



OLLEY
WHITE

Table of Contents

Love’s Landscapes.....	3
Game On – Information.....	5
Dedication.....	6
Game On.....	7
1. The Chapter Where Everything Max Thought He Knew Proved Wrong...	8
2. Monkeying About.....	13
3. Talking Chicken.....	18
4. Closets Are for Clothes and Mothballs.....	22
5. BFF’s.....	29
6. Dog Eat Dog.....	36
7. Skater Boy.....	40
8. Boys Will Be Boys.....	47
9. Facts Are Facts.....	53
10. Game On.....	62
11. Fight or Flight.....	70
12. It’s Dance Stefan, But Not as We Know It.....	79
13. One Small Strip for Stefan, One Giant Leap (of Confidence) for Max(kind)	83
14. Roses Are Red.....	90
15. Happily Ever After... The End.....	94
Author Bio.....	96

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

GAME ON

By Olley White

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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GAME ON

By Olley White

Photo Description

Two men, in their early twenties, lean towards each other for a kiss. Both smiling, they have their eyes shut. One boy has tousled hair, an earring and an upper ear piercing. He's wearing a bright turquoise T-shirt while the other has neater hair and is wearing a checked shirt. Their hands are held, and a gaming controller nestles between them. A computer screen with a game playing on it is visible in the background.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We met in the strangest way.

I was convinced he was a girl because of his choice of character, and he thought the same thing about me. You can imagine how surprised we were when we first met in person. How confused I was about my feeling for him. I was already in love with the person behind the character, but I had never been attracted to a man before.

Can you tell the story of how we became that happy couple in the picture?

Sincerely,

MC

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, UST, gaming, humorous, geeks, men with pets

Word Count: 36,437

Dedication

This story is for all of us who have made a judgment—intended or not. It is for all of us who have learnt from those judgments. It is for all of us who love love and hate labels.

I have loved every minute of this writing challenge and would like to thank MC firstly for such a great prompt.

Without the support of my fellow Unicorns who, underneath all the smut, have hearts of gold and are generous to a fault, this wouldn't have been possible. Those layers of smut can be kinda deep though, just as a warning. ;) As morale boosters, question answerers and doubt bashers they are amazing. Thanks Uni's, you truly are the best and I love you all.

Enormous thanks to Sara for beta-reading and editing and giving me confidence.

Also a big thanks to Natasha Snow for my beautiful cover—I love it hard, and for believing in these boys from the start.

I wouldn't be me without my husband and children. They complete me and let me be just me. They let me listen to the characters in my head—even if it means I burn tea. Thanks guys, I love you so, so very much.

GAME ON
By Olley White

1. The Chapter Where Everything Max Thought He Knew Proved Wrong

Max slammed shut his car door and locked it. He looked down at his dark jeans and shirt combo—god he hoped he looked alright. Was he too casual? Too smart? Should he have worn a T-shirt or trainers? He closed his eyes, took a breath and shoved his keys into his jacket pocket. He was here, this is what he was wearing, and if Stef judged him on that, then the relationship they'd built up wasn't as good as he'd thought. Right? Besides, they'd both agreed to wear the colours of their Final Fantasy characters so they'd recognise each other, and this was as close as it got for him. For a start, he didn't own a dress of any description—drag wasn't his thing—but the colours were similar to what MAX11, the Elezen archer he played as, wore. He knew he was looking for someone in a silvery top and navy blue bottoms. He wondered if Stef would have on the long, flowing skirt and top combo her Miq'ote, Keeper of the Moon wore. He tried not to think about the knee-high boots the feline creature wore, because even on the cat avatar they were a bit of a turn on.

He walked towards the zoo entrance, eyes, hidden by his sunglasses, constantly scanning the crowds for anyone who could be Stef. He ground his teeth together nervously and wished he'd suggested sending photo's to each other in the chat room they occupied. He'd obviously read far too many crappy novels where the characters met and could only be identified by the outfit they wore. It had seemed a little romantic at the time for him not to know—now it just seemed cheesy and ridiculous.

At the entrance he leaned back against the wall, knee bent up, foot pressed flat against it—he was aiming for casual nonchalance, but as crowds of families passed him he thought perhaps looking too casual wouldn't be the best way. He wanted to make a good impression after all. Having a crush on someone you'd never actually met was ridiculous wasn't it? Even if he had spent more hours with her than his so-called best friend recently. He stopped that thought in its track—Aaron had just become a father, and he was already a nominee for father-of-the-year as far as Max was concerned. His best friend had gone from *gamer extraordinaire/lad about town/last to leave the pub* to a dedicated, *do the middle of the night feeds and still work all day as a mechanic to pay the bills*, kind of guy. Max wouldn't have thought such a one-eighty would be possible if he hadn't witnessed it himself. That was love he supposed. Maria had walked into his life, given him one look with her huge Bambi eyes, and Aaron was

smitten. Max would hate her for taking his bestie away if she wasn't so damn nice. It wasn't like she was his type or anything; he preferred a more—practical—woman than Maria. She must appeal to Aaron's Neanderthal side, the protector part of him that he'd managed to keep well-hidden for the first twenty-two years of his life.

He stood up straighter as a tall girl, wearing long flowing clothes in light blue shades, walked towards him. His heart thudded as he patted his hair and adjusted his jacket. Her hair was short and she had a piercing through her lip that Max really liked. He moved forward and was about to speak when a man ran up to the girl, slung an arm around her shoulders and planted a kiss on her mouth. Shivers ran down Max's spine—that was too close for comfort. He slumped back against the wall and checked his watch, it was only ten-twenty, five minutes after they'd agreed to meet. Traffic was horrendous—at least it had been on the small bit of the A11 he'd had to travel on. Meeting on a bank holiday Monday perhaps wasn't the brightest idea he'd ever had. *Patience is a virtue*, he reminded himself in a voice that sounded an awful lot like his mother's.

The August sun was beating down, and he slipped off his jacket, being sweaty when he met Stef for the first time was not going to win him any brownie points. The chatter of monkeys and the excited squeals of children could be heard coming from inside the zoo. More and more cars pulled into the car park and families and couples drifted past—excited children and parents who already looked worn out. He wasn't the only person waiting though, another bloke stood to his left scanning the crowd with the same faux-casual nonchalance as Max. Max was rather envious of the cut-offs the guy had on, and the short-sleeved, pale grey top looked much cooler than the shirt he was wearing. Cooler, in both senses of the word, Max realised in dismay, as he noted the Final Fantasy logo on the front of it. Suddenly he felt very overdressed. What if Stef thought he was a toff prick? He had to wear shirts in the week, but he always wore T-shirts outside of work. Always. At least he'd got his favourite boots on—they were hot in the summer, but they were comfortable. Not as impressive as the well-worn, brown lace-ups Mr. Cool was wearing though. Max wouldn't mind getting his hands on a pair of them, they looked good and comfortable. He realised he was staring at about the same time Mr. Cool caught him. A grin plastered itself across the other man's face and Max blushed. How friggin' embarrassing. He nodded his head in the way that dudes did when trying to be cool—though god knows, he didn't have a cool bone in his body. Geek to the core and further out of his comfort zone than he'd ever been in his life.

Purposely turning his head in the other direction, he scanned the crowds and checked if he could see any girls waiting alone by the gates. Nadda, nobody, not a person in sight—well excepting Mr. Cool obviously. Wishing he'd brought a bottle of water with him, he glanced once more at his watch. Just gone half past. Fuck. What did he do? Did he carry on waiting, did he go into the zoo—perhaps Stef had got it wrong and thought they were meant to be meeting inside the gates not outside. Or did he just go home? Running his fingers over his short hair, he wondered if he should muss it up more, make it look less preppy. Why hadn't they exchanged numbers? It wasn't, you know, like it was the twenty-first century or anything. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and stared at it as if it would help—then he thought about sending a message to the chat room, maybe, just maybe she'd see it and let him know what was going on. Or maybe she'd already left a message there to say that she wouldn't be able to make it. What if she'd had an accident on the way or something... He could virtually feel his blood pressure rising as he accessed the internet.

The chat room was empty when he entered, but he left a message for Stef anyway—both in their private chat space and in the main forum. It was ridiculous, if, hell *when*, anyone asked about Stef he could talk about her like he'd known her forever. He could tell people what kind of sense of humour she had—a downright dirty one that he loved. He knew what a wicked fighter she was in the virtual world, how she fiercely defended waifs and strays and took on enemies for the weaker characters. He knew her love for waifs and strays bled into her real life, that she worked in an animal re-homing centre and she loved all of the creatures, but that the cats were her favourite. It was one of the things they had in common; he was a cat lover to the core. He knew she liked silvery blue and also turquoise and bright yellow. He knew summer was her favourite season, and she loved nothing better than a walk on the beach as the sun was either setting or rising. She preferred early mornings to late nights, dessert better than mains and her taste in music was eclectic to say the least. He felt like he knew her inside out—nobody else had seemed to understand his sense of humour like she did. Even Aaron looked at him sideways sometimes with a bewildered look on his face. It was all those little bits of the puzzle that he'd slowly fallen in love with over the past year—but now he was looking at the whole picture he couldn't see a damn thing. What did he really know? Not what she looked like or how to get hold of her; that was a fact.

Cold dread that this was going to turn into an episode worthy of that Catfish show gripped him as he refreshed the page for the chat room. Nada. He scanned

the crowd again praying someone in silver and blue would come into sight. Nobody—except Mr Cool, giving him a strange look. Max frowned, what was up with *him*? Turning away again he refreshed the page on his phone and was pleased to see that Stef was in the chat room.

5t3ff: *Hi MAX11 ☺ Everything ok?? I can't see you anywhere??*

MAX11: *5t3ff - R U at the zoo??*

5t3ff: *At the front gates as promised.*

Max looked up and scanned the area. He couldn't see anyone waiting there other than him and Mr Cool. Was there another entrance—were they both at the right zoo?

MAX11: *R U at Banham zoo??*

5t3ff: *Yep! I can't see you...*

MAX11: *Um - are you in silver and blue? Can you wave or something?*

5t3ff: *LMAO - sure thing MAX11!*

Max once again looked up and searched the people coming in to the zoo. Nobody was waving—then a movement caught the corner of his eye. Slowly, he turned and watched as Mr Cool waved. He was facing directly towards Max and grinning like a loon. A feeling of horror came over Max. He looked down at his phone, as he watched a new message appeared on screen.

5t3ff: *Are you by any chance wearing a blue shirt, dark jeans and are a bit of a hunk? ☺*

Max could feel the colour rushing to his face as he lifted his head once more. Mr Cool was looking straight at him, the grin tempered to a welcoming smile. Warmth and kindness lit up his face, and he took a small step towards Max. Max was frozen to the spot, staring straight ahead. His phone beeped—another message in the chat room.

5t3ff: *Hi MAX11 - you're not exactly what I expected. From the look on your face, I'd say you're feeling the same. Lol. I'd still really like to see the animals though - if you'd like to.*

Max looked at the phone in his hand and tentatively typed:

MAX11: *sure.*

He then watched as Mr Cool walked slowly towards him, smiling that goddamn smile.

“Hi Maxi.” Mr Cool stopped right in front of him.

“It’s Max,” Max said, the millions of greetings he’d rehearsed in his head gone.

“Hi Max—it’s nice to meet you. I’m Stefan—or five T three F-F as you know me!”

Max shuffled uncomfortably. “I thought it was Stef, short for Stephanie,” he admitted.

A chuckle escaped Stef. “And I thought you were Maxi—short for Maxine.” Stefan grinned again, and Max couldn’t help himself; he joined in.

Offering his hand forward, he said, “Let’s start again—hi, I’m Max, nice to meet you!”

“And I’m Stefan,” said the other man before pulling him in for a hug. “I don’t do handshakes, sorry, too formal for me.” He let go, and Max, the least huggy person he knew, couldn’t help giving him another great big cheesy smile.

“So, shall we go and see what the monkeys are up to?”

2. Monkeying About

By the time they'd made it through the pay point and were poring over the little leaflet map of the park together, Max was feeling easier. He'd stuffed all the preconceived notions he'd had of Stef into a quiet part of his head and was trying to think of Stefan as an entirely new person. Not the someone he'd been convinced he was in love with for the past six months.

"So I reckon if we go round this way and see the monkeys first, by the time we've done this section here," Stefan pointed to the map, "we'll be in time to see the birds of prey display. What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me." Max folded the map, and they started walking. "I love the howler monkeys. I remember when my mum and dad brought me here as a kid, and they were calling to each other, it was brilliant."

"I'd ask you to do an impression," said Stefan, "but I'm pretty sure you're not drunk enough for that."

"I'd never be drunk enough for that!"

Stefan stopped and looked at Max. "Well that sounds like a challenge, if ever I've heard one." He raised his eyebrows, charcoal eyes glinting in the August sun. They were a really unusually deep grey, Max found himself thinking, kind of like the deep, purpley-grey clouds that were collecting in the distance.

Max shook his head and circumnavigated a group of girls in party dresses squealing at each other, while two very tired-looking mums checked their map. "No way—not gonna happen. The one and only time I got drunk it was a complete disaster. It's *never* happening again." The memory of the night he and Aaron had discovered vodka for the first time was ingrained in his head so hard it still caused him to blush when he thought about it, three years after the event.

"If you think that's going to put me off trying, you really don't know me very well at all."

Max sighed, the truth of that was more than apparent.

By the time Max's stomach started growling at one o'clock, they'd done a good third of the zoo. They'd seen all the primates and caught a birds of prey show. Max had nearly had a heart attack when the vulture had swooped straight towards them, skimming over the tops of their heads. Stefan had just clapped

his hands together and laughed. He was like a child in a toy shop at Christmas, over-excited and expressive. Instead of finding it annoying though, Max found he loved how happy Stefan was, enjoyed how he delighted in everything.

“Pit stop?” asked Stefan, as Max’s stomach grumbled again. They queued for sandwiches, drinks, crisps and cake in the small cafe, and then took them to a quietish, shaded spot under a big, old oak tree to eat.

“I like your T-shirt,” said Max as he swallowed down his cheese sandwich with a mouthful of orange juice.

Stefan looked down at the grey shirt with its entwined everlanders on the front. “Is it really sad that I own about a million T-shirts like this—gaming, Game of Thrones, Big Bang... You name it, and I’ve probably got it.”

“The Bazinga one? I’ve got that too. And one of the iron throne. And a Kvothe King Killer one.”

“And there I was thinking you were such a yuppie in your shirt and ironed jeans.”

Max threw a crisp at him. “I don’t think yuppies exist outside of the 1980s,” he said, batting away the rolled-up chocolate wrapper Stefan had used as his own missile. “I knew I was over-dressed.”

“Nah, it suits you.” Max was thankful that, at that moment, Stefan lay back on the grass with his hands under his head because, for the third time, at least, that afternoon, he blushed.

As the sounds of the zoo carried on around them, they relaxed in the sun. There was still a good five hours before the park shut. With his eyes closed and his booted feet crossed, Stefan looked so comfortable. The bit of leg that showed between the ragged edges of his denim cut-offs, just above his knee, and the top of his, mid-calf length, unlaced biker boots looked muscled and well-formed—and a *much nicer shade of tan than my own milk-white legs*, thought Max. A peep of toned stomach was showing where his T-shirt had slid up, and Max self-consciously sucked in his own stomach, not that he was fat, but there was also nothing washboard about his abs. Stefan’s biceps bulged slightly where his arms bent up, so his hands could form a pillow under his head, they were that nice kind of bulgy—not over-done gym bunny, but formed from honest outdoor work. *Though*, thought Max, *Stefan works in an animal sanctuary, how much physical work is there in that?*

“Do you work out?” he asked before his brain caught up with his mouth. Stefan laughed as his eyes shot open, and his gaze found Max’s. Max had to

force himself not to look away, certain he was scarlet again. How mortifying, to wear your emotions on your face, he'd never been so self-conscious of his blushing in his life.

"I, er, I... I mean does your..."

"I have to do a lot of lifting, not to mention grooming, cleaning and dog walking," said Stef, apparently enjoying Max's discomfit. "I run occasionally, bike a bit, play the odd game of footie... I don't go to the gym or anything. Why? Do you?"

Max snorted and held his arms out to indicate himself. "Seriously, do I look as though I work out? The most I do is a bit of walking, I should think that's pretty obvious." He couldn't help the derogatory tone that slipped into his voice. Geek might be the new chic, but when he'd been at school, pale and nerdy wasn't a hit with anyone. Funny really, he hadn't felt like a loser for years.

"Hey, I'm telling you, everything I see looks pretty darn fine to me," said Stefan, with that damn lazy grin of his again. Max turned crimson for the gazillionth time, and Stefan chuckled. The thought slipped into his head that Stefan was flirting with him. He tucked away that deliberation with the others he was going to examine at a later date and added in the recognition that he didn't feel all that uncomfortable with it.

"Come on," Max said. "Shall we go and see the rest of the animals?"

After a quick look at the zoo map, they headed off towards the giraffe enclosure. The heat was really oppressive now and Max undid another button on his shirt. Despite the high temperature and the glaring sun though, dark clouds were gathering rapidly and heading towards the zoo. The giraffes were eating from feeding baskets wired up near the visitors' walkway. One looked up as Stefan and Max approached.

"Giraffe selfie," said Stefan, grabbing hold of Max and pulling him close. They both grinned manically and Stefan took the picture. He looked at his phone and started laughing. Before long, tears were streaming down his face, and Max just looked at him bewildered. He was unable to stop the grin rapidly spreading across his own face at Stefan's hysterics. Once he'd composed himself a little, Stefan held up the screen so Max could see and there, right between the two of them, was a giraffe looking slightly bonk eyed at the camera. Max couldn't help it; he snorted loudly and erupted into his own giggles—setting off Stefan again. It took ages to stop laughing, and several zoo

visitors gave them odd looks as they passed them on the walkway. A few grinned along with them—and more than one mum dragged her children by, as if their hysteria was catching. Of course this only served to make things seem funnier, and they both set off again. Finally, they'd got their mania just about under control and made it to the end of the giraffe enclosure.

By mutual agreement, they were saving the big cats for last. The afternoon flew past—they laughed at the prairie dogs as they popped in and out of holes. They pretended they weren't freaked by the fifteen-foot python, Max even tentatively ran his fingers over the smooth scales on a Honduran milk snake. Snakes weren't his thing, but he didn't want to look a complete wuss in front of Stefan. Hand shaking, he touched his fingers to the scaly reptile. The keeper offered Stefan the same chance. Stefan, though, took one look at the snake and stepped backwards.

"There is no way, in this kingdom or the next, you are getting me to touch that thing," he said. "Even at work they know better than to try and get me near any snakes."

"You don't like them, huh?" Max asked and led the way out of the reptile house.

"Do you know what, Max?" Stefan's grin returned. "You're my hero." Max laughed loudly, he was the least hero-like person he knew. "Nope, seriously dude, you the man!"

At last they'd been everywhere except the cat enclosures. First they visited the cheetah area and observed silently through one of the viewing windows as one cheetah strolled around its compound, while another lazed on a platform basking in the sun.

"See how magnificent they look." Stefan's voice was full of wonder as he watched. "See how sleek and muscled they are. They can run up to about 75 miles an hour, just for a short burst, but still that's impressive isn't it?"

Max's eyes darted to Stefan, there was something about the awe in him that filled Max with joy—he liked Stefan being happy. "They really are magnificent, Stefan."

The other man looked at him. "I'm not boring you am I? I know I go on a bit when I get around animals. John hated it, it was one of the reasons we argued all the time."

"Not at all," stuttered Max, simultaneously thinking he couldn't imagine Stefan ever being boring and wondering who John was.

Stefan held his gaze for a few seconds, those damn grey eyes searching for something but Max had no clue what. A small smile creased the corners of his eyes, and Max released a breath he hadn't realised he was holding.

The snow leopards and Sri Lankan leopards held Stefan just as rapt, but it was the Siberian tiger that stole him away. Max wasn't quite sure where Stefan had gone to in his mind while they were looking at the tiger prowling round its domain, but at least part of him wasn't in the zoo with Max. A mixture of awe and disappointment writ themselves across his face, and Max saw more than the happy-go-lucky Stefan who had been with him all morning.

"Last stop, the small cats," Stefan said eventually, and Max ignored the stab of disappointment that struck when he realised the day was almost over. They lingered by the small cat cages. Max pretended to himself he was going slowly because he really liked the ocelots, and that the Geoffroy's cat was too beautiful to whiz past. It was nothing do with how much he'd enjoyed being with Stefan. At least, that was what he told himself.

