

Don't Keep Your Distance

by

just-a-silly-romantic

Klaine || AU || M

Blaine meets the Hummels when he is a teenager & Kurt is just a toddler. He then moves to New York to pursue his dream of becoming a professional singer. After losing touch with the Hummels for a long time, he returns to Ohio when Kurt is all grown up.

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CHAPTER ONE

Prologue

Blaine Anderson was 16 years old when he first met Burt Hummel.

The year was 1998.

Blaine's day started off as a typical Wednesday. He woke up, ate breakfast, showered, brushed his teeth, and drove to school. At school he did his best to avoid the jocks, but he didn't have much luck. He was shoved into lockers several times, and had taunts and jeers thrown at him in the halls between classes. By the last class of the day, the new bruises on top of yesterday's ones had made Blaine's back so sore that he had to sit on the edge of his seat to avoid accidentally leaning against the back of the chair.

When school finally let out, Blaine breathed a sigh of relief as he headed to his car, and then stopped short.

Somebody had keyed his car.

Not only that, they had etched the word "FAGGOT" into the green paint in large letters that covered the entire driver's side.

Blaine felt his face heat up as his eyes burned with tears of shame. He couldn't drive the car home, he couldn't. If his dad saw...his parents still didn't know. They could never know.

Blaine hastily climbed into the car, blinking back his tears so he could focus on the road. Fifteen minutes later, he pulled into Hummel Tires and Lube, the auto shop that he drove past every day on his way to and from school. He parked the car and went inside the shop to seek help.

He was greeted by a gruff-looking man in a brown cap and blue coveralls. His nametag read 'Burt'.

"Hey kid, how can I help ya?" Burt asked. Blaine swallowed nervously.

"S-someone keyed my car," he stammered nervously. "C-can you please fix it?"

"Sure, no problem. I've got a ton of jobs to get through today, but maybe you could bring it back tomorrow morning around 10, and come back for it around 3?"

Blaine felt his eyes filling with tears again, and he shook his head frantically. "N-no, please, It *has* to get done now – I'll pay you extra, just *please, sir*, I can't let my parents see, they..."

Burt raised his eyebrows at Blaine in surprise. "Whoa, whoa, calm down kid. Let me see the damage, okay? I'll see what I can do."

Blaine nodded stiffly and turned to lead Burt to the car. When they reached the damaged side, he heard Burt breathe in sharply. Blaine squeezed his eyes shut, expecting that Burt would ask him to leave, or throw around some insults of his own. But the cold rejection never came. Instead, when Blaine opened his eyes, he found Burt looking at him with a sorrowful and deeply pitying expression on his face.

Burt slowly, cautiously, reached out a hand to squeeze Blaine's shoulder. Blaine looked down in shock at the gentle and comforting gesture. "Are you okay?" Burt asked, his voice full of caring and sincerity.

Blaine opened his mouth to repeat the lie he was so accustomed to telling – "*I'm fine.*" But that's not what came out. Instead, before he could stop himself, the floodgates opened. He let out a choked sob and suddenly he was crying, sobbing brokenly, and Burt was pulling him into a tight hug.

A series of thoughts raced through Blaine's mind. *Oh god, you are crying all over a total stranger, stop it, you're embarrassing yourself. You're pathetic.* But he was helpless to stop the tears so long held in.

After about five minutes of borderline-hysterical sobbing, Blaine somehow managed to regain his composure, sniffing as he pulled away and grabbed a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his eyes and nose. "I'm so s-sorry," he choked out.

"Don't be," Burt said firmly. "You have nothing to be sorry for. Come inside, let me get you a cup of tea or something."

"Oh, no, thank you for the offer sir, but I've already bothered you enough -"

"-Nope. I won't take no for an answer, now come on."

Blaine nodded stiffly, feeling too drained to argue, and followed Burt into the house adjacent to the garage. Upon entering, Blaine caught site of a little girl with short brown hair running through the living room in a pink princess dress and far-too-big heels. Burt chuckled lightly, and bent down to swoop the child up into his arms.

"What're you doing running around all crazy, kiddo? Have you been eating sugary snacks again?"

The girl giggled, and then seemed to notice Blaine. Her beautiful glasz eyes widened in surprise, before she buried her face in her father's neck.

Burt laughed. "That's weird," he said, "he's not usually the shy type."

Blaine started to ask her name, but then stopped, his jaw dropping in shock. *He?*

"This is my son, Kurt," Burt explained, looking at Blaine meaningfully. "Kurt, this is my friend..."

Blaine realised that he had never provided his name.

"Blaine," he said, turning to look at Kurt, who was peeking out at him from behind his dad's shoulder. "My name's Blaine. It's nice to meet you, Kurt," he said.

The boy smiled shyly at him. "I'm having a tea party," he squeaked, his voice adorably high-pitched. "Would you like to come?"

Blaine laughed, and suddenly his eyes were filling with tears again. He felt overwhelmed by Burt's acceptance towards his son, and extremely sad that his own parents would never love him so unconditionally.

"Kurt," Burt said, "Blaine is going to have tea with me, okay? We have grown up things to talk about." Kurt's face fell.

"No, no!" Blaine said quickly, desperately wanting to make the little boy smile again. "I'd love to join you, Kurt. That is, if that's okay with your dad...?"

Burt raised his eyebrows in surprise, before grinning down at Blaine. "Fine with me. Actually, if you're here, Blaine, I think I'm gonna head back out to the garage for a bit, see what I can do about your car. That is, if you don't mind watchin' Kurt for an hour or so."

"I don't mind," Blaine responded with a smile. "I babysit my cousins sometimes."

"Great. Come and find me when you get bored, okay?"

Blaine nodded as Burt put Kurt down. The boy immediately grabbed Blaine's hand and dragged him into the living room, where a small pink table sat, surrounded by chairs occupied by Barbie dolls and stuffed animals. A pretty porcelain tea set sat on the table, next to a tray of real sugar cookies.

"Wow," Blaine said, as Kurt pulled him down onto one of the tiny chairs. "This is a very pretty tea set, Kurt."

"Yes, I know," Kurt said primly. "I told my mommy that I wanted it to be elegant. Plastic is tacky."

Blaine barked out a sudden laugh, and Kurt quirked an eyebrow at him questioningly. This kid was something else. How did someone that young even know what the words *elegant* and *tacky* meant?

"How old are you, exactly?" Blaine asked.

"I am 3 and a half," Kurt announced proudly. "Soon I will be 4, and then I will be 5, and when I am 5 I will be a big boy and then I can go to school. How old are *you*?"

Blaine grinned widely.

"I'm 16," he said.

Kurt's eyebrows shot up. "Wow," he responded, his voice full of awe. "You're so *old*. Are you married?"

Blaine chuckled. "No, not yet."

Kurt grinned delightedly at that. "You have pretty eyes. I would marry you. Will you marry me someday?"

Blaine blushed, caught completely off-guard. He was unsure of how to respond to the child, who was looking up at him with big hopeful eyes. He decided to do the kind thing and humour him. "Of course I will," he said sweetly, reaching across the table to ruffle Kurt's hair. "Especially if you make me yummy tea like this."

Kurt's eyes lit up. "Good," he said. "But you will need to stop touching my hair, Blaine, because now it's all messy. Would you like a sugar cookie? I baked them myself."

It was after 6pm when Burt finally returned to the Hummel house to find Kurt and Blaine lying on their stomachs on the living room floor, watching *The Little Mermaid* and singing along to *Part of Your World*. Burt stood in the doorway for a minute and watched the two boys, smiling fondly. He hoped that Blaine would be okay. He was worried – if today was any indication, the poor boy wasn't coping too well at school. His heart clenched at the thought that one day his precious Kurt may have to go through the same hardships. Blaine had seemed so worried that his parents would see that horrible word etched onto the side of his car, and Burt felt a sudden surge of anger. At least Kurt would always have a supportive home to return to at the end of the day, no matter what happened at school – Blaine didn't even have that. Burt remembered reading an article in the paper a few months ago, about a gay boy around Blaine's age who had taken his own life after being bullied at school and receiving no support from his parents.

At that moment, Burt vowed to make sure that Blaine always had someone to talk to when he needed it.

He coughed, and the boys turned to him, grinning. "Did you have fun, kids?"

"Yes," the boys chimed, and Kurt ran up to his dad, clinging to his legs.

"I like Blaine, daddy," he stated. "Can he come over and play again sometime?"

Burt looked over to Blaine, who was grinning at Kurt with fond amusement.

"I dunno, Kurt, that's up to Blaine. I'd be happy to have him, of course."

Blaine smiled shyly, and lowered his head. "Are you sure, sir? I don't want to intrude."

"Call me Burt, kid. And yes, I'm sure. You're welcome here any time, even if you just need to talk."

Blaine looked up at Burt with wide eyes. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Don't mention it. I fixed your car, by the way."

"Oh!" Blaine exclaimed, climbing to his feet. "Thank you so much. How much...?"

"No charge," Burt said, shaking his head. "You babysat my kid for several hours anyway, I think that just about covers it."

"Several hours?" Blaine yelled, looking down at his watch. "Crap! Sorry, excuse my language, I completely lost track of time – I've got to get home or my dad will chew me out about missing dinner. Thanks for everything, Burt, you...you really helped."

"Like I said, kid, don't mention it. Come back and see us soon, yeah?"

"I will," Blaine responded sincerely, turning to Kurt.

"TTFN, Kurt!"

"Ta ta for now!" The boy replied, giggling at the Winnie The Pooh reference. They had been watching the show together earlier, and while Kurt had firmly asserted that Piglet was the best character, Blaine found that he associated more with Eeyore. It had turned into quite the heated debate.

As Blaine headed to the door, Burt hastily scrawled his home phone number onto a piece of paper and pressed it into Blaine's hand before he left the house. Blaine tucked it carefully into his jacket pocket.

He didn't say goodbye to Burt.

He knew he would be returning to the Hummel house soon enough. He didn't think he could stay away if he wanted to.

Over the next few years, Blaine Anderson spent more time with the Hummels than with his own family.

The second time he went to visit, he met Burt's beautiful wife, Elizabeth. She and Kurt had the same delicate features and stunning glasz eyes, and she immediately swept Blaine up into a hug and welcomed him into her home.

Blaine took to visiting the Hummels every day after school for an hour or two, as they always seemed eager to have him around. He felt *at home* in their house – it was like a sanctuary, the one place he could finally feel safe.

His parents never asked where he went after school, just so long as he was home in time for dinner. They had to at least keep up appearances of being a happy, functional family.

Blaine loved looking after Kurt, and Kurt seemed extremely excited to have a playmate – he would rush over to Blaine every time he arrived and demand that Blaine kiss the back of his hand in greeting, because "that's what princes do and you look like a prince, Blaine."

When Blaine wasn't playing with Kurt, he often confided in Burt and Elizabeth about his troubles at school. They did the best thing that anyone could ever do to help – they listened, and they told him everything would be alright, and they cared.

It was several months before Blaine had the guts to actually say the words to them – "I'm gay." He burst into tears after he said it, and they both hugged him and let him cry.

"We know," Burt said. "We know about Kurt, too. And you're perfect just the way you are. I'm sorry that some people are too blind and ignorant to see that."

That was the moment that Blaine realised that he had only known the Hummels for a few short months, but he already considered them to be his family. His biological parents shared his DNA, but that was all they would ever share. Burt and Elizabeth were the first people that he had ever come out to, and they accepted him unconditionally, as a family should. His parents would never do that for him.

When Blaine finally graduated from high school, he was beyond relieved to be escaping the narrow-mindedness of his peers. He had no idea how they had even figured out he was gay – he figured that it must have been the way he liked to dress (bowties and suspenders), or the fact that he had never had a girlfriend or been even remotely interested in girls, despite the fact that he had gotten several offers from very pretty, perfectly nice girls who had taken pity on him.

A few weeks after Blaine's graduation, Burt and Elizabeth sat Blaine and Kurt down and informed them that Elizabeth was very ill. Cancer, they said. Blaine broke down crying – all he knew about cancer was that it made you sicker and sicker and thinner and thinner, and then you died. When Kurt saw Blaine crying, he started crying too, and then the whole family was crying together.

Later that week, William Anderson informed Blaine that he would be studying Business at Ohio State University. Blaine didn't argue. He needed to be there for the Hummels, to help them in any way possible.

Elizabeth Hummel was a fighter. She stayed alive for over 3 years. During her illness, Blaine spent even more time with Hummels. He looked after Kurt when Burt and Elizabeth were at the hospital, and he

helped around the house. He did everything he could to make the situation easier on them, especially Burt, who was not only having to deal with his own grief, but also spent a lot of time worrying about Kurt and Blaine.

Kurt was 8 years old when Elizabeth died. At her funeral, Burt held one of his little hands while Blaine held the other, and later on all three of them sat curled up on the sofa, and cried until they fell asleep.

Blaine stayed in Ohio for about six months after Elizabeth's death, completing his degree. It was hell, and everything hurt, but eventually things did get easier. By the time of Blaine's graduation, the Hummels had managed to get back on their feet somewhat, and things were looking brighter.

Immediately after Blaine graduated, Burt encouraged him to move to New York to pursue his dream. Blaine had wanted to go to New York for as long as he could remember, so he agreed. He told William and Judy Anderson that he was going there to look for a job with a big flashy company, but he had no intention of doing any such thing. He was moving to pursue his true passion – singing.

He said a tearful goodbye to Kurt and Burt at the airport, and when he knelt on the floor to hug Kurt, the boy pleaded with him not to go. Blaine had come to regard Kurt as something between a little brother and a best friend, and he felt extremely protective towards the boy. It broke his heart to see him so upset.

"I have to go, Kurt," Blaine whispered brokenly, regretfully. "I'm sorry. You'll be fine, I promise."

Kurt sobbed into his shoulder. "I'll miss you."

"I promise I'll stay in touch. We'll talk every day," Blaine said, looking up at Burt as he said it.

"You'd better, kid," Burt said gruffly, wiping tears from his eyes. "You're not getting out of this family that easy."

Blaine let out a choked sob, holding Kurt tighter.

"Goodbye," Kurt whispered, tears streaming down his face.

"No," Blaine said, trying to sound firm, but the tremble in his voice betrayed him. He cupped Kurt's little face in his hands and wiped the tears from his cheeks. "I'll never say goodbye to you."

And with one final family hug, Blaine picked up his bag and headed towards the gate, Kurt's sobs following him the whole way to New York.

CHAPTER TWO

Coming Home

December 2011

Burt groaned as he rolled out of bed, stumbling down the hall towards the phone. Who on earth would be calling him at this hour? He had tried to ignore it, but the phone just kept ringing, ringing, ringing. He snatched the phone up angrily, not even bothering to fake politeness.

"Hello, this is Burt Hummel and you better have a damn good reason for waking me up at 3am."

There was a quiet sniffle on the end on the line.

"Hello?" *Burt asked, concerned.* "Hello? Who is this?"

The voice that responded was soft and broken. Burt would have recognised it anywhere. "Hi."

"Blaine." *Burt's voice was full of disbelief as his heart began to pound in his chest. Whether it due to excitement or happiness or foreboding, he wasn't sure.*

"Blaine, oh my god, kid. Oh my god, it's so good to hear from you. Are you okay? What's going on? Goddamnit, kid, I can't – this is -"

There was a soft sob on the end of the line. Burt immediately fell silent. "Blaine, please," he whispered, trying to keep his voice even. "Tell me what you need. Please, you're scaring the crap out of me."

"I...Burt, I...I'm so sorry, I just..."

"Blaine, what is it?"

"Can I come home?"

9 years earlier...

