piercing to dance in his balls.

"Uh. Feels good. Last year. Ah. Yes. After I came home for Christmas. Needed something to clear my head after the way we—missed each other at every gathering."

The words hit Matt's chest like miniature explosions, each one digging a crater of remorse and regret into his lungs until there was no room left for air. Pushing forward, clawing his way past the pain, past the inescapable knowledge he'd handled everything wrong, he moved further into Chase's space. When he got close enough the skin of their chests rasped together with each deep breath, Matt surged up onto his toes, slid one arm behind Chase to catch the counter tile with his fingertips and cling for dear life. Chase slipped a finger under the thick silver necklace lying heavy against Matt's collarbones and tugged him forward. Matt's muscles went soft everywhere except at his groin.

"I—"

Whatever he'd been about to say broke apart into babble and delirium in his head as Chase crushed their lips together in a heated claiming. Matt slid his hand forward and flattened his palm against the countertop. Whatever foolish thoughts of dominating the younger man he'd clung to for the past four years leached away. Chase's tongue mapped the interior of Matt's mouth with fierce assurance. Heart pounding, knees shaking, Matt moaned and swayed forward, resting his full weight against Chase.

Catching his jaw with a firm hand, Chase tipped Matt's head to one side. The kiss slowed despite all Matt's whimpers and moans, easing to feather light brushes against his lips, cheeks and then his eyelids before stopping altogether. Matt blinked his eyes open. Chase grinned down at him, the razor sharp, bitter edge thankfully gone from his smile. Matt's breath stalled in his chest. Chase's eyes glimmered, amber flecks catching the light and somehow intensifying the underlying green. He stroked a thumb along Matt's jaw, and when he spoke, his voice was rough and low.

"Come on, handsome. I bet you don't keep lube in the kitchen, and I for one want to get to the good stuff sooner rather than later."

A shudder worked its way up Matt's spine. He could no more deny Chase than cease breathing. The cedar scent Chase had taken to wearing his first year away at college filled Matt's nose. Matt's eagle stirred, wings beating with the force of a hurricane against the inside of his ribcage.

Mate.

Matt gasped for breath.

Mine.

Another full-body shudder wracked him. His knees went loose and floppy, his vision narrowed to Chase alone, and his heart thudded in great, galloping hammer strokes just left of center in his chest. He drew in a slow breath that shook no matter how he tried to steady himself.

"Yes. Come on. I'm in the master bedroom now. I—my folks moved to Florida."

Chase slipped his fingers out from underneath Matt's necklace. His gaze lingered, and his lips pressed into a thin line. One corner of his mouth turned up in a sharp curve.

"Nice bit of shiny there, Matt. Get it from your folks?"

The muscles at the hinge of his jaw tightened until it seemed he'd snap the joint there as he asked. Matt's stomach clenched. Pulling in a slow breath, he reminded himself that Chase could not know the depth of insult he offered. Muscles along the back of his neck pulled taut. In the space below his right eye, a small tic jumped in rhythm with his heart.

"No. My aunt sent it to me."

Chase's jaw unclenched and his lips curved up at the corners. The easing of stress showed in the easing at the corners of his eyes. That small sign that the answer meant so much to Chase eased some of the insult's sting for Matt. The gentle tone of Chase's next words helped even more.

"Ah. Never met her, did I?"

Matt's eyes locked with Chase's, and the heat he found there nearly scalded him from the inside out. "Ah." He coughed to clear his throat. "No. You never did. Aunt Moira immigrated after you left for college. And I don't think you were ever both here at the same time."

Chase's regard intensified, hotly possessive. He stepped into Matt, bumping their hips together and pushing lightly against Matt's bare chest. "Come on. Let's go scandalize the neighbors."

The heat spread everywhere Chase's gaze touched Matt, wrapping him in a blanket of sultry warmth. Swallowing thickly, Matt raised an eyebrow at Chase. "Scandalize them how?"

Chase licked his lips. "Let's leave your windows open so they can hear you scream my name, shall we?"

English deserted Matt utterly. He could only make a clicking noise at the back of his throat as he waited for Chase's next move. He hoped Chase wouldn't catch the birdlike quality of Matt's response as Chase continued his deliciously aggressive behaviors. Longing rose in Matt's soul, hot and fast, for the nips and head strokes that would mark him with reddened patches of skin and Chase's scent. But did humans even do that? A memory of Ryan coming to work one day with bruises on his neck surfaced. He called them... hickeys. So, even if humans didn't do such things in the same way Matt's people did, perhaps Chase would feel drawn to mark Matt anyway.

"Matt? You still with me?"

It took a moment for Matt to his head of questions and wishes. Stupid bird. He needed to pay attention. Chase's voice had a lilt up at the end of his sentence, his brows were drawn together, and his eyes had gone from hot and heavy lidded to cool and narrowed. Not good. Matt hastily cleared his throat.

"I'm with you Chase. Neighbors. Scandal. Keep the windows open wide. Yes, yes, and oh hell yes."

Matt grabbed Chase's hand, strode past him and tugged lightly to move the younger man in the direction of the stairs. While everything didn't feel... perfectly in sync between them like he'd always thought it would when they finally got to the point of mating, no harm could come of their bonding further, could it?

Watching Matt's attention all turn inward, the nervous lip bite, and the faint shaking of the other man's hand in his sent tendrils of fire snaking through Chase's gut. He narrowed his eyes at Matt's back. Why the game? Why the big, do-me-now eyes and the faux-innocent gasps while they were kissing? Matt didn't need to put on a show of caring what Chase thought or felt beyond the amount of time it took them both to get off. Chase knew full well the man practically tripping over his own feet to get to the bedroom didn't actually care a second past wham-bam-thank you, man.

Oh, crap. An image of Marlon, Ryan, and Matt all playing basketball together the last summer Marlon still lived at home flashed into Chase's memory. Hell. Okay, considering how Matt had always looked up to Marlon as well as his business partnership with Ryan, Chase got why Matt would try to dress up screwing him. Matt was also Ryan's best friend, and Ryan was Chase's big brother. Matt couldn't help but feel a need to inject some faux emotion into the situation. He had to cover his ass over breaking the unwritten guy code. Blithely trampling all over "thou shalt not schtup thy bestie's younger sib" required a fairly high level of finessing to keep everyone's rosy view of the world intact. Too bad for Matt that Chase had neither the time nor the inclination to let that shit fly. He tugged on Matt's hand as they reached the top of the landing.

"Matt. Stop. You can cut all the fake nervous shit. I heard you and your dad at the hospital after you hit your head in my folk's pool. I don't care." Stepping closer, he crowded Matt against the wall, ignoring the way each hard-edged word caused his heart to pound faster, the way his eyes stung, and worst of all the how his gut moved past burning to being shredded by invisible talons of want and need. Pushing his chest into Matt's, Chase reached around to palm the most biteable ass he'd ever seen.

"I want in here. You gonna let me in, Matty? No games, no bullshit, just us fucking until we're sweaty and sticky and spent?"

Matt froze. His whole body locked down tight, the muscles under Chase's hands morphing from warm, pliant bits of flesh to the hardness of rock in a second's time. The only movement Chase could detect in the other man was the erratic, darting motions his eyes made as he seemed to map out every segment of Chase's face. Matt ended with his gaze locked with Chase's. Something flickered in his grey eyes. Something he saw caused his breath to stutter. He stumbled back a step. His retreat left Chase chilled and furious.