3. Talking Chicken

The rain that had threatened to fall for the last half an hour started as Max drove carefully out of the car park. He tried not to think of it as allegorical. The zoo had been fun, and he tried to talk himself out of rushing in and getting straight on to the computer to disappear into the forests of Eorzea in the hopes that 5t3ff would be there. The rain splattered against the windscreen, and the wipers almost hypnotised Max with their back and forth motion. He thought about the journey there—how he'd been so convinced he was about to meet the love of his life. God he needed to get out more; he sounded like such a teenage girl.

Turning down the puddle-strewn lane to his cottage, he slowed to let next door's chickens scatter from the middle of the road. Actually, next door was a relative term—so was road come to think of it. "Next door" was a good fifteen minutes' walk down the pothole-ridden track that passed itself off as a "road".

Darting in out of the rain, he was assaulted in the kitchen by two bundles of fur. "I've only been gone a few hours," he said to the *miaows* that accompanied him opening a tin of tuna. Eric stretched out tall, reaching his paws to the bowl on the surface, and Max swiftly pushed it back. "I know someone who'd like you," he muttered, stroking the black-and-white cat's head. "And you too," he added to Polly as he placed the full bowls down, and the cats both stopped head butting him and gulped at the food. Typical, they hadn't missed him at all, just his opposable thumbs and tin-opener wielding abilities.

Eyeing the computer in the corner of the higgledy kitchen, he forced himself to walk away from it. Half an hour later and freshly showered he was standing there again, trying to think of another reason not to turn it on. He picked up his Kindle and fired it up, maybe getting lost in Karthain with Locke Lamora and Jean Tannen would do the trick. When he'd read and re-read the same page for the third time, however, he knew that it wasn't going to work. He couldn't remember the last time a book had failed to distract him. Sighing, he put it down and tried to think of another distraction. Realising it was nearly seven o'clock and he'd not had any tea yet, he emptied a tin of beans into a saucepan and put some bread in the toaster.

By the time seven-thirty ticked round, he'd prepared, eaten, and washed-up from his meagre evening meal, fussed the cats, swept the kitchen and picked up, then discarded his Kindle again. He'd talked himself into going on Final

Fantasy—and talked himself out of it again. He'd sat for a second and questioned his sanity, fully aware that he wasn't now, nor had ever been, a teenage girl with a new best friend. Or worse, a crush. He was twenty-three years old for fuck's sake. He was a bloke. A bloke-y bloke—okay, a geeky bloke, but last time he'd checked, his balls were firmly intact. When he started analysing why he wasn't more disappointed that the girl of his dreams turned out to be a hairy-arsed chap instead, he gave up on not giving in and finally powered up the PC.

Within minutes he found himself wandering through the Twelvewoods that surround the city of Gridania, hoping 5t3ff—or Stef—would be around somewhere. Sure enough, the familiar feline form of his favourite Miq'ote was gathering wood by the light of the moon. MAX11 pulled an arrow from his quiver and aimed the bow just above 5t3ff's head, the Elezan's aim was superb, and the arrow whistled within inches of the Moonkeeper's ears. He swung round, dropping the wood and pulled his own weapon free. Laughing, Max shifted in his chair waiting for the tirade that he knew would follow. Trying to earn back the love of his friend, he moved his avatar over so that MAX11 was collecting the dropped wood. The Moonkeeper was a serious personality, and, as he helped him re-collect his wood, Max had to wonder why Stefan had chosen that character—it was the complete opposite to the man he'd met today.

For a while they wandered round the woods, collecting supplies, interacting with some of the other characters they came across. For the first time in ages however, Max couldn't get into the game. He just wanted to chat with Stefan. He never got fed up of playing this soon though, and he didn't want Stefan to think he was being weird. His brain was working overtime and he was relieved when Stefan finally suggested meeting in the chat room.

5t3ff: Had fun today. It was nice to meet you.

MAX11: Me too—even if you weren't what I was expecting!!

O__o

5t3ff: LMAO at your face. Can't believe we stood there like lemons beside each other for ages!!

MAX11: IKR. Doh! 5t3ff is a lot prettier than Stef though. ☺

5t3ff: Bastard! I'd say the same but with those eyelashes—you're defo prettier than Maxii...

MAX11: Hey MAX11 is plenty pretty. MAX11 btw NOT Maxii.

5t3ff: *Whatever... ..Maxii ;-)*

MAX11: *You are so going to pay for that next time we meet up. Steffi?*

5t3ff: *Steffi—is that the best you can come up with??*

MAX11: *Challenge accepted. Stiffy.*

5t3ff: *Stiffy—PMSL. What are you 13??*

MAX11: *Only my shoe size and you know what they say about big feet. O____o*

Do not press send Max, do not press send. Don't do it... Max thought as his finger hit the enter key. What the actual fuck. Oh my god. Why? Why in the name of all that Joss Whedon holds dear would he write something like that? He stared at the screen, watched the little *5t3ff is typing* sign flash on and off. Breathing was getting kind of difficult and he had to concentrate really hard on getting air in and out of him. Oh crap, he was starting to get a little dizzy. Was this the verge of a heart attack? Or a panic attack? Or...

5t3ff: *Isn't more than a handful a waste???*

Breathe. In. Out.

Holy crap.

MAX11: *isn't that boobs?*

5t3ff is typing... ..

5t3ff: *Wouldn't know, not really my area of expertise. ☺*

Not really my area of expertise. What the hell did that mean? Max wasn't exactly Mr Popular on a Saturday night; it wasn't like he was beating them off with a stick or anything, but he wasn't exactly a virgin either. He'd manage to cop a feel of enough breasts in his time to know that, whatever their size, they were squashy wonderfulness. And even he could see Stefan was more likely to score than he was, good-looking, funny, kind—he probably had the girls tripping over him.

MAX11: *You more of a leg man?*

Max hit return, and as soon as his finger left the button he cringed and prayed for a glitch that meant the message wouldn't get sent. It sounded like he was talking about a chicken take-away. Lad speak wasn't his style, it was much more the kind of thing Aaron would come out with. At least it was before he'd

turned into the domesticated, loved-up creature that now inhabited his body. Staring at the screen, he prayed for an error message. But, of course, they were purely the reserve of important communications, not to be wasted by the fates on trivial matters, such as him not appearing to be a complete knob.

4. Closets Are for Clothes and Mothballs

5t3ff: *I'm more into nads.*

Stefan stared at the screen, his finger poised to hit return. Should he? It was brash, but no cruder really than what Max had sent. His heart pounded. Not because he was outing himself—he'd never really been in the closet. Fuck he hated that term. He'd just been him, and no one had batted an eyelid when he'd brought home a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend. He was lucky, of that he was aware. Many people he knew had found telling their families the hardest thing they'd had to do. Some hadn't spoken to their parents since they'd uttered those two words—I'm gay.

No, it wasn't the fact of letting Max know he was gay that concerned him. It was the fact that since he'd spotted the guy standing there at the zoo entrance, looking far too hot in a shirt and *beautifully* fitted jeans, he'd been yearning after him. He'd taken a look at first and memorised him for the wank-bank later, then it had become apparent that Maxi, the girl he was thinking of as his BFF, was actually Max. The bloke was top tossing totty, and he'd moved into full on lust mode.

Slowly, he let his finger descend... and pressed delete. Changing nads to men he hit send and waited. Max was obviously into women, but they could still be friends, right? It should all be good, as long as he wasn't a raging homophobe, and Stefan was pretty good at picking them out. Of course, he'd also thought Max was female so...

MAX11: *oh, sorry. Well I'll take your judgement on whether more than a handful is too much then.*

Stefan might have squealed a little—though if pressed, even in a court of law, he wouldn't admit it. He'd just thrown his well-worn copy of *How to Avoid Masochism 101: Don't Crush on Your Straight Mate* out the window, but he didn't care.

With reluctance, Stefan signed out of the chat room. He was on earlies tomorrow and was already tired. Besides, he wasn't sure he trusted himself at the moment. The memory of Max's tall, perfect body and conker brown eyes was already invading his brain, and the internet was far too easy a place to flirt. He'd demonstrated great willpower so far, but he couldn't guarantee he could

keep it up much longer. After the fantastic day he'd had, he really didn't want to spoil things with misplaced innuendo.

Far too soon it was morning. Stefan dragged himself away from his dream of slowly peeling the shirt off a very hot and sweaty Max and rolled himself out of bed. A shower and a strong cup of tea soon sorted him out. He fed his ginger toms, Tigger and Oscar, and promised them bigger cuddles when he'd done for the day. He couldn't complain about getting his backside to work; he'd had the bank holiday off, which wasn't always guaranteed in his job. After all, the animals still needed feeding and plenty of people decided a sunny bank holiday was the best time to give a pet a new home. Gripping his hastily buttered and Marmited piece of toast in his teeth, Stefan rammed the keys in the ignition and made his way out of Ely to Precious Paws, the animal sanctuary he worked at. Tally, the night supervisor, and Stefan's best friend, smiled wearily at him as he let himself in.

"Tough night?" he asked.

"A bitch has been brought in, thin as a rake and trying to feed four pups. Two have gone already, and if the other two make it I'll eat my hat. Not sure about mum either; she has no energy to look after them."

Stefan didn't need to say anything; they'd all been there at some point. You didn't do this job unless you loved animals, but unfortunately, not all the human population thought the same way. When he'd first started, he'd gone home distraught when he'd seen the state some of the animals came in. He wouldn't have lasted six months though if he'd let every case tear him apart like the first couple did. He still carried a sadness for the mistreated and abused animals, but he didn't let it rule him. Once the other day staff arrived, Tally handed over, giving a detailed account of the residents who'd needed help overnight and a lowdown on any new arrivals.

"Get you home and to bed," said Stefan, handing Tally her bag. "I'll call you later, okay?"

"Sure thing, sugar. I want to hear all about Maxi, this girl who's rivalling me as your BFF!"

Stefan grinned. "I'm looking forward to telling you. Now scram!" Tally didn't need telling again and blew Stefan a kiss as the door swung shut behind her.

Stefan poked his head into the room with the cages for the more poorly animals, the ones not up to being re-homed yet. "How're they doing?" he asked Jilly, the nurse on duty.

“Poor little buggers, don’t think they’re gonna make it.” She syringed some liquid into one of the tiny pups’ mouths. Stefan gave a half smile and left her to it. These dogs were getting the best care they could, and there were still plenty of other animals that needed feeding, cleaning and exercising.

It was three in the afternoon when Stefan was able to take some of the dogs out for a run. Technically his shift had finished, but this was one of his favourite parts of the job. Sometimes the dogs only got a couple of short walks round the sanctuary. There was a big field that was part of the complex, and they often took the dogs there to play fetch for half an hour at a time, but Stefan liked to get some of the bigger, longer-term residents out for a better walk if he could. He put leads on two Labradors and an old red setter. All were older than people tended to look for when getting a rescue dog, but they were all lovely animals and Stefan wished he could take them home with him. Unfortunately, his small two-up, two-down, with its patch of weeds that passed as a garden, really wasn’t suitable. Cats were fine there, but it really wasn’t the best place for dogs.

Both the Labradors had problems with their back legs—old age and a too rich diet before they’d moved into the rescue centre were to blame. They’d both been with the same owner, an elderly lady, who’d died suddenly, and been loved to within an inch of their lives. Stefan hated that they were ending their years here after they’d had more than enough home comforts for the majority of their lives. And Alfie, the red setter, well, he’d been found wandering alone at night in the middle of the city. Nobody had ever come forward to claim him, and, to the best estimation of the vet, he was nearly reaching his first decade on this earth, too old for the majority of people to want to re-home, despite his stunning beauty. These were the dogs Stefan would take home if he could. Instead, he settled for special walks and fusses whenever he could.

Stefan walked them by the river, watching the boats chugging lazily past and the ducks enjoying the bread they were being thrown by a group of toddlers and their parents. It was a beautiful day, and as he walked Stefan found himself wishing that Max was there with him. He’d been at the edge of his mind all day, but keeping busy had proved to be a blessing in disguise. Now though, with just the peaceful, scenic waterfront of Ely and three plodding dogs to occupy his mind, his thoughts rapidly returned to his gaming buddy.

Yesterday had been surreal. He’d been longing to meet the girl who could make him laugh in the chat room. He’d joked with Tally how the only thing that would make MAX11 even more perfect would be if he turned out to be a

six-foot hunk. He'd got carried away, describing the beautiful man MAX11 would have to be to go along with the humour to sweep him off his feet. The textbook Adonis was nothing compared to the Max he had met though. He'd stood there, in those tight jeans and that blue shirt. As soon as Stefan had clocked him, he'd been trying to work out if it was rude to try and get a number when he was meant to be meeting someone else. Hell, he hadn't even cared about a number, he just wanted a chat, see if his gaydar pinged. He was screwing up the courage when he realised that it was well past the time MAX11 was meant to meet him. He briefly contemplated just going up to preppy guy and trying to wangle a day with him—after all he appeared to have been stood up too judging by the way he kept searching the onslaught of zoo visitors—but his good manners wouldn't let him. Besides, he was slightly concerned as to what could have happened to her.

The mix-up between MAX11 and 5t3ff hit him about six seconds before it hit Max. Watching the slow realisation dawn on Max's face was both nerve-racking and amazing. Every emotion Max had ever had must have been displayed for the entire world to see because he had one of the most expressive faces Stefan had ever seen. And when he blushed? Stefan choked back a groan, the way that flush slipped up his face... Stefan could definitely get used to that. The way he'd stroked the snake when he was obviously terrified, the fact he was that willing to come out of his comfort zone was a turn on in itself. He was everything Stefan didn't know he wanted in a man—and a lot of what he did. Funny, gorgeous, kind and a gaming nerd to boot. Even better, he was pretty sure they'd enjoy some of the same types of books. An image of the two of them lying in bed on a Sunday morning reading together slid into his head, and he had to concentrate on not hardening at the thought. He was perfect. Totally perfect—as long as you overlooked the fact that he was straight.

Leaving the main riverfront behind, Stefan hit the grassy scrubland that followed the next bit of meandering river for about a mile. He unhooked the dogs' leads and fished out his small dog whistle. Age and injuries meant none of them strayed too far, and they were all pretty good at coming when called, but it didn't hurt to be careful. He tried as hard as he could to stop thinking about Max, but the man was a wet dream come true. He knew it would be in his best interest to just go back to the online friendship they had, but he was already yearning to see him again. Already wondering how many times he could make him blush. Already longing to see him come out of his comfort zone. *Fuck, I'm screwed*, he thought as he strolled along.

"I'm so bollocksed," he said down the phone to Tally later that day. She had five minutes to spare in between feeding the family and leaving for work and Stefan felt a tiny bit guilty about stealing that time. This was almost as important as life and death though. At least, it felt that way to him.

"Okay, so are you talking to Tally, the practical, or Tally, the romantic, just so I know?" asked his friend, and the distant sound of a toilet flushing echoed down the line.

"Tal, are you on the loo?" he asked, not entirely sure he wanted to know the answer.

"It's the only place to get any bloody quiet in this house," she said, "besides what does it matter to you, the phone don't have pictures."

"Tal, that's just... Ugh... Okay, moving on. I'm asking Tally, the practical," he paused, "no, no wait, I'm asking Tally, the romantic."

"Oh boy do you have it bad," she said. "Okay, well Tally, the practical, would say give it up right now, you'll only end up hurt or embarrassed. Tally, the romantic, would say go for it boy. It's better to have tried than live with regrets. You never know, he might just feel the same."

"Gay for me, you mean?" He sighed down the phone.

"I don't know, Stefan, but what I do know is that I've got to shift me arse or I'll be late. Follow your heart, you won't be far wrong. Okay?"

Follow your heart. What kind of crappy advice was that? How the hell was he supposed to know if it was his heart or his groin he was following? He needed to get out of there, go somewhere he could think—or even better, not think. The beach was his haven, even though the nearest one was an hour's drive away. He opened the sun roof in his Nissan, stuck the *Pitch Perfect* soundtrack into the CD player and started the familiar drive. As ever, traffic seemed to be mostly going in the other direction on the A10 today, people tended to come back from the beach in the evening, not go. Stefan though had always preferred the evening or early morning for his beach time. The only thing that would make it more perfect would be if he had a dog to take with him. One day, he thought, one day he would live nearer the coast and have a house with a big enough garden for a dog or two. Maybe some chickens or ducks or a goat. They might not be your typical twenty-something's dreams, but they were Stefan's.

It wasn't until he reached the roundabout at Downham Market that he realised Max lived around here somewhere. Between Downham and Lynn was

all he knew, and King's Lynn was just ten miles away. Stupidly, Stefan couldn't stop looking around—as if Max was going to magically appear as he drove past. He also couldn't quite temper the disappointment that rose in him when he made it past the last turning into Lynn without a glimpse of Max. He'd got it freaking bad. He was soon in Hunstanton and followed the road through the new resort to the old village.

The beach was deserted, apart from a couple of dog walkers and some hardy bathers giggling as they jumped in and out of the waves. The temperature had dropped, but it was still a muggy evening, and Stefan considered copying the bathers and jumping into the water. Only the knowledge that he'd have to drive home either dripping or naked stopped him.

Enough breeze blew to take away the uncomfortable humidity, and Stefan walked slowly along the sand, watching the sun sink slowly into the horizon. Tangy sea air filled his sinuses and clamshells crunched underfoot. The quiet *rush rush* of the waves, as they ebbed and flowed, started working their magic on him almost instantly. He couldn't think of another place more relaxing, another place that let his thoughts just be. Of course, it didn't stop Max from filling his head. It had been a long time since Stefan had had such strong feelings for someone he'd just met. It was ridiculous. *Though really*, he justified to himself, *they'd known each other for a lot longer*.

Bending down, he pulled his trainers off and let the sand trickle between his toes. A jogger thudded by on the compact wet sand nearer the water's edge, and he watched him for a while. How was he to know whether he should follow his heart or his head? He started walking slowly again, pondering the question. Well it wasn't love, that much he knew—one day was not enough to declare being in love. There was definitely lust involved. One thought of those long, lean legs and rangy body had him twitching in his trousers. It was more than just lust though. He wasn't gagging for Max to get him out of his boxer shorts and bent over. Not that he'd say no if it was offered. He wasn't a freaking saint, but he wanted to get to know Max more. He wanted to chat and laugh with him. He liked the easiness they'd had, the comfortable feeling when they were together. That was what he truly craved more of, and if the thought of Max's perfect mouth capturing his entered his head from time to time—well he was only human, wasn't he?

A gull swooped by, cawing loudly to its mate and pulled Stefan from his thoughts. The sun was dipping just about on the horizon, and flaming waves washed in and out beneath the mottled-purple sky. A fog of melancholy settled

on him as he turned and headed back. The bright lights of New Hunstanton were glimmering from the cliff top, the distant flashes of the fair and amusements. He didn't mind the occasional walk through the hubbub of the town, but this quiet stretch of the old Norfolk coastline was where his heart was. The thing was he realised, as he rambled along in the near-dark, Max would appreciate Old Hunstanton too. None of his other friends, or even his family, understood the draw of the quiet stillness he found there. He knew in the core of him, though, Max would, and that about summed up why he wasn't ready to just let things go yet. Some things were worth fighting for, and he was pretty sure he could handle being just friends with Max, the lust would fade eventually. Right?

5. BFF's

The Hunters Rest was as crowded as it usually was on a Friday night. The unmistakable aroma of stale beer and too many bodies assaulted Max's nose as he wrestled his way to the bar. "Two pints please, a packet of cheese and onion and some pork scratchings." Max appraised the pretty, young barmaid as she filled his order—she was new since he'd last been in here. He passed over the money then balanced the drinks and snacks and made his way outside. The evening was sultry to say the least; the air was thick and gnats attacked. The pub garden would be called bijou by any estate agents looking for a sale, for normal Norfolk folk though, "fuckin' small" usually fit the bill okay. It may be no more than two tables and four benches but at least he could breathe a little out here.

"Here you go." He put down one of the pints and the pork scratchings in front of Aaron, who yawned widely and muttered thanks. "So, how have you been Aaron? How's fatherhood treating you?"

A beam lit up Aaron's face and erased the tired lines. "It's amazing, thanks. More than amazing. Tabitha is just the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. Here look..." He fished in his pocket for his phone and swiped the screen to turn it on. Max's vision started to go blurry as image after image was flashed in front of him. He'd heard the term proud parent, but he'd never really understood it 'til now.

"Aw, look at her here." Aaron thrust his phone under Max's nose and showed him yet another picture of his daughter. Apart from the fact her outfit had changed, it looked pretty much the same as the last twenty.