From the moment Blaine stepped off the plane in New York City, he was thrust head-first into a totally new world. New York was completely different from Ohio. He was suddenly all alone. At 21 years old, he finally felt like an adult. He was responsible for his own life. He had to pay his own bills, and secure his own future.

It was both terrifying and liberating.

He managed to rent a tiny apartment with the money that he'd saved from summer jobs. His next step was to find a way to make more money, preferably through singing.

In an ideal world, he would have attended Juilliard or Tisch or some other prestigious arts school. But, this wasn't an ideal world – he simply did not have the money to do that. So, he had to start small, and hope that there was even the slightest chance that fate was on his side.

It turns out, fate *was* on Blaine Anderson's side – or so it seemed.

Blaine found it relatively easy to get jobs performing casually in cafes and coffee shops, which he was content to do for a couple of years. He was cute, people told him, and his guitar skills and soothing voice were perfect for such establishments. He made enough in tips in order to get by, but he knew that eventually, he'd have to find a way to move on to bigger and better things.

Burt and Kurt helped, a lot. Blaine made sure to call them every single day, and they were always there when he needed advice, or cheering up, or just someone to talk to. Unfortunately, because he was struggling for money and the Hummels weren't exactly rolling in it themselves, he knew that he wouldn't be able to visit as often he liked. But he stayed with them for Christmas vacation for the first couple of years that he was in New York, and each time, he fit back into the family as if he'd never left.

In 2005, everything changed.

One Friday afternoon, after he had finished playing in a small coffee shop, Blaine was approached by a gorgeous guy called Tom. Tom had big brown eyes and messy blond hair. He was the same age as Blaine, and when he introduced himself, he blushed and gushed over how beautiful Blaine's voice was. Blaine found himself blushing in return. They ended up having coffee together and talking for hours, until the shop owners came and kicked them out. Very soon after that, they started dating.

Blaine fell for Tom hard and fast. He was sweet, and charming, and adorable in every sense of the word. He was intelligent, and they shared a similar taste in books. Having Tom around made everything a lot less lonely.

But, after two years of playing in coffee shops and cafes, Blaine was getting agitated. He knew that he didn't want this for the rest of his life. He needed to get his name out there – the problem was that he had absolutely no idea how to do that.

So, he did his research. He looked online for advice, but what he found only made him more and more terrified when he realised just how many people there were in New York that shared his dreams. As Blaine scrolled through pages and pages of advice for young aspiring musicians, he felt a sense of despair settle over him. He was nothing special. He never would be. Coming all this way was a stupid idea – he was going to spend the rest of his life playing in coffee shops, struggling to pay the bills. With a cry of frustration, he grabbed his jacket and ran out of the apartment.

He headed straight for the nearest bar and immediately began drowning his sorrows. He knew that the alcohol would help to ease his worries, if only for a few hours.

After knocking back at least half a dozen drinks in under an hour, the bartender refused to serve him anymore.

"Jus' give me 'nother drink," Blaine mumbled, waving his empty glass in front of the man's face. "'m not even drunk, my life still suckkkkss," he said, swaying precariously on the barstool.

"Woah," a man said, reaching out to steady him. "Be careful there."

"Who're you?" Blaine asked, blinking up at the blurry stranger. "The name's Sebastian," the man said, pulling Blaine to his feet.

"Like the crab?" Blaine asked with a giggle.

"Yes, like the crab," Sebastian said, rolling his eyes. "Come on, let's go sit in a booth. The seats are less hazardous."

Once Blaine was slumped in a booth, Sebastian handed him a glass of water. "Drink," he said. "You'll thank me in the morning."

"What's it t'you?" Blaine mumbled, drinking the water.

"Well, at first I just wanted to fuck you," Sebastian said, and Blaine choked on his water, "but then I saw that you looked really depressed so I figured I'd listen to your sob story first."

"I have a boyfriend," Blaine said.

"Doesn't bother me if it doesn't bother you."

"Well, it does bother me, so fuck off and leave me alone."

"So you can drink yourself into more of a drunken stupor?" Sebastian sighed. "Come on. Tell me what's wrong."

Blaine glared at the man in front of him for a long moment, before sighing resignedly. "Basically, my life sucks," Blaine said. "Tom is the only good thing I have. I never even get to see my family back home. I just want to sing, I want to perform and make something of myself...I'm 23 years old and I have nothing besides a business degree that my father forced me to get, and I'd rather die than do that for the rest of my life. I'm a loser."

Sebastian appraised him for a moment, before a sly grin spread across his face. "Well, sweetcheeks, today just might be your lucky day."

"M'name's Blaine."

"Whatever. Look, my dad is Brandon Smythe, and he -"

" – Wait, wait. Did you say Smythe?"

"As in Smythe Records? Yes, I did."

"You're messing with me."

Sebastian laughed, and pulled out a business card, shoving it under Blaine's nose. There is was, clear as day.

Sebastian Smythe

Executive Vice President

Smythe Records.

Blaine stared at the card for several long seconds, until he became aware that Sebastian was talking again.

"So, come by our recording studio tomorrow, and if you have the talent, we'll see what we can do. But if you suck, don't expect any sympathy."

Blaine looked up and met the man's eyes. His face was twisted in a self-satisfied smirk, and Blaine narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What's the catch?"

"No catch," Sebastian said. "No catch at all. You're an attractive guy, Blaine. A really attractive guy. You wouldn't believe how important that can be in the music industry. Plus you have a sort of...charisma about you. I just have a good feeling. Here, keep the card," Sebastian said, sliding it across the table. "I trust I'll be seeing you tomorrow, then?"

Blaine stared at the card, unable to believe that such an opportunity had just fallen into his lap. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah. Tomorrow."

When Blaine arrived at Smythe Records, he was trembling with nerves, and still trying to fight off the remnants of a hangover. He was surprised to find Sebastian waiting for him in the main foyer. He smiled widely when he saw him.

"Blaine!" He greeted, "I'm glad you could make it. Let's head straight to the recording studio and see what you've got, shall we?"

When they got to the recording studio, Blaine was introduced to Brian and Kendra, who quickly got everything set up. Sebastian stuck around to watch Blaine the entire time he was in the recording studio and Blaine wondered how the executive vice-president of the company didn't have better things to do than listen to him sing. Blaine found himself constantly glancing over at the man, but Sebastian never once gave any indication of whether or not he enjoyed the music.

At first, Blaine's fingers shook as he strummed his guitar, and he tried desperately to stop his voice from shaking. However, he was encouraged by the fact that Brian and Kendra kept giving the thumbs up, and asking him to sing more of his original songs. Their only criticism was that Blaine was just singing the songs, but not really *feeling* them. Blaine understood what they meant – he always wrote songs that he connected to on a deep level, but being under so much pressure was affecting his ability to really get into the music like he normally did. After a couple more songs, however, he felt himself starting to relax, and he allowed himself to really lose himself in the music.

After several hours in the studio, Blaine was finally called out. Sebastian immediately started clapping enthusiastically.

"That was fantastic, Blaine!" He turned to Brian and Kendra. "Don't you guys think he has potential?"

They both nodded. "Definitely," Brian said. "He has a great voice, and his original material is both catchy and soulful."

"Not to mention the fact that he's gorgeous," Kendra said, winking at Blaine, who blushed scarlet and found himself grinning ear-to-ear at the praise.

Sebastian smiled at him. "I think we have a few things to discuss."

The next couple of weeks passed in a whirlwind of meetings and consulting sessions. Blaine was having difficulty believing that this was actually happening. Things like this just didn't happen to him.

When Blaine was called into Smythe Records for a meeting with the company president and the executive vice-president, he didn't know quite what to expect. But he knew that if he was meeting with Sebastian and his father, it had to be important.

Blaine knocked on the door of Brandon Smythe's office, and found Sebastian already seated. He looked up to smile at Blaine as he entered.

Blaine shook Mr Smythe's hand quickly, and hoped that his palms weren't sweaty.

"So, Blaine," Brandon said once Blaine was seated next to Sebastian, "my son here tells me that you have a lot of potential."

Blaine cleared his throat nervously. "That's what everyone keeps telling me, sir."

"You don't agree?"

Blaine doesn't know what to say. "I...I love music, sir. I love performing. I put a lot of time and effort into it and it means a lot to me that others are able to appreciate it."

Brandon hummed softly. "Well, Blaine, I've listened to your stuff and I have to say, I was impressed. Your music possesses a unique character that is not unlike your disposition. You've got a sort of boy-next-door charm that will appeal, mostly, to the teenage and young-adult female market. However, I do have one...concern."

Blaine swallowed. "C-can I ask what you are concerned about, sir?"

"My son here tells me that you're gay."

Blaine's heart sank.

"Don't get me wrong, Blaine," Mr Smythe continued, "I'm not homophobic. Sebastian here is gay too, and knowing him he's probably hit on you at some point." He chuckled. "However, this is a business, Blaine, and you have to realise that something like this could have detrimental effects on your career. If you want to make it big, sometimes that means compromising certain aspects of your personal life. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"You want me to stay in the closet," Blaine replied softly.

"I hate the term 'the closet'. I'm merely asking you to keep your personal life away from the public eye, which I think is a fair request, considering all that we're doing for you. It will be a condition of your contract, if you agree to sign with this company. If you choose to go public with your sexuality, we will reserve the right to terminate your contract. This is for the best, Blaine - it will help your career, and it will help the company. Besides, are you really ready for the *whole world* to know?"

Blaine considered the man's words. Honestly? No, he wasn't ready for the whole world to know that he was gay. He hadn't even told his parents.

"Do we have an understanding, Mr Anderson?"

Blaine looked up to meet Brandon's eye. He nodded.

A week later, Blaine lay in bed with his head spinning. He couldn't sleep. He was full of energy, his body thrumming with excitement.

He had been officially signed by a record label.

Tom was ecstatic. "I'm so happy for you, baby," he'd whispered as he kissed Blaine senseless, and Blaine swallowed guiltily as he summoned the courage to tell his boyfriend that as long as he was signed with Smythe Records, they would have to keep their relationship under wraps.

Tom was upset, but his anger and frustration didn't seem to be directed at Blaine. He called Brandon Smythe every name in the book, and when Blaine argued that the man was "just protecting his company," Tom cursed the fact that gay people still had to hide their sexuality in order to be successful in this day and age. Once he had calmed down, however, he assured Blaine that he loved him more than anything, and that he would support him with whatever he chose to do. Blaine let out a relieved sigh, and kissed his boyfriend until they both forgot all about Brandon Smythe and his stupid conditions.

When Blaine called the Hummels, Burt and Kurt were overjoyed to hear the news. "I'm going to be the first person in line at the store to buy your album when it comes out," Burt said, and Blaine laughed joyously. He wasn't sure if his own parents would want anything to do with him anymore once they heard that he had deceived them, but he knew that he would still have Burt and Kurt, and that was enough to give him the courage to make the phone call.

His parents, as expected, did not react well to hearing that Blaine had completely ignored his business degree in order to pursue singing. After several long minutes of hearing his father yell about how much of a disappointment he was, Blaine managed to get the man to calm down long enough to tell him that he had a contract with Smythe Records. His parents seemed unable to believe that Blaine was capable of achieving any sort of success, and Blaine could tell that they didn't expect his singing to go anywhere. It

hurt, but it was nothing he wasn't used to. It seemed that he was always disappointing his parents one way or another.

The next 6 months were the busiest months of Blaine's life. He had so many things to do. He had songs to record in the studio, and music to write. He spent a lot of time in meetings with managers and publicists and loads of people from other important positions that he didn't even know existed.

Before long, Blaine had an album. When he first saw it, he burst into tears. The cover-art was a picture of him from his first photoshoot, walking down a desolate rocky path, guitar clutched at his side. His hair was wild and wind-swept and Blaine had to admit, he looked pretty good.

Shortly after the album's release, Blaine gained a small fanbase. He soon ended up playing small local shows, which he loved more than anything. After the shows he would always take the time to talk to his fans and sign copies of his album – he tried to remember the names of the fans he met, but their numbers just seemed to keep growing, and became more and more difficult to keep track.

The first time Blaine heard one of his songs played on the radio, he was in a cab. He burst into tears yet again, and earned a very strange look from the driver.

From then, things escalated rapidly. Blaine knew that things had changed after the first time he was recognised on the street. Soon after that, he was forced to hire bodyguards for whenever he went out.

The money started pouring in. Blaine and Tom bought a new apartment together - it was big, and beautiful, and offered a stunning view of the surrounding city. Blaine knew that he wasn't in it for the money, but that didn't mean that it wasn't *awesome* to be able to buy new clothes and take his boyfriend out to fancy restaurants and not have to worry about paying the bills.

The irony of the situation was that, despite the fact that Blaine now had the money to go back to Ohio whenever he wanted, he no longer had the *time*. But he promised Burt that he would still go home for Christmas as usual, and this time, he had Tom to take along with him.

Blaine kept his promise. On Christmas Eve, Burt picked Blaine and Tom up at the airport. There were tears and hugs exchanged, and everything was wonderful.

When they got back to the Hummels, Blaine's face split into a huge grin at the sight of Kurt. "Oh my god, Kurt!" He cried, sweeping the boy up into an enthusiastic hug. "You've grown so much since last year! How old are you now, 10?"

The boy nodded against his neck, clinging to him tightly, and when Blaine pulled back, he was shocked to see that Kurt was crying.

"Kurt, was wrong?" He asked, wiping away the tears.

"I just m-missed you so much," Kurt whispered. Blaine pulled him into another hug.

Christmas was absolutely amazing. Blaine would never forget the way Kurt's face lit up when he opened his gift - a gorgeous custom-made designer coat that had cost Blaine a couple of thousand dollars (although he had lied and told Burt that it was only a couple of hundred).

For some reason, Kurt didn't seem to like Tom very much. "Don't worry, he'll warm up to him," Burt had said with a chuckle after Tom had kissed Blaine on the cheek, earning an icy bitch-glare from the boy.

When it came time for them to head back, Kurt and Burt both came to say goodbye at the airport. The goodbye was a tearful one, and Blaine's heart ached to see Kurt crying yet again. It made him cry too, and he wasn't able to calm down until he and Tom passed through the security gates, leaving his family behind them.

A couple of months later, Blaine had just gotten out of the shower when he received a call from Sebastian.

"Congratulations, killer," Sebastian said when Blaine answered the phone.

"Congratulations for what?"

"You've just been nominated for a Grammy. Best new artist."

Blaine screamed so loudly Tom came bursting into the room in a panic to make sure he wasn't being attacked.

On the night of the 2006 Grammy awards, Blaine wore a beautifully-tailored suit with a black bowtie. His date for the night, a pretty blonde girl called Jennifer who Sebastian had introduced him to the previous day, looked stunning in a strapless blue dress.

Blaine wished more than anything that Tom could be there by his side instead of watching from home, but he knew that it wasn't an option.

When the nominees for Best New Artist were called, Blaine was shaking in his seat.

"And the winner is....Blaine Anderson!"

The next 5 minutes passed in a crazy blur. Blaine was vaguely aware of Jennifer kissing his cheek as he got up to accept his award. He made sure to thank Sebastian and his parents in his acceptance speech and, even though his parents didn't know about the existence of the Hummels, he mentioned his "good friends Burt and Kurt. Without them, I wouldn't be here today." He wanted to thank Tom, but his publicist had strictly forbid it, so he made his speech and tried his very best not to feel like a total sell-out.

The moment Blaine opened his apartment door later that night, he knew that something was wrong. The air felt tense, and he could hear the sound of shuffling in the bedroom.

"Tom?" He asked as he made his way into the bedroom. "Tom, did you see? I won!" Blaine stopped in his tracks when he entered the room.