Narrowing his eyes against what looked like pain in Matt's gaze, Chase growled. "Don't. You don't get to look at me like that."

Matt's face turned a whiter shade of pale, and then something shifted in his gaze. Pupils narrowing, the grey of his eyes shimmering a metallic silver, he rolled up off the wall and stalked forward. His hands shot out and grasped Chase's wrists. Pushing them behind Chase's back, Matt transferred his grip on both of Chase's wrists, holding both in one of his large hands. Breathing in sharp bursts, Matt raised his chin to whisper directly into Chase's ear.

“Yes. I’m the only one who gets to look at you like that, or like this.” Then he pulled back to give Chase a molten gaze of want and need.

The heat in Chase’s stomach rose, wrapped around itself and lodged like a miniature sun in the very center of his chest, burning everything there to ash. Matt wanting him bad enough to handle him like this was sorta hot, but... His eyelids drifted shut for a split second. With the sight of Matt’s chiseled features and the warmly welcoming hues of his home hidden, Chase focused on chasing down the feeling slipping just out of reach. An image of himself and Matt, positions reversed, flashed against the red and gold screen inside his eyelids. The second Chase saw himself holding Matt, owning every single inch of the other man, everything in him from heartbeat to hard-on settled, steadied, and drove down into the hard-baked soil of his soul like steel-tipped arrows into paper targets backed by bales of hay. The rasping clutch of Matt’s big hand around his wrist instantly chaffed.

“Wh-what do you mean? You know what? Never mind. Never fucking mind. I wanted a fuck, not a damn nail-painting sleepover party. You can keep your pre-teen Patty feelings to yourself.”

Matt cocked his head to one side, brows drawing together. Chase clamped his jaw shut. Fuck it. Sue him for having weird sayings. They made sense to him. Matt squinted at him, shook his head, and then his face got harder, more focused somehow. He swooped forward, plastering his mouth to Chase’s while making a strange keening sound at the back of his throat. Something sharp scratched at Chase’s wrists, but the sensation was lost in the sudden heat of Matt’s mouth plundering his. It was different somehow once Matt made that hungry sound and clutched Chase’s wrists. Something intangible shifted. Chase felt the way Matt used his grip on Chase to hold himself together. That made everything okay again, made it hotter than before, made it so damn hot it melted every thought in Chase’s head for a few moments.

So it was no surprise that this time, it was Chase gasping, Chase’s hands shaking as he wrenched them free to push Matt away but instead ended up wrapping them tight around Matt’s thickly muscled neck. It was Chase’s eyes going wide in wonder before sliding shut so he could concentrate on feeling everything. Matt made that odd keening, *click, click* sound again, and then one big hand slid from the small of Chase’s lower back to cup his ass, and the other slid up to press between his shoulder blades. To press Chase forward. That was—oh, that was right and wrong at the same time. Chase fisted his hand in Matt’s hair, tilting the shorter man’s head until the angle felt right again and

pushed away from the wall. He pulled Matt up onto his toes, enough to pull his heels off the floor, just enough to take back control of everything, and then he tore his mouth free.

“Fine. Fine. No more words. Just—where the fuck is your bed, Matt? I’ve been waiting years for this.”

Fuck. Shit. Double-damned pissing camels. Chase’s ears burned. He ignored the sensation, eyes locked on Matt’s, gaze unflinching as he pretended he didn’t say that last bit out loud. Matt didn’t say a word about Chase’s needy-sounding slip of the tongue. Dipping his head almost shyly, he cast a look up through his lashes as his cheeks pinked up enough to finally bring some color back to his face. He slid his broad, callused hand into Chase’s, turned and walked a few steps down the hall. Glancing over his shoulder, Matt reached forward blindly, hand landing unerringly on a sturdy door handle. A small part of Chase’s brain noted the handle—like much of the hardware on cabinets and doors throughout the house—was new since he’d last been in the house. Not new-new, clearly antique or trying to seem antique with its slightly pitted brass surface. Chase noticed the changes peripherally. They added to the creeping sense of right and belonging seeping deeper into his gut with every passing second. Then Matt’s tongue flicked over his plump bottom lip, and all Chase’s thoughts except those of getting Matt naked and under him as quickly as possible disappeared. Chase pulled his hands free, placed one on Matt’s lower back and steered him into the bedroom.

Matt’s eagle beat at him. His mate was—what?—trying to leave? No, that wasn’t quite right. His gaze flitted around the room he’d spent the past four years preparing for this day. A pang shot through his chest, ricocheting around until it lodged in his gut. The homely, pine-green comforter, the worn wooden towel rack standing next to the floor vent, and the bits of change strewn across the scratched top of his dresser were exactly as he’d meant them to be. They screamed simple, unpretentious comfort. They whispered of home. But Matt couldn’t shake the feeling that Chase wanted to have quick sex and then leave. No, no, that couldn’t be allowed. A shivering cry right at the edge of human hearing whispered from his throat. Matt needed his mate to be whole. It wasn’t the same as with the humans—they could love and lose and break their hearts a thousand times and live to tell the tale—but the Altarians, the people of the Summer Triangle, weren’t like that. Being without Chase for the amount of time necessary for him to attend school had been bad enough. Matt sucked in a

shallow breath. Only his parents' dedicated nursing in the early days and his own stubborn will had kept him mostly sane and physically whole during the hellish time apart. Once he and Chase cemented the next portion of their bond there could be no separation for Matt without losing his human half to the eagle completely.

Matt swallowed, trying to work up enough saliva to wet his dry lips. Waving a hand toward his favorite things in the room he started to blurt out something stupid about how he'd prepared their nest. Chase shot him a superheated glance from under lowered brows. The instant connection slammed into him. Remembering Chase's edict concerning unnecessary chatter, Matt shut his mouth on his stumbling description. His teeth clicked together audibly in the sun-dappled silence of the room.

"I-ah, this is... right. No words."

The normally soothing green, brown, and gold colors of his room failed to calm his racing pulse. Turning to face Chase, Matt reached shaking fingers down to the button of his jeans. His voice deepened, roughened as he spoke again. Chase noticed, pupils flaring in response.

"I-how do you want me? There's lube—"

Button undone on his jeans, fingers still fumbling with the tab of his zip, Matt bent over the bed to reach the nightstand on the far side. As he stretched across, snagging the edge of the worn brass handle with one hand, Chase's palm landed in the center of his back. The warm weight slid back and forth, fingertips digging into taut muscles on either side of Matt's spine. Chase pressed down until Matt lay prone on the soft cotton of the gold duvet cover. Matt lifted his hips to push his jeans down, pushing at them with one hand while the other reached to the bedside table. Chase's hot hands circled his ankles, squeezing for a moment before his jeans were tugged down and off, briefs tangled inside them. Matt grunted, dropping flat to the bed again and redoubling his effort to reach the bottle of lube at the bedside. Objective snagged with the tips of his fingers, even though it meant his arm stretching far enough to strain the joints at elbow and shoulder, Matt sank into the comforter. Lips pulling into a grin so wide it almost hurt, Matt let the pride roll through him. He was a good mate, providing what his other half wanted and needed. His chest filled with bubbles of joy. Chase's warm weight pressed down on him. So right. Chase would see. There was no way to miss it.