"She's certainly cute, good thing she takes after Maria, huh." There were only so many things you could say about baby photos. Only so many ways to lie about how sweet the baby was. After all, no one wanted to hear their child looked like ET in drag. Max might not know much about the whole having children thing, but even he knew that.

"I know, right?" Aaron beamed. "Imagine if she'd got my ears or nose, poor thing. Did I tell you she's nearly sleeping right through? Doesn't..."

"Aaron, you told me, okay." Max sipped his pint, wondering if he should've gone for something stronger.

"Sorry." Aaron looked once more at his phone and then put it away. "I'm all yours. Well unless there's an emergency because..." Max stared at him. "Okay,

there's not going to be an emergency, or probably not but... alright, shutting up now." Max glared a little longer for good measure and then returned his focus to his beer.

"So how is everything with you?" asked Aaron around a mouthful of pork scratchings. "Did you ever meet that Stef bird from the computer?" For a minute second, Max considered talking about Tabitha again. Aaron was his best mate and everything, but he could rip the piss like nobody's business.

Taking a deep breath and hoping that fatherhood had mellowed him enough to not completely pull him to shreds, Max explained the Stefan situation. "So there I was, standing at the gate looking for this Steffi, and instead, I got to meet Stefan."

Aaron swallowed the mouthful of beer he had before he started laughing, and Max gave him points for managing to not spit it everywhere. "Let me get this straight—you were waiting for some fit bird and ended up meeting some hairy-arsed bloke instead." He shook his head, sides shaking as he tried to suppress his laughter. "That is the funniest fucking thing I've ever heard."

"Yeah, well glad I'm here for your amusement," Max said, "and to be fair, I had no idea what she looked like, that was kind of the point remember? Also, I have no idea if Stefan's arse is hairy or not because I haven't seen it." He paused as his cock twitched, flushing at the thought of Stefan's backside. He swigged his beer, hoping Aaron hadn't noticed anything. He really needed to get laid if just the mention of the word arse was enough to get him horny.

"You're kind of missing the point, Max." Aaron smirked at him. "I mean, how long is it since you and Kate broke up?"

"Nearly a year." Max shrugged. "Kate and I weren't a good fit, you know that. She's happy now, and it would never have worked out between us. I mean the girl was a technophobe and hated the country. I love the country and spend far too much time gaming. It was never going to happen." Sighing loudly, he drained the dregs from his glass. "Wouldn't mind some company though, know what I mean?"

"You mean you need to get laid?" Aaron never was one for beating round the bush. "Trust me bro', I know the feeling."

Max snorted. "Yeah, right—you have a live in girlfriend. On-tap nooky is what you told me."

Aaron snorted even louder. "Yeah, then Tabitha happened. If Maria's not too sore, she's too tired or just not feeling sexy or horny or..." he trailed off,

the tired look returning to his face. "I love her, man. So much, and I love Tabitha more than life itself, but..."

"A man has needs?"

Aaron shrugged. "That's crude, but yeah. I miss her—not just the sex. Just having that time together. Jas says it'll sort itself out, that time will do wonders, but what if it doesn't?"

"I'm not the right person to ask Aaron, but your sister is wise, I'd trust her. She knows what it's like to have youngsters around, and I'm sure she's talking from experience."

Aaron nodded. "I suppose." He tipped the pork scratchings into his mouth and crunched the last of them down. "Back to you though. You do need a shag, right? Have you got your eye on anyone?"

"Nope. That's the problem—who do I meet? I mean, the barmaid here is pretty cute I guess..."

Aaron chuckled. "Yeah and her boyfriend is pure American beefcake, so I wouldn't even try that."

"Figures." Max grimaced. Honestly, the girl behind the bar was pretty, but she hadn't really done anything for him. Not really. A picture of Stefan flashed into his head again and he shook the image away. If only Stefan *had* been Steffi—all his problems would be solved. He sighed again. When did life get this complex?

Max went and got them both another pint and they sat until nearly eleven chatting. He was pretty sure he'd been eaten alive by gnats, but it was nice to spend time with Aaron. Finally, he was ready to call it a night and rang for a taxi. It wasn't far from Old Scytheton to home, but he really didn't feel like walking. "Aaron, if you want me to babysit for you at all so you and Maria can have some time together... well you've got my number okay?"

Aaron looked at him, and if Max hadn't known him so well he'd have sworn there were tears in his friend's eye. "Hay fever," Aaron mumbled as he reached forward and pulled Max into a hug. Untangling himself from his friend's grip, Max clambered into the taxi and waved goodbye. He wasn't sure what had just happened—except that fatherhood had definitely changed his friend. As the taxi pulled down the winding roads, he shook his head; he hoped against hope Aaron didn't take him up on his offer—he had no bloody idea how to look after a baby.

The humidity didn't leave, even as the sun set. At home, Max stripped to his boxers and got into bed. It took two seconds to fling the covers off and another two to stick the fan on and point it at himself. The conversation with Aaron ran through his head. He'd never been one for needing to be in a relationship. Truth be told, he was perfectly happy alone. Or at least, he had been until recently. He couldn't really pinpoint the moment the aching loneliness started gnawing at the pit of his stomach, he assumed it was when Aaron started moving on with his life. Doing those things grown-ups did: buying a house with someone, starting a family...

It wasn't that Max craved this; there had been nobody he could imagine living with. Well, apart from Aaron, when they'd talked about flat sharing way back when—before they'd both realised neither fancied living in town too much and that flats in the middle of the fenland countryside were so few and far between they were virtually non-existent. But sometimes he did long for someone there when he came in at night. Someone to share a meal with or a walk or even the chores. Someone to tell about his bad day, or the great film he'd just seen or the new book he was dying to read. Sighing, he pulled the quilt over his legs, the fan was cold but he couldn't be bothered to get up and turn it off.

Of course, sex was an added bonus of having a partner—at least until children came along apparently. Sex was sex he supposed, but, as jaded as it sounded, he couldn't really get into random one-night stands. The sex was great—of course it was, but honestly he wanted more, and he had yet to find it. There had been nobody that'd caught his interest enough, nobody that he felt he could share stuff with as well as he could his mates. He'd always got on with boys better than girls, he felt embarrassed and a bit of an oddball around females for the most part. Especially if they'd shown any sign of interest in him. Kate was a prime example—beautiful, kind, and funny, but it just hadn't felt right. As sweet as she was, he just couldn't feel properly comfortable around her. It was fine when they were out as a group and he let Kate and Maria pal up, but once they were alone he always felt as though he was saying or doing the wrong thing.

Flipping onto his stomach and stuffing his arms under his pillow, he closed his eyes, remembering the stilted argument he'd had with Kate when he'd first signed up to the Final Fantasy page. He'd tried to convince her to join with him. It would be a fun thing for them to do together, that was his line of thinking. It wasn't even as if he was hung up on Final Fantasy, he'd have

chosen any of the MMORPG games out there. But Kate wasn't at all interested. Not only was she not interested, but she resented the time he did spend gaming. Gah. Why was he thinking about her? He'd not exactly been pining for her. It'd been the first argument they'd had when he'd actually joined up and entered the fantasy realms, the place that he'd first met 5t3ff. It hadn't taken long for him to prefer spending time in the virtual world with her—or so he'd thought—than in the real world with Kate. Of course, he hadn't known that had been the beginning of the end for him and Kate, not for a few weeks anyway, and it had taken months after that for him to fancy himself in love with 5t3ff.

And look how that turned out, he muttered to himself, throwing the covers off again and getting out of bed. He wasn't going to be able to sleep with his brain being noisy, and he really needed a slash. He used the loo, poured himself a drink of orange juice and switched on the laptop. Even at this late hour there was bound to be someone to chat with. Opening the window to try and let in a breath of air he stretched his legs out in front of him on the settee and waited for the computer to boot up. Before he went to the main chat room he pinged off a message to Stefan to see if he was around—more out of habit than anything else. While he waited for a reply, he checked his social media. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Goodreads, Instagram... the list was endless, and pretty pointless. He didn't want to drop any in case he missed something. A sad sign of the times.

Once he'd liked and commented and reposted everything he wanted to, he checked in the chat room. Conveniently ignoring the way his heart skipped when he saw Stefan's name in there, he started composing his first message.

MAX11: *how was your day?* ☺

5t3ff: *:/ Not so good. Had two dogs left outside the shelter today and they both had to be put down. Extensive injuries, look like they were fighting dogs and we couldn't risk it. Feeling pretty pissed off at the moment TBH.*

MAX11: *Oh Stefan—that is so crap.* ☹ *I don't know how people can treat animals like it. Why...*

I'm sorry, I don't know what to say.

5t3ff: *There is nothing to say. Sometimes I really hate people though—do you know what I mean? Crap. I thought I was toughened up against this stuff—maybe this isn't the right job for me after all. Sorry Max, didn't meant to dump all my rubbish on you. How was your day?*

Max pushed his laptop to one side and stretched his legs out. Reaching across he found his phone and, finding Stefan's newly procured number in his contacts list, pressed call. The phone rang out, and he waited for Stefan to pick up.

"Max?" Stefan sounded breathless, his voice catching in his throat like he'd been running or crying or... Christ, Max did not want to finish that thought.

"Hi Stefan, I thought you might need someone to talk to. It sounds like you've had a hard day." Silence met him down the phone. "Or not, whatever. I can go, I just thought you sounded like you needed to vent a little." He paused for a second and when no response came he sighed and said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have called. Just, you know if you need to talk..." He trailed off, reluctant to hang up but feeling awkward about phoning. As he was about to press the end call button, a muffled sound came down the phone.

"Stefan?"

A sniff and the distant sound of someone blowing their nose. "Max? Are you still there?" Stefan's voice sounded thick and swollen with tears. "I'm so sorry Max, you must think I'm such a wuss, I..."

"I think you sound exactly like someone who cares about the animals left in their charge. Nothing more and certainly nothing less." A fresh wave of sobbing came down the phone. Max just held the phone to his ear and waited. After a moment he murmured, "I'm still here Stefan, take your time okay?" Shifting his legs a little, he used one hand to navigate the internet to an animal cruelty site. He clicked on images of dog fighting and cringed at the results. Dogs with torn ears, ripped snouts and chunks missing from their bodies filled his screen. He felt bile rise in his stomach and shut down the site. No wonder Stefan was a mess if this was what he'd had to face today.

Max could hear Stefan getting control of his breathing as the time passed, not a lot, just a few minutes really. It was hard to picture the cool, together, quick-witted, jovial guy he'd met as a sobbing mess. Then he remembered the faraway look on his face when they were looking at the caged big cats and recognised the passion that the other man exuded. He was too tired to analyse the tightening in his gut at the muffled sobs. The urge he had to get in his car and drive to Ely, just so he could wrap his arms around Stefan and take away the hurt, was strangely overwhelming, but he forced himself to just sit there quietly.

When it seemed Stefan was calmer, Max spoke. "I can't believe you have to deal with this stuff, Stefan. Those animals are so lucky to have someone to care

so much for them. I know you wish you could have done more today, but you couldn't and you have to remember all the ones that now feel loved because of you. The ones you could help." Max stared out the window as he spoke. The moon was high and lit up the front yard, the trees dancing silhouettes in its light. He hoped he didn't sound patronising. After all, what did he know? The most heartbreaking thing that happened to him at work was someone forgetting to replace the teabags.

A sniff echoed down the phone. "Thanks Max, I know, it's what Tally told me too, and she's always right."

His stomach clenched. Who was Tally? His mind went blank, conversation seemed to disappear, and all he could say was, "Oh."

"Yeah, she's been doing it longer than me and is usually right. I thought I'd managed to toughen up but..."

Oh thank god, a work colleague. "Well, she probably knows what she's talking about then."

"She does. Tally's great, you should meet her—she takes no bullshit from anyone, but she's the kindest person I know."

"I'd like to meet her. I'd like to see where you work; you always sound so passionate about it. I wouldn't want to disturb you though, or get you in trouble or anything." He stifled a yawn as he spoke. It was past midnight, and finally, he was starting to feel tired.

"You would?" Max could virtually hear the smile in Stefan's voice as he spoke. A warm feeling spread up inside him that had nothing to do with the muggy weather.

"Yeah, we'll definitely have to sort that out." They chatted for a while longer. When Max could hold back the yawns no more, he hung up the phone and went back to bed. Thoughts of dogs and a laughing Stefan tumbled into his head as sleep stole in, and the dreams that followed were happy.

6. Dog Eat Dog

It was actually several weeks before Max managed to get to the animal shelter. Summer had passed and autumn was well settled in. Winds blew and leaves swirled, and it was absolutely Max's favourite season of the year. The past month and a half had been a whirlwind. He'd chatted to Stefan on the computer nearly nightly, they'd met briefly in Max's lunch hour when Stefan had been in Lynn. He'd been dying to see the place where Stefan worked. Stefan was so passionate about what he did, Max felt as though going there would complete the picture of Stefan that he had.

Driving into Ely, Max was wowed by the beauty of the tiny city. It had been years since he'd been there and the city had been regenerated and looked amazing. Maybe he could persuade Stefan to have a walk around the cathedral later. It was huge and dominated the flat fenland landscape, and he'd love to see inside.

Following the sat-nav he turned left into a windy road of small terraced houses. They were pretty, but, even from the outside, you could see they were minute. He knew Stefan longed for space to have a dog or two, and he felt sad for him that there wasn't room here. Pulling up outside number twenty-one, he appraised its shiny black door and pretty window boxes. Stefan took care of this place, Max liked that. He hadn't even got out of the car when the door opened, and Stefan came over. "Saw you from the window," he explained, "do you mind if we get going, and I'll give you the guided tour later? I really want you to meet Tally, and her shift finishes at two."

"Sure." Max waited while Stefan climbed in and then followed his directions to the shelter. The building was more modern than Max was expecting. A spacious car park was half full, and he could hear dogs barking as he exited his car. "Wow, it sounds like there are hundreds of them."

"Unfortunately there are. Well, just over a hundred at the moment. Several puppy litters but they should go soon." Stefan held the door open for Max then followed him into the building. He waved at the girl on the reception desk but didn't stop to chat. Max offered her a smile and followed Stefan through another set of double doors. Here the sound of dogs was much louder. Some barking, some whining. A strong smell of dog, disinfectant and pee filled the air, and Max wrinkled his nose.

“You soon get used to it.” Stefan grinned at him. “Come on, Tally should be through here.” He pushed through another door marked “Staff Only” and into a clinical little room that reminded Max of his vet’s surgery.

“Tal?” Stefan called as he pushed through yet another door into an inner room with the same clinicalness as the first. Antiseptic scented the air, and a woman about ten years older than them was leaned over a table syringe feeding the tiniest puppy Max had ever seen.

“Stefan.” The woman smiled, gently squeezing a tiny drop more liquid into the pup’s mouth. “Can’t stay away huh? And you must be Maxi, I’ve heard a lot about you.” She smiled tiredly. “I’d shake your hand, but as you can see...”

She shrugged, and Max said, “They’re full, and it’s Max by the way. Nice to meet you Tally, I’ve only heard good things.” Tally snorted loudly and raised her eyebrow as if she didn’t believe a word of it.

“What?” Stefan asked, Max’s favourite grin on his face as he lifted another puppy from the basket they were bundled in. “I’ve only ever been perfectly nice about you Tally.” He affected a sad look on his face and nuzzled the little puppy up under his chin. “Want to try feeding him?”

Max opened his eyes wide. “Oh I couldn’t, he’s so tiny, I’ll hurt him.”

“You’ll be fine. Here.” Stefan reached forward and opened Max’s hand. “It’ll be easier than holding your cats, I promise. Okay, snuggle him close, keep him warm.” Max did as he was instructed and the sweet smell of puppy filled his nose. “Okay, take this and just drip it into his mouth. Yep, just like that.”

Max grinned as the tiny bundle lapped at the drops of liquid dripping onto its tongue. “Oh my—this is just the sweetest thing ever. Where’s its mother?”

“In one of the kennels, her body was too undernourished to feed these two. We’ve left her to rest and taken these to be fed by us.”

Carefully, Max coaxed the fluid from the syringe into the puppy’s mouth. He gently stroked the little thing then let Stefan put him back, all bundled up with his brother.

“So what are you boys up to today?” asked Tally as she disinfected and tidied round the small room.

“Just showing Max around the joint, then who knows. A meal maybe?” Stefan looked questioningly at him.

“Whatever you want, Stefan, I’m easy, honestly.”

Stefan and Tally snorted in unison. "Don't say things like that around our Stefan," said Tally, wagging her eyebrows up and down, "he'll consider it a challenge."

"Tally!" Stefan hissed as colour flooded Max's face. Knowing he was blushing made Max even more uncomfortable. It was so damn embarrassing acting like a school girl caught behind the bike sheds.

"Ignore her," Stefan said to Max, "she's just grumpy because I get more than her." He poked out his tongue to his colleague, and Max felt his stomach tighten, though he had no idea why.

"So would you be if you needed another four hours in the day just to get your jobs finished, and the only sex you're getting is a quickie when your children are asleep and you're praying they don't wake up. I love my kids but their timing stinks. Between Jim's night shifts and my night shifts, we're lucky if we time to fit in even the quickest of quickies these days. And nine times out of ten you can guarantee the painters are in when we do both happen to be at home. God forbid all our balls fall into place because it's pretty much a certainty one of the kids'll be ill or something and Jim won't get his balls where he wants 'em to be."

"Tally, really that is way too much information." Stefan laughed loudly, but Max just squirmed. What kind of person told a complete stranger she couldn't get any action because she was having her period? "You'll get used to her," Stefan said, grinning again as he looked at Max. "Okay, I'm showing Max round the rest of the place now. Go home Tally, you look exhausted again." He leaned forward and hugged her then tugged Max's hand and pulled him out of the room.

Cages after cages were filled with dogs and cats and while they were impeccably clean and all the dogs were well groomed it broke Max's heart to see them confined in such small spaces.

"I don't know how you do it, work here every day, see these animals shut up." He was sitting cross legged in the middle of a cat cage with a patchwork, dog-eared tom cat on his lap and a pretty little kitty head butting him, wanting a stroke.

"You get used to it and do the best you can," Stefan said, laughing as a kitten chased round after its own tail.

"No Stefan, you have to be special to do this kind of job."

"If by special you mean..." started Stefan when Max interrupted him.

“Don’t. Don’t knock what you do Stefan. You are a good guy, and the world is a better place for having you in it.” He pushed the cat gently off his lap and stood up. “I mean it Stefan, I’ve known you for nearly a year now, and even without meeting you, I knew you were amazing. And now I have met you, I can see for myself how true it is.” For some reason he needed to make Stefan understand what an exceptional person he was. Time slowed and Max could have sworn the air in the cage thickened as he stood staring at Stefan. He was certainly finding it harder to breathe. Stefan stared at him. He looked as though he was on the verge of saying something and a feeling of euphoric-laced terror grabbed hold of Max.

“Max, I...” Stefan faltered and breathed deeply. “I...” Max looked at him and took a step closer. His heart thumped hard. He wanted to speak, and he wanted to be silent. He wanted Stefan to say the words—but he didn’t want to know what words Stefan was going to say. He yearned to hear them, and also dreaded hearing them, despaired at having to face a truth he wasn’t ready for.

“Can we go and see those dogs you talk about? Sandy and Sooty?” Max broke the spell. He watched as Stefan masked the disappointment that briefly crossed his face with his trademark grin.

“Sure, how do you feel about taking them for a walk?”

The afternoon passed quickly. A walk by the river, a meal in the pub, a conversation that never quite happened. The ball was in his court, of that Max was certain, but quite what he wanted to do with it he wasn’t sure. Should he serve it high, play it for what it was worth and see what Stefan could hit back? Should he carry on with the volley they were playing at the moment, back and forth, simple and not taxing? Or should he just call it quits and walk away before injury called halt to play? He wasn’t sure, and as he had no idea whether an injury would occur, he felt unable to assess the damn thing properly.

7. Skater Boy

The clack and slide of roller skates droned around the rink, only barely audible beneath the sounds of the '90s tunes screaming from the huge overhead speakers. Stefan watched the crowd whiz round the rink under the flashing disco lights. He swung his skates from where they hung by their laces over his shoulder and loosened them enough to fit his foot in. The Bauers were old, but he wouldn't change them for the world. If skates could talk they'd certainly have more than their fair share of tales to tell.

"Stefan, mate, didn't think you'd make it." Nick high fived him as he skidded to a halt in front of him.

"Old Skool '90s night, who'd miss it?" he asked raising his eyebrow.

"Er, you—the last three times," said Nick pointedly.