Tom was standing in the middle of the room packing clothes into a large suitcase, several other large suitcases leaning against the wall. His hair was a mess, his face streaked with tears.

"Tom?" Blaine asked, his stomach twisting nervously as he took a tentative step forward. "Baby, what's wrong?"

Tom let out a choked sob. "I'm sorry, Blaine, I can't do this anymore." Blaine's heart dropped.

"What?"

"I love you, Blaine," Tom said, tears streaming down his face. "I love you so much, and I'm so proud of you, I really am. But I just *can't* do this anymore. I can't watch you go to awards shows with some random girl on your arm. I can't watch you pretend that I don't exist even though we spend every moment of every day together. I can't stand by and watch you deny who you are for the sake of fame. I can't do it."

Blaine felt his eyes well up with tears. "N-no," he said, "no, Tom, please don't do this! It doesn't matter what other people know, what matters is that we love each other!"

"But do you love me enough to come clean about us? Do you love me enough to not be ashamed of me?"

"I'm not ashamed of you! I have *no choice*, if I tell people, I'll lose everything! Everything I've worked for -"

"Maybe you won't lose everything!"

Blaine shook his head. "It was a condition of my contract, I can't just -"

"Another company would sign you!"

"But what if they didn't?"

Tom stared at him for a long moment. "I've heard enough, Blaine," he said finally. "The fact that you're not willing to take that chance for me speaks volumes. You don't need me. You'll be just fine. I have to go. Goodbye, Blaine."

After Tom left, Blaine found himself overcome with pain. He cried and sobbed and screamed, but nothing seemed to help. He smashed up their picture frames that sat on the bedside table, but that didn't help either. It hurt so much. It hurt even more because he *knew* that it was his fault, that he could have fixed it, but he was too much of a coward to try.

He stumbled to the liquor cabinet and pulled out a bottle of vodka, willing to do anything to numb the pain.

For the next few weeks, Blaine turned to alcohol to make his waking hours more bearable. He woke up with a hangover every morning, and went to bed drunk every night. He stayed cooped up in his apartment and ignored all his calls and emails.

One day he woke up to the sound of his doorbell being rung over and over again. He groaned as he rolled out of bed, a splitting headache making him stumble as he walked the (too long) distance to the front door, and wrenched it open.

"Fuck," Sebastian said. "You look like shit." He barged his way in before Blaine had a chance to object, and he immediately crinkled up his nose.

"It smells like booze and death in here. Blaine, where the fuck have you been? I've been trying to get you to arrange tour dates for the past three weeks and you haven't answered a single one of my calls, I was half-expecting to find a dead body when I came here today. I wasn't that far off, by the looks of things."

Blaine groaned and rubbed his eyes. It was far too early to be having this conversation. He went into the kitchen to make coffee.

"Blaine, here's what's going to happen," Sebastian said as he followed him into the kitchen. "You are going to clean yourself up, and you are going to come down to the office first thing tomorrow to discuss the up-and-coming tour. And then you are going to come home, and get on with your life because drowning your sorrows in alcohol is not the answer. I'm sorry about your boyfriend, really, but you could do so much better anyway."

Blaine slammed his mug of coffee down on the table. "Shut the fuck up, Sebastian!" He yelled. "You don't know *shit* about him. Just leave me alone."

"I know that he dumped you," Sebastian continued, "and made you feel like you were responsible. He didn't deserve you, Blaine. None of this is your fault. The sooner you get over this guy, the better."

Blaine stared at Sebastian for a long moment, before stepping forward and pulling him into a rough, searing kiss. Sebastian responded immediately, pulling Blaine forward until their bodies were pressed together. Their tongues battled for dominance, teeth clashing together. Blaine reached up and tore Sebastian's shirt open, feeling a sick sense of pleasure at the fact that he probably just ruined a \$500 shirt. Sebastian growled into his mouth and fumbled with his belt buckle.

Blaine wasn't sure exactly what he was trying to achieve. Perhaps he was hoping that sleeping with Sebastian would help him to get over Tom. Or maybe he just wanted to feel something other than pain, if only for a moment.

Whatever pleasure he may have felt that day, it was short-lived. After Sebastian left a couple of hours later, a self-satisfied grin on his face, Blaine felt even worse than he had before.

Tears streamed silently down his face as he poured himself another glass of vodka.

The next several months passed in a blur. Blaine forgot what it was like to be sober. He missed meetings and photoshoots, which resulted in Sebastian banging on his door and dragging him out of bed. He threatened Blaine's career several times, but he and Blaine both knew that he'd never let him go. He made too much money for the company.

Blaine stopped calling the Hummels because he didn't want them to hear how his voice slurred. He stopped seeing his friends, because he didn't want to see their judgemental eyes. He was safe at home, by himself, with a bottle booze in his hand.

One day, Blaine was scheduled to appear on The Ellen Show. He showed up late, and drunk. Sebastian was furious, and as soon as the disastrous interview was over, Blaine was dragged back to the office headquarters and berated by Sebastian and his father.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Blaine!" Brandon yelled as Blaine slumped in his chair and tried to pretend that he cared about anything the man had to say. "I don't care about what you do in your personal life. If you want to drink yourself into an early grave, that's your choice. But what you're doing is *shattering* your career, and you know who pays the price? Me. This company. If you're going to be this person, you need your fans to empathise with you and see you as a troubled artist rather than a disgusting mess. So tonight you're going to go home and you're either going to clean up your act, or you're going to write me some fucking fantastic, angsty songs. You understand?"

When Blaine got home, he poured all his alcohol down the sink.

The next morning he woke up shaking, and stumbled his way to the liquor store down the street to get some more. When he got home, he grabbed a piece of paper, a pen, and a bottle of vodka, and sat down to write.

For the next couple of weeks, he stayed home, writing. He wrote songs about heartbreak and loneliness and hopelessness. He knew they were good, but they were so different from his old stuff, he had no idea how receptive his fans would be to the new Blaine Anderson. He was already being bombarded with worried tweets and fanmail after his interview with Ellen, because even though he'd managed to answer the questions fairly well, the slurring of his words and lack of coordination had made it fairly obvious that he was drunk.

Blaine sighed as he picked up his guitar and started to sing.

A couple of weeks later Blaine was awoken at 11am to the sound of someone repeatedly ringing his doorbell.

Blaine groaned as he rolled out of bed, a familiar pounding in his head and dryness in his mouth.

"Fucking Sebastian," he mumbled as he pulled on a pair of sweatpants, stumbling towards the door.

He flung the door open, prepared for one of his regularly-scheduled arguments with Sebastian. He gasped in shock when he opened the door.

"Burt," he said.

Blaine watched as Burt looked him over, and he felt completely naked and exposed. When Burt met his eyes, his expression was a combination of disappointment and sadness, and it hit Blaine like a punch to the gut.

Blaine stood up as straight as he could in a vain attempt to make himself look less pathetic than he probably did right now.

"What are you doing here?" He asked.

"You gonna let me in?" Burt asked, and Blaine reluctantly stepped aside to let him into the apartment. He was suddenly very aware of the dirty dishes in the sink, the empty bottles of alcohol on the counters and the clothes on the floor.

"It's been six months, Blaine," Burt said. "*Six months* since I've heard from you. You haven't answered your phone, or the emails I've sent you. I wanted to come here earlier until I realised that you never actually gave me your address and, believe it or not, finding out a celebrity's address is not easy to do. I ended up having to track down Tom, and he told me that you'd broken up."

Blaine stood there, arms folded across his chest, staring at the floor in shame.

"Well, Blaine? You care to give me an explanation? I've been worried sick. Kurt misses you like crazy. And then I come here and your whole apartment smells of booze and vomit. You need help, Blaine."

Blaine looked up, glaring at Burt. "You have no right to come over here and tell me how to live my life!"

"The hell I don't! I love you like a son, Blaine! I just want you to be alright!"

"Well, as much as you may pretend to be, *you're not my fucking father!*"

"I'm as good as! You never exactly spoke highly of your real father!"

"Well at least *he* minds his own business!"

"He minds his own business because he can't be bothered to do his job, which is to make sure you're alright -"

"I'm FINE!"

"The hell you are. You need to see a doctor, or a counsellor, or *something* -"

"What the fuck is a counsellor doing to do for me, tell me that I'm depressed or that I'm not coping or that I need to stop lying to everybody? There is not a damn thing a counsellor could say to me that I don't already know."

"Well do you really think *alcohol* is going to help solve your problems?"

Blaine paused. He was beginning to shake, and he knew that it was a combination of his emotional state and the fact that he really needed another drink.

Blaine's chest ached. He stared at the man in front of him, the man who really *was* like a father to him – more of a father than he ever thought he'd have. And all Blaine could think about was how much of a disappointment he was – to Burt, to Kurt, to Tom, to his parents, to his fans, even to Sebastian.

Burt and Kurt didn't deserve this. He had put them through enough pain. They didn't deserve to spend the rest of their lives worrying about him and whether or not he was okay, because he'd never be okay. And he could never be the Blaine that he once was. That Blaine was long gone, and they'd never get him back.

So, Blaine did the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. He took a deep breath, and said the two words that he knew would leave him utterly and completely alone.

"Get out."

Burt blinked. "What?"

"I said, get out. Get out of my apartment and get out of my life. I never want to see you or speak to you ever again. I'm not your son, and you're not my father. I'm not a child anymore – I don't need you, and you don't need me. Just leave."

"You don't mean that," Burt said, taking a step forward. "You're hurting, and you're going through a really rough patch, but this is when you need your family most of all -"

"I DON'T HAVE A FAMILY!"

There was silence. Burt stared at him with sad eyes, and Blaine struggled to swallow around the lump in his throat.

"Blaine, please -"

"Just get out."

Burt let out a sad sigh, and headed towards the door. As he walked past Blaine he reached up and squeezed his shoulder gently.

"You'll always have a home with us, Blaine. Always."

And then he was gone.

Blaine crumbled. He let out a cry of despair and pain as he grabbed a half-full bottle of vodka from the kitchen counter and fell to the floor. Violent sobs racked his body as he curled up in the corner of the kitchen and brought the bottle to his lips.

In all his life, he had never felt so empty.

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"BLAINE!" Tyler yelled, laughing as he launched himself across the room to pull Blaine into an enthusiastic hug. "So glad you could make it, man."

"I've been here for 2 hours, Ty," Blaine laughed, clapping his friend on the back.

"Oh...sorry man, I got distracted. There was this really hot chick, Candice or Candy or something, and she has the most amazing tits, man, you gotta -"

Blaine grimaced. For the sake of keeping up appearances, he nodded along like he actually cared, chugging back half of his beer. The party was in full-swing at this point – everybody was well and truly drunk, and Blaine grinned. It was nice not to stand out for once. He finished his beer, letting out a sigh of contentment at the pleasant buzz that filled his body.

"Oh, by the way, man, did I introduce you to Alexa?" Tyler waved over an incredibly good-looking girl wearing nothing but a bra and a pair of denim shorts so tiny they might as well have been underwear.

"Alexa's a huge fan," Tyler said, throwing Blaine a not-so-subtle wink.

"Really?" Blaine asked, smirking at the girl. He expected her to blush, but she just smirked right back at him.

"Yeah, you got some real talent," she said, reaching out to fiddle with the collar of his shirt. "I love your latest album. Dark and depressing, just the way I like it."

Tyler grinned. "I'll leave you two alone," he said, turning around and making a beeline for three (possibly underage) girls in the corner of the room.

As soon as Tyler was gone, Alexa leaned in to whisper in Blaine's ear. "I know that you're gay."

Blaine started, turning to stare at the girl with wide, panicked eyes. She laughed.

"Oh, relax, pretty boy. I'm not here to stir up shit. I'm just very observant."

Blaine gawped at the girl in front of him. "How...?"

"You've been checking out the guy on the couch for the past hour," Alexa said. "But that's not how I figured it out. I'm pretty sure you have more chemistry with that bottle of beer in your hand than you did with that Sylvia girl you were supposedly dating. You're so far in the closet, you're in Narnia."

Blaine let out a sudden laugh. He had a feeling that it would be useless to try to deny anything to this girl.

"You caught me," he said with a grin.

"You wanna go upstairs?" Alexa asked. Blaine blinked at her.

"Umm...?"

"Not to fuck, Jesus," she said, laughing. "Some friends of mine are having a private party in the main bathroom."

Blaine cocked his eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Alexa grabbed his hand and dragged him upstairs and into the bathroom. There were four other people in there, seated on the edge of the bathtub and the toilet seat.

"Blaine here is gonna join us," Alexa said, locking the door behind them.

"Hey," one of the guys said. "You're just in time." He pulled out a clear pipe with a circular end containing a small amount of a white powdery substance. He then pulled out a lighter.

Blaine started when he realised what was going on. "Is that...?"

"You ever tried it before?" Alexa asked as the guy lit up and began inhaling the smoke from the pipe.

"No," Blaine said. "I...I heard it's really dangerous."

They all laughed.

"Honey," Alexa said, reaching out to grab the pipe, "you go through, what, like 2 litres of vodka a day? If you're going to kill yourself, you might as well make it good. And this stuff," she raised the pipe to her lips and inhaled deeply, "is fucking *good*."

She held the pipe out for Blaine to take. He stared at it. He had learnt a bit about Crystal Meth at high school – mostly that it was extremely addictive and would make you crazy and ruin your life. But really...what else did he have to lose? His life was just a big scrambled mess of booze and parties and money to spend on more booze and concerts he couldn't remember the next morning and lonely nights spent alone or in the arms of a nameless stranger.

He reached out to take the pipe, and raised his to his lips.

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door loudly. "Open this door!" They yelled.

"Shit!" Alexa yelled, snatching the pipe from Blaine and scrambling to hide it.

"Open this door right now!"

One of the guys stepped forward and unlocked the door, and suddenly Sebastian was running into the room. He spotted Blaine immediately and rushed forward, grabbing his face and tilting his chin up to look into his eyes.

"Did you smoke it?" Sebastian asked, his voice cold and hard. "Did you?"

Blaine shook his head, and Sebastian let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank god."

Sebastian turned towards the others in the bathroom.

"Is this fun for you?" He hissed. "Is fucking up other people's lives fun for you?"

"Oh, please," Alexa said, rolling her eyes. "As if his life isn't fucked up enough already."

Sebastian glared at her before grabbing Blaine's hand and pulling him out of the room.

The trip back to Blaine's apartment was silent, but as soon as they arrived and the door closed behind them, Sebastian let loose.

"What the hell were you thinking?" He asked. Blaine stayed silent, making his way to the liquor cabinet.

"Don't even think about it," Sebastian said, stepping into his path.

"Jesus, Sebastian, what do you want me to say?" Blaine cried in frustration.

"I want you to say that you'll *try*, Blaine!" Sebastian yelled. "You are so fucking lucky that I showed up when I did. Do you have any idea what kind of reputation that girl has? How many times she's narrowly escaped winding up in prison for dealing?"

"I'd never met her until tonight."

"And you were going to...you know what, Blaine? This has gone far enough. For the past 6 years, I have watched you ruin your life. I don't even remember what you're like when you're sober, and I don't think you do either. Well, this ends now. You're going to rehab."

"I am *not* going to rehab, and you can't send me there against my will."

"If you don't go, we're done."

"What do you mean 'we're done'?"

"You're out. I'll terminate your contract."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

"Why the fuck do you even care?"

"Because, you stupid asshole, I actually care about you! We're friends, aren't we? I want you to be okay."

Blaine groaned, and buried his face in his hands. "Rehab won't work," he said, raising his head. "I know for a fact that it won't work."

"Then go home," Sebastian said. Blaine looked up at him in surprise.

"I am home."