Then there was a quick rub of striated fabric against Matt's legs, and then the rough-soft feel of lightly furred legs sliding along the outside. A hot puff of

air blew moistly over Matt's ear, and then there was a slick, slithery sound followed by a muted thump. Something crinkled on the bed near Matt's hip. Cool and slippery yet dry, whatever it was slid half under Matt's leg. Chase's hand eased along Matt's side and then whatever it was got pulled away. Warm air caressed the side of Matt's face again as Chase's voice dropped another half-octave deeper than before to purr into Matt's ear.

“Lift your hips.”

Shuddering, all Matt could think was oh. Oh. Sweet Summer Gods, yes. Something melted and then tightened deep in Matt's gut. Lungs squeezing together and heart pierced with inexplicable, razor-tipped shafts of sensation, Matt gasped. Chase didn't seem to hear the sound though, nor did he see the gnarly ropes of hacked-off, fraying tension Matt's muscles became. Instead, his hands gripped Matt at both hips. As Matt glanced over his shoulder, Chase's lips pressed together forcibly, and his whole face squinched into something that was probably the beginning a little old man pucker. Or possibly the harbinger of a pleasure so sublime Chase couldn't process it yet.

Matt's whole being stilled, his eagle silent in his chest, body utterly motionless on the cool gold of his softest cotton sheets. One of Chase's hands stayed at his hip, tightening until the sensation teetered between hard, bright pleasure and a faint, clouded pain. Chase's other hand eased, rough and sweet, between Matt's ass cheeks to tap his fingers in an easily deciphered code against the tightly furled muscle there. Dot-dash, let me in, flick-tap. Matt moaned, helpless to stop the sound from welling out of his chest once his body interpreted the message. Chase leaned forward, voice so deep and gravelly Matt barely recognized it.

“Don't move. Gonna try something. Gotta taste—”

Chase's hands—and fuck, they were big four years ago when he'd still been a kid, but now they were hard, and capable, and—they pulled Matt's hips up from the bed. A pillow shoved between his groin and the bed while Chase growled against his thigh. A rush of hot, moist air rolled across the thin flesh where Matt's legs met up with his ass, and then those ridiculously competent hands were pulling his ass cheeks apart. Neurons scrambling on a slippery slope of hommina-hommuna-guh-yeah-there, Matt only managed a throaty whine when Chase's tongue slicked a strip of hot, wet perfection from his taint to the top of his ass crack. Chase didn't bother to speak, just gave a rumbling hum and settled in like he planned to make a seven-course meal out of Matt's ass.

Matt's neurons—poor, overwhelmed little fuckers—rolled over and showed their bellies at that point. Gibbering, humping the air, spooging right where they lay in quivering heaps, they did fuck-all toward cooperating with his attempts at higher thought and sang a hallelujah chorus toward the powerful and moist God of the Flexing Tongue. At this point, Matt made a few noises pretty much unknown to man, although standard enough for mating eagles. Chase, the evil bastard, hummed again. This time he licked a circle around Matt's asshole as he did it, and that was the final straw. Matt heard a wild scream echoing off the walls. His face went hot the second he realized the god-awful noise came from his own throat and not outside the house. Fingers twisting in the sheets, ass shoving back toward Chase's face, he gave up trying to be macho, gave everything over to his young human lover, screamed and whimpered and hoped like hell the noises he was making didn't include any words. He had absolutely no idea what might pop out of his mouth while Chase used his mouth and hands like hell-red branding tools glowing as they marked Matt's shifter soul.

Matt made another wild kingdom sound, and Chase couldn't stop a quick 'I am the man' hum from rumbling up out of his chest. All those failed attempts to hook up, all the hours watching "educational" porn and the one uber-humiliating Q & A session with his friend Martin... they were all worth it when he could pull raw animal sounds out of Matt. Blood thrumming in his veins, Chase snagged the lube from next to him, flipping open the top with a gratifying snick sound. He never would have guessed a little plastic bottle top popping open could make his dick jump and dance.

Another moan filled the air as Chase pulled back to drizzle lube down Matt's crease. The noise and accompanying shiver pulled Chase's gaze up the line of Matt's spine to his face. Mouth hanging open, eyes squeezed shut hard enough to leave the corners crinkled, and a hectic flush staining his high cheekbones, Matt had never looked so defenseless.

The soundtrack in Chase's head stopped playing the hot Euro Techno-pop club tune, "Du hast den schoensten Arsch der Welt", by Alex C featuring Y-Ass and morphed seamlessly into the smoked out, sexy blues stylings of Chet Faker crooning "No Diggity" in what Chase always thought of as a drop-trou voice. The change in his mental playlist pulled Chase's stomach into a tight ball of acid, angst, and released the brakes on things he'd thought were lock-boxed and tossed in the same brain landfill where the stats for his little league team's

second (shitty) year ended up. He meant to lean forward, bite Matt's sweet-peach ass, and then sheathe his latex-covered cock in the ass he'd been wanting to fuck for the past four years. Instead his tongue flapped around in his mouth like a survivalist salmon at a grizzly convention while his traitorous hands caught Matt's hips and twisted, pushed, and rolled the man over.

"I want to see you."

Oh fuck, fuck, fuckkity fuck, he did not just say that out loud. Except Matt's eyebrows crept up his forehead like sangria-dipped caterpillars, all eighty or so feet a touch unstable but still moving in the same direction—straight toward Matt's hairline. Yeah, pretty clear indicator that he did indeed spill that angsty crap off his tongue. Clamping his lips tightly together, Chase settled one of Matt's legs into the crook of his arm, canted his hips and positioned himself with his free hand. Cudgeling his brain managed to knock a few less "seventeen and hopelessly in lurve" words out of his mouth.

"Ready for the rodeo, cowboy?"

Okay, so that was lame too. Matt blinked and then burst into a split second of raucous laughter. Chase stopped that shit in its tracks with a thrust of his hips. Matty's eyes glowed like a solar flare, but then Chase blinked, and Matt's thick lashes were dusting his high cheekbones and he was biting that plump bottom lip. Chase growled, swooping forward to nip Matt's chin. Matt gasped, releasing the punishing hold his teeth had on his lip. The noise covered Chase's bitten back cry. He—dear lord, he didn't know it would be so tight and hot. Matt's face tightened, and the ring of muscle around Chase's cockhead closed in a crushing grip for a moment. Chase froze.

"Matt. Matty. You okay?"

Matt's eyes stayed closed, but his plump lips turned up at one corner. "Um. Maybe go easy? It's actually my first time at the rodeo."

The words hit Chase square in the chest. Air wooshed out of his lungs at hurricane force, and he tried to pull away but Matt's legs were locked around him. "Fuck. That woulda been great info two minutes ago, Matt."

Nodding, Matt opened his eyes. Sun-warmed pools of honey and fields of sunflowers had nothing on the sweet golden orbs, and Chase was all at once gasping for air. Matt's legs tightened a bit more, pulling Chase forward a scant inch. They both moaned. Matt's cheeks were redder than Chase had ever seen them. A tremor started somewhere between Chase's belly button and his cock. "I—Matt, I gotta move. Please. I. Are you?"