Stefan shrugged. "In my defence, last time was '80s, not '90s and the time before I was working..."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say. It's good to see you though. Charlie's trying to persuade Andy to play bulldog already. You up for it?"

Stefan looked over to the DJ booth and saw Charlie chatting away to the DJ. That girl had a competitive edge like no one he knew. "In a minute, I'm just waiting for someone."

Nick raised his eyebrows and leered at Stefan. "Ooh, you getting laid Stefan, knew there had to be a reason we hadn't seen you around. Who's the lucky fella?"

Stefan pushed him and grinned. "No I'm not, he's just a friend, and it's nobody you know."

One eyebrow remained raised, and Stefan couldn't stop himself from grinning back. If Max still wanted to be friends after tonight he'd be more than a little surprised. Kill or cure right?

Smiling back, Nick headed onto the rink while Stefan finally got his skates on. Nick was right, it'd been far too long since he'd been here. He raised his hand to greet several familiar faces as they skated past. The temptation to get on the rink was strong, but he wanted to make sure Max could find him when he got here. Fishing his phone out of his pocket, he made sure it was on vibrate.

There was no way he would hear the ring tone over the music blaring out, and he didn't want to miss it if Max called.

He was just about to give up and hit the rink when he saw Max walk in through the entrance, his face bearing a slight "rabbit caught in the headlights" look.

"Maxi!" He skated up and spun round him before coming to a halt dead in front of him.

"Max," the other man repeated. "Wow," he said looking around. "I can't believe I've never been here before." And Stefan couldn't believe he'd spent half his teenage years mere miles from Max's front door with no clue he existed, but he had.

"Me neither, it's what, ten miles from you?"

"Eight," agreed Max. "I'm just more a *both feet in shoes* kind of person. The wheels are scaring me a little."

"It'll be fine," Stefan said. "We'll have you skating like a pro in no time." He couldn't resist executing a twizzle, showing off a little, and damn didn't he appreciate the admiration in Max's eyes. "Come on, let's go hire you some skates."

Tentatively, Max stood, gripping Stefan's hands tightly. He wobbled as the beige hire skates he was wearing shifted a little, but Stefan steadied him. This was an unexpected bonus to bringing Max skating that he hadn't considered. "Steady," he said, "just get used to the feel of them at first. I know it'll probably make you feel silly, but what do you think about trying the practice ring first?"

Max glanced over to the tiny wooden ring and then onto the heaving disco rink behind him. "Honestly, I think I'd feel dafter going head over heels in front of that lot." He jerked his head, indicating the skaters behind him—it turned out to be a big mistake as he teetered precariously and squished Stefan's hands gripping them tighter. Stefan moved his booted foot in front of Max's wheels to stop them slipping further forward and held him tightly until he'd regained his balance.

"Good call," he said, ignoring the sparks that zipped up his arm from their joined hands. Skating backwards and keeping their hands tightly gripped together, Stefan slowly led Max to the practice rink.

"So, are you telling me you've never been on a pair of skates before, ever? Not even those strap-on adjustable ones that fitted over your shoes as a kid?"

Max shook his head. "Unless you count putting on my brother's and falling over straight away and ending up with a fractured elbow. As I didn't actually skate anywhere apart from on to my jacksie, I wasn't counting it."

"Ouch," Stefan sympathised. "No wonder you've never been before. Well, I promise you I'll keep you safe, okay?"

"I trust you completely." Max smiled at him and promptly wobbled again. Using all his strength, Stefan kept him upright. Maybe he wasn't in such a rush to teach Max how to keep balanced, it was a great excuse to hold hands.

"Steady. Okay, when you've got your balance I'll just pull you round..." A look of horror covered Max's face. "Don't worry Maxi, I'll go really slowly and let you just shuffle forward. You'll get a feel for it really quickly, I promise."

"It's Max," he said as he slowly pushed one foot forward on the slippery surface. Stefan wasn't sure if the gritted teeth were because of the name or the skating.

Slowly, they made it round the tiny training rink. Stefan kept a firm grip on Max's hands as they slowly built up speed. He resisted the urge to show off, he wanted Max to trust him. Though he couldn't resist singing along to "Tragedy" as the DJ started a Steps mix-up.

"Steps? Really?" asked Max, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "And there I was thinking you were so cool." Stefan grinned and just sang louder, ignoring the way his heart raced at Max's unintentional compliment. Max thought he was cool.

"Okay I'm gonna try letting go now and see how you do." A brief moment of panic from Max, but Stefan just smiled what he hoped was an encouraging smile. As he skated slowly round, Max kept his balance and grew in confidence with every skate he took forward. Suddenly, all the lights came on and the DJ started talking over the softened music.

"What's going on?" Max came to a juddering halt beside the wooden barrier.

"Game of bulldog." Stefan looked over to the main rink.

"Do you want to join in? I'll be fine if you do." Max looked across the rink. "Just help me to one of those seats first."

Lined up along the edge of the rink, Stefan eyed up the taggers. Nick, he knew, would go straight for him. At this stage of the game, though, there were

enough skaters between them for him to get safely across. The whistle blew, and, like thunder on a stormy day, the sound of skates thudding forward echoed round the old warehouse. As predicted, it was easy to keep out of Nick's way and none of the other taggers headed for him. There was far easier prey to tag first. If he was being honest with himself, he'd have had to admit that he was trying to impress Max with his skating prowess. *If* he was honest with himself, he'd have admitted that he was showing off. But he wasn't being honest; he was ignoring honesty like a pro. As the skaters thundering across to the other side grew fewer and those in the middle grew more, Stefan ducked and dived and twisted and turned to get safely to the other side each time the whistle sounded. Soon there were only five of them trying to get across and the DJ told everyone to get off the rink except the original three taggers and those still left in. Nick was coming after him, Stefan knew it. A shrill toot and Stefan waited. Two taggers went after three of the remaining players. One lad beside Stefan set off, and he feigned as if to follow. Nick fell for it and darted left. Changing direction, Stefan pushed off as hard as he could sliding to the far side of the rink.

"And we have a winner," the DJ announced. "Nice one Stefan. I think he's still beating you Nicko, but who's keeping score hey?" Nick stuck his fingers up at the DJ, a huge grin offsetting the gesture. The lights faded, and the disco started again.

"Stefan got you that time, babe," Charlie skidded over to them and wrapped her arms round Nick. "Don't worry, I'll take him out for you next game."

"Charlie, you won't catch me—though you'd do a better job of it than your boyfriend. I practically had time to walk across the rink, how slow he goes."

Nick gave him the V again and they all laughed. Out of the corner of his eye, Stefan caught sight of a figure tottering towards them.

"Max!" he scooted forward and grabbed Max's hands, enjoying the small smile of relief that crept across the other man's face as he helped him balance.

"Wow, Stefan, I had no idea you were that good. You need to go and skate, it will be totally boring staying with me all night."

Stefan raised his eyebrows, a glint in his grey eyes. "Oh I'm getting on the rink very soon, and you're coming with me."

Max shook his head. "No way, Stefan, they're far too fast for me."

"We'll just take it slow, everyone'll skate round us, I promise."

“But they’re all so better balanced than me.” As if to prove his point he wobbled precariously, his feet threatening to shoot out from beneath him. Stefan tightened his grip with one hand and moved the other one to support under Max’s elbow. He held him close until he’d regained his balance.

“Thanks, Stefan.”

“No problem... now come on I’ll keep you upright, I promise.”

The look of trust that Max wore made Stefan’s heart skip a beat. He liked Max having faith in him to make sure he was safe. He liked it a lot.

“Are you sure your friends won’t mind me taking up all your time?” Max asked as they slowly skated on the wooden floor.

Stefan crossed his feet behind him as he swerved slowly into the corner. “They won’t care. I’ll introduce you in a minute. They’re a good bunch.”

“Nick looks pretty competitive—he’s not as good as you though.”

Stefan could feel the smile spreading across his face and knew he must look like a complete loon. He didn’t care. “Thanks mate, I’ll love you forever if you tell Nick that!”

“Undying gratitude?” said Max, pretending to ponder the situation before wobbling ferociously. He bit his lip and leaned into Stefan’s steadying embrace. “Thanks. I think I owe you anyway, of course I’ll tell Nick.” A wicked smile, that Stefan liked very much, split his face in two.

They made it round the rink safely three times before Max said he was ready for a drink. Stefan reluctantly led him from the rink; he liked having an excuse to hold hands. Max didn’t drop his hand though as they made their way to the small cafe where Nick, Charlie and the rest of the gang were sitting. In fact, it wasn’t until he’d sat down that he let go of Stefan’s fingers. Nick gave Stefan a pointed look and raised his eyebrow questioningly. Stefan gave a minute shake of his head before he started the introductions. As good as his word, as soon as Nick was introduced, Max grinned and said. “Oh yeah, you’re the one whose arse Stefan kicked.”

Nick widened his eyes in mock shock. “Only this time,” he said, “I have to let him win occasionally or he feels bad about himself.”

The crowd at the table erupted into laughter, good-natured ribbing and side-taking. Max joined in, the slightly awkward geek he really was masked by the easy-going nature of the gang. They were all kind of misfits in their own way.

"I'm winning at chariots though," Nick said eventually. "Right, Tommy?"

"Well with me onside you're bound to win."

"You do realise you're pushing, right?" Charlie asked Tommy. "He needs me to be the other half of the chariot." She smiled up at her boyfriend.

"James, Andy? Up to being on team Stefan?"

"Are we up to being on the winning team? What do you say James?" Andy flicked Nick. "You're going down Nicko!"

"Ooh, is that what the loser has to do?" giggled Charlie.

Nick shook his head. "My girlfriend has a mind like a sewer."

"Yeah, like you mind!" She stuck out her tongue.

Stefan sipped from the bottle of fizzy orange that someone had placed in front of him. "What do you say to consequences?" he asked Nick.

"I'm not going down on you," Nick said promptly. "I don't care what Charlie's fantasising about."

"Nick, I do have standards you know."

Charlie punched his arm. "Hey, that's my boyfriend you're insulting."

"And you should have a medal for putting up with him." He blew her a kiss.

"Oh, he's not too bad." She pecked Nick on the cheek.

"Wow, ringing endorsement there girl." Nick smiled at his girlfriend and returned the kiss—with slightly more passion than she'd shown. "I know, I'm just not geek enough for you," he said to Stefan after breaking contact with Charlie. "I can't help if I'm too much of a sex god and you're into gamers and stuff." His eyes darted to Max and back and Stefan was glad he wasn't prone to blushing.

"So what about the consequences?" he said, changing the subject back and risking his own look at Max who thankfully hadn't cottoned on to Nick's innuendo. He'd definitely have to have words with Nick before he brought Max up here again.

"I know," piped up Tommy, "losing team has to dance in public for half an hour one Saturday lunch-time."

"Seriously?" Nick said. "Where do you come up with this shit?"

“YouTube.” Tommy shrugged. “Come on—not afraid of losing are you?”

“Not at all. Besides even if I do, you know I’ve got the moves...”

Eventually, they got the terms of the dare sorted out, and Stefan turned back to Max.

“Are you alright? You’re not bored are you?” He broke off a chunk of chocolate and passed it to Max.

“Not at all. I just want to know what chariots are, other than Roman transportation obviously.”

“Okay, it’s where two skaters sit on each other, face to face, forming, well, a chariot then a third person pushes them round the rink.”

Max just looked at him blankly.

“I suppose that does sound odd. Okay, imagine I get down on the floor, on my hands and feet, facing the ceiling.” Max nodded and Stefan continued. “Okay then the other half of the chariot would sit on my lap and I’d hook my arms over their thighs... see?”

“Maybe,” said Max. “I think I’d best give it a miss for now huh? I have no idea how you’d skate like that, but I guess I’ll find out soon.” He looked confused, the corners of his eyes screwing up, as he tried to figure out the logistics of it all.

“You sure will. Up for another skate?” Stefan asked. He needed to get up and moving. He’d never had to explain how to do a chariot before, and he’d never really thought about quite how erotic it actually sounded. Now all he could think of was how much he’d like to do one with Max. Then he had to stop thinking because those thoughts were taking a definite turn south, and that was a complication he could do without tonight.

8. Boys Will Be Boys

This time on his way round the rink, Max could feel his confidence growing. As long as he kept pushing one foot in front of the other and tried not to over-think it, he didn't find it too difficult. He was almost ready to let go of Stefan's hand. Almost. And he wasn't even thinking about how weird it was to be holding another man's hand. He wasn't thinking about it at all.

Nick and Tommy sped past backwards, calling something to Stefan as they went. Max didn't hear under the sound of Shaggy blaring from the speakers, but judging from the V Stefan flicked them it had been something rude.

"Go on, have a proper skate, I'll be alright," he said. He released his grip on Stefan's hand and immediately felt like he was going to fall over. "Go on." Stefan faltered for a second, looking unsure but, as Max tried to keep his momentum going, he suddenly took off, leaving behind a lingering smell of musk. Max came to a slow halt and breathed deeply as he watched him glide backwards round the rink, he'd never before paid attention to quite how a man's body looked before—well not anyone's other than his own. There was something though about the way that Stefan weaved in and out of the other skaters, the way his muscled legs pushed him round. The way his T-shirt clung to his torso. Max forced his eyes away. *Left foot push, right foot push, left foot...* he muttered to himself, denying the direction his thoughts had been headed.

He teetered round a couple of times, managing to stay upright and feeling quite proud of himself in the process. Stefan zipped by, stopping sometimes and then whizzing off with his other friends. Max was trying to concentrate on what he was doing but he couldn't help his eyes straying to Stefan. Carefully he made his way to the edge and rolled out the exit ramp. Feeding some coins into the vending machine, he grabbed the bottle of water once it had dropped and glugged at it. Using the back of his hand, he wiped his forehead, skating was hot work. Finding himself a seat near the barrier, he let himself watch Stefan. The man had some serious skating moves, and Max was very impressed. He came round forwards, backwards and sideways.

"Side surfing," said a quiet voice beside him. Surprised, he turned his head and saw Charlie standing there. "That's what it's called when they skate like that." They both turned and watched Stefan and Nick side surf round the rink

together. By just turning their bodies slightly, they were able to weave in and out of the other skaters.

“They’re good, aren’t they?” he said. “I have no idea how he stays balanced like that.”

Charlie chuckled. “He’s been doing it for years, they both have. Though, of course, he is showing off a little tonight!”

Max glanced at her and raised an eyebrow. “Oh, trying to impress the novice is he?” He shifted his leg so there was room for Charlie to sit beside him. As she sat, a waft of vanilla reached his nose—it was nice, but Max had to say he preferred the muskiness that Stefan smelt of.

“I’m not sure it’s just because you’re new to this he’s trying to impress you.” Charlie sighed and watched her boyfriend for a few seconds. Then she caught Max’s gaze, her moss-green eyes searching his for something, quite what Max wasn’t sure. “He’s a good bloke, Max. The best.” Max nodded, quietly agreeing with her. She sighed softly. “I really don’t want to see him get hurt.” And with that she stood and skated away. Slipping in between Stefan and Nick, she grabbed both their hands and the three skated round the rink together, pulling each other faster and faster.

Max sat and watched for a bit longer, a disconsolate gloom settling on him that he couldn’t quite explain. He watched Stefan skate for a while, the gloom spreading through him as he watched him laugh and joke with his friends. Every now and then, he glanced over and waved at Max. Deciding to call it a night, Max slipped off his skates and walked over to the hire bar. Just as he was handing them over a body slammed into his back. Long arms wrapped around him and hugged him tight, stopping him from falling.

“Whoa, sorry I completely misjudged that stop.” Stefan grinned at him. “Are you going already, Max? I’m sorry I’ve been mean, ignoring you while I skate.”

“Oh, no, that’s okay... your friends are here, I understand.”

“You’re my friend too, Max. At least, I hope you are.” He pulled Max round so they were looking at each other. “I just get carried away when I’m skating. Let’s go and have a drink, or better still some chips, I’m starving!” Max stood and looked at Stefan for a moment.

Stefan returned the look, doing a great hang-dog expression, and Max couldn’t help but smile. “Sure, some chips sound great, do they do cheesy ones?”

“Cheesy chips—a man after my own heart.” Stefan’s smile stretched wide.

“Yeah you’ll need your energy if you’re going to beat Nick at chariots right?” Max said, leading the way to the cafe.

Chariots, as Max was about to find out, *were* actually easier than they looked. At least for the person on the bottom—Stefan had assured him of this and who was he to argue?

“You’ll be fine, honest,” said Andy wincing as he slipped his boot off his twisted left ankle.

“Bloody idiots not looking where they’re going. Here, you may as well borrow these if you’re replacing me.” He shot his skates over to Max.

“Stefan, I’m really not sure about this, I bet there’s hundreds of people you can ask who will be better than me.”

“Just get your skates on man. Honestly, it’ll be fine. All you have to do is hold yourself up on my legs and keep your feet pointed in the right direction—I’ll be steering and everything else. Okay?” He looked so hopeful that Max couldn’t find it in his heart to say no. And that was how he found himself on the rink with Stefan holding onto him.

“Just watch how Charlie and Nick get into the chariot,” said Stefan and so Max watched as they faced each other, held onto each other and then seemingly fell backwards, legs entwining and catching each other in the sitting position.

“Holy Frodo—there is no way I’m going to be able to do that!”

“Honestly, as long as you can hold your weight over my legs once we go down I’ll do all the work.” Max wasn’t sure—he was so unsure he didn’t even laugh at Stefan’s unintended innuendo.

Somehow, and he really wasn’t sure how, they made it safely into the chariot position and James pushed them slowly round the rink as Max got used to it. It was, as Stefan said, a lot easier than it looked, he literally had to keep his arms hooked over Stefan’s knees. Stefan somehow managed to steer and avoid all the other skaters, Max had no idea how and he wasn’t twisting to try and find out. The strangest thing was getting used to Stefan sitting on him, his arse pressed firmly into Max’s groin. Max liked it more than he cared to admit.

“Ready to race?” asked Stefan and Max found himself nodding. It wasn’t true; he was in no way ready to race. This *might* be easier than it looked, but the

idea of zooming round so close to the floor with only his meagre arm strength holding him up was daunting. If he admitted that though, he'd feel like a total dweeb in front of Stefan—and that for some reason bothered him.

James tightened his grip on Stefan's shoulder, Charlie, Nick and Tommy lined up alongside them. From the sidelines, Andy counted down from three and yelled go. Suddenly, he was gliding over the wooden rink clinging on to Stefan for dear life. Going backwards was a really bad idea he realised, closing his eyes briefly. Nope, that was worse, he shot them open again and looked straight up into Stefan's laughing face.

"Watch where you're going, you sadist," Max said.

"Stop worrying Max, just hold on, we'll be fine, I promise."

"That's easy for you to say. You can see where you're going!"

Stefan laughed and shifted his boot minutely so they turned the corner. "Just trust me." He looked down at Max. "You do trust me, right?"

"Right now, I'm not willing to answer that. Ask me again at the end of the race," Max said, then let out a scream as James suddenly picked up the speed, and Stefan swerved round a slower chariot.

Round and round the rink they raced. The aim was to be the first to get to ten laps, and both Stefan and Nick were equally determined to do it. Max gripped the rough denim of Stefan's jeans and willed his legs to hold on as they sped past other skaters. The noise of the skates on the hard floor was nearly deafening when you were that close to the ground, the music barely audible above it.

Lap eight and they were neck and neck, then Stefan managed to swerve them in front of another chariot, holding Nick and Charlie up. For nearly a lap and a half, they were in front. The edges of the rink raced past, and Max relaxed into the end of the race.

"Shit!" cursed Stefan, and before Max could begin to process the remark, he slammed into something hard, and his feet shot out from under him. Stefan's leg dug into his side, and he shifted a little to remove the wheel of a roller boot that was jammed into his back. Then he lay on the rink, flexing his legs, trying to assess if he'd done any damage. Thankfully nothing hurt too bad as he moved, and he sighed.

"Stefan, are you okay?" He tried to move his leg from underneath the other man but couldn't shift the weight there.

“Uuugggh—I think so.” Carefully, Stefan moved and rolled so he was sitting beside Max. “Are you okay, James?” he asked as the other man skated up beside them.

“Yep, totally missed it all. How about you two?”

“I wish we’d missed it,” groaned Max as he unlaced the boots on his feet. “I’m sticking to computer games, they’re much less damaging to your health.”

Stefan laughed before apologising again. “I’m so sorry, Max, that other couple just collapsed in front of us, I had nowhere to go.” He glared at the two girls giggling their way off the rink. “Really not a good idea to go in the bar and then skate,” he called after them. They just giggled louder and poked their tongues out in unison.