"I meant go back to Ohio. You need to get out of this place for a while, Blaine, it's not healthy for you to be here. This environment is toxic for you and you need to start afresh."

"There's no home for me in Ohio."

"Are you sure about that?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Blaine, for the last 5 years, a man called Burt Hummel has called me every single week to ask if you're alright. I always hated having to tell him the truth."

Blaine paused for a long moment. "He c-called?"

Sebastian nodded. "The man's a goddamn pain in the ass."

Blaine let out a sob. Sebastian immediately pulled him into his arms and Blaine cried into his chest, his whole body trembling.

"Call him," Sebastian whispered, stroking Blaine's hair. "I'll take care of packing your stuff. Let him know that you'll be at the airport tomorrow."

Blaine shook as he sat on his bedroom floor, his cellphone clutched to his chest. He could hear the sounds of Sebastian walking around in his living-room, searching for some clean clothes that he could take with him to Ohio.

Summoning up all his courage, he took a deep breath and hit the call button.

The phone rang for a long time, and Blaine was just about to hang up when Burt answered.

"Hello, this is Burt Hummel and you better have a damn good reason for waking me up at 3am."

The sound of Burt's voice sent a fresh wave of emotion through Blaine's body.

"Hello?" Burt asked, sounding concerned. *"Hello? Who is this?"*

Blaine's voice cracked as he responded. **"Hi."**

"Blaine. Blaine, oh my god, kid. Oh my god, it's so good to hear from you. Are you okay? What's going on? Goddamnit, kid, I can't – this is -"

Blaine could hear the genuine concern and caring in the man's voice, and he let out a soft sob. Burt fell silent for a moment. *"Blaine, please,"* he whispered. *"Tell me what you need. Please, you're scaring the crap out of me."*

"I...Burt, I...I'm so sorry, I just..."

"Blaine, what is it?"

"Can I come home?"

CHAPTER THREE

Changes

Blaine anxiously tapped his foot on the floor as the pilot announced the descent of his private jet into Ohio. He was in a terrible mood because, not only was he scared as hell of seeing the Hummels after everything he had done, he also hadn't had a drink in several hours. He wasn't used to going more than an hour or so without something to tide him over, and he found himself growing increasingly agitated. A part of him wished that he could have had some of the mini bottles of alcohol they usually kept on the plane, but Sebastian had confiscated them before the flight. Blaine felt another stab of nervousness at the thought of not having access to alcohol when he got to the Hummel's house. He *really* wanted to sober up and get his life back on track, but the thought of doing that was terrifying – or rather, the thought of trying his hardest and still *failing* was terrifying. He didn't want to fail. He really, *really* didn't want to fail.

Blaine leaned back in his seat, concentrating on his breathing and willing his churning stomach to settle down.

By the time the plane landed, Blaine was wiping sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. He quickly got out of the plane and was informed that there was a jeep to drive him off the tarmac and around to the back of the airport, where Burt would be waiting for him. Sebastian had insisted that Blaine try his best to stay off the radar in Ohio, and Blaine had agreed with him, which meant that he needed to avoid being recognised in the airport terminal. If he kept his location under wraps, he and the Hummels could avoid the stress of dealing with the media, who would no doubt want to follow his every move. Sebastian had said that he would be personally releasing a statement later that week, claiming that Blaine was attending a rehab centre in an undisclosed location until he felt ready to return to his music.

Blaine clambered into the jeep and, after a short drive, it began to slow down. Blaine glanced out the window and saw a man leaning against the side of a grey car, his familiar posture causing a jolt of recognition.

Aside from being a little thinner and balder, Burt looked exactly the same as he had the last time Blaine had seen him, 6 years ago. And he was *smiling*, as if he were actually excited to see felt a lump beginning to form in his throat. He hadn't realised just how much he'd missed him until now.

As soon as the jeep stopped, Burt began walking towards it. Blaine climbed out cautiously, not quite sure what to expect. He opened his mouth to say "hi", but before he could get anything out, he was pulled into a

tight embrace. He froze in shock for a moment before melting into the hug, and a familiar scent of motor oil and aftershave invaded his nostrils, filling him with a feeling of warmth and contentment that he hadn't felt in years. He felt a hot tear slide down his cheek.

With a soft chuckle, Burt pulled away and Blaine was surprised to see that the man's eyes were also shining with tears. He quickly wiped them on his sleeve.

"God, kid," Burt mumbled as he squeezed Blaine's shoulder affectionately, "it's so good to see you."

Blaine swallowed around the lump in his throat, trying to at least retain some semblance of composure. "You too," he whispered, and Burt pulled him into another hug.

Blaine twisted his fingers together as he gazed out the window of the car, watching the scenery fly by. They had been driving for 10 minutes now, and Burt hadn't said a word. He had a feeling that the man was waiting for him initiate conversation, but after everything that had happened, he felt oddly shy – like he and Burt had to re-learn how to be around each other again.

Blaine cleared his throat nervously. "So..." he asked, "how have you been? How's Kurt?"

Burt smiled brightly, clearly pleased that Blaine had finally decided to break the silence. "Wow, where do I start?" He said. "Kurt's....he's good, I think. He hasn't exactly had it easy at school. Some of the kids give him a hard time because he's different – you'd know all about that."

Blaine swallowed guiltily.

"Having said that, he joined his school's Glee club last year and since then things have gotten a lot better for him, I think. He's made a lot of friends and he really enjoys singing and performing. He's brilliant at it, too."

Blaine nodded. "He always was. I remember him completely upstaging Aurora at *Once Upon A Dream*."

Burt chuckled. "I remember how you two used to sing all the duets from those old Disney movies - I don't think I'll ever be able to forget the lyrics to those songs. Kurt's definitely moved on from his Disney Princess phase now, though. He turned 17 not long ago, and he's probably taller than you at this point."

Blaine breathed in sharply.

Seventeen.

He knew, of course, that 6 years had passed since he had last seen Kurt, but he still thought of him as a little boy. The years that had passed were barely noticeable on a man of Burt's age, but he was struck by the realisation that Kurt was now a *teenager* – very nearly an adult, in fact. And – oh, god – he'd probably *hate* Blaine for the way he had abandoned him. How could he *not*? They had been so close. Blaine had been a friend to Kurt, and a mentor – the closest thing that he had to a brother growing up, and without so much as a 'goodbye', he had cut the boy out of his life. If the situations were reversed, he would be *furios*.

Burt seemed to pick up on Blaine's fear, and he reached across to pat him on the knee reassuringly. "Kid, calm down before you give yourself a panic attack," he said. "He couldn't hate you if he tried."

Blaine's stomach churned with guilt. He just felt so much *guilt*, all the time. He wondered if there would ever be a time when he wasn't plagued by it. As a child, he felt guilty for not being the son his parents always wanted. He felt guilty when Elizabeth Hummel died and he had to watch Kurt cry himself to sleep, all the while knowing that he still had a mother who he barely even spoke to. He felt guilty when he had to leave the Hummels so soon after the tragedy to selfishly pursue his own ambitions. He felt guilty that he hadn't visited as often as he should have, and he felt guilty for having so much money and not trying harder to convince Burt to take some of it. He felt guilty for drinking and for being a burden and a disappointment and for shutting out everyone who cared about him and for daring to *come back*, after everything. He had no right to be here. He had no right to ask for a single thing more from Burt or Kurt.

"You okay, bud?" Blaine startled at the question, and nodded, although Burt didn't seem convinced. In an attempt to distract himself, he attempted to steer the conversation back to safer topics.

"You've lost weight," he stated, and Burt laughed loudly.

"Yeah, that'd be the crazy diet Kurt put me on. All bloody organic whole-grain low-fat rubbish. But, if it stops me from having another heart attack, I guess I better learn to deal with it."

"*WHAT? YOU HAD A HEART ATTACK?*"

"Relax, I'm fine! It was earlier this year, but the doctor said that just as long as I stick to my diet and exercise regularly, there's no reason for it to happen again."

Blaine breathed a small sigh of relief. "Have you considered becoming a vegetarian? It might help you lower your cholesterol -"

"Oh god, not you too! STOP! I'm a man, not a rabbit!"

"Okay, okay! I was just suggesting..." Blaine amended quickly. He should have realised that Burt would never give up steak and sausages.

Burt reached up to scratch his head and something glinted in the sun, catching Blaine's eye. Blaine stared at the ring on Burt's finger for a few seconds before registering its meaning.

"OH MY GOD!" He shouted suddenly, pointing at Burt's hand. Burt jumped at the sudden loud noise. "BURT, THAT'S A WEDDING RING!"

"Jesus, are *you* trying to give me another heart attack?" Burt grumbled, rubbing his chest.

"YOU'RE MARRIED?"

Burt's face lit up. "Yeah, I'm married," he said. "Her name's Carole. "You'll love her, she's amazing. She makes me really happy."

Blaine squealed and clapped his hands excitedly, before he suddenly realised what he was doing and lowered his eyes, blushing bright red. Burt laughed loudly.

"Kid," he said, smiling at Blaine fondly, "you really haven't changed a bit."

As the area became more familiar, Blaine grew more and more nervous. His hands were clammy, and he felt faintly nauseous as they passed by McKinley High. It was now empty of students, but it didn't stop Blaine from wincing at the sight of the dumpsters which he had become well-acquainted with during his time as a student there.

"Blaine," Burt said, "There's something I should probably tell you. Carole knows about you, and she's fine with you staying with us, but after you became famous Kurt insisted that I don't tell anyone about how close we used to be. If people had found out about how well we know you, they would have hassled Kurt

to get them concert tickets and stuff like that. Finn, Carole's son, doesn't know anything either, 'cos from what I know he's not exactly the best at keeping secrets. We'll obviously have to explain things to him tonight though."

"Fair enough," Blaine said. "I understand why you wouldn't want to be associated with me."

"Blaine, it's not that -"

"No, no, it's fine," Blaine said, waving his hand dismissively. "I am fully aware of my reputation. It makes things easier, anyway. It means it's less likely that someone will find out where I am and tip the media off."

Burt looked like he was going to argue further, but he seemed to decide against it. "Well, I ahh...I sort of haven't exactly told Kurt that you're coming back, either."

"*WHAT?*"

"Well, I only found out myself last night, and Kurt was staying over at his friend Mercedes' house...I didn't want to tell him over the phone, so I figured you could surprise him when he gets back today."

"I *really* don't think that's such a good idea."

"Blaine, seriously, I don't think you understand how much Kurt missed you when you left. He'll be ecstatic to see you."

He had a hard time believing that.

Blaine was surprised when they drove right past the Hummels' old house. "We had to upgrade when Carole and I moved in together so Kurt and Finn could have their own rooms," Burt explained. "The house is much better, there's a lot more space. We even have a guest room, so you don't need to worry about sleeping on the couch." Blaine was glad that he'd have his own room. He knew that he'd probably be experiencing strong withdrawal symptoms soon, and he really didn't want anyone to have to see him in that state.

They soon pulled into the driveway of a beautiful white Victorian-style house. "Nobody's home right now," Burt said. "Carole works until 5, Kurt's probably still gonna be at Mercedes' house for a couple of hours, and Finn's spending time with his girlfriend."

Burt parked the car, and Blaine followed him into the house.

"Wow," Blaine said, looking around at the amazing décor. "This place is beautiful."

Burt chuckled. "Yup, that would be Kurt's doing."

"He always did have an eye for style."

"Don't let him hear you say that, he'll take it upon himself to give you a personal makeover."

Blaine was suddenly struck with the memory of a five-year-old Kurt searching meticulously through Blaine's bowties, telling Blaine which ones went with which outfits, and which ones were 'crimes against fashion'.

"Hey, earth to Blaine."

Blaine blinked. "Sorry," he said. "I got a little nostalgic for a second there."

Burt smiled understandingly. "Come on," he said. "I'll give you a tour of the house and you can unpack your stuff."

A couple of hours later, Blaine had finished unpacking, and he and Burt were seated on the living room couch watching a football game. Blaine was silent, his mind pre-occupied, but Burt was as vocal as always, shouting out advice (and abuse) at the teams. When he called one player an "ass-faced douchenozzle", Blaine couldn't hold back a giggle. Burt looked over at him with a raised eyebrow, and that just set Blaine off again. Burt soon joined in, but their laughter was cut off when Blaine heard shuffling outside the front door. He froze before jumping to his feet.

There was the sound of a key turning in a lock. The door swung open.

A boy walked into the house, and hung up his coat on one of the hooks inside the door. He turned around, and noticed Blaine immediately. As soon as their eyes met, Blaine's stomach lurched as though the earth had dropped from beneath his feet.

There was no doubt that this was Kurt. He had the same stunning glaz eyes that he'd always had. He had retained his cute upturned nose, and his lips were exactly the same shape as they'd always been. He was, unmistakeably, Kurt.

But my god, he had *changed*. Burt had been right – he did appear to be slightly taller than Blaine. He had lost all traces of baby fat, and Blaine gulped as his eyes trailed over the boy's lean, sculpted figure, accentuated by his skintight black jeans and cinched waistcoat. The freckles that had once dotted his face had disappeared, his skin perfectly pale and smooth. His once round face was now all defined cheekbones and angular jawlines, and his dark coiffed hair only accentuated his chiselled features. He was, to put it simply, absolutely stunning.

Blaine didn't have a whole lot of time to think about the implications of his observation before he was snapped out of his trance by Burt's firm grip on his shoulder. He jumped slightly, glancing quickly over to the man before returning his gaze to Kurt, whose eyes were now narrowed dangerously and blazing with an intensity that made Blaine's breath catch in his throat.

He decided he should probably say something.

"Kurt, I -" he started, but he was cut off suddenly when Kurt spun on his heel and walked straight back out of the front door, slamming it behind him. Blaine's heart sank. The house was silent, and Blaine could hear Kurt starting his car outside and driving away. Blaine could still see Kurt's glare, and it was even worse than he'd thought it would be – he had seen nothing but pure *loathing* in the boy's eyes. He was flooded by yet another wave of guilt, coupled with overwhelming fear and sadness. A part of him had dared to hope that Burt might be right – that Kurt would throw himself into his arms and hug him and cry and tell him how much he'd missed him and assure him that all was forgiven. He now realised just how stupid, and unrealistic it was, to even contemplate such a possibility. He didn't realise that he was shaking until Burt pushed him back down onto the couch and sat next to him.

"Blaine, you need to calm down," Burt said, stroking his back soothingly. "Kurt will come around, he's probably just in shock. Or mad at *me* for not telling him you were coming so he could wear a fancier outfit." Burt chuckled, but it sounded forced, and Blaine just dropped his face into his hands. He knew the truth.

He sat there for a while, too busy wallowing in his misery to hear the door open a second time.

"Oh my god."

Blaine looked up to see that another boy had entered the house. This boy was freakishly tall, and clad in a (highly unfashionable) plaid shirt and vest combo. The boy was standing in the middle of the lounge staring at him in shock, and he realised that this must be Finn.

Finn turned to Burt, open-mouthed. "There's a famous singer dude on our couch."

CHAPTER FOUR

Promises

"There's a famous singer dude on our couch."

If Blaine wasn't feeling so incredibly shitty, he would probably have laughed at that reaction. Instead he just plastered a fake, half-hearted smile on his face, and waved. "Hi," he said. "I'm Blaine."

"Yeah, *I know*," Finn replied, still staring at Blaine. "What are you doing our couch? Did I win some sort of contest?" His face lit up. "Dude, do I get free tickets to your concert or something? 'Cos my girlfriend Rachel loves you." He paused for a moment before narrowing his eyes suspiciously. "Don't even think about making a move on her, though. I'm not afraid of punching a celebrity."