But he didn't need to ask. The vise-grip on his cock eased to ripples that pulled him farther inside Matt's startling heat. Matt answered anyway. "Yeah. Go. Just... slow, okay?"

So Chase went slow, as gradual and measured as spring sunshine coaxing the first green shoots of the year to life from winter's blankets of cold and forgetfulness. He eased forward, eyes squeezed shut to block out the burning gold of Matt's eyes, block out the hard-edged echoes of words he'd heard four and a half years ago outside Matt's hospital room, block out the snarling, clawed thing that had lived in his gut since that day. Those jagged words—"He's not *Aquillian*, Matt. That's all there is to it."—snarled out in Mr. Altieren's gravel and smoke voice.

Then Mrs. Altieren's razor-tipped alto—"It wouldn't be proper, Matthew. Why are we having this discussion? You know what you have to do."

Chase released Matt's legs, slid his hands under Matt's shoulders and dug his fingertips in at the top. He squeezed his eyes tighter. His face stung, and his lungs were riddled with holes. The slick velvet vise of Matt's channel almost strangled the memory into nothingness, but then Matt made a tiny sound at the back of his throat, and Chase couldn't keep his eyes closed one second longer. He had to see Matt's expression.

His heart banged around in his chest as his gaze mapped every inch of Matt's face. An impossibly earnest expression in the clear grey eyes, the soft curve of a half-open mouth, and then the flutter of inky lashes against Matt's reddened cheek sent the weight of four fucking years of carrying that overheard conversation around in his chest crashing down on Chase. "Why, Matty? Why now?"

Matt squeezed his eyes shut. For a second Chase could breathe again. Then Matt turned his head away. "Later, Chase. Weren't you the one who didn't want any small talk?"

Chase looked for the spray of blood, sure Matt had pulled an acid-tipped straight-razor from somewhere and laid him open, but somehow the cuts seemed to be all on the inside. Matt's hands gripped Chase's hips, and he curled and surged and—holy fucking four-year dry spell—suddenly Chase was balls-deep in the guy who'd starred in every single monkey-spanking and chicken-choking fantasy Chase ever had. Matt made that whine-scream-animal cry again, and this time the sound rolled through Chase's chest at the same time Matt's ass clamped down on Chase's cock. Yep, all she wrote.

It should have been mortifying, but right when Chase's head was exploding and his nuts were trying to propel themselves out the top of his dick, Matt made a new noise, raw, needy, and scraped from the floor of his soul maybe. His eyes rolled back in his head; his whole body tensed under Chase's. Earthquake of the flesh, Matt shuddering and coming wet, messy, musk and want and need distilled... and it was perfect for a handful of heartbeats.

Right about when Chase's brain stopped gibbering and making guh-guh-guh noises, Matt squirmed and then tensed in a very "get the fuck off me" kinda way. Chase recognized the move because it was the exact move he'd made about twenty-eight times over the past four years, usually right before his "it's not you, it's me" speech. Fuck that noise. He was gonna make like next year's Audi and move on down the road.

"Well. Guess you'll get the buckle since you stuck for the whole eight seconds, huh?"

He peeled himself off Matt and levitated off the bed. No, not really, but he gave it his best shot. Then he hotfooted it across the hall, scrubbed up without meeting his own eyes in the medicine cabinet mirror, and dug around in the cupboard next to the toilet for a washcloth. Matt still kept the linens right where his mom had, so in less than two minutes Chase was back in the bedroom. After giving Matt the warm cloth and a lopsided smile, he dove for his clothes, scrambling into them faster than he'd ever managed before in his life. Matt was giving him this weird, soft, wet-eyed look that Chase needed to get away from pronto. He turned up the wattage on his smile.

"O-kay. I—yeah, I'll see ya later, right? At Ryan's thing tonight?"

Matt might have responded, but Chase leapt straight from awkward shuffle to fleeing like the hounds of hell were on his heels, and he was out the bedroom door and leaping down the stairs three at a time before the man would have had time to do more than suck in a single shocked breath.

Their accidental bond grew; of course it grew over the years. From that first drop of blood Matt unthinkingly ingested, while Chase was busy saving Matt's life four and a half years ago to today, their bond had grown, tightened, and strengthened. Every joint barbeque their parents threw, every holiday gift exchange, every pheromone-laden breath of summer air by the back fence or bleak mid-winter piney promise on December twenty-fifth, added weight and tension to the tenuous thread between them until it grew into a solid, shining

web of interwoven life forces between the two of them. The final piece came with the scent of Chase's ejaculate. Matt's whole body caught fire, every nerve ending screaming out its own hallelujah chorus. Matt hung there: vaguely aware of communication sounds pouring from Chase's mouth. His eagle was screaming though, and the only thing that made sense was the touch of Chase's strong hands steadying and cleaning him. By the time the eagle was calm enough to make sense of man words and things again, the front door was rattling closed, and Matt was wondering what the hell had just happened.

Chase said he'd be at the party, Ryan's party that night. Matt remembered those words. Sucking in a lungful of strangely insufficient air, Matt clung to them, twining his mind with his eagle's and promising they could have their mate in a few hours. Neither of them bought that fairy tale any more than they'd bought the one the *Impritessians* sold at the beginning of the cleansing back on his home world. Some of the other eaglets in his training wing had believed everything the big reptiles told them, but Matt had listened to the mature eagles. Well, eavesdropped. None of them believed. To have that same hollow nothingness expand in his chest in response to words from the lips of his mate cut down through sinew and bone to nearly stop Matt's heart. His eagle screamed, and for a while, everything faded to white.

"Matt. Matt. Matty! Ewwww. Are you going to eat that? Seriously? That is so gross. Jesus. Do you have to tear them apart like that every time?"

Matt came back to himself hunched on the rough attic floor, back pressed into a corner and hands wrapped around the shredded carcass of...

"Oh fuck. Did Chase?"

Ryan pressed his lips together until a white line ran around them, throat working for a moment. "No. Jesus. Just." He shuddered, eyes flitting to the bloodied flesh hanging in Matt's hands. Nostrils flaring, Ryan stepped forward, pulling the dead rodent from Matt's hands. "Dammit, Matt, get downstairs and take a fucking shower. For the record, that's seriously gross, but more importantly, what the hell made you eagle out?"

Matt shivered. His lungs stung. "I-I think Chase lied to me. I. He said he'd be at your party, but the door closed like good-bye."

Ryan gaped at him, hand tightening convulsively around the remains of Matt's rodent tartar. "Oh shit. You said he can't—what the fuck is the little princess thinking?"

Matt's shoulders crept toward his ears, and his teeth began to click against one another. Face pinched into a moue of disgust, Ryan flung the carcass to the floor and then pulled Matt to his feet. "Come on, buddy. You need to get warmed up, and I need to get down to the YMCA to round up your freaky darling. You know exactly where the weirdo is. Where does Chase go when life throws him a curve?"

Matt's heart stuttered, stopped, and then banged into a galloping rhythm. Ryan rolled his hand in a very maestro of the orchestra motion, and they locked gazes to speak in unison. "Zumba class."

Then Ryan's gaze flicked down to Matt's feet and back up once. His lips kicked up on one side, and a dimple flashed. "I really think you should save the nature boy attire for my baby bro though. I keep telling you that even your extreme hotliness won't tempt me to the dark side, man."