“Charming.” Max looked at Stefan and the smirk pasted across his face. “I thought you said this was safe.” He grinned to show he didn’t mean it.

Stefan groaned, “It is. I just didn’t factor in drunken idiots!”

Max hauled himself to his feet then turned and held out his hand for Stefan. Warm fingers clenched his, and a spark of electricity shot down his arm. Stefan stared at him, his hand wrapped around Max’s and the jolt continued, even as Max pulled Stefan to his feet. “Whoa, static,” said Stefan as he slowly released his grip. Max just nodded—it was the strangest static shock he’d ever had. He could still feel the burn of it, even without Stefan’s touch.

“Get out the fucking way!” The yell broke him from his reverie, and he padded off the rink, aware of Stefan skating slowly behind him. How weird. He handed Andy his skates back and took the condolences and ribbing at losing good naturedly. He even managed to join in the joking and blame it on Stefan—but his head wasn’t really there. He rubbed his palm, the place where he could still feel the ghost of Stefan’s touch. His hand felt empty—hell, *he* felt empty, he wanted to reach forward and brush against him. Link fingers with him or hug him or sit next to him and feel the warmth of their bodies together.

Max slammed his car door shut and started the engine. Even as he put the car in gear and turned the steering wheel, his hands still felt Stefan’s touch. He’d mumbled a goodbye—leaving Stefan, Nick and the others joking about the consequences they were going to have to do, arranging the details of their public humiliation. Honestly, Max didn’t give a fuck, he just couldn’t stop thinking about Stefan.

The winding fen roads were lit only by the light of the moon, a low-level fog hovered over ditches and fields—an eerily beautiful sight that would usually have entranced Max, but tonight he barely noticed it. Tonight he was remembering the feelings he'd had going to meet Stef at the zoo—and was wondering why he was feeling the same now for Stefan. That excited knot in the pit of his stomach, the way his hands felt bereft from his touch. He couldn't even begin to analyse the longing in his groin when he thought of him. He forced himself to stop thinking—he was too tired and too confused to try and make sense of it all now.

He'd never been so thankful for poor weather in his life. The fog got thicker and thicker as he drove, and he strained to see through it, his headlights bounced off of it, reflecting back at him instead of lighting the way. He had to focus purely on the driving, and for that, he was thankful. Even as he slowly pulled his way into the lane leading to his house, he told himself he wouldn't let his thoughts slide back to Stefan. To the yearning to talk to him that he didn't understand. As he let himself in, fussed the cats, pulled out his phone and composed a text message, he carried on telling himself that he wasn't thinking of the other man. It was the right thing to do to check he'd got home safely in the fog. That was all.

The wait for a reply was endless—Stefan lived a lot further away from the skating rink than he did and every minute ticked by slowly. Every second he waited though, he still told himself he wasn't thinking about Stefan. In fact, it wasn't until he'd climbed into bed and, safe in the cocoon of his covers, had reached down to stroke his cock, had built himself slowly, deliciously up to climax, that he dared to admit the truth to himself. In that moment of abandonment, where the truth was exposed, laid bare and impossible to ignore did he let himself admit how fully Stefan was in his thoughts. It was both uncomfortable and delightful. Uneasy and wonderful. In that moment, when there was no space for lies, he admitted the truth. He had a crush—on a man.

9. Facts Are Facts

Unfortunately, once he'd admitted the truth he couldn't un-admit it. It was there when he went to sleep, it was there in his dreams and it was there when he awoke. The fog had cleared and the day was bright, holding the promise of being a perfect autumnal day. For possibly the first time in his life, he wished it was a work day; that he was at his boring-as-all-hell job just so he'd be distracted from his own thoughts. He considered popping round to his parents or calling in to see Aaron—neither option appealed though. All he wanted to do was see Stefan. Keeping busy might help, so, before the sun was barely above the horizon, he started up the lawn mower and cut his grass. He strimmed the edges, dead-headed dying plants and basically gave his garden more attention than it had had in the entire time he'd lived there.

By the time he stopped, he was sweat-soaked, despite the chill in the air, and his garden looked fabulous. He also had to admit that keeping busy was only partially working. Downing a glass of icy summer-fruit-flavoured squash, he gave up trying to not think and decided the opposing tactic might work. He cooled off and cleaned up in the shower, sat down and deliberately let himself think about Stefan. The truth was sometimes an uncomfortable thing, but Max wasn't stupid enough to deny it. Instead, he approached it like the methodical geek he was.

You're so anal, he muttered to himself as dug in the drawer for a notebook. He grabbed a Biro and split the page in two. Down one side he wrote pros and the other he wrote cons. And he stared at the paper. He put the pen down on the page and took it off again. He let the thoughts swirl round his head and tried again. Eventually, he gripped the Biro tight and scribbled out the headings—he wasn't trying to buy a car, he was trying to work out his feelings. *Except*, he thought, *I already know what my feelings are*. With a sigh, he screwed up the piece of paper and chucked it towards the bin. The fact was he fancied Stefan—it didn't matter that he'd never thought about another bloke like that in his life before, he was now and facts were facts. Oh, dear god, but he had no idea what to do now. Just because Stefan was gay didn't mean that he felt the same about Max, that would be like assuming every woman you'd ever met had a crush on you—and Max knew from long and many painful experiences that this just wasn't true.

Eric jumped up onto his lap and, purring loudly, head butted him. "What do I do Eric?" he asked, stroking him behind his ears. Did he completely ignore

Stefan? Say something? Carry on like nothing had happened? He stretched, literally he had no answers—would he feel this way about other guys? Would he still fancy women? What the hell was he going to do? His head was spinning trying to think about it, a crush had never been this complicated before. He was about to turn on the computer when his phone beeped. He checked his messages and there was one from Stefan.

I'm going to Sunny Hunny—fancy coming with me?

Max's heart skipped a beat, and he'd texted back "yes" before he'd had time to even think about it. What the actual fuck was he doing? Really, this was the worst idea he'd had. Ever. He knew this even as he arranged for Stefan to pick him up. It didn't stop his stomach from tightening and him running round the place madly with a Hoover or showering again. Nope, apparently knowledge was useless in this situation because it seemed he was going to ignore whatever good advice he could come up with.

Glancing at his watch, he anticipated that Stefan would be here any minute. He checked the house with a sweeping look—other than redecorating there really wasn't a lot more he could do to make it look better. He put biscuits down for the cats and topped up their water. He grabbed a pullover and stood at the back door, listening for the telltale sound of a vehicle coming down the lane. When the familiar sound of tyres crunching over the gravel road reached his ears, he could have sworn his heart rate doubled. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to sit as nonchalantly as possible at the kitchen table looking at a paper he really wasn't reading. He'd told Stefan to come straight round the back—most people did, and, with every footstep that sounded on the path outside, his pulse thudded in time. He'd never felt more like a teenager in his life. And that included when he was actually a teenager.

The rap of knuckles on the backdoor was a relief, and he jumped up. "Hey Stefan, come in. Do you want a drink before we go?"

Stefan grinned at him from the doorway, and Max couldn't help noticing the way his eyes crinkled ever so slightly at the edges. "I'm good, thanks, Maxi. Nice place you've got here, it's huge compared to my place."

Max loved his cottage, but he was under no illusions about its size. "Wow—your place must be really small, and it's Max." He grimaced as the words left his mouth—did that sound too critical? And was he destined to overanalyse every word he said now?

Thankfully, Stefan just widened his grin. "It really is! This is great though." He turned and looked at the garden. "I'd love to have a space like this, then I could have the dogs I want."

Locking the door, he followed Stefan to the car. “You’d really like a dog wouldn’t you?” he asked, buckling in the seatbelt.

“I’d love to give Sooty, Sandy, and Alfie a home. I’d like to re-home the old dogs that nobody really wants anymore. The trouble is I just don’t have enough space for them. I take them for tons of walks and things in my spare time, but...” He trailed off and glanced at the sat-nav. “Don’t suppose I can convince you on the virtues of dog ownership, could I?”

“Nah, I’ll stick to the cats, as lovely as the dogs were, I’m not really here enough in the day to give them a proper home. I’d love to visit them again though.”

“Really?” Stefan asked. “I’d love that Max.” He started telling Max about the dogs’ recent antics, and Max couldn’t help but notice how animated he was.

“Did you always want to work with animals?” Max asked and, despite Max’s fears, the conversation flowed. Before Max knew it, they were in Hunstanton and heading towards the clifftop.

“I’ve never been here before,” he said as they rode past the new part of town towards the original village.

“You’ve never been to Hunstanton?” Stefan’s eyebrows shot up. “You live half an hour away, and you’ve never been here before.”

Max chuckled. “No, I’ve been to Hunstanton, just never the old bit. Everyone I ever came with always wanted to go to the funfair and on the slot machines.”

“I promise, walking along this bit of beach, with the sun setting—it’s one of the most beautiful places on earth.” Stefan parked the car and screwed up his nose. “I sound like such a dork, don’t I?”

Max shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. He didn’t sound like a dork to Max at all—he sounded perfect.

As they made their way down the cliff path, the sun beat down on their backs, warm and lovely, despite the late month of the year. The sea breeze, though, brought a freshness and Max enjoyed its cooling touch on his skin. The beach was still fairly crowded, a mix of families, couples and dog walkers. Max followed Stefan, and they headed away from the busy area. They walked along in silence, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. Max stopped and slipped off his trainers, letting the dry sand trickle through his toes. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been to the beach, and considering how close it was, this was

really sad. Gulls swooped together on the horizon, dipping down into the water and then flying back to the cliff where they nested. A golden retriever sped past them in hot pursuit of a ball. They both watched him, laughing as he plunged straight into the water and proceeded to shake his coat, soaking the young boy running after him.

“Did you know more than seven thousand dogs were abandoned in East Anglia in 2012?” Stefan said as they started walking again. Max glanced sideways at him.

“Really, wow—that is a lot. How many of them are re-homed?”

“Not enough.” Stefan looked out to the water, lost in his thoughts for a moment. Max studied him, the pain was written across the other man’s face for the entire world to see. Then, in an instant, it was gone. He smiled up at Max. “Sorry, no getting maudlin. How about a paddle?”

Max smiled and dropped his shoes in the sand. “Sure thing—last one to the water buys the ice cream.”

Hurling down the sand, Max couldn’t help laughing. He glanced over his shoulder at Stefan hopping round trying to pull his trainers off. Slowing down he turned and grinned. “I’d like a Ninety-nine, please,” he called back over the expanse of sand between them.

“You’ve not won yet,” Stefan called back, finally dumping his shoes with Max’s and sprinting towards him. Stefan was certainly faster than Max, but with the gap he’d already created, it wasn’t hard to race to the water first. Damn was that water cold though. It showered up his calves and he paused to roll his shorts up a bit further.

“Very sexy,” Stefan sniggered splashing alongside him. He was only joking, but Max’s heart still beat a tiny bit faster than it was. There was no point denying it, Max knew it was nothing to do with the mad dash down the sand.

“Don’t you know it,” he said, glad the setting sun would hide the red in his face. “It takes a whole lot of sexy to rock rolled-up shorts like I can.” He pulled them up even further exposing to mid-thigh. “I bet you’d give your left nut to look this good!”

I bet you’d give your left nut to look this good. What the fuck... Since when did he flirt?

“I bow to your superior sexiness.” Stefan made bowing actions. Max snorted and splashed water at him. He couldn’t quite figure out who had taken

over his mouth—but he'd quite like control of it back. He didn't like not knowing what was going to come out of it next.

“Oh, so that's how it's going to be, is it?” Before Max could ask what Stefan meant, a tidal wave of water cascaded over him, aided by Stefan's foot. Stefan was grinning so widely Max wondered if his face would split in two. *Really? So that's how he's going to play.* Feigning anger, he moved away a little, then turned and swept his hand through the water. Handfuls of it swept up into the air completely drenching Stefan too.

He regretted it as soon as he'd done it. The playful look on Stefan's face increased tenfold and he launched himself at Max. It was like being hit by a wrecking ball. Well, maybe less painful—and certainly more enjoyable—but wrecking ball or Stefan, Max did not stand a chance of staying upright. With Stefan's arms round his neck and legs wrapped around his waist they both fell into the water. Salt water doused him, they may have only been in the shallows, but there was definitely enough water to saturate the pair of them.

Max lay in the sea with Stefan sitting on top of him shaking water over him like the Labrador they'd watched. Euphoria swept through him, and the urge to laugh became overwhelming. He tried to hold it back, but he couldn't and snorted loudly. The harder he tried not to, the louder he snorted, and soon, full blown gales of laughter ripped from him. Proper belly laughs, the kind that you couldn't stop no matter how hard you tried. As at the zoo, the laughing was contagious, and Stefan joined in, gasping to try and breathe. The happy sounds echoed above the gentle splash of the water, and Max couldn't have told you how long they'd lain there like loons. The sky was rapidly darkening, and it was only when he shivered violently that Max realised this was probably not the smartest idea he'd ever had. Not that he was taking the blame for this; it was one hundred percent Stefan's fault as far as he was concerned.

“I'm so cold,” he said, pulling himself up from the water.

“This was not a good idea,” Stefan agreed, climbing up too. “I do have some spare clothes in the car. Come on jog, it'll help warm you up.”

“You p-p-planned this?” Max stuttered, the cold making him shiver.

“Not exactly planned it, but I was prepared.” Max must have looked puzzled because Stefan chuckled. “I came up here a few weeks back and wished I could have a dip but didn't have a change of clothes, so I stuffed a couple of spare sets in for the future and a towel. You look so cold.” Max startled when Stefan reached back and grabbed hold of his hand, with no option

but to follow, he found himself pulled along the sand. Pausing only to gather up their shoes, Stefan kept his grip firm on Max's hand. The running was definitely helping, at least, Max told himself it was the running even though the warmth radiated up from their linked hands.

They got to the top of the cliff, and Stefan released the grip, opened his boot and chucked a towel at Max. "You use it first. You're much colder than I am." Turning his back and slightly embarrassed, Max stripped off his sodden T-shirt and wrapped the towel round his torso, enjoying the meagre warmth it offered.

"Here, these should fit." A T-shirt came his way followed by a pair of shorts. As quickly as he could, he stripped off his wet stuff, dried and slipped on the dry clothes. Bundling up his sopping things, he turned to hand the towel to Stefan. He stopped short—the other man stood staring at him, for once the mischievous grin gone from his face. The look Stefan wore sent all the blood rushing south, and Max started moving round the side of the car before his knob became too hard.

"Nice arse," said Stefan reaching for the towel, the cheeky tone he usually had mastered so well, sounding a little off to Max.

"Er, thanks," he said, not quite sure how to respond. God knows, he knew how he wanted to respond, but this was more than just unknown territory. If he was wrong about this, if what he thought he knew was really just a flash in the pan, a moment of curiosity, then he risked ruining a great friendship. Even with his thoughts scattered all over the place, he knew that would be a bad idea. While Stefan was changing, Max climbed into the passenger seat. *Nice arse.* The words echoed round in his head. Did he mean it, did it mean anything if he did? And what made a backside nice anyway? Sure, he liked the peachy softness of past girlfriends, but he'd never really thought about a man's arse before. Now the thought was in his head though. Damn it. He stared at his hands, willing himself not to glance in the mirror. But, why shouldn't he—after all he wouldn't be doing anything Stefan hadn't done first. *Could he sound any more like a school boy?* Still, one little peek wouldn't hurt. And this is what he was thinking as he let his eyes slide towards the passenger-side mirror.

One look couldn't hurt. Except he hadn't counted on that one look almost causing his blood pressure to drop. Or rise. Or whatever. It did something inexplicable that left him hard as a rock and dizzy as all hell. He'd been in changing rooms before, he'd seen naked men—not that he'd ever paid attention as he was usually trying to get dressed as quickly as possible to hide his own geeky trimness—but anything he had seen had never been as perfect as the

sight he was looking at now. Rounded and taut and holy fuck, what was going on with him? Fuck, fuck, fuck. What the hell was he going to do?

“Ready to go?” Stefan climbed into the driver’s seat. “I know I owe you an ice cream but I’m not sure we’ll find anywhere serving one at this time of night. Can I give you an IOU?”

“Sure thing.” Max couldn’t bring himself to look at Stefan and was glad that Stefan was having to concentrate on driving. The ride home seemed both endless and the shortest trip ever. Conversation was mumbled, muted. He hoped Stefan was putting it down to him just being tired. He wanted to go home and pretend he’d never met Stefan—that he was just still 5t3ff, his computer friend. Then the thought of never seeing him again hit, and he felt sick to the stomach. Damn he needed to sleep; maybe things would seem clearer in the morning. Though, that hadn’t worked out too well for him yesterday.

“Earth to Max!” A hand waved in front of his face, and Max was woken from his reverie. “Are you okay? I’ve just been talking to you for ten minutes, and I don’t think you’ve heard a word I’ve said.”

“Sorry, I’m... just tired. What were you saying?” Max tried to look interested in the conversation and not focus on the outline of Stefan’s face. How his nose was almost perfectly straight, with just the tiniest upturn at the end. How, even in the dark, he could make out the laughter lines that feathered the edges of his eyes and gave him a look of permanent happiness.

“Just asking about work tomorrow. Didn’t know when you wanted that ice cream, I like to get my debts paid.” The grin returned, and Max’s stomach flipped.

“Um, no, tomorrow’s no good. Can I let you know?” His fingernails dug into the bare skin at the bottom of his shorts as he lied. He needed to get his head straight, and he wasn’t going to do that by seeing Stefan. He knew he’d have to see him again soon though. This was seriously, seriously fucked up.

“Sure thing.” Stefan shrugged and flicked the indicator on, navigating the roundabout and remembering which turn was Max’s.

The night was long, and so was the next day. And the day after. And the one after that. Max threw himself into his job. The office of an insurance firm wasn’t the most fun place to work, but it was busy and distracting, and for that he was thankful. Thursday rolled round, gaming night. He’d managed to avoid

Stefan so far, just sending a text to say he'd washed the clothes and would return them soon. He'd had time and space to think. And think he'd done. He'd gone over and over things in his head. Thought endlessly about his reaction to Stefan, how he felt when he was with him. He knew how he felt; he wasn't stupid enough to deny it to himself. Analysing it would be silly, he liked Stefan, and Stefan turned him on. End of. The thing he wasn't sure of was how to deal with it.

September was unusually bright, the weather that perfect combination of sunny but not too hot. Still it was a rare day that found him gardening when he didn't have to be. Tonight though he found it was quite urgent that he cut the grass again—even though he'd only done it on Sunday. With the evening sun lowering but still warm on his back, he strode up and down pushing the mower. In the distance, a tractor chugged up and down fields doing whatever tractors did at the start of autumn. The apples on the tree at the bottom of the garden were about ready to pick, he noted as he cut the grass there, and the grape vine that ran riot over an old shed was full of grapes. Too sour for human consumption, the birds loved them.

A breeze added some freshness to the air as the evening drew in. Finishing up, he put the mower back in the shed and poured himself a tall glass of pineapple juice. Sitting outside as darkness descended, he could hear no sounds of human life in the still of the evening. No neighbours calling or children playing. Some might think it lonely, but to Max it was perfect. Finally, sipping at his juice he could avoid thinking about Stefan no longer. Past eight and he was pretty sure 5t3ff would be travelling through the Twelvewoods looking for him. How did he carry on pretending everything was hunky dory? He rubbed his hands over his face, this was so damn complicated.

Option one—ignore Stefan completely. Stop playing Final Fantasy, don't call him or meet in chat rooms. But... but... that would be so stupid. And ridiculous. Giving up before you'd begun. Option one was not an option, he decided as he thought about option two. Carry on like before. That seemed sensible and it shouldn't be too hard. Except when he thought about it, he realised it would be hard—fine on the computer and in the game. But what about when they met up, and if he wasn't going to meet up, how would he explain his sudden reluctance? He didn't want to hurt Stefan. Except, he thought, that's not the full truth. Of course, he didn't want to hurt Stefan, but what he was really afraid of was not seeing him anymore. Or pretending the whole time they were together. Pretending that it didn't feel like he was on fire

every time they touched. Nope, that was no option either. Which left him with choice three—tell Stefan how he felt. Tell him. “Well fuck a duck,” Max muttered to himself as he chucked the dregs of his pineapple juice on the grass and went inside to the computer. After all that thinking, the decision wasn’t so hard really.