Blaine stared at the boy incredulously while Burt coughed in an attempt to stifle his laughter. "No, there's no contest," Blaine said, "but I'm sure I can get you some concert tickets once I'm back in action. And you *definitely* don't need to worry about me making a move on your girlfriend."

Finn grinned widely. "Cool," he said. This time, Blaine's mouth twitched in a real almost-smile.

"I know this whole situation must be quite...startling, Finn," Burt said, "but, Blaine is actually an old friend."

Finn gawped. "No way!" He said. "I knew you were from Lima but dude, that's awesome." He turned back to Burt. "How come you never told me that you know Blaine Anderson? If the kids at school knew about this I'd be the most popular guy in school again for sure."

"We wanted to keep this private, Finn," Burt said. "The situation is delicate, and *nobody can know about this*. I mean it – you can't tell anybody that Blaine's staying here, or even that we know him. Not even Rachel."

Finn's eyes widened. "He's staying with us?"

"Yes."

"*Blaine Anderson* is staying with us."

"Ain't that what I just said?"

"And I can't tell anyone?"

"No."

"Not even Rachel?"

"Especially not Rachel."

Finn let out a long, drawn-out groan. "This sucks balls," he muttered. "I'm going to go make a sandwich." Blaine chuckled as Finn headed in the direction of the kitchen.

As soon as Finn left the room, the phone rang. Burt jumped out of his seat quickly to answer it. "Hello?" He said, and then sighed in relief.

"Hi, Kurt." Blaine sat up straighter on the couch, staring at Burt, trying to read the expression on his face. "Kurt, calm down, please..." Burt said, his brow furrowing. "Look, I'm sorry, I misjudged the situation...yes, I know, I should have warned you. I thought you'd be happy..." Burt suddenly held the phone away from his ear, wincing, and Blaine could hear Kurt's high-pitched yelling through the receiver from across the room, although he couldn't make out what the boy was saying.

"Bud, I get that you're upset, but yell at me again and I'll confiscate your Navigator!" Burt shouted, phone still held at arm's length. The yelling immediately ceased, and Burt brought the phone back to his ear. "Jesus, Kurt, you nearly deafened me...Apology accepted. Where are you?...Okay. Okay. I'll see you later, bud...bye."

Burt hung up the phone and sighed, and Blaine stared at him expectantly.

"Kurt's...pretty upset," Burt said. Blaine winced.

"Try not to worry yourself too much, he'll come around. He said he just needed some time to himself, and he'll be back late tonight." Blaine nodded, swallowing nervously.

"Hey Blaine, you wanna play Call of Duty?" Finn asked, returning from the kitchen with a plate full of sandwiches.

Blaine blinked at the boy in surprise. "Yeah, okay," he said. He figured he could use the distraction.

Much to Blaine's surprise, playing video games with Finn was actually pretty fun – and despite the fact that he hadn't played since he was a teenager, he didn't do too badly.

He and Finn talked while they played, and Blaine found Finn to be a genuinely nice guy, if not a little dim. Finn seemed to have already gotten over the shock of having a celebrity staying in his house, and it took him less than an hour to start readily addressing Blaine as 'dude' and treating him more like a friend than a famous singer, or a strange intruder. Blaine found it extraordinarily refreshing. Another thing he liked about Finn was that if he was curious about something, he asked about it directly rather than skirting around the issue like most people did. It made it easier for Blaine to explain how he knew Burt and Kurt, and gave him the opportunity to explain how he was trying to sober up and get his life back on track. Finn was very understanding, and Blaine was eternally grateful for that.

At 7pm, Burt knocked on the door and told them that dinner was ready. When Blaine followed Finn into the dining room, he was met with the smell of roast chicken, and he saw a very pretty middle-aged woman placing a dish of mashed potatoes in the middle of the table. She looked up when Blaine entered, and smiled brightly.

"You must be Blaine," she said, walking up to him and immediately pulling him into a warm hug. "It's so nice to finally meet you. I'm Carole."

Blaine smiled when she pulled away. He hadn't even spent 30 seconds in her presence, yet he liked her already. She exuded an aura of warmth and caring, and Blaine found himself wishing that his mother could have been more like her. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Carole," he said.

"Well, aren't you a charmer," Carole teased playfully, ushering him towards the table. "Sit down, have some food. You must be hungry."

Blaine actually wasn't hungry at all – the emotional turmoil of the day coupled with the lack of alcohol had left his stomach feeling like it could barely contain itself let alone anything else. He didn't want to be impolite, however, so when everyone else had helped themselves to some food, he took a (much smaller) portion for himself and began chewing slowly. Surprisingly, his stomach actually felt settled by the food,

and he ate some more. It was delicious. He couldn't remember the last time that he'd eaten a home-cooked meal.

Throughout dinner, the Hummels made small-talk about their day. Blaine learned that Finn was in Glee club at McKinley, and Carole was a nurse at Lima Memorial. Burt still owned *Hummel Tires and Lube*, and Blaine was pleased to hear that business was booming.

After dinner, everyone retired to the living room to watch a movie together.

"You seen *Inception*, Blaine?" Burt asked.

"Umm..." Blaine said, shuffling awkwardly, "I think I did, but I don't remember it."

"Dude, what do you mean, you don't remember?" Finn asked, stuffing his mouth full of microwave popcorn despite the fact that they had just finished dinner.

"I don't remember a lot of the last 6 years," Blaine said softly. The atmosphere in the room changed immediately, tension filling the air.

Blaine's face was burning with shame, and he started when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Carole smiling at him reassuringly. "It's a good movie," she said. "I think you'll like it."

Blaine smiled, and tried to thank her silently with his eyes. She gave a tiny nod to show that she understood.

She was right, the movie was very good, although Finn left pretty soon, complaining that it was too confusing. As soon as the movie finished, Carole started yawning. "Burt, I think I'm going to go to bed," she said. "I'm exhausted."

"I might as well turn in, too," he said. "I gotta be at the shop really early tomorrow, I got orders to fill and I'm way behind."

"I'll meet you upstairs. Goodnight, Blaine," Carole said, heading towards the staircase.

"Goodnight, Carole," Blaine called in response.

Burt turned to him. "You stayin' up?"

Blaine nodded. "I'm not really tired just yet, I think I'll just watch TV for a couple more hours."

"You're gonna wait up for Kurt, aren't you?"

Blaine gulped. "I...I think I should at least make sure he's okay."

"Alright. If he's not back by midnight, please come and wake me up."

"Of course."

Burt ruffled Blaine's hair affectionately and headed upstairs. Blaine turned down the volume on the TV and continued to watch the screen, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

After what felt decades, Blaine heard the sound of shuffling outside the door. He quickly shot up out of his seat and took a couple of steps forward, prepared to do some serious grovelling.

The door opened. Kurt stepped inside, and he spotted Blaine standing awkwardly in the entranceway. His eyes immediately narrowed into an icy glare, but not before Blaine noticed that they were swollen and red-rimmed from crying. Blaine felt like someone had punched him in the stomach. He'd always felt a very strong sense of protectiveness over Kurt, and he hated seeing the boy upset.

Blaine took a deep breath. "Hi," he said softly, preparing himself for Kurt's reaction. He expected that Kurt might ignore him, or yell at him, or even hit him – but he didn't. He just stared at Blaine, his eyes flickering across Blaine's face as if re-learning his features.

After a long moment, Kurt responded, his voice soft and hoarse. "Hi."

Blaine breathed a sigh of relief. "Before you say anything, Kurt, I just want you to know that I am so, so sorry for everything. I never meant to hurt you. I know an apology probably doesn't mean a lot at this point, but -"

"- Blaine, stop," Kurt said, cutting him off. Blaine shut up immediately. Kurt sighed. "I'm really tired, Blaine. Can we please have this conversation tomorrow?"

Blaine nodded, mentally chastising himself for being so insensitive. "Yeah. Yeah, of course," he said. "That's fine. Absolutely."

Kurt blinked at Blaine, staring at him intently. He began chewing on his bottom lip, and Blaine tilted his head inquisitively – he knew all about Kurt's bottom-lip-chew. When he chewed his bottom lip it meant he was having some kind of internal debate with himself. When he was younger he would do it every time he had to pick out a Disney movie for them to watch, or when he had to choose between new shoes or a new scarf, or when he was shy about asking Blaine if he could sit in his lap. It had been cute and endearing when Kurt was a child, but Kurt wasn't a child anymore. Blaine watched as Kurt nibbled on his soft pink lower lip, and he felt himself growing hot. He realised that he had started unconsciously chewing on his own lip in response. He stopped immediately, feeling himself blush slightly. He stared down at the floor, hoping that Kurt hadn't noticed him staring. *I think the lack of alcohol is making me loopy*, he thought to himself.

Kurt seemed to have reached some sort of decision, because the next moment, he was taking a hesitant step forward. "Blaine," he said, "I'm going to do something now. But I want you to know that this in no way means that you are forgiven, or that we are friends, or even that we will ever be friends again." Blaine gulped nervously before nodding, completely unsure as to what Kurt was going to do.

Kurt stepped forward again until he and Blaine were standing directly in front of each other, and then he reached out and wrapped his arms around Blaine, pulling him into a tight hug. Blaine's eyes widened in shock, and his body tensed for a short moment before he realised that *Kurt was hugging him* and he completely melted. He tightened his arms around Kurt, pulling the boy snug against his chest. The soft scent of vanilla and honey filled his nostrils. He felt Kurt's body shudder before the boy buried his face in Blaine's hair, letting out a soft sob. Blaine wasn't sure if it was him or Kurt who was trembling. Kurt continued to sob in Blaine's arms, fisting his hands in the back of Blaine's shirt, clinging to him as if he were a life-line. Blaine was more than happy to be that life-line. *I'm never going to let you go ever again*, he thought to himself.

Blaine wasn't sure how long they stood there for, but when Kurt finally loosened his arms from around Blaine's middle and stepped away, Blaine immediately missed the warmth and wanted nothing more than to pull him right back.

Kurt wiped the tears from his eyes and it was only then that Blaine became aware of the wetness on his own cheeks. He wiped them as quickly and discreetly as possible.

Kurt was still breathing heavily from the force of his sobs, and he now had his arms folded across his chest defensively, as if shielding himself. "I'm going to go to bed now," Kurt said.

"Okay," Blaine responded, his voice soft and breathless.

"Please come down for breakfast at 9 tomorrow so that we can talk before I go to meet my friends."

"Okay."

"Don't use all the hot water in the morning."

"Okay."

"And Blaine? I want you to promise me something."

"Anything."

Kurt stared right into Blaine's eyes, and Blaine shivered with the intensity of his gaze. "I want you to promise me that you will never drink another drop of alcohol ever again."

Blaine inhaled sharply. This was a huge promise. This was not a promise to be made lightly. This was a promise that he did not know if he could keep.

"Yes," he said.

"I want you to say it, Blaine."

"Kurt, I promise that I will never drink another drop of alcohol ever again." He meant it.

Kurt nodded stiffly. "Good," he said as he began ascending the stairs. "Goodnight, Blaine."

"Goodnight, Kurt."

CHAPTER FIVE

New Beginnings

Blaine was standing in front of a door. It was a familiar door that he had been in and out of many times – the door to the Hummel's old house. He reached for the doorknob, and smiled when he found that it was unlocked. He entered the house, and was met by the sight of little Kurt, no more than 4 or 5 years of age, running down the hall in a bright pink princess dress, squealing in excitement. He wrapped his little arms around Blaine's legs, grinning happily.

"Blainey!" He greeted, "come and have a tea party with me."

Kurt grabbed Blaine's hand and dragged him into the living room. Blaine went along willingly, laughing at the little boy's enthusiasm.

The pretty porcelain tea set was set out in the living room, along with a tray of shortbread cookies.

"Sit down, please," Kurt squeaked, pulling out a tiny chair for Blaine to sit on. He then took a seat for himself, and grabbed the teapot. "Would you like some tea?" He asked primly.

"Yes, please," Blaine said, smiling at the little boy.

Kurt tipped the teapot over Blaine's cup, but the liquid that came out was clear.

"You forgot to put tea bags in," Blaine said with a chuckle, when suddenly, he noticed a strong and painfully familiar scent. He lifted the tea cup to his nose and sniffed, before turning to Kurt with wide eyes.

"Drink it," Kurt said with an innocent smile.

Blaine was suddenly very aware of how parched his throat was, how much his body craved the satisfaction that the drink would provide. He shook his head.

"Kurt, I can't," Blaine said, placing the cup back on the table and pushing it away from him. "Where did you that? You're not supposed to have that, it's very dangerous."

"Why?" Kurt asked, frowning in confusion. "It's just tea, Blaine. See?"

Kurt grabbed Blaine's cup and brought it to his own lips. "No!" Blaine said, reaching out to try to take the cup from Kurt's hand. But it was useless – his hands scrabbled at Kurt's arms to no avail. It was as if he possessed the strength of an infant.

"Yum," Kurt said, smacking his lips together and grinning.

"Kurt, stop drinking that!" Blaine exclaimed, his voice frantic.

"I'll stop if you drink some too, Blaine," Kurt said with a smile.

"I can't!" Blaine said, staring at the teapot in horror. "I promised!"

Kurt shrugged and brought the cup to his lips again. Blaine's eyes widened in shock as the boy suddenly began to transform right before his eyes. His legs lengthened and his chest widened, the tiny princess dress splitting at the seams as he continued to grow. His cheekbones crept up his face and his small arms became longer and more muscular.

By the end of the transformation, a very 17-year-old Kurt sat before Blaine, the torn scraps of the pink dress barely hanging from his frame.

Blaine gulped as his eyes travelled over the long expanse of Kurt's legs, which seemed to go on forever. The area from his upper thighs to his waist was, thankfully, still concealed beneath the torn pink fabric, but the majority of his lean muscled torso was exposed. When Blaine's eyes travelled up to reach Kurt's face, he found the boy smirking knowingly at him, and he blushed.

Kurt reached towards the table and picked up the teapot, filling up his cup again. He held it in his hands and brought it to his lips, taking a long, slow gulp.

"Mmmm," he said as he lowered the cup. "Tempting, isn't it?" He looked directly at Blaine as he said it, and Blaine's stomach lurched at the expression in his eyes – it was an invitation, and a challenge.

Blaine was filled with a sudden overwhelming urge to take what was being offered. He sat taut in his seat, his muscles straining as the rational side of his brain attempted to fight the feelings of want, need, now.

He turned his head away, staring intently at the plain cream-coloured wallpaper on the other side of the room, willing himself to remain in control.

He heard Kurt shuffling his small chair closer to him, and his heart began to race. Suddenly he felt a soft hand on the side of his face, and despite his attempt to fight against it, it turned his head effortlessly. Blaine found himself practically nose-to-nose with Kurt, staring deeply into his eyes, and he felt so exposed, like he had been stripped completely naked and laid bare, and there was nowhere for him to hide.

Kurt dipped his finger into the cup of vodka and brought it back to his lips, sucking it into his mouth and closing his eyes with a soft moan. Blaine let out a soft whimper. He was entranced, and he swallowed dryly, the feeling of desire stronger than ever before.

Kurt opened his eyes and leaned in impossibly closer, his lips a hairs breadth from Blaine's own. Blaine could smell the vodka on his breath.

"Pick your poison," Kurt whispered, and he slowly extended his tongue and flicked it over Blaine's upper lip.

Blaine jolted awake with a gasp, his body drenched in sweat. He lay still for a moment, the residues of the bizarre dream still clinging to him. "Well, that was sufficiently disturbing," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes as he sat up in bed and glanced grabbed his watch from the bedside table.

7:15 a.m.