Matt growled, pushing past his friend's broad-shouldered smartassery to stomp down the stairs. A shower sounded damn good.

Later, sitting in his mother's car in front of the YMCA his parents still held a family membership at, Chase dialed his brother's phone and prayed for voicemail. By the time the fourth ring clicked over into the blessed distance of Ryan's tinny recorded voice, Chase was at the front desk and asking what time their next Zumba class happened. His luck turned, because the perky blond at the counter named a time that coincided perfectly with Ryan's party.

"Hey, bro... not gonna make the party tonight. Uh, got notice that I have an interview in Boston the day after tomorrow, so if you could stick the keys to the Mystery Machine under the driver's seat, I'll grab them tomorrow morning before I head out. I'll see you in about a week, ha, unless I get the job—"

Blond and bubble assed said something low and flirty—Chase honestly couldn't be arsed to figure out exactly what—and Chase held up a finger before pointing at the phone that was right there in plain sight against his ear. He turned away before he rolled his eyes. "—and then I guess you'll have to come visit me in my new digs. I'd say I owe you a beer or something, except you're not forgiven for throwing me under the bus this afternoon. Fuckwad."

Then Chase turned back to the guy at the desk. "Sorry, sweetness. I'm taken."

As he strode away to the locker room, battered gym bag in hand, Chase realized the weirdest part of the whole damned surreal day was that the words

sounded so sincere he almost fooled himself. He shimmied his shoulders as though the uncomfortable thoughts would roll off onto the cheap but clean linoleum flooring of the locker room. "Right. Fuck my life. Like it could ever be that easy."

Muttering the words under his breath in case there were any kids lurking in the hallway leading to the studio where Zumba class was about to begin, Chase dragged a hand through his hair. Glancing through the window of the first door into the studio, Chase's whole world brightened. "Oooh, score. It's Chuck, which means step-Zumba. Hell to the yes."

Stride lengthening, Chase hustled into the dance studio and parked himself behind the first empty stepper he found. Chuck grinned at him, and Ann Marie, one of Chase's favorite Zumba aficionados, fell in at the stepper next to him. The heavy Cuban rhythms Chuck preferred began to pound through the room. Chase took his first full breath since he'd peeled himself off of Matt and followed Chuck's lead into the opening sequence of dance exercises.

An hour and twenty minutes later, the last of the hip-shaking rhythms faded away with the echoes of Chuck and Ann Marie's farewells. Chase settled onto the pale wood of the studio's floor to do one more set of quad and hamstring stretches. Lying on his back, one leg stretched toward the ceiling and the other bent and lying flush to the floor, Chase floated in his happy place. The *squeak, tap, squeak, tap* of a pair of athletic shoes barely registered.

"I never took you for a coward, bro."

Fuck. Ryan. Squinting against the glare of the overhead lights, Chase peered up at the shadowed face of his, sometimes, favorite brother. "Seriously? I'm in the Zumba room, man."

Ryan snorted, huffed out a breath and nudged Chase's side with his toe. "There's crap you don't know, princess... and anyway, what the hell have you had your royal knickers in a twist over for so long?"

Chase unkinked his legs and rolled to his feet. "Guess it's a good thing I was done here, isn't it?"

Ryan flinched, eyes darkening and face closing down to his construction-guy mask. Shit, Chase hadn't meant to lace his words with arsenic and old knives. "Crap. Sorry. I'll—we can talk, but not here. You know this is my Zumba zone, Ry."

And he just couldn't get anything right today, could he? Evidently not, because there went the fucking whine he thought he'd eradicated from his

repertoire over two years ago. Chase cleared his throat and dug his big-boy voice out of the depths of his psyche. "Meet me down in the locker room, okay? And I—"

Chase lay a hand on Ryan's shoulder, squeezing firm for the length of a heartbeat. Ry's eyes lightened a fraction. He grunted, chin still tilted at a pugnacious angle. "Whatev. Fucking weird ass Zumba-head. You got five to get your ass downstairs, princess. I am seriously pissed. That voice mail was total bullshit and we both know it."

He flung a callused hand up, pivoting to stalk across the floor. As Chase watched him fume out of the studio, a reluctant smile curved around the edges of his mouth. Pissed Ryan might be, but he still respected the Zumba zone. Chase called out after his brother. "Hold up, Douche. Ma would be so proud. You honored the no fly-DMZ-Zumba zone."

Ryan tossed a one-fingered salute over his shoulder. A guffaw shook its way free of Chase's throat as he snagged his water bottle and loped across the floor to catch the door before it closed behind his pain-in-the-ass brother. He caught Ryan two strides past the doorframe and slung an arm across his shoulders. Ryan reached up with the arm not trapped between them to flick Chase in the nose. "You're still a pain in the ass, Princess."

Chase choked on a laugh. "Yeah, I was just thinking the same about you, Douche."

Matt leaned against the wall, eyes trained on the archway leading to the front hall. Everyone kept calling the party Ryan's thing, which really made no sense unless you understood Chase. The Simms were celebrating Chase's graduation despite his longstanding antipathy toward graduation celebrations. Though, really, the dislike was for any celebration held in his honor, so they called it Ryan's party. Weird, but it worked for them. Matt turned his thoughts to the why behind Chase's dislike of celebrations, and winced. He harbored a suspicion as to the source of Chase's dislike. The Simms ebbed and flowed around him, reassuring chatter turning the party noise into something sounding like a flock of flamingos gathered in one of the marshes near his parents' new abode in Florida. His eagle flexed one wing and then the other, the restive clench of flight muscles preventing him from settling comfortably into his human form on an internal level. He kept his eyes fixed on the door and sipped slowly from the bottle Mr. Simms pressed in his hand the moment Ryan dragged him through the front door this evening.

Matt picked at the familiar golden-yellow label of his favorite beer with one ragged nail. The cherry-red accent colors outlining the edges of the seasonal brew drew a click and a chirrup from his throat. Gah. His fingers tensed around the brown glass of the bottle as he fought down the burning urge to find out how many pieces the bottle would make if he flung it against the wall opposite him. This constant tap-dance around who knew what, and how much he could reveal, kept his stomach acids in a constant slow boil. How much before the possibility of a lifetime spent on the cold metal tables, of some nameless research facility, extended beyond his own beak and encompassed his entire immediate flock? Family. Whatever.

Matt shook his head, the single short, sharp movement doing nothing to dispel the rising tide of dissatisfaction. Then the front door opened, and finally, finally Matt could scent his mate. The huge honking knot residing dead center in his chest ever since Chase took off that afternoon loosened.

Taking his first full breath in hours, Matt let the air escape to form his favorite word in the world. "Chase."

Nothing else came out, but it didn't matter. His eyes filled with long clean lines of muscle, his lungs with the dark musk of recent physical exertion overlaid with brighter tones of cucumber and melons... a new shampoo. His feet pulled him away from the living room wall and into the entryway before his head registered the tight-lipped, carefully blank state of Chase's face. His hand, as foolishly optimistic as his overeager feet, traced a shaking arc up from his side toward the high curve of Chase's cheek. Ryan stepped forward, blocking Matt's move. Eyes wide, lips puckered in a ridiculous duck-face selfie pose, he settled into the inches between Matt and his mate with the stubborn implacability of a granite wall.

"What the actual fuck, Matty. Did you guys talk at all? I mean ever?"