10. Game On

Stefan was kind of sick of wandering around a computer game searching for Max. The fact that this was the fourth night on the row he'd been *in* the game and not actually *played* the game smacked of desperation even to himself. So much for keeping his feelings under control. Paranoia was not his usual mindset, but, since Sunday evening and Max going all quiet on him, paranoid was exactly how he was feeling. Had he overstepped with the remarks about Max's arse? He honestly didn't know, and he hated second guessing himself—he hated even more that he was so worked up about this. He was a grown man for fuck's sake. So, he'd found himself moping at work, avoiding anyone who was going to ask him questions about Max and spending a lot of time in a virtual realm.

Actually, being on Final Fantasy and not actually playing Final Fantasy was harder than it sounded. Other players kept trying to rope him into stuff; he'd had three requests to make up raiding parties in the last half hour alone. Just drifting around the area was getting difficult, another Miq'ote had questioned him twice in the past fifteen minutes. He could always turn off the computer and do something else. He could... but maybe just five more minutes. Turned out he'd never been so thankful to give anything five extra minutes in his life. He returned to his hideout with another huge bundle of sticks—his Miq'ote was never going to suffer from the cold if the towering pile he'd collected over the past few days was anything to go by—and a familiar Elezen figure waited in front of his log pile. As relief and joy wrestled inside him, Stefan only let himself consider briefly how truly pathetic he was before he let his avatar stroll on over to MAX11.

It was well after eleven when Max suggested the chat room, and Stefan practically sighed in relief. Okay, he *did* sigh in relief and was thankful nobody was there to hear him. At least, he knew he hadn't frightened Max off completely. This was the most goddamn ridiculous thing ever, never had he had a crush on someone like this before. Not even when he was a teenager. As he exited the game and signed into the chat room, his hands started to sweat a little.

5t3ff: *Hey.* ☺

MAX11: *Hi Stefan. Good gaming tonight, huh? Glad we avoided getting caught by that Lalafell gang. I don't like them, far too conniving!!*

5t3ff: *IKR! How are you? Haven't heard much from you this week. Thought I'd scared you off *G**

Stefan tapped his keyboard impatiently as he waited for a reply. Communicating via keyboard had its advantages—but it also had disadvantages. At least, when you were actually speaking to someone you could see their reactions and not guess at their mood entirely. Outside a rowdy group wandered past. Thursday night was student night at The Bell where they served cheap drinks from six 'til eleven. He'd long since given up trying to sleep on a Thursday until the drunken mass exodus concluded just before midnight.

MAX11: *Lol—no way. Just busy at work. ☹ I was wondering if you wanted to meet up tomorrow evening?*

Stefan's heart rate doubled, and his hands shook. With nerves, excitement, or apprehension, he wasn't sure. He thought for a second before he typed.

5t3ff: *I'd really like that Max, did you have anywhere in mind?*

Stefan waited for the 'typing' icon to start flashing. And waited. And waited. Just as he was about to give up and offer a suggestion, Max started typing.

MAX11: *Do you know The Badger's Retreat at Elmsley? How about we meet there for a meal, then decide? How does 7.30 work for you?*

5t3ff: *Sounds great! ☺ CU then.*

The days had turned cold, and Stefan added a tank top to his outfit, carefully pulling the collar of his shirt straight at the neck. The deep plum colour complemented the charcoal shirt and teamed with jeans was the right kind of smart/casual for a pub meal. He hoped. He glanced back at the bed, piled high with the contents of his wardrobe, most of which he'd tried on at least once. He *never* had this much trouble deciding what to wear, usually he didn't really care what he looked like and choose comfy over cool every time. Today though... Max always looked so well dressed, even when he was in jeans and T-shirt, he appeared ironed and well groomed, and for some reason Stefan wanted Max to feel as though he'd made the same kind of effort.

Well, not *some* reason, he thought as he started hanging his clothes up again. *The* reason; he fancied the pants off the man. Unfortunately, he didn't

think it likely he'd get into the guys trousers, far less his pants. Except... why suggest a meal, that was like a date. Wasn't it?

He pulled his phone from his pocket and dialled Tally's number. "It's not a date if he's straight," she said before he'd even asked the question.

"How do you do that?" He looked in the mirror and used one hand to add a little gel to his hair and tousle the front up a little. "How do you know what I'm going to ask?"

"Because sugar, I know you. I know that despite your supposedly laid-back attitude, you really like this Max, and you're conveniently trying to overlook the fact that he's not gay and are wishing desperately that this was a date."

Stefan pouted at his reflection. "But you said to go for it."

"No, romantic Tally said go for it, and only practical Tally is in the house this evening."

Stefan laughed, despite himself. "Oh, domestic bliss not quite as blissful as it should be?"

"Don't you know it," Tally said, through what sounded like gritted teeth. "I'll bore you with the details next shift. Just don't ever decide to use washing up liquid instead of washing powder because you've run out. The clothes won't like it and neither will your partner."

Laughing again, Stefan hung up. Tally was an angel, and she always knew just how to make him feel better. Poor Carl was in for it tonight if he really had bugged up the washing machine. Shoving the rest of the clothes onto hangers and away, he checked his hair once more to make sure it wasn't too boy band and grabbed his car keys.

Thirty minutes later, he walked into The Badger's Retreat and looked for Max. He knew he was here already, his car was in the car park. The bar wasn't overly full, and it didn't take long to spot him leaning on the bar cradling a drink. Fuck he looked good. Dark jeans and a bottle green jumper that looked so freaking hot on him. Max turned around and looked at the door, and a slow smile spread across his face when he saw Stefan. Circumnavigating the tables, Stefan went over. Max ordered drinks, "Another shandy and... what would you like Stefan?"

"Just a coke," he said, and when the bartender had served them, he followed Max to a small table in the corner.

“Hi.” Max smiled at him, and a thousand volts jolted through his body. That smile—was it how Max usually smiled at him? It seemed more... possessive. More wanting. Didn't it? Or was he overanalysing it? Flustered, he grabbed a menu and studied it intently. Max smiled at him and picked up the other menu. Stefan scanned the list of foods without taking it in. Max shifted in his chair, and their knees brushed together. Was it intentional? Had Max meant to do it, or was it a complete accident? Heart thudding, Stefan focused on the writing, willing himself not to look up. Resistance it seemed was futile, and, apparently with a will of their own, his eyes turned up, and he looked at Max over the top of his menu. Max was perusing his menu with more calm about him than Stefan had ever seen. It was almost complete role reversal, and Stefan wasn't sure he liked it. In fact, no he didn't like it—so he was going to change it.

“Seen anything you fancy?” he asked, making sure his grin was just a little bit suggestive. A bit wider than usual, eyebrow tipped up a little. He knew how to tease and tempt if need be. He could feel the grin widen as Max's smile faltered, just a little, but enough that Stefan knew he wasn't as confident as he appeared.

“Maybe,” said Max, recovering quicker than Stefan would have liked. “I usually go for something vegetarian, but I'm thinking of trying some meat tonight.” He cocked an eyebrow of his own and stared directly at Stefan. Good god, was that innuendo? Stefan's dick certainly seemed to think so anyway.

“I'm thinking the rump steak looks good. I usually find it's the best thing on the menu.” Stefan had to hold back a leer as the faint touch of a blush started to creep up Max's neck. Two can play at this game.

“I'll take your word for it.” Max smiled back, still blushing a little but holding his own. Fuck he was sexy like this. Stefan really hoped that Max was flirting, because if this was just one major misinterpretation he wasn't sure he could cope.

Wriggling in his chair to adjust himself a little, Stefan stared at Max, devouring him with his eyes. Confidence suited him—but that edge of insecurity, the bit that caused the blushing and Max to lower his gaze, that did Stefan in. When Max was flustered, his mouth ran away from him. He said the darndest things, then blushed like a virgin. When Max was flustered, he was as sexy as all hell. “I'll go and order shall I? You definitely want the steak?”

“Without a doubt.” Max looked directly at him. Stefan could see the effort it was taking for the other man to not lower his gaze, and *parts* of him really

appreciated it. He gave himself a second to adjust himself and then went and gave their order. Standing at the bar, he thought about Max. Carefully he snuck a look at the other man. God, he looked hot tonight, especially now as he sat there fiddling with a beer mat, rolling it up then stretching it flat. Looking away again before he got caught peeking, Stefan tried hard to describe Max accurately. He wasn't vulnerable or delicate, that wasn't the right way to depict him. At first glance, he could appear to lack confidence, but truly he didn't. He didn't wait for others to make choices for him or try to fit into a mould, he just *was*. His train of thought was interrupted as a barmaid came over to take his order.

"For table seven?" she repeated back to him after he'd relayed what they wanted. Grabbing them each another drink, he went and sat down. He shifted his chair a little closer to Max's and flipped open the menu again between them.

"Best decide what we want for pudding—it is the best bit of the meal after all!" Max looked at him sideways and purposely opened his legs so their knees rubbed together.

"I hadn't forgotten that dessert was your favourite course." Max moved a little, leaning towards Stefan so as well as their knees rubbing under the table; their arms were touching on top of it. If Stefan had thought it felt like volts of electric had zapped him before he was surely mistaken. Because this. This is what touching an electric fence must be like. Well, except less painful. And less dangerous. But the feeling like a pulse of current running from every point touching, that, that must be the same.

"Feels like being permanently statically shocked, doesn't it?" Max spoke quietly but moved his arm slowly against Stefan's. Stefan could only gape and nod his head. "I guess we need to talk, huh?"

Stefan nodded again. "I guess so," he said, feeling more out of control than he ever had in his life.

"So, I suppose I'm making it pretty obvious I like you in a *more than like* you way?" He posed it as a question, but Stefan felt sure it was more a statement and just nodded. The smile that crept across Max's face turned his stomach inside out. "And I'm hoping you do... are... feeling the same?" The last part of the sentence rushed out of his mouth, confidence faltering at the last minute. Before Stefan could speak, could confirm or deny, Max gabbled on. "It's not that I assume you'll like me like that just because you're gay, but I thought we had... it felt like..."

"I do like you Max. I more than like you." Stefan paused. He needed to be careful, words could be so misleading sometimes. The same sentence, with a different nuance on a different word could sound so poles apart in meaning. While he'd never been a shag, fag, fart, sleep kind of bloke he also didn't turn down sex if it was someone he was really attracted to. Frankly, this situation was completely new to him. And who the hell had even mentioned sex anyway, talk about jumping the gun. But, well they were men and men did like sex. A lot. He assumed it was the same for straight men, as it was gays. "But you're straight," he finally blurted out, coming to the crux of his problem in the most inelegant way possible.

"Gay, straight, bi—labels, schmabels." Max sipped at his shandy and let his little finger rub gently along the side of Stefan's hand. "Why? Why do I have to be straight... maybe I've just never found a man I've been attracted to before. I'll admit I'd never thought about it before, but trust me, since we went to the zoo I've thought about little else."

"I..." Stefan started.

"Steak, chips and peas?" a waitress stood beside the table holding two plates of steaming food. Stefan pointed to Max. "And steak, jacket and salad?"

"That's me, thanks." He moved his hand so the plates could be put down and missed the feather-like touch of Max's finger immediately.

"Can I get you anything? Sauce, salt? Another drink?"

"No, we're good, thanks," Stefan answered, too eager to continue his conversation with Max to worry whether the other man did want any condiments.

"Enjoy your meal." The girl finally left them alone. But now Max had picked up his fork and was attacking his chips like he hadn't eaten for a week.

"You're a big chip fan, huh?" Stefan sliced his own steak carefully and enjoyed the look of enjoyment on Max's face as he ate.

"The hugest!" Max agreed once he'd swallowed his mouthful. "I don't have them very often because I hate exercise and chips are fatty. A chip butty is the food of gods though."

"I'm afraid I'll have to disagree with you there. Pavlova is the most divine food on the planet. And in the heavens," he added quickly. Max smiled again before continuing his meal.

They ate in relative silence, but Stefan was all too aware of Max's leg periodically brushing up against his and he was convinced it was by design rather than accident. He so wanted to just give in, to fall into whatever this was, but, after months of longing for this very thing to happen, he was having doubts. *Worrying*. And, *what the actual fuck*, screamed his brain. He'd been lusting after Max since he'd seen him standing awkwardly against the wall at the zoo, and each time he'd seen him since had been like slow torture. He spent weeks trying to convince himself they would only ever be friends, and the friendship they had was different to any of his others. He craved their time together. Longed for it, obsessed over it, if he was being honest with himself—which apparently he was tonight.

He chewed his steak slowly and thought. All his dreams of the last few months could come true tonight, and he was hesitating. Why?

“You're worrying about ruining our friendship, aren't you?” Max asked.

What the... “How do you do that, know what I'm thinking?” Stefan put down his cutlery and stared at Max.

“Because it's exactly what I worried about. Well, you know, after I got used to the idea of you being a man and all.”

“No labels, right?”

“Exactly. But, I don't want to ruin our friendship...” his voice dropped, and he looked down at the table, “no matter how much I want to kiss you.” The telltale red started to creep up his neck again, and, between that and the fact that Max had just admitted wanting to kiss him, Stefan was as hard as a rock. Sometimes, just sometimes, he envied females and their ability to not let the world know every time they were as horny as hell.

With his knob straining against his jeans, and the thought of Max's mouth against his, it was with great difficulty that he managed to keep his mind on the conversation. “You don't want to ruin our friendship? So what are we doing flirting with each other then?” Stefan thought for a moment. “I mean, how many of your exes are you still friends with? What happens if we do try something and it all goes wrong?”

“And what happens if we don't start something and miss out on the best relationship of our lives because we were too scared to try it?” Max put his fork down and stretched his arm across the table. Gently, he caressed Stefan's hand. “I can tell you now, my mum would say my dad is her best friend and vice

versa. Sure, there are times they'd happily kill each other, and sure, they have other friends they spend time with, but for the most part, they have their best friend there with them every day of their lives. I guess you just have to fight for what you want and not be afraid of what you might lose."

11. Fight or Flight

If anyone had ever asked Stefan if he would be a fight or flight kind of guy, he would have emphatically stated FIGHT. He wouldn't have hesitated. Not one doubt would have crept into his mind. Except now, *now* when he was faced with having to make some kind of choice, all he could think about was the possibility of losing Max altogether, and he wanted to retreat as fast as possible. Tally's voice echoed in his head. She'd been his go-to-gal for advice for so long he couldn't dismiss what she'd said earlier. Even if his dick wanted him to.

"I'm going to the loo," he said, abruptly snatching his hand back and moving away. In the toilets, he splashed water on his face and stared at himself in the mirror. What was wrong with him? This was what he wanted, what he'd been thinking about day after day and now it was a possibility he was, what? Running scared? How did he do this? Did he give it a go, run away—what was going to risk the friendship more?

Heading back towards the table, he could see the pensive look on Max's face. The mask of confidence had gone and doubt was there instead. Slipping into his seat, he let his hand caress over Max's. "I'm scared of ruining what we have Max—but I'm also scared of not trying."

Max looked at him, his dark eyes searching Stefan's face for answers. Hope glistened under the pensiveness. Stefan thought carefully before he spoke again. "I want to take it slow. Like really, really slow—I'd rather have our friendship than a short-lived, lust-fuelled affair."

Max nodded his head and turned his hand, catching Stefan's caressing fingers in his. "Sounds like the perfect idea to me. Slow and steady wins the race anyway, hadn't you heard?" Stefan smiled, not entirely sure if he was less or more apprehensive than he was previously. "Now though," Max continued, "we have a very important decision to make." Furrowing his forehead, Stefan looked across at Max. "What we want for pudding?" Max said.

"Seeing as there's no pavlova, I'm going for spotted dick." Stefan grinned and raised an eyebrow.

"And there I was thinking we were taking it slow," said Max, scanning his own menu. "Are you having cream with that?"

Stefan just raised his eyebrow further until Max blushed. “Nope, I’ll have custard, thanks.” Max chose a knickerbocker glory and, smiling like the Cheshire cat, Stefan went to place their orders.

A strange sense of relief settled itself round Stefan. It was tentative, as if it were a cloak of feathers that could blow away at the first bit of breeze, but it was there. A relief. His cards were on the table, but so were Max’s. There was no wondering or second guessing. They stated their positions and knew which path they were taking. And edging the relief was anticipation—and anticipation was a huge turn on. Slow was good. Slow could be fun.

They waited and chatted, and then ate their desserts when they arrived. Hands bumped together and so did knees, but no touch or caress was too long or too blatant. The joy was in the subtlety. In the quiet possibility of a friendship becoming something more. Soon their meal was finished and last orders had been called. “Ready to go?” asked Stefan. Max nodded. Stefan wasn’t entirely sure he was. Conversation with Max was so easy, time passed without him realising.

Outside the air was chilly, and Stefan wished he’d brought a jacket, even for the short journey across the car park. “I’m over there...” Max pointed, then stopped when he realised Stefan was parked next to him.

“It’s been a great evening, Max,” Stefan said, standing between their cars, near Max’s driver’s door. Suddenly, he felt awkward; this was new territory for him. There was no going slow usually, not since his first boyfriend had he not ended up shagging when there was a mutual interest with someone. This was different though. Not because Max had never fucked another man before, but because there was more at stake than just some bad nooky.

“It’s been a nearly perfect evening,” said Max.

“*Nearly* perfect?” Stefan stepped forward, so the gap between them closed. It was Max though that reached forward. Warm hands stroked gently down the side of his face. He’d never been touched so softly in his life, but the feather touch sent chills through him that had nothing to do with the season. Even in the dark, Stefan could see the delicate features of Max’s face. Such fine bone structure, he was almost pretty. Long lashes framed his dark, dark eyes, and Stefan was hypnotised by the warmth he saw in them. The pupils, blown and full of want. His lips were perfectly shaped, and a scratch of stubble glinted in the moonlight. The power of speech had seemingly abandoned both of them, and they stood for either the longest or the shortest time, just staring.

They moved forward together, an unspoken agreement of symmetry. Lips brushed his; tentative, hesitant, needing. Every nerve in his body sang. His arms reached round Max's waist and pulled him closer, and the kiss deepened. It was sweet and light and hot and fiery. Chocolate and delicious and Stefan wanted more. Max pressed harder into him, a soft graze of teeth across his bottom lip. Hands twined into his hair, clutching and caressing. Need for more simmered just beneath the surface, but either chance or willpower kept them from acting on it.

An eternity later, they pulled apart. Words seemed redundant; they'd just spoken silent prose after all. A brush of hands down his face, the promise of tomorrow and tomorrow's tomorrow and Max got in his car. With just a brief lift of the hand goodbye, he drove away, and Stefan climbed into his own car, only aware of the cold evening air again now Max had gone. It was just a kiss he told himself as he started the engine, just a kiss. But a kiss had never felt like this before.

If anyone had asked Max the next day how he'd gotten home, he wouldn't have been able to tell them. The same autopilot locked his car, let him in the house, fussed the cats, brushed his teeth and got him into bed. Then and only then did the world come back into focus. As he snuggled down into his pillows and pulled his quilt up around his neck, every memory of the evening fought its way to the surface of his mind. It was thoughts of the kiss, though, that consumed him. Stefan's lips had been softer than he'd thought they would be—yet rougher than he was used to. No lipstick, or gloss, or balm had greased them, and he'd loved the naked feel of them beneath his own mouth. He'd tasted of the sweetness of his pudding. He'd made soft moaning noises as he'd kissed that turned Max the fuck on and that, Max was sure, Stefan was completely unaware of making. It had been the most perfect kiss ever and, while he yearned for more, he also wanted to take it slow. For all the reasons they'd discussed. For the sake of deepening a friendship and not just blowing it.

Eventually, sleep drifted over him and, though he couldn't remember them in the morning, his dreams were full of Stefan and full of joy. The days once more blended together and thoughts of Stefan filled his mind. This time though he wasn't trying to desperately avoid him. Social media made keeping in contact a breeze without him looking like a total loser waiting anxiously for a phone call. Comment, tweet, like, update status, share a picture... it made the wait between texts and calls and visits to the chat room bearable.

The thirty-five minute trip between their houses wasn't far, and it was a cold Friday evening when Max next made his way to meet Stefan. Tally and some of the other people from Stefan's work were celebrating a colleague's birthday at a riverside pub. Max parked his car and pulled his scarf tighter. Winter definitely wasn't far away if the bitter evenings were anything to go by. His breath huffed out in front of him, and he hurried to the metal steps leading to the private party in the upstairs bar. The river twinkled in the moonlight, stars reflected in its rippling surface. His feet clanked up the steps where noise and warmth spilled out into the bitter night. For a second, he stopped and stared at the people he didn't know, laughing and joking together in the brightness of the disco lights. Happiness was all he could see, and he couldn't help himself smiling, even as nerves started to kick in.