He was awake much earlier than he needed to be. He decided to take a shower, and as he clambered out of bed, he suddenly became aware of the throbbing erection between his legs. He glared down at his lap. *It's just the morning*, he thought to himself. *It doesn't mean anything.*

Blaine would usually just jerk off in the shower in this situation, but today he turned down the temperature as low as it could go, shivering under the water until his erection disappeared.

As he showered, Blaine gradually became more and more aware of the dull, pulsating headache behind his eyes. Knowing that it would not be relieved by aspirin, he opted to just ignore it and hope that it didn't get any worse. He climbed out of the shower and got dressed in some simple, warm clothes before heading downstairs to kill some time before Kurt got up.

However, when he got downstairs, he was surprised to find that Kurt was already awake, seated at the dining table with a large cup of coffee in his hands. He didn't notice Blaine at first, and Blaine stopped in his tracks, taking a moment to just *look*.

Kurt's hair was already perfectly styled into an elegant coif. He was dressed in a pair of tight white jeans with a light blue sweater that perfectly complimented the colour of his eyes and greater emphasised the luminous quality of his skin. Kurt took a sip of his coffee and licked his lips, and Blaine immediately flashed back to his dream. He felt a twinge of guilt and unease in the pit of his stomach, coupled with...*something else*.

Blaine was beginning to feel like a bit of a creeper, so he cleared his throat to announce his presence.

Kurt jumped in his seat, coffee spilling over the rim of his mug. "God, Blaine, you scared me," he said, grabbing a napkin to wipe up the spilt coffee from the table.

"Sorry," Blaine said sheepishly, running a hand through his slightly damp, un-gelled curls. "I woke up early, for some reason. Is...anybody else home?"

Kurt shook his head. "Carole has an early shift today. Dad went to the garage and Finn went with him to help out. I think my dad might have forced him to go so that we could have time to talk, alone."

Blaine nodded, twisting his hands together nervously. "Kurt, I...I'm really sorry about yesterday."

Kurt immediately stiffened, glaring at Blaine with a sudden ferocity that made Blaine's breath catch. "Why are you sorry for *yesterday*?" Kurt snapped. "Yesterday, you came back. It's the past *6 years* that you should be sorry for."

The familiar wave of guilt hit Blaine like a freight train. "I know," he said, his hands already beginning to shake. "Kurt, I am so, *so* sorry. I don't have the words to express how truly sorry I am."

Kurt got to his feet, grabbed his cup and marched past Blaine. Blaine followed him into the kitchen where he placed his mug on the sink, and let out a long sigh. "I don't want an *apology*, Blaine," he said, looking Blaine directly in the eye. "I want an explanation."

Blaine could tell that Kurt was trying to keep his voice steady and strong, but he could hear the underlying quiver that betrayed just how close he was to crumbling. When Kurt spoke again, he didn't yell, but the coldness of his words chilled Blaine to the bone.

"I want an explanation," Kurt said, "for how you could do what you did. You came into this family and you made us need you so much, you made us *love* you, and then you just *left*. You just abandoned us, like we were some sort of...disposable convenience."

Blaine opened his mouth to speak, but Kurt cut him off. Blaine decided it was probably best to just wait for him to get everything out. After all, he needed to figure out just how much he'd screwed up before he could attempt to fix anything.

"Did you even think of me *at all*?" Kurt continued. "Did you think of my *dad*? We fucking *needed* you. We needed you to be there because we already lost one member of this family and losing you as well was just too much. My dad felt like he'd lost one of his sons, and do you have *any idea* what *I've* been through in the past six years? I suddenly lost my best friend. I was *tormented* at school every single day, and for *years* I had no friends at all...and, as if that wasn't enough, I almost lost my dad too! The day he had a heart attack...I thought that was it. I thought I was going to be left completely alone."

By this point, tears were streaming down Kurt's face, and Blaine's heart physically *ached* to see him like this. He wanted to wrap his arms around him, telling him everything would be okay, that he was here, that he would never leave him again.

"You could have helped me," Kurt said, his voice softer now. "You could have been there for me, with the bullying, when my dad was in hospital...but you weren't. You were off in New York, *drinking* and *partying* and spending your millions of dollars on god-knows-what. I don't know why we just suddenly stopped being good enough for you, but it fucking *hurt*, Blaine."

Kurt let out a soft sob. Blaine stepped forward and tentatively placed his hand on Kurt's arm. The boy didn't flinch away, which Blaine took as a good sign.

"Kurt..." Blaine whispered, "Kurt, you don't really believe that, do you?"

Kurt sniffled. "B-believe what?" He asked, eyes trained on the floor.

Blaine placed his hand under Kurt's chin and lifted it gently so that they were eye-to-eye. "Kurt, you could *never* not be good enough for me," he said. "Never. You're *too good* for me. I never deserved to have you, or your dad, in my life."

Kurt snorted. "Yeah, right," he mumbled. "Why did you leave then?"

Blaine swiped his thumb across Kurt's cheek, wiping away his tears. "Because," he whispered. "You deserved better. Kurt, I was a *mess*. I was drinking every day, I was hardly ever sober...you've seen the magazines. You didn't need someone like me in your life. I would only have added to your problems."

Kurt shook his head. "That's not true."

Blaine shook his head. "I wasn't even *myself*," he said. "It was as if the alcohol turned me into a different person. And that person was nothing but destructive. Trust me, Kurt – it's better that you never knew him."

Kurt was silent for a moment, contemplating Blaine's words. "Why...why did you start drinking?" He asked.

"I don't know," Blaine responded honestly. "I think breaking up with Tom was the tipping point. At the time I thought that was the whole reason, but looking back now, I think it was a lot more than that. I felt like I was under so much pressure from everybody...from the record company, my parents, my fans, everyone. And they all wanted me to be something different, something that I wasn't. No matter what I ended up doing, someone would get hurt, and it was just – too much. And the fact that I hardly ever had time to come and see you and Burt just made it worse. When Tom left...he was my rock. He was the only thing I had that was stable and enduring and *honest* and I just felt so lost without him. Everything went downhill from there. It sounds so stupid, after hearing what you've been through – *fuck*. I'm just, I'm not as strong as you, Kurt. I never have been, and I never will be. I'm just a pathetic mess."

Kurt shook his head vehemently. "*No*," he said. "No, Blaine, don't think like that. It's that kind of thinking that got you into this position in the first place. For as long as I can remember, you've *never* given yourself enough credit. You're so much better, and stronger, than what you think you are."

Blaine stared at Kurt with wide eyes. How could he defend him with such conviction, after everything he'd done?

"Kurt," Blaine said, shaking his head, "I gave up *everything* that was important to me just so that I could drown myself in alcohol and make myself numb, because I couldn't deal with the pain. I'm a *coward*."

"You came back," Kurt said. "That took a lot of courage."

Blaine shook his head disbelievingly. "Why are you defending me?" He asked. "I thought you'd hate me. You have every right to hate me."

Kurt paused for a moment before grabbing Blaine's hand in his. Blaine started, staring at their intertwined fingers in disbelief.

"I don't think I could ever hate you, even if I wanted to," Kurt said. He squeezed Blaine's hand gently. "I don't think that you and I will ever be able to go back to the way we were before. But I would really like for us to start again. To be honest, Blaine, I'm sick of being angry with you. I've been angry at you for 6 years, and I don't want to feel that way anymore. I... I would like to forgive you. For my own sake."

Blaine's eyes filled with tears. "Are...is that what you're saying? That you forgive me?"

Kurt hesitated for a moment. "I think I need some more time," he said. "But I'm getting there."

"Kurt, can I hug you?"

A hint of a smile played on Kurt's lips. He let out a dramatic fake sigh. "Fine, if you *must*," he said in mock-annoyance, opening his arms. Blaine wrapped his arms around Kurt's waist and hugged him tightly, feeling his heart flutter happily in his chest when Kurt wrapped his own arms around him in response. Blaine felt an unfamiliar warmth in his chest, a spark of life that he hadn't felt in many years.

He recognised it as hope.

"Kurt?" Blaine mumbled.

"Hmm?"

"Would you forgive me faster if I grovelled?"

Kurt let out a sudden bark of laughter, pulling away from Blaine with an expression of amusement on his face. "Well, it couldn't *hurt*," he said with a shrug. "I find that flattery is a good way to go, too."

Blaine grinned. "You're a great hugger."

Kurt wrinkled his nose in distaste. "My *hugs*, Blaine? Really? That's the best you could come up with?"

"You also have a fantastic complexion."

Kurt smiled. "Better."

Blaine's stomach grumbled loudly, and they both laughed.

Kurt smiled at Blaine bashfully, and Blaine cocked an eyebrow questioningly. "What?"

"I...this is probably a stupid idea," Kurt said, sounding a little embarrassed, "but I couldn't sleep this morning, so I went to the store really early and bought ingredients for white chocolate and macadamia pancakes. I thought we could maybe..."

Blaine's face lit up in delight. "*Really?*"

Kurt grinned. "Well, it *is* Saturday today."

White chocolate and macadamia pancakes were Kurt's mom's recipe, and Blaine's favourite food of all time. When he lived in Lima he used to come over to the Hummels' every Saturday morning, and he and Kurt would make the pancakes together, often ending up with more batter on the floor (or each other) than in the pan. Elizabeth sometimes helped them, although most of the time she just looked on in amusement. They'd continued the tradition after she'd died, as a way to remember her – and also because they just really liked the pancakes.

"Did you get ice-cream too?" Blaine asked excitedly.

Kurt rolled his eyes with a smile. "Yes, of course I got ice-cream. Come on, we better get started."

As they worked together, measuring out ingredients and pouring them into a large mixing bowl, Blaine tried to work up the courage to break the silence between them. He felt like he didn't really know Kurt anymore – so much had changed since they'd last seen each other. He wanted to know absolutely everything that there was to know about the other boy, but things were so *delicate* between them right now. He didn't want to accidentally ask something that might bring up painful memories.

"Pass the sugar?" Kurt asked, and as Blaine handed him the jar, he decided to stop being a baby and just *talk* to him.

"So...you got, erm, taller," Blaine said. He winced as soon as the words left his mouth. *Of course he got taller, you idiot. You haven't seen him since he was eleven. Smooth, Anderson.*

Kurt let out a surprised laugh. "Ahhh, yeah," he said. "I had a huge growth spurt last year." He turned to look Blaine up and down, smirking slightly. "I see that the same can not be said for you."

Blaine gasped, affronted. "Hey, it's not my fault I was born petite – *why are you laughing?*"

"You just described yourself as 'petite'," Kurt said, giggling. "*Petite.*"

"Well, I am," Blaine pouted, crushing a handful of macadamia nuts.

"I'd say you're more...*compact*," Kurt said, still smirking.

"You're still as cheeky and mean as ever, I see," Blaine said playfully. "At least some things never change – *ow!* Did you just hit me with a wooden spoon?"

Kurt just stared at Blaine in mock-innocence, expertly twirling the wooden spoon between his fingers.

"Abuse," Blaine mumbled, eyeing the spoon warily.

"I think your nuts are sufficiently crushed," Kurt said, waving at the pile of decimated macadamia nuts on the chopping board.

Blaine snorted.

"Oh my god," Kurt groaned, staring at Blaine in disbelief. "I thought you were *twenty-nine*, not thirteen!"

"I'm sorry. That was immature. I apologise."

"Good."

They grinned at each other for several seconds before Blaine realised just how *natural* this felt. He had expected that he and Kurt would take a while to fall back into their playful rhythm, or maybe things would have changed completely – but they really hadn't. Something was different, yes...there was definitely a

new dynamic between them now, a sense of cautiousness and mature understanding that hadn't been there before – but they were still Kurt and Blaine.

Blaine blushed slightly as he turned back to the counter, quickly adding the nuts and white chocolate to the mixing bowl before stirring. "These are ready to go in the pan now, I think."

As they flipped the pancakes, they exchanged gentle banter, and Blaine was struck by how completely and utterly content he felt in that moment. He felt, for the first time in 6 years, like he might have something to live for – something to look forward to in the future.

Once the pancakes were cooked, Blaine grabbed the ice-cream from the freezer and proceeded to scoop half the container on top of his enormous pile of pancakes while Kurt look on in horror.

"Blaine, how are you going to eat all that?" He asked as they sat down at the table.

"Easy," Blaine said with a grin. "Like this."

He shoved a huge mouthful on pancakes into his mouth and closed his eyes, letting out a loud, obscene moan. "Holy shit, I forgot how *amazing* these are," he said, opening his eyes. Kurt's cheeks looked slightly flushed, and Blaine cocked his head with a smile. "Try some."

Kurt lifted a forkful of the pancakes to his mouth and took a delicate bite. He let out a hum of contentment, and Blaine grinned.

"They *are* rather good," Kurt said, already going for a second bite.

They ate their pancakes in a comfortable silence. A couple of times Blaine found himself experiencing a rush of nostalgia when the familiar taste activated an old memory of he and Kurt eating pancakes in the living room while watching cartoons. He realised that he was now in a position where he could make more of those memories, if he wanted to.

Deciding it would probably be a bad look for him to start crying into his breakfast, Blaine forced himself to think about safer things, like what he wanted to get the Hummels for Christmas. It was only a couple of weeks away, after all.

"Well, I'm finished," Kurt said, putting his fork down and wiping his mouth with a napkin. "That was delicious. And extremely fattening."

"Let's just focus on the delicious part," Blaine said with a smile, getting up to help Kurt clear the table. He felt a sudden jolt in his stomach and doubled over with a gasp, gripping onto the counter for support. *Shit.*

"Woah, Blaine, are you okay?" Kurt asked, looking concerned.

"Yeah," Blaine gasped. "I think you were right, I probably ate too many pancakes."

"I'm supposed to meet Mercedes and Rachel for coffee," Kurt said. "I could call and cancel."

"No, no," Blaine said, forcing himself to stand up straight and smile. "I'm fine, really. See? Nothing to worry about."

Kurt nibbled on his lip for a moment, still looking slightly worried. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm totally fine. Go hang out with your friends, I insist."

"Okay," Kurt said, still sounding somewhat reluctant. "I'll be back in a couple of hours. If you need to call me, my cell number is on the fridge."

Blaine nodded. "Okay. I'll see you later."

The second Kurt walked out the door, Blaine collapsed onto the couch with a groan. His stomach was churning, and the dull headache from the morning had built up into a strong, steady throb behind his eyes. He could feel the beginnings of a fever coming on, and he focused on taking deep breaths.

He'd known this was coming. He was just relieved that he was alone – he didn't want anyone else to have to witness this.

Suddenly, his stomach lurched violently, and Blaine bolted from the couch into the bathroom. He barely managed to get his head over the toilet bowl before he was violently vomiting up his breakfast. He continued to gag and retch for what seemed for like forever, until he wasn't sure how there was still anything left in his stomach to come back up. Finally, the urge to vomit seemed to subside.

Blaine gasped for breath as he pressed his forehead against the wall, his eyes streaming. He felt like he was seconds away from passing out. He needed to lie down, but he knew there was no way that he could make it up to his bedroom, or even to the living room couch. He slipped down onto the cool tile of the bathroom floor and curled himself into a ball, his body trembling as he broke out in a cold sweat.

Blaine whimpered as his body convulsed. He couldn't remember a single time in his life when he had ever been in this much physical pain. *Please*, he thought to himself. *Please let this be over soon.*

Completely drained of energy, Blaine closed his eyes and let consciousness slip away, with the hope that sleep could bring him even the tiniest amount of comfort.