Matt's hand accidentally brushed Ryan's thick pectoral muscles for a scant second, burning before he snatched it back. Crap. Mating response. Dammit. No touching other males even casually for a few months. Better get some thick gloves to wear all the time at work.

Rubbing his stinging palm against the side of his jean-clad thigh, Matt squinted at his friend. "I-yes? Or maybe. What do you mean? Chase, what's he talking about?"

The cool strains of Chet Faker's *Thinking in Textures* album faded into silence at the exact moment Matt's voice rose to an ungodly screech. Ryan

flinched back, mouth turning down at the corners and dark gaze boring a white-hot hole through Matt. Flicking a split-second glance toward the sea of curious faces turned toward them, he waved an impatient hand at his mom. Matt glanced over as Mrs. Simms pushed buttons and cursed at the stereo system. The music cut back on, and Ryan leaned in close to Matt. “Yeaaaaaaah. Ah, why don’t the two of you take this out to the pool deck to work things out? And for fuck’s sake, talk this time. With actual words and everything, m’kay? Full disclosure time, buddy.”

Chase ground his back teeth together. His mom would definitely kill him if he punched the back of Ry’s head hard enough to knock the fucker out. Well, maybe not. He was her baby. Flashing a look across the room, he caught sight of her shaking her head at him. It was not fair that she always knew when he was about to kick the shit out of some deserving douchey douche-fucking moron. Her lips quirked up on one side, but her gaze stayed steady even though he unleashed the full power of his baby-of-the-family puppy-dog eyes on her. Only the slight shake to her shoulders even indicated that she’d seen his plea for a blind eye this once. Fine. He stalked down the hall past the arched entrance into the living room. Matt’s distinctive *tap-patter-thumpata-tap* eased along the hardwood behind him, so Chase didn’t bother to look back. After that magma-infused eye-fuck Matt treated him to before the giant dillweed masquerading as his brother stepped between them, there could be no doubt Matt was following wherever he led. Chase pulled in a long, slow breath as he approached the sliders leading out onto the pool deck.

“After you.”

Shit. His voice came rumbling out deep and raspy, a clear marker of desire. He drew in another heady lungful of air. Matt—dear god, he still smelled like sex, pine and sunshine. As he brushed past Chase into the dusky evening air, he made a wordless murmur. The sound sparked an instant flame in Chase’s gut and had him clenching his jaw hard enough to make it ache. Damn, he wanted to sink his teeth into the man. Again. Chase breathed deeply, which made everything worse, lungs filling with more of the wild scent that was all Matt and sex and home to Chase. He cleared his throat, shot a heavy glare down the hall toward his brother’s smirking face, stepped forward far enough to pull the sliders closed, and strode out in to the dark.

Matt meandered around the deck, down the steps and then over to the exact spot where he’d fallen into the pool four years ago. Chase’s gut tightened and his mouth went Death Valley dry.

“Christ. Don’t stand there.”

Matt shuffled back a step, then turned to fix his eyes on Chase. In the dark, their unusual amber-gold hue flashed out at Matt like gleaming high beams on a two-lane country road. “I-I promised Ryan I would tell you, but—”

The heat in Chase’s stomach turned from lava-lava hot meets ocean floor to molten center of the sun incendiary. The ball of dread and leftover hurt he’d carried for four years expanded, pushing all air and words from his lungs before his brain had a chance to sort them out. “What the fuck does Ryan have to do with anything? I’m—”

Matt took another step toward Chase, but Chase slashed one hand through the empty air between them. “No. Wait. I just can’t. I heard them, you know. I get it. You guys are some kind of royalty or something where you’re from, and I’m nobody. Well guess what? I don’t give a shit—right, that’s a fucking lie. I do care. But I get it.”

Even in the faint light filtering to where they stood, remnant of the golden beams spilling from every window of the house behind him, Chase could see the instant pallor of Matt’s face. Matt stood there for a heartbeat of time, face stark white and mouth gaping open. Then a tide of red rushed up the older man’s neck to crash against the high cliffs of his cheeks. Chase could practically feel the heat from where he stood.

Matt slammed his mouth shut, took two rapid steps forward and curled his fingers into the thin cotton of Chase’s shirt. “I—wait—just wait. Listen. Let me say—just listen and let me say this. I can’t stop or I might never get it said right. Okay? Okay. So there’s something you don’t know. I. My whole family. We—fuck, ask Ry later, okay? I’m not crazy—we’re shifters. Eagles. Not royalty, though related distantly on my father’s side.”

He shook his head, pressed his lips together until they turned white, kept one fist wrapped in the front of Chase’s shirt while the other opened into a hand that crept, hot and trembling, to press against the side of Chase’s neck. “I—Chase, that day. Here. When I fell, and you saved me?”

He paused then, waiting. Chase forced words out of the thousand-miles-deep well of crazy he’d fallen down. “What about that day, Matty?”

Matt’s eyes, close up, were wet and gold and fucking glowing like twin stars. He swallowed convulsively. “You started the bond, Chase. I knew—we all knew—you were my mate the first time we met your family. But it’s forbidden—no, no, not because of why you think. You were too young. We

have to wait. Our mates have to be adult before we can start the bond. It—what happened is forbidden.”

Chase reeled, the vise grip of four years' worth of rejection and bitter self-recrimination sloughing away in the span of a single heartbeat. “Matty. Matt. Jesus, your eyes are glowing. It's—Christ, it's true, isn't it? You're like—what—a werewolf? *Underworld* and shit, but with wings?”

A harsh sound filled the air between their breaths, half-wild animal cry and half choking laughter. The noise slid into the aching spaces of Chase's soul, slipped down into the love-drought-riddled soil inside the empty acres years of self-doubt had created within Chase. He shook, absolutely certain now. “Christ. Truth. Every word. I—Matty, what does that—fuck, either I'm going to be taking some nifty new meds soon, or you're telling me the truth here. I...”

Chase blinked, eyes blind to everything but the glistening yellow fire of Matt's gaze. “Fuck it. I can do crazy. So you're a shifter. Ah, and I'm your—what, mate? Is that why I haven't been able to keep my dick stiff around anyone but you since I was seventeen and you bit the shit out of me?”

Matt nodded wordlessly, an expression of such wariness flinching along the surface of his face it hurt to breathe next to him. Chase coughed, choked, and lifted a shaking hand to wipe across his face. “Okay. You're a shifter.”

Matt flinched again. Dammit, maybe he needed to try to make his voice a little softer around the edges, because damn if that last thing didn't come out all gonna-fuck-you-up badass. Chase huffed out half the air in his lungs. “You shifter, me mate, and what—oh shit. You were all kinds of screwed after the thing by the pool... that was what, instinct?”

This time there was less flinch and more rosy-cheeked, glowing-eyed goodness to the head nodding. A tiny spot of easy warmth began to push aside the lava-acid in Chase's stomach.

“Instinct.” He nodded decisively, and then leapt nimbly to the next logic rock in the raging river of crazy. “Instinct, and then you got your ass reamed in the not fun way by all those older and wiser bird-brains I overheard in your hospital room that day.”

“Yes.” Finally, a word to go with Matt's cute bobble-head impersonation. Oh damn. He just called bobble-headedness cute. This did not look good. Next thing, he knew he would think it was adorable when Matt did something weird

and birdy like eating a rat, maybe. A shudder wracked Chase's body and he swallowed hard. Christ. His life was officially *X-Files* level strange now.