He'd spent all day not thinking that this was the first time he'd seen Stefan since the kiss. He'd spent all day not thinking about how he was going to react to him. He thought it'd all be cool, they'd communicated every day in one way or another, but right now his hands were shaking slightly, and his heart was beating just that bit faster. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the door open and walked into the room. He walked over to the bar and ordered a pint, scanning the room for any sign of Stefan. It wasn't long before the other man caught his eye. Deep in conversation with Tally and, he assumed, other work colleagues, he had his head thrown back in laughter. Wearing jeans with a shirt and suit jacket he looked as hot as all fuck, and Max took a moment to appreciate the other man's beauty. His heart pumped hard as he noticed the artfully ruffled hair and the touch of guy-liner. He liked dressed-up Stefan. A lot.

Clasping his drink, Max pushed through the groups of people scattered across the small dance floor and joined Stefan and his friends. Tally saw him first and smiled at him. Max was nervous about seeing her too. He knew she was Stefan's best friend, he also knew that Stefan set a lot of stead in what Tally said. Max needed to make a good impression tonight. As Olly Murs pumped out from the speakers, Stefan finally noticed Max as he joined the group. A wide grin spread across his face that went straight to Max's groin. He'd never known anyone to turn him on so quickly before.

"Wow, I like your earring, does it hurt?" said Max noticing the bar through the top of Stefan's ear. He repeated the words back to himself and cringed.

Stefan smiled even wider and grabbed Max into a hug. "It's a scaffold piercing, and it hurts just a little. Do you really like it?" He loosened his grip on

Max but didn't release him completely. Standing looking directly at each other, it was as if the rest of the room had disappeared.

Nodding, Max said, "I really like it. It's very sexy—so is the eyeliner. You are hot, mister, very hot." Max didn't know what taking it slow entailed exactly, but he was pretty sure compliments were allowed. Besides, he liked the way Stefan's eyes widened just a little at the compliment.

"You remember Tally?" Stefan asked, and as Max nodded, he found himself swept into another hug. Hugging was not his thing, not at all, he much preferred a handshake, so he just let his arms curl awkwardly around Tally's shoulders, not quite sure how tight to pull her or where to place his head. It was only once she'd pulled away and given him a knowing grin that he realised there was none of that awkwardness with Stefan. When Stefan drew him into a cuddle it felt like the most natural thing on the planet. The rest of the group were introduced—a Sandy, Graham, Joshua, Liam. Max knew he wouldn't remember their names by the end of the night, but he tried to anyway.

The music blared out of the speakers, the DJ playing top forty songs relentlessly. They weren't necessarily the current top forty, but they were all loud and they were all upbeat, obviously designed to get people on the small square that counted as a dance floor. And they all made conversation nearly impossible. The small space and mass of heaving bodies meant that it was as warm as hell in there, and he shrugged off his scarf and jacket pretty quickly. When he found himself next to Tally, she leaned into him and said, "Nice shirt." Max looked down, though he knew which one he was wearing. The black silk T-shirt was plain and tight, but he liked it. It was just the right amount of sexy, and Max felt good in it.

"Thanks. How are those puppies now?" She frowned as she thought back, then told him they'd all found new homes as soon as they were old enough.

"I don't know how you don't get attached to them and want to take them all home." He leaned back, resting against a table, arms folded across his chest.

Tally shrugged and smiled. "I literally don't have the room for all the ones I want to take home. There would be no point taking them from the potential of a family that can look after them properly to crowd them into my house. It would be kind of counter-productive."

"That makes sense." Max thought for a moment. "Is it hard though, seeing them day in, day out in those cages?"

Biting her bottom lip, she paused before answering. "It is, but you can't think about it. If you were falling apart every time you went to work, what use would you be to the animals?"

Max swigged his drink. "Stefan said pretty much the same thing. I don't think I'd be very good at it. I'd try and take them all home and..." he shrugged and let the sentence trail off, flushing a little as he realised how much of a wuss he sounded. Tally just looked at him and offered a sympathetic smile.

"Oh god, I love this song! Fancy a dance?" She grabbed hold of him and pulled him onto the dance floor before he had a chance to say no. As he passed Stefan, the other man raised his eyebrows, smirked and deftly took the bottle of beer out of Max's hand. Stefan was definitely going to pay for this, Max thought as he started imitating Tally's moves. Friends—boyfriends?—did *not* do that to one another. They helped each other out.

It had been so long since Max had been dancing, he'd forgotten how much he actually enjoyed it. Once he got over the self-consciousness—usually aided by an alcoholic beverage or three—he was actually quite a good dancer. Despite his long limbs and tallness, he had a natural grace that didn't present itself in his everyday life. Tally was easy to get along with he discovered as they twisted and swayed together. She was very blunt, but even Max could work out her heart was solid gold.

Tune after tune played, and he lost himself to the music. Rhythm and a steady beat and he felt freer than he had in a long time. Song after song played, yet Max made no move to come off the dance floor, even when Tally gave up and went to get herself another drink. He hadn't danced in so long, it felt good to let himself go a little. Finally, the current run of old rock songs came to an end, and the DJ swapped them for some rapping stuff, so Max decided he was ready for another drink. He made his way towards the edge of the dance floor where Stefan was. As he found his way through the bodies still dancing, he saw Stefan watching him, an indescribable look on his face.

Silently, Stefan held out a glass of orange juice to him, and Max downed the contents thirstily. Still without words, Stefan grabbed Max's jacket with one hand and Max's hand with his other and pulled him out of the room, back down the metal steps outside into the frigid night air. The coolness hit his skin and soothed the heat away, and Max relished it, even as he wondered where they were going. Max had never seen Stefan like this before, so... purposeful. He opened his mouth to ask where he was being taken and then changed his mind. Instead, he enjoyed the warmth of Stefan's hand in his, the way he gripped his

fingers tightly, the way his thumb stroked up and down. They rounded the corner of the building, the river flowing quietly in front of them. Boats moored for the night bobbing up and down, only the quiet slap, slap of water on their hulls making any noise. Stefan stopped and turned, gripping the front of Max's T-shirt the best he could with his handful of coat.

"You never told me you could dance." His voice was low, gravelly like he'd smoked one too many cigarettes.

"I... I... uh..."

"You are so fucking hot right now. I'm just reminding myself *slowly*."

Max frowned, confused as Stefan looked him up and down.

"You have no idea what you do to me, do you?" Stefan asked. Max barely had time to shake his head when he felt himself being pushed backwards, up against the hard brick of the pub building. "No idea," Stefan murmured again as his mouth closed over Max's. Heat seared through him as Stefan claimed him. Rough lips, hot breath, sharp teeth. Sucking, kissing. A tongue swept over his bottom lip, parted his mouth. A low moan and a hard body pressed against him. Wanting him. Claiming him. Every nerve in Max's body sparked to life. Nothing. *Nothing*, had ever felt like this before. He let his own tongue search Stefan's mouth and was rewarded with another soft groan that headed straight to his groin.

Suddenly, Stefan placed his hands at the side of Max's head and pulled them apart from each other. Caressing the side of Max's face, he muttered under his breath, *slowly, slowly*, then swallowed and looked at Max; want gleaming so obviously in his eyes, Max could see it, even in the moonlight.

"We'd better get back upstairs before I forget the slow part." Stefan still clasped Max's face in his hands. Max was in no hurry to move away, he wanted nothing more than the taste of Stefan's mouth in his again.

"Max?" Stefan asked, finally moving back. Max shivered as the frigid night air made its way into the gap between their bodies. Stefan smiled softly and passed Max his jacket then wound Max's scarf round his neck. It was warm and soft, but Max still would rather have Stefan providing the heat.

"What if slow isn't right?" Slow meant pulling away from long, deep kisses apparently, and Max's willpower was pretty shot because all he wanted was to kiss Stefan.

“Max,” Stefan caressed the side of his face. “I have never once worried about the sensible thing when it comes to... this.” He waved his hands between them. “But...”

“Yeah I know.” And Max did know. Did understand. “Do you really want to go back upstairs?” Max asked. “If I promise not to molest you totally, how do you feel about a walk? It’s such a beautiful night.” He caught Stefan’s hand in his, twining their frozen fingers together.

Stefan swallowed hard. “That would be perfect.” In unspoken agreement, they walked alongside the river. They went in the opposite direction to that which Stefan took with the dogs. The moon flooded the sky with silvery light, and in an eerie mystical way, it was almost as light as in the daytime. Everything was bathed in soft sparkles. Muted and beautiful. The quiet lap, lap of water splashing on the riverside was peaceful, and they walked in silence. Fingers still threaded together, their breath billowed in foggy puffs, and the sharp crunch of gravel underfoot echoed into the night. No words were exchanged for the longest time but contentment cloaked Max; a blanket of soft happiness.

“It’s a good job your dancing skills are top notch, they’re going to come in useful next Saturday.” The words penetrated the silence, extra loud though quietly spoken. “Nick’s decided it’s time to pay our dues, and it’s the first Saturday I’m free.”

It took Max a minute to catch on to what he was talking about. “Oh god, no, Stefan. I was just a stand in. There is no way I’m dancing in public!” Stefan slowed and twisted to face Max, his usual grin spread across his face. His eyes were darker, sexier in the moonlight and make-up, Max swallowed back a moan.

“You wouldn’t back out of a bet would you?” Mischief danced across his face. “How about if I promise to make it worth your while?”

Max’s heart stuttered as he asked, “How would you do that?”

“I could cook you dinner—I’m a very good cook, and we could get a film... you know, have a quiet night in?”

Max’s heart stopped. Just for a second, but he would swear under oath that it did physically stop. “Is that the same as asking me in for coffee?” he asked after a moment.

Stefan paused, then swallowed hard and shook his head. “Slowly,” he whispered, as though the word pained him. *Slowly*. Max stared at him, wishing he knew how to change the other man’s mind. *Slowly*. The word hung between them then dissipated in the night air as lips found lips again.

12. It's Dance Stefan, But Not as We Know It

“How did you know you were in love with Maria?” Max asked Aaron as soon as he'd picked up the phone. Lazily, he trailed his hand over Eric's back, trying to appease the head-butting cat.

“Max,” Aaron said yawning loudly into the phone, “what time do you call this?”

“Er, it's only just past eleven,” Max said guiltily.

“Hmm, well Tabitha's teething, so I've been up since four. Never mind—what do you mean how did I know I was in love?”

“Just that, what did it feel like, what gave it away?” Eric purred loudly in Max's ear, and he pushed him down the settee a bit. “Why Maria, out of all the girls you dated?”

A muffled yawn then, “I just knew. I couldn't stop thinking about her, my heart beat faster when we were together, I imagined us together when we were old... and couldn't imagine not having her with me. I knew she'd be a great mum. I don't know Max, I just knew. Why, have you met someone since we last met?”

“Not exactly, I've just been thinking about my feelings when...” A wail could be heard from Aaron's end of the phone.

“Look Max, I've got to go, Maria's had even less sleep than I have. I'd say if you can't imagine your life without her then I think it's fair to say you're in love. I'll talk to you soon.” The empty nothingness of the phone being hung up reverberated down the line, but Max thought he'd got his answer. He'd have to explain to Aaron it was a him and not a her causing the feelings, but that could wait for another day.

The first Saturday in November wasn't grey and drizzly as Max had hoped, in fact, it was a nearly perfect day in Max's opinion, bright sunshine and freezing temperatures. A crisp frost covered the ground and hung from the trees, Jack's art left for all to see. Max threw back the quilt and shivered in the chill of the room. Yawning widely, he cleaned out the fire before even putting the kettle on; a cuppa would be so much nicer in the warmth. Igniting the fire-lighter, he watched as the flames took hold of the kindling and added coal when

it had taken enough. A quick shower and finally a cup of tea, his stomach was churning too much to even think about eating. Today was D-day. Dance day. And dick day, if Max had his way. In no other circumstances would he agree to this, but the need to impress Stefan, to convince him to take that next step was overwhelming his fear of looking like a twat.

The bandstand in the walks in King's Lynn had been decided the appropriate place to do this. Lynn was nearer to him than any of them, by designation or chance he wasn't sure. Stefan was coming to pick him up and they were meeting the others at ten. It was already nearly nine. The house was spotless; he'd made sure of that. He brushed his teeth. Again. Checked his hair, grabbed a coat and fussed the cats. He watched the clock. Did the seconds usually pass so slowly? At last, the telltale sound of a car on the gravel outside and Max did his best to look casual.

This time when Stefan made his way to the door, he greeted Max with a kiss. Every time their lips touched, Max's knees weakened. There was not an inch of this man he didn't want to know. Playfully, Stefan sucked Max's bottom lip. Max forced himself to pull away. "We've not got long until we meet the others." His voice broke with the effort of speaking—to do this he had to make Stefan want him as much as he wanted Stefan. He trusted Aaron, and that was that.

In the car, Max casually laid his hand on Stefan's leg, stroking his thigh, supposedly absent-mindedly. "So what do you think Nick will have dreamed up?" he asked, letting his hand creep up, nearly to the groin, then back down again. "You've known him a long time. How evil is he?"

Stefan laughed. "Oh, he's got a nasty streak. It's not aided by the fact that last time I may have made him go to a party dressed as a nurse. A female nurse," he added for verification.

"Why do I feel that I've got myself into something I really shouldn't have?" Max *accidentally* let his fingers trail lightly across the crease in Stefan's thigh before moving his hand to check his hair in the passenger mirror. Out the corner of his eye, he caught a look of yearning wisp across Stefan's face and suppressed a small smile. "Take the third exit of the roundabout," Max directed as they came into town. "So, do you have any idea of what Nick will have planned?"

"Not a sausage." Stefan indicated left and followed Max's directions. "I guess we're about to find out though," he said pulling into an empty parking

space. Nick and Charlie were already waiting at the bandstand and across the green Max could see Tommy, James and Andy heading towards them. The walks were a historic part of King's Lynn. With the ancient city wall still visible in parts, and the Red Mount, a fifteenth century chapel sitting alongside small streams full of ducks, playing fields and a free-running course, its Victorian tree-lined walkways combined history and modern beautifully. Unfortunately, even in this weather it was popular. Teenagers hung around the play equipment, tourists photographed the historical memorials and families fed the ducks. The look of glee on Charlie's face was a little too sadistic for Max's liking.

"I suppose there is no way I'm getting out of this is there?" Stefan just grinned and shook his head.

"Hallo, hallo—hope you have brought your leg warmers with you, my darling girlfriend thought up the perfect, er, forfeit for you all." Tommy cackled at Nick's smirk and high-fived Charlie. James sighed dramatically and Andy laughed out loud.

"Don't know why I'm here, I technically wasn't part of the losing team—I guess I'm a glutton for punishment."

"Hmmm, nothing to do with the fact you're a drama and dance whore and are hoping to pull a hot chick with your moves then?" James smacked Andy playfully round the head.

"Oh, yeah there is that." Andy grinned.

"Actually, it's thanks to you that I came up with this idea," Charlie said. "I remember going through those dances with you for your audition last April and thought, 'what about a homage to some of the best dance films out there?'"

Andy was the only one left smiling at this point. "Basically, I've got some tunes, from soundtracks; if you manage to dance some of the actual dances from the films then we're going to let you get away with just twenty minutes instead of thirty. Oh, and you need to wear these." She fished out some glittery cowboy—cowgirl?—hats and handed them round. Max wasn't sure he could do this after all, he already felt like a major fucking idiot.

"What..." Max started, but Charlie jumped right in.

"If you don't know the moves copy Andy, I know he does. Hey, I'm more than happy for you all to look like twats, this is a forfeit remember—there's supposed to be a certain amount of humiliation involved."

“You really are a sadist, Charlie, no wonder you and Nick get on so well together.” Stefan was grinning madly, not seeming to be at all perturbed by the idea of dancing in public. Max wondered briefly if trying to impress Stefan was really worth this amount of public humiliation. A quick glance at him, how even in his tracky bottoms, he looked fit as hell confirmed that, yeah, humiliation would be worth it.

“Well guys, no point in wasting time.” Charlie clapped her hands together then fished an iPod out of her bag. Nick laughed and stepped down from the bandstand. Max saw him look gleefully around at the people wandering around the walks. Not many were near yet, but... how had he got into this? It wasn't a usual turn of events for him. He had a feeling this type of thing did happen to Stefan though. A lot. With that in mind, he swallowed hard, stared at Charlie and said, “Bring it on.”

The sound of Greased Lightning blasted out of the iPod and with more enthusiasm than he actually felt, Max started swinging his arms in the moves he remembered from long ago school discos. He felt like a twat, no doubt about it, yet Stefan's giggles as he mimicked Andy's moves were endearing, to say the least.

Grease segued to Hairspray segued to Dirty Dancing. The more the music played and the more Stefan and Andy laughed, the more Max found he didn't care about the little group that had collected around them. Charlie was unabashedly dancing with them, and Nick and Tommy were busting a few moves too. It was fun. Max had stepped out of his comfort zone, and he was loving it. As the Bella's finale from Pitch Perfect came on, he laughed out loud. This one he knew.

Composing himself, he channelled Anna Kendrick and grinned at Nick who was shaking his head at them all, as they forgot to give a fuck. Apparently, the others had seen the film too, and between them they managed a half tidy version of the dance. Stefan camped it up as fat Amy, Max thought he was going to die from trying not to laugh and remember his moves. Nothing, he had ever done, had been this much fun before. He literally didn't care that they were making fools of themselves in front of a crowd. Okay, so it was only a small crowd, but nonetheless, he knew he wouldn't have done it before Stefan. It was okay, he was king of the world. He could do anything.

13. One Small Strip for Stefan, One Giant Leap (of Confidence) for Max(kind)

Anything. The world was his oyster. There were no barriers. The biggest rollercoaster in the world, the highest bungee jump couldn't produce the endorphins this did surely. Max glanced at his watch, they were nearly done with their "show". He felt fit to burst, and knew that, despite him puffing and being out of breath, he had the biggest, most stupid grin on his face—and frankly, he didn't care. He could do anything.

Hot Stuff came on, and Max copied Andy as best he could, trying for the life of him to remember what film it was from. Concentrating hard, he shrugged his shoulder up and down and stepped his leg forward, then back.

"Please tell me you didn't?" Stefan shouted to Nick, and Charlie, who'd left the bandstand, and was smirking madly beside her boyfriend.

"Didn't what?" Max huffed out, turning.

"Of course, I did," Nick shouted back. "A whole night in tights and a skimpy nurse's outfit, remember, Stefan? Now you know why you needed the hats."

"Revenge is a dish best served cold." Charlie cackled, and Max stopped dancing.

"I've got a feeling I've missed something." He looked at Stefan who was still moving in time to the music. "Stefan?" Stefan smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry," he mouthed.

"Can somebody tell me what is going on?" Max asked, noticing for the first time that a couple of ladies in the crowd were giggling away to each other.

"Nice show, boys," said another, "but I'm guessing this is our cue to leave." And she grabbed hold of her toddler's hand and led him away across the green. Some of his euphoria dropped a little, and he looked pleadingly at Stefan.

"Keep dancing Max, there's no get-out-of-jail-free card for being new. You joined the losing team, you get to pay the price." Said with a glint in her eye, that Max found hard to dislike, Charlie raised her eyebrow at him. Resigned, he started moving again before chucking a beseeching glance her way this time.

"Okay, okay," she said, "don't say I didn't give you anything. What film is this song from?"

Max turned again, following Andy's lead. "I don't know, it's on the tip of my tongue, but I just can't remember."

"Steelworks close down, a group of men are desperate for cash... they perform the..."

"Fuck me, The Full Monty." Max glanced at Stefan who offered him a small sympathetic smile before laughing out loud.

"No way!" There was no way Max was going to strip off in public. Not a friggin' chance. "Never. Not going to happen..." He looked at the other two lads dancing and then down at the small crowd watching them.

"What's the matter love, got something to be ashamed of?" The twenty-something drew deeply on her cigarette, blew a steady stream of blue smoke into the air, then added, "cos from where I'm standing everything looks pretty good to me." She leered at his denim-clad groin to emphasise her point. Max could feel the red shooting up his neck and staining his face.

"There's not one of us ashamed up here, Ma'am." Stefan said in a Texan twang and bobbed his hat. "Right, Max?"

The lady laughed and whispered, none too quietly, to her mate. "That one's mine." Max just looked at Stefan, felt his heart beat faster at the wink he gave him and gave the hell up worrying. He could always move right? He'd heard Scotland was great if you liked the snow (he did). The end notes of Hot Stuff sounded, and, as predicted, You Can Leave Your Hat On started. A cheer went up from the small gathering of people—led by Charlie, Max noted. There were probably only about ten people there, but it may as well have been a hundred. It was only then that he noticed Charlie and Nick seemed to be on quite good terms with some of them. The arseholes. Swallowing hard, he looked across the expanse of grass, realised the bandstand sides would hide his junk and jacksie from anyone but those standing directly in front of them, and decided that he may as well just get on with it—you only live once and all that crap. He wished he could regain some of the euphoria he'd had just a few moments ago though.