CHAPTER SIX

Comfort

Blaine wasn't sure how long he lay on the cold bathroom floor, drifting in and out of consciousness. His dreams were bizarre and disjointed, filled with pain and desire and fear. He was vaguely aware of the fact that his body was shivering uncontrollably, but he had neither the strength nor the motivation to move anywhere more comfortable. He just wanted to sleep.

After what felt like days of agony, Blaine vaguely heard the sound of the front door closing. A few seconds later, someone called his name. The high, melodic tone was unmistakeable. *Kurt*.

"I'm in here," Blaine called, his voice soft and weak. He heard footsteps heading in his direction, followed by pounding at the bathroom door.

"Blaine!" Kurt said. "Blaine, open the door." Blaine groaned and summoned all the strength in his aching body, before pulling himself into a slumped sitting position against the wall and turning the lock on the door.

The door was yanked open immediately, and Kurt gasped as he entered the room, eyes wide with concern. Blaine felt another wave of sudden nausea sweep over him, and he turned to lean over the toilet bowl, vomiting once again. He only brought up bile, but his stomach continued to convulse as he gagged violently. He was vaguely aware of a couple of hands running through his hair, pushing the sweat-drenched locks off his forehead.

Once he had finally stopped retching, Blaine collapsed to the floor again, exhausted. Kurt was kneeling on the floor next to him, and he looked terrified.

"Blaine," Kurt said, and Blaine heard the quiver in the boy's voice, "Oh my god. You're so pale. Should I call my dad? I can get him to come home from work early and we can take you to the hospital -"

Blaine shook his head, groaning when it resulted in a burst of pain. "I'll be fine," he rasped. "It's just...withdrawals. I can't go to the hospital...the media..."

Kurt pressed his hand against Blaine's forehead and gasped. "Blaine, you have a really high temperature," he said, his voice shaking.

"Carole's a nurse," Blaine said, his teeth chattering. "She can take a look at me when she gets home."

Kurt bit his lip nervously. "I don't know what to do."

"It's okay," Blaine said. "Just...can you maybe help me get upstairs? I'd rather lie in bed than on the floor."

Kurt nodded, and Blaine winced, bracing himself against the wall as he attempted to stand on shaky legs. Kurt's arm immediately encircled his waist to support him. With Kurt's help, he managed to get to his feet. They slowly made their way out of the room and up the stairs, and Blaine felt bad about the fact that Kurt was practically carrying him.

"You're stronger than you look," he mumbled, and the corner of Kurt's mouth twitched.

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

After an arduous climb, they finally reached Blaine's bedroom. Kurt gingerly lowered Blaine onto the bed.

"I'll be right back," Kurt said, leaving the room for a few minutes before returning with several more pillows, a bucket, and a bottle of water. He placed the bucket next to the bed, in case Blaine was sick again. He then proceeded to pile the pillows onto the bed, building somewhat of a pillow nest.

"Have you unpacked your clothes?" Kurt asked, and Blaine nodded, gesturing towards the chest of drawers. Kurt rummaged around for a minute before returning with a baggy t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants.

"Here," Kurt said, handing the clothes to Blaine. "You're drenched in sweat and you've been lying on the bathroom floor for hours, you need to change."

Kurt turned his back while Blaine fumbled with the zipper on his pants, but his hands were shaking so much that he couldn't get the button undone. He let out a cry of frustration, and Kurt turned around.

"Oh," Kurt said, blushing slightly as he realised Blaine's predicament. "Here, let me help."

Kurt came over and began working on the button of Blaine's pants. Blaine felt his own face heat up in embarrassment, partly due to the fact that *Kurt was undoing his pants*, but more from the fact that he

actually needed help getting his own pants off. He wasn't used to having to rely on people, for anything. He hadn't depended on another person in a very long time.

Eventually, Blaine managed to wriggle out of his pants, and Kurt asked Blaine to lift his arms so he could pull his shirt off too. Blaine was left in just a pair of black boxer-briefs, and Kurt's face was bright red as he helped Blaine put on the new set of clothes while desperately trying to ignore his state of undress.

Once Blaine was finally dressed in the fresh set of clothes, Kurt pulled back the blankets on the bed so that Blaine could crawl between the sheets. He immediately pulled the blankets up to his chin, his teeth chattering with the force of his fever.

"Here," Kurt said softly, holding a water bottle to Blaine's lips. "Drink. You don't want to get dehydrated."

Blaine obediently took a few sips of the water, and Kurt handed him some aspirin. He swallowed the pills and hoped that he could keep them down long enough for them to work. When he had finished drinking, Kurt offered him a stick of gum which he gratefully accepted, his mouth still thick with the sour taste of vomit.

"I'll be right back," Kurt said, leaving the room for a moment and returning shortly with his laptop and a few Vogue magazines. Blaine looked at him questioningly as he dumped them on the bed.

"I had to find something to keep us entertained, now that you're stuck in bed," Kurt explained.

"Us?" Blaine asked, fidgeting in discomfort.

Kurt responded by pulling back the blankets on the other side of the bed and climbing in next to Blaine. Blaine looked over at him in surprise.

"Kurt, you don't have to stay with me," he said. "I'll be okay on my own."

"Shush," Kurt said, fluffing up the pillows to make himself more comfortable. "I'm not leaving you alone when you're sick." His voice sounded thick and choked, as if he were trying to hold back tears.

Blaine stared at the boy, endlessly grateful for his willingness to help despite the fact that Blaine had brought this upon himself, and sure as hell didn't deserve any pity. "Thank you," he whispered.

Kurt's lower lip trembled, and his eyes began to fill with tears. Blaine's eyes widened in surprise. "Kurt," he said, reaching out to grab Kurt's hand, "what's wrong?"

"I'm so sorry," Kurt said, and a tear fell from his eye onto his cheek. "I feel terrible for leaving you here alone today. I knew that you'd go through withdrawals soon, I should have had the sense to realise that you shouldn't be left alone."

Blaine's heart ached. After everything he had done in the past – after all the hurt that he had caused Kurt – the boy somehow still managed to feel guilty for going out with his friends.

"You're unbelievable," Blaine whispered incredulously. Kurt looked up at him with wide eyes.

"What?"

"My God, Kurt. After everything I've done to you, you're telling me you're blaming *yourself* for the fact that I'm sick?"

"I'm not blaming myself, but you shouldn't have had to be alone for that. I should have been there to make sure you were alright -"

"Kurt," Blaine interjected, "Listen to me." Kurt stopped talking immediately.

"Kurt," Blaine continued, "You did nothing wrong. I lied to you today. I knew that I was about to get really sick, but I told you to go out with your friends because I didn't want you to see me in this state. I knew it would upset you. The fact that you feel *guilty* about it... God, Kurt. You have to be the most wonderful, kind, forgiving person I've ever known."

Kurt was staring at Blaine with wet eyes, teardrops clinging to the ends of his long lashes. "Forgiving?" He sniffled. "I'm not that forgiving. I told you this morning that I haven't forgiven you yet."

"And yet you still carried me up the stairs, dressed me, helped me into bed and climbed in after me to keep me company."

"Well, I don't want you to *suffer*," Kurt defended. "I'm just being a decent human being."

"No," Blaine responded simply. "You're being Kurt."

Kurt stared at Blaine for a long moment in silence, before his lips finally twitched up in a small smile. "Am I really the most wonderful person you've ever known?" He asked, wiping the remnants of his tears from his face.

"Absolutely."

Kurt laughed lightly. "Well," he said, "I'm about to become even more wonderful."

"How so?"

"I have The Lion King 2 on my laptop."

Blaine perked up immediately. "The Lion King 2? I've never seen it. I've always wanted to, but..." *But I had no one to watch it with.*

Kurt grinned. "I thought we could continue our tradition. It's one that we haven't had the chance to watch together before, but it's one of my favourites. And I've always had a bit of a crush on Kovu."

"Who's Kovu?"

"Kiara's love interest."

"And Kiara is Simba's daughter, right?"

"That is correct."

"So what you're saying is, you had a crush on animated lion?"

Kurt glared at Blaine. "Shut up. You have yet to *see* this animated lion."

Blaine burst into laughter, regretting it a moment later when his muscles screamed in protest. A soft whimper escaped his lips, and Kurt bit his lip nervously.

"You know," Kurt said, "I've always found that when I'm sick, it helps to have someone to cuddle with."

Blaine's eyes widened, and Kurt blushed as he shuffled closer on the bed. Blaine immediately opened his trembling arms in invitation, and Kurt smiled softly as he crawled between them to snuggle against Blaine's chest, his head resting against Blaine's shoulder. Blaine curled his arm around Kurt's waist. Kurt let out a hum of contentment, and Blaine smiled, grabbing Kurt's laptop from the bed and propping it open on their laps.

As the movie started, Blaine became very aware of just how much he was trembling when the computer started shaking on their laps.

"I'm sorry," he said, frowning at the screen.

Kurt shook his head. "Don't apologise, you can't help it." He moved the computer to his own lap and angled it slightly so that Blaine could see the screen. "Better?"

"Yeah."

"Are you comfortable?"

Blaine shrugged. "I'm about as comfortable as I can get."

Kurt frowned in concern.

"You're right, though," Blaine quickly amended, "it totally helps to have a cuddle buddy."

That made Kurt smile, his eyes crinkling adorably. Blaine felt his stomach swoop.

As they watched the movie, Blaine found it somewhat difficult to concentrate on the storyline due to the fact that he could feel Kurt's chest rise and fall every time he took a breath, and his hair smelled like coconut, and every time he laughed at something that happened on the screen it was like the sound of tinkling chimes and it made Blaine feel inexplicably happy.

A couple of times, however, Blaine was distracted by less pleasant things. At one point, he was hit with another strong wave of nausea that had him scrambling to reach the bucket next to the bed. He didn't vomit again, but he did spend a few minutes dry-heaving over the bucket while Kurt rubbed his back soothingly.

At another point, his shaking got so bad that Kurt paused the movie and clung to Blaine extra-tightly until it subsided. Blaine didn't mind that one so much.

When Blaine actually managed to concentrate on the movie, he found that he really enjoyed it. When the adult version of Kovu appeared, Blaine gasped in shock. "Holy shit, that lion is *sexy*," he said, and Kurt burst into laughter.

"I told you so!"

"It's an *animated lion*! How do they *do* that?"

"I don't know, but it freaks me out every time."

When the music started for Kovu and Kiara's duet, Blaine perked up in excitement. "Hey, I know this song! I had a friend, Jessica, who used to sing it all the time." He paused for a moment, a sad frown on his face. "I haven't talked to Jessica in a while. I haven't really talked to any of my friends in a while. Except Sebastian."

Kurt glanced at Blaine sympathetically. "Well, if you know this song," he said, "maybe you can sing it with me? It'll be like old times. And then when you next see Jessica, you can sing it with her, too."

Blaine smiled. "Okay."

Kiara's part of the song was first, and when Kurt began to sing, Blaine's heart skipped a beat.

In a perfect world

One we've never known

We would never need to face the world alone.

Blaine stared at Kurt, open-mouthed. His voice was *beautiful*. His voice had always been beautiful, but over the years it had become more refined. It was the purest, most melodic sound Blaine had ever heard. He sounded like an angel, and Blaine only hoped he could get through the song without crying.

They can have the world

We'll create our own

I may not be brave or strong or smart

But somewhere in my secret heart

I know

Love will find a way

Anywhere I go

I'm home

If you are there beside me

Like dark turning into day

Somehow we'll come through

Now that I've found you

Love will find a way.

Then it was Blaine's turn to sing. His voice was weak, but he knew that Kurt wouldn't mind. The boy was looking into his eyes and smiling encouragingly, and Blaine took a deep, shaky breath before he began to sing.

I was so afraid

Now I realize

Love is never wrong

And so it never dies

There's a perfect world

Shining in your eyes

Kurt joined Blaine for the final part of the song. Their eyes were trained on each other, rather than the screen. Blaine was sure that Kovu and Kiara's reunion must be beautiful, but it was no match for what he was seeing at that moment.

And if only they could feel it too

The happiness I feel with you

They'd know

Love will find a way

Anywhere we go

We're home

If we are there together

Like dark turning into day

Somehow we'll come through

Now that I've found you

Love will find a way

I know love will find a way.

It hit Blaine like a freight train. *Oh, there you are*, he thought, as he stared into Kurt's eyes. *I've been looking for you forever.*

Blaine's heart was pounding in his chest as he stared at the beautiful boy in front of him. There were so many thoughts rushing through his head, so many *feelings* – it was too much. He pushed them all away for now, promising himself that he'd deal with them later. Right now, Kurt was still looking at him with compassion and caring in his eyes, and that was all that mattered.

"You have a beautiful voice," Blaine whispered.

Kurt smiled. "Not as beautiful as yours."

"Don't be ridiculous, I could never compare."

Kurt blushed and turned back to face the screen, a smile on his face. They watched the rest of the movie in a comfortable silence, and when it was finished, Kurt gushed about how much he loved it.

"I don't usually like sequels," he said, "but I've always really loved this one." Blaine nodded in agreement.

"Do you want to look through the magazines now?" Kurt asked. "It's fine if you don't, it's just that I remember looking through them with you when I was a kid." He shrugged. "I guess I'm feeling kind of nostalgic today."

"I'd love to look through them with you," Blaine said with a smile. "Did I spot the Marion Cotillard cover? It's my favourite."

Kurt squeaked excitedly. "Oh my god! Mine, too! So you still read Vogue, then?"

"I like to read it sometimes. When I...have the time." *When I'm sober enough to make out the words.*

Kurt nodded and grabbed the magazine, opening it to read aloud. Blaine remembered all the times in the past he and Kurt had sat on the living room couch together, Kurt perched on Blaine's knee while Blaine read the magazine aloud to him. Even at the age of 5 Kurt had always critiqued every outfit he saw, letting Blaine know exactly how it could be improved. Blaine smiled fondly at the memory.

As Kurt continued to read, Blaine allowed himself to be soothed by the sound of Kurt's voice and the warmth of his body. For a moment, it was almost possible to forget about everything. The pain, the guilt, the fear – at that moment, it all faded into the background.

Blaine felt his eyelids beginning to droop, and for the first time in 6 years, he fell asleep with a smile on his face.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gifts

When Blaine awoke a couple of hours later, the first thing he noticed was how cold he was. Kurt was no longer curled up next to him, and at some point during his nap he had managed to kick his blankets off, leaving him shivering and drenched in cold sweat.

Blaine attempted to sit up, letting out a soft whimper when his muscles ached in protest. He grabbed a handful of the blankets by his feet and pulled them up his chin, curling himself up into a ball in an attempt to warm up and ease his trembling, which had definitely not improved.

Lying on his side, Blaine caught sight of a small handwritten note propped up on his bedside table. He squinted at neat, pretty handwriting.

Blaine,

I'm downstairs helping Carole with dinner. I didn't want to wake you.

I hope you're feeling better. Text me when you wake up – don't try to get out of bed!

Kurt

There was a cellphone number at the bottom of the page. The corner of Blaine's mouth twitched up in a small smile when he read the note, and he grabbed his phone from the bedside table.

Typing out the simple text took a ridiculously long time, as Blaine's fingers kept shaking and hitting the wrong buttons. He finally managed to type out a somewhat legible text, and barely 30 seconds after he sent it, there was a soft knock on the door.

"Come in," Blaine mumbled, and Kurt opened the door and entered the room, smiling gently at Blaine.

"Hey," Kurt said softly. "You feeling any better?"

Much better, now that you're here. "A little."

"That's good." Kurt paused for a moment. "I'm gonna go get Carole so she can give you a check-up, okay?"

Blaine nodded, wincing at the throbbing sensation behind his eyes. "Thanks."