Matt watched Chase closely, waiting for the incredulous stare, the stammering excuses to leave, or the full on pale face-pulse drop-holy shit shock to set in and send Chase screaming into the house. The younger man surprised him with a level gaze, hands that shook only a little, and the faint scent of arousal. Either Chase was holding out on some prior knowledge of shifters being real, or the pull of the mate bond eased the way to belief. Matt would lay money on the last one. "Can we take this over to my place? I. Your call. I know your mom planned this whole thing—"

Chase snorted, eyes bright and teeth flashing white against the tan backdrop of his face. "Ha. Told them all I didn't want a party. I hate these things."

Matt shivered. "Because of me?"

Chase froze, eyes locked on Matt's face, gaze sliding focus from the region of lips to chin to eyes and back again like a warm caress. "Huh. Yeah. Probably. Never really thought about it. Well, I was never crazy about all the people staring and shit. But yeah. It got worse for sure after that summer."

The words hit like a hail of arrows. So much pain, and he'd caused most of it. Matt's chest squeezed down tighter than an asthmatic's breaths in the midst of a Florida Keys heatwave. "I'm sorry. I never meant for you—"

Chase took three short steps, chest bumping Matt's and then pressing him back a pace. His large hand curled around the nape of Matt's neck, strong, warm, and steady. "I think I'm starting to see that... but let's talk about it where people aren't trying to be clever and watch us through darkened windows."

Matt laughed. Chase's voice rose steadily through the whole last half of his statement, and at least two curtains twitched guiltily in upstairs windows. The acid-peel bitter feel of the last few minutes broke, leaving him with the sweet scent of summer, Chase, and chocolate. "Okay. You want to go through the house or out the side gate..."

But Chase wasn't listening, already turning toward the gate, that hot hand sliding down to the small of Matt's back. Protective and guiding rather than proprietary and demanding, the small gesture wrapped Matt in a blanket of care. When it slid away, even though he knew the gate was old and needed two

hands to finagle open, he still mourned the contact. Worse yet, that sliver of time showed him exactly how bad having Chase deny him now would be. He bit his lip and lifted suddenly leaden feet to clump along the side of the Simms home and across the intervening lawn to his own front door. The pinprick of happy goo he'd felt when Chase took control of him, steering him out of the pool area and then out of the Simms's backyard grew and spread through his body faster than mice on ice disappeared at an Altieren family reunion. The kick in the teeth came with the way the happy goo morphed into a huge load of leaden happy-be-gone, what-ifs, and good-bye blues.

If Chase left, it wouldn't kill Matt, or make him wish he were dead. This wasn't some stupid romance novel full of easy clichés. No. Chase denying their bond would merely strip Matt of his will to retain his human half. No big deal. He'd always enjoyed the time spent in his bird form. Matt squared his shoulders, lifted his chin, and unlocked his front door. This was a win/win scenario for him, right? Either he got a gorgeous mate, or could start putting things in order to turn all his possessions over to either Ryan or the flock. Hey, maybe someone could set him loose on one of those big wildlife preserves to give him a good shot at staying out of any close encounters with the local taxidermist.

Matt's head filled with the buzz that came before the white noise pulled him under. Panic streaked though him on fiery wings. He flung a hand behind him grasping for some bit of Chase's naked skin. The heat of Chase's broad palm settled against the nape of his neck.

"S'okay, Matty. Just get the door open. I'm here. Listening. You got my attention, okay? I'll hear the whole thing through. Might need a little show and tell, 'cause this shit is definitely *X-Files* strange. Heh. You're cuter than Mulder though."

The razor-winged, gnat-sized eaglets flipping through advanced maneuvers in his stomach paused long enough to let him bark out a ragged laugh. "I—okay. Okay. Come inside."

Finally, the damn door was open. They stepped inside, and then Chase crowded him against the door, and oh, the chocolate he'd been smelling all night was coming from Chase. He tasted of it, dark and faintly bitter and so damn good. A gasp painted the air between them, and Matt didn't know which of them it had come from. He took the chance to push a hand against Chase's chest, not that he could move him. Chase was crazy strong for a human. Probably from the protracted bonding process. Matt sucked in a lungful of

Chase-scented air, moaned, and forced himself to speak intelligibly. “Wait. Talk. I—shit, step back. Can’t think when you touch me.”

Chase, the evil bastard laughed low and rough, pushing his hips forward for a teasing moment before canting them back and tipping his head down to rest their foreheads together. “Sorry. I’ll behave. We—you wanted me then?”

His voice betrayed a barely there quiver, and his big hand, still resting on the back of Matt’s neck, had gone cold. Matt lifted his own hand to cover Chase’s. “Always, Chase. Every damn second, since I first laid eyes on you, as twisted as that sounds. You were so young when we first got here, and my parents insisted—I didn’t want to fuck you then. You were just a kid, and I wanted to be your best friend—”

His mouth was running away with him. Thankfully, Chase jumped in with the perfect thing to stop him. “Once more into the breach, my friend, and fill it with your froggy dead!”

Matt blinked, not sure if he should be impressed that Chase was quoting Amy Lane, or appalled at such rampant misquoting of classical literature. That Matt needed to be appalled at the implication that he would prefer squishy amphibians over a juicy rodent went without saying. He shook his head to clear it. “Ah. So. I—do you want to see it?”

Chase snorted. “Matty, I’ve already seen your everything.”

Matt thumped him on the chest. “My eagle, you jerk. Do you want to see my eagle?”

Face gone still, eyes hot and fathoms deep, Chase nodded. “Yeah. Think I’d better, hadn’t I?”

Matt pushed against him again. “Well then, you’d better let me up off this door. Let’s go upstairs. If I’m gonna get naked, it might as well be in my bedroom.”

Following Matt’s juicy bubble of an ass up a set of stairs could never be seen as anything but pure pleasure. Chase rolled with it, feasting his eyes and putting serious thought into whether it might be acceptable to engage in a bit of groping before they go to the meds-or-madness part of the evening. He should probably take this all more seriously, but... he just couldn’t. Nope. Chet Faker’s “No Diggity” started looping in his head again, and he figured, fuck it.

Reaching forward with both hands, he grabbed a double handful of delight. Matt squeaked in a very unmanly and screeching tone. “Wha—Chase. I—give me a second to—”

Chase kept one hand on Matt's bite-worthy posterior, and slid the other forward to cup his equally luscious package. “Christ, Matty, you're just fucking edible, you know that right?”

Matt skipped up a step. “Please, Chase. Let me show you first. I—you need to see it. Meet my eagle.”

His eyes glowed again, and Chase swallowed against a sudden tightness in his throat. “Okay, Matty. I—so you change into an eagle? No fooling?”

Matt smiled, but the edges of his grin were too tight and the expression didn't reach his eyes. “Yeah. No fooling. My eagle... he wants to meet you, Chase. He wants to see you, and have you see him.”

No pressure there.

“Yeah. Okay, Matty. Bring it.”