He looked over at Andy, who seemed to be relishing every second of the dancing, neither James nor Stefan seemed to be bothered they were about to take their clothes off in public either. Swinging his arm up and turning in time with the others, he swallowed his pride and decided he could at least admire Stefan instead of worrying about getting naked.

Of course, in the film they'd had on velcroed outfits and here, in real life, they didn't. Stefan's trousers slipped off quite easily, but he, James, and Andy

had more trouble getting out of their jeans. And bugger was it freezing. The sun might be out, but it was still effing nippy. Thankful he'd stuck to plain black boxer shorts and not gone with the Where's Wally ones he'd toyed with putting on just a few hours earlier, he stripped off his jeans and shoved his feet back into his boots. Cat calls and whistles erupted from the crowd. Max ignored them as best he could. Risking a glimpse sideways he loved the fact that Stefan had on the brightest pair of turquoise pants he'd ever seen. With purple piping round the edge they were not the underwear of someone with any shame of what he was packing and holy hotness did they cling nicely to his arse. Realising he was staring, and really, now was not a suitable time, he raised his gaze, kept swinging his hips, and caught a wink from Stefan. That wink and that arse almost made this public humiliation worth it.

Thrusting in time with the music, he prayed and prayed that the twenty minutes would be up soon and they could get the hell out of here. A change in movement and Andy started stripping off his T-shirt. What the hell was wrong with these people, it was freezing and not one of the other three seemed at all embarrassed. As he bared his pecks to the chilly November air he felt his nipples harden. He had absolutely no idea at this point if that was a good or bad thing, one thing was for sure though; he wasn't going to try out for the Chippendales any time soon.

The wind gusted and swirled leaves around the base of the bandstand. Goose pimples spread all over his body and he raised his hand to keep his hat on. Of course, he wasn't planning on keeping it on at the end of the song—there was only one person here he had any intention of showing his knob to, and that certainly wasn't in the middle of a very public park. The end notes of the song sounded and bile rose in his throat as he gripped his hat with one hand and the waistband of his boxers with the other. Just as he started to push on the elasticated band the music came to an abrupt halt. Max's hand stilled and it took him less than a second to figure out that it was indeed planned. Stefan was good-naturedly calling Nick every name under the sun, and the crowd was booing in such a way that Max suspected they realised there had been no intention for them to strip completely.

“Bastard,” he called over the wooden surround to Nick as he hastily re-clothed himself. It really was too freaking cold out here. He slipped his jumper back on and bent to re-lace his boots. Standing up, Stefan was just behind him, holding out his scarf.

“Thanks,” Max said reaching forward for it, but Stefan shook his head slightly and leaned forward wrapping the scarf round Max's neck before kissing him briefly on the mouth.

“You are perfect,” he said, turning away to pick up his own coat and put on. Max shrugged into his jacket, sure that the loud thudding from his chest must be able to be heard by all.

“Told ya,” he heard Charlie say to Nick. “You owe me dinner and wine. When will you learn that I am always right about these things?”

Stefan overheard the comment too and winked at his friend. Nick narrowed his eyes at him but was wise enough not to remark any further on the matter.

“Do you fancy going into town?” he asked Max. “We could get a hot chocolate, see what’s on at the pictures?”

“A hot chocolate sounds great.” Max rubbed his hands together, a small smile playing on his lips. Stefan’s heart warmed. He was trying not to think about just how perfect Max was. He had come here and done something completely out of his comfort zone to honour a bet he’d not really had a part of making. Also seeing Max in his underwear had only served to remind him of how hot the man was.

Saying cheerio to the others, Stefan followed Max across the expanse of green space to where it bordered the town. Leaves swirled about underfoot, a crunchy carpet of red, gold and brown. Stefan found it hard to not beam constantly, everything felt so perfect at the moment. He almost wished he could freeze time, make it stop right here in this moment of blue skies, biting wind and rustling leaves.

“I know a great cafe that does hot chocolate with cream and marshmallows,” Max broke into his reverie. “It’s really delicious, do you fancy that?”

“Sounds good.” Stefan shoved his hand in his pocket to keep from linking his fingers with Max’s, the looks they would get just wouldn’t be worth it—besides, he selfishly didn’t want to do anything that would make Max change his mind about them. Stefan knew he was the one with the *slowly, slowly* mantra, but, in all honesty, he was pretty sure even now his heart would break if Max called a halt to things.

They left the green of the park for the hustle bustle of town. Circumnavigating a man on a step ladder stringing Christmas lights outside an electric goods shop, Stefan pondered the fact that soon the season of goodwill would be here. He wondered what he should get Max and looked forward to a

day in town shopping. Generally, shopping was on his top ten list of hated activities—all that changed when it came to buying Christmas gifts though. Whether it was the lights, the atmosphere or just taking the time to pick out something special for those he loved, he wasn't sure, but whatever it was, he always loved it.

“Earth to Stefan!” A hand waved in front of his face, and he realised they'd stopped. “Is in here okay for a drink, they do great hot chocolates, I promise.” Max smiled at him and indicated a pokey little cafe that looked like it had been new about sixty years ago and redecorated at the same time. Not that it was dirty, just old fashioned, with frilly nets at the window and chequered tablecloths across the tables. “Nan used to bring me here when I was little.” Max pushed open the door, and a bell tinkled above. Warmth hit Stefan as he stepped inside, warmth and the smell of cinnamon and cakes. He followed Max to a small table in the corner of the room and shrugged off his jacket.

They placed their orders with a waitress who oohed and aahed over Max and what a big boy he was now and how it had been too long since he'd been in there. As she bustled back to the counter, Max discreetly rolled his eyes at Stefan. “She has a heart of gold. This is the kind of place that the same people have been coming to for generation after generation. No WiFi, so our generation doesn't stop in much unfortunately. The food is fabulous though.”

At that point in time, Stefan felt as though, if someone was to x-ray him right now, they'd literally be able to see his heart expanding and swelling in his chest because he was sure he could feel it doing just that. The word *perfect* slipped into his head, and he fought to push it back out again. Unthinking, he reached across the table and took hold of Max's hand.

“So, honestly did you have any clue what Nick was up to today?” Max asked, curling his fingers into Stefan's.

Stefan shook his head and absently stroked Max's hand. “I mean, I guessed it would be something humiliating, but I didn't know what.”

Max painted a look of mock horror on his face. “More humiliating than dancing in public? And you didn't let me know!” He tutted and then laughed, his eyes crinkling just a little at the corners and glinting mischievously.

“Hey, you have no worries about dancing in public, you can *move*.” Just the thought of that lithe body and how it could move made his trousers uncomfortably tight around the groin. Max just raised his eyebrows and rubbed his thumb along Stefan's forefinger.

"I can honestly say I don't think I've ever been so scared and exhilarated at the same time." Max reached forward and clasped his other hand round Stefan's too. "I don't know whether to kill you or hug you."

"Well, I know which one I'd opt for." The cafe was filling up as lunchtime approached and Stefan shuffled his chair round a bit to let an old man past. Leaning on a walking stick, he hobbled round them towards the counter. He mumbled something under his breath but Stefan couldn't work out what, none of the words sounded like thank you though. And they moaned about the younger generation's manners. "I think I owe you a trip to a theme park if that's the most excitement you've ever felt," Stefan told Max.

"Theme parks are good, but I'm sure I can think of something exciting to do much closer to home." He waggled his eyebrows up and down, leaving Stefan in no doubt as to his meaning.

"Slowly," said Stefan grinning.

"Back to mine for coffee," said Max widening his eyes, and his grin, as the old man made his return journey.

"Bloody queers." The old man's mumbled words were much clearer that time, and, while he didn't stop or look at them as he made his way past them, Stefan felt himself freeze. Not at the insult, as lucky as he'd been in his family and friends accepting him, there were always those who wouldn't. A level of homophobia that he wasn't hit over the head with, but of which he was aware. There was the coming out every day that occurred, the assumption he was straight every time he met someone new meant he came out of the closet again. It wasn't always prejudice, sometimes just old-fashioned ignorance. He tried to pull his hand away from Max's, he could already feel a look of apology arrange itself on his face, and as much as he hated it, he felt responsible for Max being insulted by a stranger. It hurt that it was because of him Max was being insulted at all.

Max though, Max closed his fingers tighter round Stefan's and didn't let him pull away. The smile didn't leave his face; there was barely a falter in his conversation, even though Stefan knew that he'd heard the old man's insult. "I mean we could genuinely have coffee—or, you know, we could *have coffee*." The quotation marks were implied, but Stefan clearly heard them. Max continued to rabbit on, without further innuendo, only relaxing his grip on Stefan's hand when Stefan had stopped trying to pull his away.

It was at that moment that Stefan realised *slowly* was no longer going to cut the mustard. It was at that moment that Stefan realised he was in love.

14. Roses Are Red...

Max gripped Stefan's fingers until he could feel the other man relax his grip. Seeing the grin drop, the look of worry that replaced it, made Max's heart ache. Everything in the cafe narrowed to just the two of them. He pushed the tone of normality in his voice, hating himself for faltering even a little. Wow, so he'd been called queer. It hurt, of course it did, he'd done nothing wrong. He was no different to the person he was twenty-four hours ago, or seven days ago, or a month ago or even a year ago. At least, no different in any way that counted. He didn't hurt people, steal or manipulate. He was a good person. He knew that, his friends knew that, his family knew that. He wasn't going to let one word get to him. He didn't want to give Stefan any excuse to reiterate his *slowly* mantra.

"We could genuinely have coffee," he found himself saying, a verbal two fingers at the old git shuffling past, "or we could *have coffee*." The way the blood rushed south at his own innuendo was alarming, and he moved swiftly onto other topics. Sporting an erection in a cafe was further out of his comfort zone than he hoped ever to travel. Public naked dancing or not.

"How are Sandy and Sooty?" Dogs were a safe topic of conversation and slowly the world widened out to more than the two of them. Customers talking, teaspoons rattling on saucers. A baby crying loudly and the gentle shushing of its mother.

"Here you go love, two hot chocolates, extra cream." She put the tray on the table. "Now Max, don't be a stranger, we miss you since your nan passed on, bless her soul. I didn't even know you had a boyfriend, love. Your nan would've approved, he's a looker." The stage whisper was so loud, Max didn't know whether to laugh or blush, so he compromised and did both.

"I promise to visit soon, Ivy." He raised his eyebrows at Stefan and mouthed sorry across the table. Stefan just spooned a marshmallow out of the hot chocolate and offered it across to Max.

"Boyfriend, huh," he said and Max shivered, god that word sounded good. *Boyfriend*, Stefan muttered again under his breath as if trying it out for size.

"Sandy and Sooty are great." Stefan answered Max's earlier question, "More than great really. I keep thinking about trying to get some place with a bigger garden so I can adopt them and Alfie, but I'm not sure I could get a bigger mortgage on my wages. Renting's always an option, I suppose."

Sipping at his sweet, hot chocolate Max nodded in sympathy. "It's a huge shame you don't have enough space for them. They couldn't have a better owner. Imagine taking them for a walk along the beach, they'd love it."

"It would be so perfect, wouldn't it? Alfie would love the waves," he chuckled, a low sound that caused Max to shiver again. "I'm not sure Sooty would though, the only way he likes water is to drink it." The love Stefan had for the animals was so obvious, Max wished he could give them to him. Finishing their drinks, they put on their coats and braved the chill outside again. The wind had picked up and was particularly biting now. This time, Stefan did reach for Max's hand as they walked back to where they'd parked the car, and, while no words were exchanged, Max was pretty convinced that something had completely shifted between them.

The perfect November day had turned grey and miserable by the time they'd driven back to Max's place. The air in the car was thick with anticipation, the conversation light, casual with an undercurrent of sexual tension that the pope would find hard to miss. The ball was in Stefan's court, but that didn't mean Max was out of the game. He let his hand rest lightly on Stefan's knee—no teasing strokes this time though. As they talked, he found his gaze straying to Stefan, watching as his perfect mouth formed each word, wishing he could taste those lips again.

"So fancy some Minecraft this afternoon?" Stefan asked, braking gently to let a couple of hens scatter to the side of the lane. "It really is like the good life out here, isn't it?"

"Hmm, next door aren't too good at keeping their chickens caged, they really are free range. To be fair though, as I'm the only one who lives further along here than them, it isn't exactly Piccadilly Circus. And yes to Minecraft, we can split screen some survival challenges. Prepare to lose!"

Stefan just snorted loudly and turned into Max's yard. He stopped the car and pulled up the handbrake. Max's heart thudded hard in his chest; all the non-words that had been floating around among them since they'd left the cafe like a wall between them. His seatbelt clicked undone, though he hadn't touched it, and a strong hand gripped his chin and turned his head. Grey eyes stared into his, searching for something, though Max knew not what. A deep breath and soft groan and those perfect lips found his in the softest, most gentle kiss ever.

"I'm done with slowly," Stefan whispered, "if you still want more?"

Max replied by finding his mouth again and promising the world with a slow, sultry kiss. His heart pounded, and his breath caught in his throat. This

was everything he wanted and somehow managed to be everything he was scared of having as well. Quite how they made it from the car to the house, Max couldn't really say. It was an unimportant moment between fuck-hot kisses and underlying decisions. They stood in Max's kitchen, staring at each other, and then Stefan was pushing him backwards, pressing him to the wall and kissing him like both their lives depended upon it. Soft mouth and hard kisses. A sweep of tongue parting his lips. Sweet chocolate breath and want, so much want.

The kiss sparked a need in Max that he hadn't realised was there before. Every previous kiss he'd experienced felt chaste by comparison. He truly didn't care it was a man he was kissing, was needing—to him it was just Stefan, the person who he was falling in love with. Even as the thought tumbled through his brain, and both terrified and delighted him, Max knew he was lost. Lost to lust and love and need and friendship. Lost to a man who he hadn't known he'd want.

He reached up and helped Stefan shrug off his jacket and unwind his scarf. Their lips only parted for brief moments at a time, but each time they touched together again, his body reacted electrically. Charged and alive. "Is this what you want?" Stefan whispered, even though they were alone.

Max nodded. Apprehension pooled in his belly, a fear of the unknown—an unknown he wanted and desired more than anything else. And then Stefan kissed him fiercely before pulling away. "I'm not saying no, I'm not even saying slowly anymore but we don't have to rush. We don't have to try everything at once. There is so much to discover about us, about each other..."

"I want you Stefan, I've never felt like this before, not for anyone but, I, um..." Stefan looked at him, concern etched in his lust-filled face. "I'd like a shower first. I feel gross from the dancing and hot and cold and..."

Stefan laughed loud and hard and some of the high tension in the air dissolved. "I wouldn't mind one either," he said caressing Max's cheek and kissing him again.

"We could share?" Max's chest was nearly bursting his heart thudded so hard. "To be honest Stefan, I need to do this, it's... new to me, though sex is sex is sex, right?"

"Sex is sex is sex," Stefan agreed, "but I want this to be more than a quick fuck, more than just a hook up." It was more than that already as far as Max was concerned, but he knew what the other man was trying to say.

Steam filled the bathroom, and slowly, they peeled off each other's clothes, revealing what before had only been seen by half-hidden glances. Max traced his fingers across the tattoo Stefan had on his chest, following the intricate Celtic design carefully. Then, tentatively he let his fingers trail over Stefan's nipple, eliciting a sigh from the other man that set him on fire.

They stepped into the spray together, and as warmth cascaded over their bodies, they explored each other. Hands and mouths. Softly, gently, then with need and passion. Frotting, hands together encircling their hardened cocks. Need filled and swelled inside Max until everything was concentrated on the fire in his groin, pushing and pulsing and then spurting onto soapy bodies and away down the plughole. Stefan came too, and Max watched fascinated by the sight of another man's dick in orgasm. It was beautiful.

"You're perfect," Stefan said claiming his mouth once more. As the fire faded and the urgent need lessened slightly, they cleaned each other. Contentment radiated from them both, and Max felt like a cat wanting to purr. He understood what Stefan had said; this wasn't a quick *wham bam, thank you Stan*. This was just the beginning. The beginning of a path he hoped they'd walk down together.

Soft towels and warm clothes, a roaring fire and computer games. Talking and laughter and the first tentative steps together. Perfection found in all its imperfect glory.

15. Happily Ever After...The End

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Stefan, happy birthday to you.” Max rolled over and laid across his boyfriend, placing a soft kiss on his mouth. Then he rolled back again before things heated up too much. He had a game plan this morning, and as much as some nooky would be a fun part of it, it wouldn't fit his carefully made schedule.

“Come back here.” Stefan reached out and tried to pull Max back onto him.

“Nuh uh. We need to get up, and then there will be presents!”

Warm hands smoothed over his backside, and Max flipped out of bed before they reached somewhere he wouldn't be able to ignore. “Later birthday boy, come on—I'll do you a bacon butty and a nice cup of tea.”

He was in the kitchen, bacon sizzling in the pan, when Stefan came through, a pair of jeans thrown on and nothing else. Max poured the tea and handed Stefan a gift from the badly wrapped pile teetering on the edge of the table.

“How many are there?” Stefan laughed, as he kissed Max and started ripping into the paper.

“Twenty-six, one for each year of your life.” Max smirked to himself, knowing Stefan would count them. Sure enough as he unwrapped them and gathered piles of CD's, socks, computer games and silly knick-knacks he started counting.

“That's only twenty-three,” he said as Max handed over the last one. “I know Maxi, because I know exactly how many times I got to snog you.”

Max just raised his eyebrows and smirked. He listened carefully, hoping to hear the telltale sound of tyres on gravel any minute now. He and Tally had planned this meticulously, and he'd hate for it to go wrong now. In fact, it couldn't have worked out more perfectly. As Stefan laughed and cursed at the sticky-tape Max had wound round and round the gift and tried to figure out how to get into it, the sound of a car pulling up outside made him look up.

“Who's coming to visit us at this time of the morning?” Stefan said.

“Visitors for you no doubt, I'll go and let them in while you get into your prezzie.”

It took all his willpower not to skip down the garden path to meet Tally. As she opened the back of her car, three dogs bundled out and started sniffing Max.

"Tally," he swept her into a hug, "thank you so much for bringing them. Stefan doesn't suspect a thing."

"Nothing makes me happier than to see you two happy," she said clicking leads onto the dogs' collars. "Come on then, let's go surprise the birthday boy."

Max's heart was racing. He hoped he'd judged this right. Eight months ago they'd met at the zoo. Stefan had moved in a month ago and found work at an animal shelter nearer to home, every weekend he'd gone to see Sooty, Sandy and Alfie though. Not once had he suggested bringing them to Max's place—their place—but Max knew he would love nothing more than to see his favourite dogs homed. Some sneaky phone calls to Tally, and a little rule bending on her part, and he had managed to adopt all three dogs.

"Tally—Sooty, Sandy... what the...?" Stefan asked bending down to ruffle each of the dogs necks before sweeping Tally into a bear hug.

"Twenty-four, twenty-five and twenty-six," said Max, biting his bottom lip, "happy birthday, Stefan."

Stefan released Tally and looked up. "They're here... to stay?" he asked hesitantly. Max nodded, holding his breath.

Tears swam in Stefan's eyes, and he ducked down and hid his face in Alfie's neck. Max swallowed. He really hoped he hadn't misjudged this.

"Here, I'll take them for a sniff round the garden," said Tally tugging on the leads. As she led the dogs away, Stefan stood up and wrapped his arms round Max's neck. "Thank you," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "Thank you."

"Happy birthday, Stefan. I love you." Max found his boyfriend's mouth and kissed him fiercely.

"I love you too, so, so much." He leaned into Max then turned and watched the dogs sniffing out each corner of the garden. "I guess this explains the bowls I just unwrapped, huh?"

"I guess it does," Max agreed.

The End

Author Bio

Books with romance, books with sex,
Voodoo books and books with hex,
Fantasy, mystery, humour and crime,
Young adult, adult adult and kids from time to time,
In all their shapes and all their sizes,
I love books in all their guises.

Olley White is the pseudonym of Lori Powell, an English gal who likes reading too much, housework too little and her family the perfect amount. As she writes YA books under her actual name and doesn't want a youngster stumbling across the ~~smut~~ more adult books she writes, she thought an AKA was the way to go.

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