Matt didn't pause at the head of the stairs, stride long and even as he made his way into the master bedroom. The second he hit the door he started peeling out of his clothes. Chase watched the fluid movements with hot eyes and fingers pressed against his lips. His heart beat against the walls of his chest like it was trying to escape. Matt dropped his shirt to the floor at the foot of his bed, then unbuckled his belt before unsnapping and unzipping his jeans. Every article of clothing that came off seemed to center him more and fill Chase's body with pins and needles. Matt kicked off his shoes and stepped out of his pants.

Chase caught his breath as he took in the perfect symmetry of his lover's form. “God. Matt. I don't know if I'm ready.”

Matt fixed him with a long glance. His pupils contracted, his head thrust forward, shoulders pushed back, and then there was a flash as white light poured out of every pore of Matt's body. Chase blinked, one arm flinging up to shield his eyes. Something rustled, flapped, and a heavy weight landed with sudden force on Chase's wrist and the lower portion of his forearm. Prying his eyes open, he stared into the fierce silver of Matt's eyes resting in an eagle's face.

“Fuck. That is really weird, Matt. And damn if you don't make a sexy bird. Huh. Trust you to find a way to stay edible, even all feathered out. Um, thanks

for not slicing my arm up with those huge fucking talons. Nice trick. Do you think you can bring the skin and man-shape back now?"

The light flared again, and then Matt stood in front of him, chin lifted and eyes staring at him without blinking. "So?"

Standing at the foot of his bed without a stitch of clothing to hide behind, arm outstretched and verbal challenge hanging in the air between them had the razor-winged mini-eaglets bashing at the walls of Matt's stomach again. He swallowed thickly, hand growing heavier with each second ticking by. Chase didn't seem to be breathing, and if he'd blinked once since Matt changed back to his human form, Matt had missed it entirely.

"Um, Chase? Dying here. Are you... what are you going to do?"

But Chase didn't say a word. Instead, he knocked Matt's hand to one side, surged forward, and wrapped both arms around Matt's torso. Lifting Matt with both arms, he nipped along Matt's collarbone. Fire raced through Matt's veins and a shuddering sound, half moan and half sigh, escaped him. "I—Chase what—"

Chase bit down on the side of Matt's throat. Incendiary. Matt gave up on words. Fuckers were over rated. Keening in tones more suited to his bird form would express what he was feeling with perfect adequacy. Chase nipped under his jaw, then pressed a chuckle to his lips. "Don't have to guess if you liked that."

And with a growling, grunting noise from Chase, Matt found himself suddenly airborne. He bounced down on the messy surface of his bed, the musk of their earlier lovemaking rising from the sheets. Matt shivered, cock racing past *ooh, interesting* to *oh-hell-yeah* in less time than it would take to speak the phrases aloud. Chase watched him with hooded eyes as he stripped off shirt, shoes, and everything in between in a handful of sharp, efficient moves. Breath going shallow and fast, Matt stroked his tongue along suddenly dry lips and lifted both arms up toward his mate. Another whining, keening sound slipped from his lips. Chase grinned, teeth sharp as a shark's appetite. Crawling up from the foot of the bed, the younger man prowled up the length of Matt's body, heat and intent radiating from his golden skin like a promise.

"Shh." Chase dipped down, hot skin sliding along Matt's chest, thighs, belly and groin. Squeezing his eyelids shut, Matt lifted his head, arms slipping behind Chase's slim waist and pulling. His lips drawn like metal shavings to a

strong magnet, Matt pressed a whole swarm of butterfly-light kisses along the length of Chase's throat. Hunger coiled, wild and toothy, in the cavern of Matt's mouth. He moaned and then sucked up a mark under Chase's jaw.

"Oooh. Yeah. Just like that."

Matt grunted, hips rolling up, every piece of him seeking friction. Chase obliged, sliding and twisting against him to the music of their moans. A snicking sound echoed through the air and then Chase was pushing two slick fingers into Matt's ass. The stretch burned enough to pull a hiss from Matt, and Chase paused for a split second. He lifted his head away, settling back on his knees and flicking Matt's hip. "Pay attention, Matty. I—you were my first. I'm thinking that's a mate thing? Hoping anyway, because if you're as new to this as I am, we can ditch the rubbers, yeah? At least—shit, it sounded exclusive. Did you mean exclusive?"

Matt's heart rate sped up and the corners of his mouth tilted up. Good to know he wasn't alone in babbling when he got nervous. "Yeah. Me, you—that's it. Ever."

Chase grinned and flicked the condom back toward the nightstand. Matt grinned back and crinkled his brow. "When the hell did you get that thing out?"

Laughter spilled out of Chase's open mouth and danced in his glittering eyes. "While you were shivering and whining under me."

Matt's face filled with heat. "Oh."

Leaning down, Chase nuzzled behind Matt's ear. "Don't sweat it, Tweety. I'm good with my hands, and been practicing on myself for years. Seriously man, years. If you don't lose your effing mind I'll have to turn in my man-card."

Matt bit his lip, a thousand questions crashing against the sealed gates of his pride. Chase held his gaze, one eyebrow climbing up to a crooked arc. "Dude. Shit. We're gonna try. Okay. Sweaty, nakkie time first, m'kay? Then if you still wanna get your tweenie-girl gabfest on, we can. Yeah, don't crinkle your eyebrows at me. I can see at least nine thousand questions trying to fight their way out of your pointed head."

Opening his mouth, a scoffing puff of air tripping off his tongue, Matt twisted his mouth into position to deliver a suitably sarcastic zinger. Chase beat him to the punch though, pressing a feather-light kiss to his lips and then pulling back just far enough to squint down at him. "Jesus. And they call me

Princess. I can see who's really going to be shopping for tiaras in this relationship.”

And then Matt didn't have time for scoffing or zingy quips. He was too busy moaning and whining as Chase kissed him within an inch of his life. Later sounded like a perfectly acceptable time to talk. Way later. Like after Chase fucked him through the mattress a few more times. Yeah, as long as they tried, everything else was details.

The End

Author Bio

Butcher, baker, candlestick maker... Cherie does occasionally wield a meat-cleaver—it's best to stand back until she's finished that first cuppa joe. No, really. She bakes to relieve stress and increase the ratio of brownies to humans. Hey, someone has to. Cherie's really more of a candle burner than a candle maker, but let's not quibble.

Born in West Palm Beach, Florida and raised... er, is all over the damn place a sufficiently descriptive term? No? Okay then, moving right along... she's a tinker, tailor, and an Indian chief... Ooooh, Cherie especially likes to tinker when smexy men are involved (!), she only sews under duress, and did her cheek-bones give it away?

Cherie has lived in Washington D.C., Virginia, Upper Michigan, Texas, New York, California, and Alabama in the United States; Hessen in Germany, London in England, Masirah Island in Oman and... sometimes she lived in a house, sometimes in a tent, and sometimes wherever she could lay her head.

Cherie's been in love with words since before she drew breath, and doesn't see that ever changing. She writes stories. Sometimes there's music with them, sometimes they're poems, and lately, to her great delight, a plethora of M/M erotic romance. Yum. Smexy man to the second... or third power... now that's the kinda math Cherie can get behind!!

The hair curls or frizzes as it will, the eyes are green and tend to look in two different directions—no, really—and the rest is subject to change. You know the guy who didn't know if he was a butterfly dreaming he was a man or a man dreaming he was a butterfly? Yeah, that's Cherie, but substitute drag queen for butterfly and wacky, wild ex-Army chick for man.

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