A minute later, Kurt returned to the room with Carole in tow, a medical supply kit in her hand. As soon as she caught sight of Blaine, an expression of concern and pity flashed across her face. "Oh, honey," she said, perching herself on the edge of the bed. "You look miserable."

Despite himself, Blaine let out a soft chuckle. "I've been better."

Carole tenderly brushed the hair off Blaine's face. Blaine was once again shocked by how comforted he felt, having never experienced such care and affection from his own cold and distant mother.

"I'm gonna need you to sit up, okay?" Carole said, wrapping an arm under Blaine's back to help him. Blaine swung his legs off the side of the bed, shivering when the blankets fell off his body, exposing the skin of his arms to the cold air.

"Here, put this under your tongue, sweetie," Carole said, placing a thermometer in Blaine's mouth. "Keep your feet flat on the floor, I'm going to take your blood pressure in a few minutes."

Kurt and Carole made small talk for a couple of minutes until the thermometer in Blaine's mouth beeped. Carole took it out and glanced at it briefly. "You have a fever, but nothing too worrying at this point. I have some medication you can take that should help with the fever and the pain."

Carole reached into her medical kit and pulled out a blood pressure monitor. She rolled up Blaine's sleeve and wrapped the cuff around his upper arm.

"Can you tell me about the symptoms you've been experiencing?" Carole asked.

Blaine furrowed his brow, trying to recall all the awful things he'd been feeling since that morning. "Umm...I've had a constant throbbing headache. I had really bad nausea and vomiting this morning, but that seems to be a bit better now since I haven't eaten for a while. I've been shaking and sweating a lot, I guess due to the fever. All my muscles hurt and I feel kinda dizzy and confused, and really tired."

Carole nodded. "Those are all pretty standard symptoms of alcohol withdrawal, and you may experience some others before they start to wear off. Ideally, you should be in hospital, but I can't force you to go

there if you don't want to. We do need to be weary, however, of some of the most severe symptoms, such as hallucinations and seizures."

Blaine's eyes widened in fear. "Seizures?"

"It's only a possibility. I know it sounds scary, but I've had a lot of practice in dealing with alcohol and drug withdrawals, so try not to worry." Blaine swallowed nervously.

Carole turned to address Kurt. "In terms of the seizures, if you notice Blaine acting strange or disoriented at any point, get him to lie down and make sure he's away from any sharp objects that could hurt him. Then call for me immediately." Kurt nodded.

Carole turned back to Blaine. "I've managed to get the rest of the week off work, so I'll be here to help you if you need me." She glanced down at the blood pressure monitor. "Your blood pressure is a little high, but it's nothing too severe. I'll still need to monitor it closely over the next few days, of course."

She then took a stethoscope out of the bag and asked Blaine to lift up his shirt, before pressing the cold metal to his chest.

"Your heart rate is fine," she said after a couple of minutes, as she packed the stethoscope and the blood pressure monitor back into the medical kit. She took out a white pill bottle and handed a couple of the pills to Blaine, and he swallowed them with a sip from his water bottle.

"I'll have to repeat these tests daily until the symptoms start to wear off," Carole said. "I can't tell you for sure how long that will be, but with your history, I'd say the best-case scenario is a few more days." She patted Blaine's cheek affectionately. "Rest, and drink lots of fluids. If you can't eat, have some soda to keep your blood sugar up."

"Thanks, Carole. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome honey." She bent over to place a soft kiss on Blaine's forehead before leaving the room. As soon as she was gone, Kurt got up and helped Blaine to lie back on the bed again.

"I love your stepmom," Blaine said with a smile, which Kurt returned.

"Yeah," Kurt said, "she's really, really great. I couldn't have asked for a better stepmom, or a better partner for my dad."

"I can see why he likes her," Blaine continued, as Kurt gently tucked the blankets around his shoulders. "She's kind and loving, just like your mom."

Kurt paused and stared at Blaine for a moment, before exhaling shakily. His lower lip trembled.

"Hey," Blaine said, frowning slightly. "What's wrong?"

"Will you...will you tell me about her?" Kurt asked, his voice soft and sad. "I mean, I used to remember so much about her...but lately, I've just – I've had trouble recalling some things. I don't like asking my dad because talking about her always upsets him, but I thought you might remember better than I do, since you were older when she -"

"- Kurt," Blaine said, reaching out to cover Kurt's hand with his own, "Of course I'll tell you." He paused for a moment before patting the empty side of the bed next to him. Kurt clambered over him and immediately made himself comfortable on the bed. Blaine smiled, relaxing into the mattress as he began to recount his memories of Elizabeth Hummel.

He talked about the first day he met her, and the way she pulled him Blaine into a warm hug and kissed him on the cheek as if she'd known him for years. Blaine recounted every memory he could recall of the times that he, Kurt, Elizabeth and Burt had all spent time together, as a family. A few times, Kurt gasped and clutched at Blaine's arm excitedly when Blaine's descriptions triggered a sudden recollection of a forgotten moment.

Blaine paused for a moment in his story, a little nervous about the next memory that he wanted to share with Kurt.

Blaine took a deep breath. "I think I was about 17 when I first told your parents that I was gay."

Kurt inhaled sharply, the grip on Blaine's arm suddenly tightening. Blaine knew why he had suddenly tensed up – it was because this story was important to him. Elizabeth had died before he'd ever had the chance to share all of himself with her, and he wanted to know how she would feel about him if she knew about his sexuality.

Blaine smiled. "Your mom and dad both hugged me and told me that they already knew. They said that they knew about you, too. They told me that they would always love me, and that even though I wasn't related to them by blood, I would always be a part of their family."

Blaine looked down at Kurt, whose eyes were sparkling with unshed tears. "S-she knew that I was gay?" Kurt asked.

"Yes, she did. She always loved you more than anything, Kurt. She would be so proud of you. Don't ever doubt that for one second."

Kurt let out a sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh, and curled up into Blaine's side like he had the previous day. Blaine smiled in contentment.

"I think Carole and my mom would have liked each other," Kurt whispered.

Blaine yawned, his eyelids beginning to droop once again. "Yeah," he said. "I think so, too."

The next week was the longest week of Blaine's life.

The mornings were the hardest. Each morning, Blaine found himself in the bathroom with his head in the toilet bowl, throwing up everything that was in his stomach – even if it was just water.

His fever continued to rage, leaving him in a constant state of feeling either swelteringly hot or unbearably cold.

The cravings became worse and worse. Blaine had never felt so thirsty for a drop of alcohol in his life, and the worst part was, he knew that a drink would make all the pain go away.

The cravings were only exacerbated by Blaine's mood swings, which kicked in around the third day. Blaine had never felt less in control of his own body and mind, which left him in a state of constant anxiety. Several times, he found himself begging Kurt to get him some alcohol – just one glass, just one drop, *anything*. When Kurt refused with tear-filled eyes, Blaine found himself screaming at the boy in a sudden, uncontrollable surge of anger and frustration. After each of his outburst, Blaine was immediately filled with guilt and shame, apologising profusely for his behaviour while he sobbed into Kurt's shoulder.

Kurt stroked Blaine's hair gently and assured him that everything would be okay, and Blaine tried his very best to believe him.

Kurt, Carole and Burt were absolutely amazing throughout the week – especially Kurt. The boy barely left Blaine's side the entire time he was sick, and he was endlessly patient. He made sure that Blaine was as comfortable as possible given the circumstances, and adequately entertained despite the fact that he was confined to his bed. He made Blaine cups of lemon and ginger tea with honey, and dry toast on the rare occasions that Blaine felt like he could keep it down.

The fifth day was the worst of all.

Blaine spent the entire day writhing in bed, in excruciating pain. His fever was at his highest and he was burning up, his whole body drenched in sweat. His head was so sore he couldn't handle anything brighter than the tiny lamp in the corner of the room, and his vision was blurry and obscured by random flashes and shadows. His nausea had been replaced by intense stabbing pain in his stomach.

Kurt and Carole were by his side throughout the ordeal, and he occasionally felt the cool press of a damp towel on his forehead, or the sensation of fingers sweeping hair from his face.

At one point, everything went extremely fuzzy. He could hear Carole talking, but it sounded muffled, as though he had thick wads of cotton wool stuffed into his ears. Somebody asked him if he was okay, but he couldn't answer. Then, everything went black.

When he came to, he was lying on his back on the bed, his blankets bunched up around his feet. Kurt and Carole were looking down at him. Kurt's lower lip was trembling and he had tears streaking his face, although Carole seemed to be more relieved than anything.

"W-what happened?" Blaine croaked.

"You had a seizure, honey," Carole responded.

"Oh," Blaine said, turning to face Kurt. He flexed his fingers, and Kurt immediately slid his hand into Blaine's.

"I'm tired," Blaine said with a yawn.

"That's okay," Kurt whispered, "you can sleep now."

"Thanks, Kurt. Will you stay with me?"

"Of course."

Over the next 2 days, Blaine began to feel gradually better. His symptoms became less and less severe, and when he awoke on Saturday morning he lay in bed for a several minutes, trying to pinpoint what it was that felt so different – and then he realised. He wasn't in pain anymore.

Gingerly, as if one wrong move could set it off again, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and got to his feet. He sighed in relief when he found that the movement didn't make his stomach churn, and he made his way out of the room and down the stairs.

He could hear the sound of clinking pots and pans coming from the kitchen, and when Blaine entered, he saw Kurt standing in front of the stove, preparing what looked like French Toast. Blaine leaned against the doorframe and watched him for a moment, a soft smile on his face. He cleared his throat to announce his presence.

Kurt spun around. "Oh my god, Blaine!" He cried, quickly removing the pan from the hot stove, "what are you doing up? Are you okay?"

Blaine smiled. "I'm great. I feel good. Really good."

Kurt's face lit up. "Wow, that's – that's fantastic. I'm...gosh, I'm so glad that you're better. I'm so sorry that you had to go through all of that."

Blaine raised his eyebrows. "It's entirely my own fault that I had to go through all of that, Kurt. Why are you apologising? You were *amazing*." Kurt blushed.

"No, I'm serious!" Blaine continued, taking a step forward. "I don't know how I would have gone through that without you there to help me. It was too much to ask of anyone, Kurt, yet you did it anyway. You held my hair out of my face when I vomited, you wiped the gross sweat off my forehead, put up with my mood

swings and bitching and crying." He took another step towards the boy and reached out a hand, running it gently down Kurt's upper arm. "I can't thank you enough."

Kurt blushed even harder, and smiled bashfully. "I'm just glad that it's over," he said.

"You and me both." They laughed lightly, and Kurt glanced back towards the pan on the stove.

"Would you like some French toast? You look like you've lost weight."

Blaine nodded eagerly, suddenly aware of just how hungry he was after so many days of not being able to keep any food down. "I would *love* some French toast."

As Kurt piled pieces of French toast onto their plates, Blaine grabbed the maple syrup and bananas, and they headed to the dining room to eat. Blaine found himself practically inhaling the food, and he finished his whole plate plus half of Kurt's.

When they were finished, they retreated to the living room, where they found Burt and Carole seated on the couch watching the morning news.

"Wow, kid," Burt said, looking at Blaine as he entered, "you look like you're feeling better."

Blaine nodded. "I feel much better, all thanks to you guys."

"That's fantastic, honey," Carole said. She patted the seat next to her, and Blaine sat down, Kurt squeezing in next to him.

A flicker of light caught Blaine's eye, and he turned to see that the light from the window was reflecting off one of the baubles on the Christmas tree. The tree had been in the living room since Blaine had arrived at the Hummels' in earlier in the month, but he noticed that it now had a rather considerable pile of presents stacked under it.

With a sudden jolt of panic, he jumped to his feet. "Crap!"

The Hummels all turned to look at him in surprise as stared at the Christmas tree.

"You okay, Blaine?" Blaine asked, looking a little concerned.

"What date is it?"

Burt raised an eyebrow. "It's the 24th."

"But that would make it – that would mean -"

"It's Christmas Eve, yeah."

"CRAP!" Blaine exclaimed, running a hand through his hair. "I completely forgot."

"Well, you were a little pre-occupied, buddy, what with the writhing in agony and all -"

"No, no, you don't understand!" Blaine exclaimed, wringing his hands. "I haven't got you guys your presents yet!"

Carole laughed. "Sweetheart, you don't have to get us gifts, it's fine -"

"It's Christmas! Of course I have to get you guy's gifts!"

The Hummels were all staring at Blaine with varying degrees of amusement on their faces, and Blaine let out a cry of frustration. "I have to go. I have to organise the gifts," he said, heading for the stairs.

"Hang on, I'll help you," Kurt said, getting up to follow him.

"No, no, I -"

"Blaine, you're gonna need *some* ideas of what to get my parents."

Blaine paused for a moment. "Yeah, okay," he said, pausing for a moment to take deep breaths. *Fuck. There was so much to do.*

"Okay, so we can cross 'Armani suit' off the list," Kurt said with a sigh, crossing out yet another item of the list of gift ideas for his dad. "Honestly Blaine, I don't know why you're so opposed to getting him clothes. Clothes are practical, everybody wears clothes. And fashion is an art."

"Yeah, but Kurt, I don't think your dad would wear *any* of the things you just suggested," Blaine chuckled.
"You just want me to buy him something other than plaid shirts and jeans."

Kurt sighed. "The man is fashionably challenged, it's not my fault. Okay, wait, wait, I have an idea! Our dishwasher sucks. I end up having to do extra hand-washing after every cycle."

Blaine raised an eyebrow. "You want me to get your parents a *dishwasher*?"

Kurt paused for a moment. "No, you're right, that's not personal enough."

"Okay, do you have *any* more ideas? There's *nothing* else they need, or want?"

"They're parents, Blaine. They do parent-ish things, like the dishes. It's hard to think of creative gifts for parents."

Blaine paused for a moment. "Well..." he said, "maybe...we should give them a break from being parents for a bit."

Kurt narrowed his eyes. "I'm listening."

"When was the last time they took a trip, just the two of them?"

"They haven't. I mean, they were *supposed* to go on honeymoon, but they ended up having to pay my tuition when I went to Dalton for a little while. There was trouble at McKinley, it's a long story, but the point is, they haven't taken a trip."

"They never had a honeymoon?" Blaine asked excitedly.

Kurt's eyes widened. "No. No, Blaine, you can't pay for their *honeymoon*, that's too much, they'll never accept it!"

"Are you forgetting that I'm rich and famous?"

Kurt snorted. "Full of yourself, more like."

"I'm just stating the facts!"

"Uh huh, sure."

"So where would they want to go?"

"Well...okay, I guess if you're really going to do this...Carole likes tropical locations. Places where she can relax and be pampered and get massages. And dad...well, anywhere with an ocean. He likes to swim."

"Sounds do-able," Blaine said, grabbing his laptop from the bed next to him. After a quick search of a couple of travel websites, he let out a triumphant "A-HA!"

Kurt attempted to peek at his laptop screen. "What've you got?"

"That," Blaine said, bookmarking the page and closing the laptop, "is a surprise." Kurt rolled his eyes. "Fine, I guess I can wait 'till tomorrow."

"Okay, so now I have to figure out what to get Finn."

"Oh, Finn's easy," Kurt said, waving his hand dismissively. "Get him video-games, or food, or...porn, or something. He's easily pleased." Blaine laughed.

"Somehow, I don't think porn is the best option," he said, "but I'll think of something. Now, there's the most important present of all to consider."

Kurt smirked. "Oh, really?"

"Indeed. I heard that you're rather hard to impress."

"That is not true at all. I have all my favourite designers listed on my Facebook page."

"Yeah, but I want to do something more original. I'll think of something."

Kurt rolled his eyes. "Okay, but if you give up, remember the list."

They were interrupted by the sound of Kurt's ringtone. *"My mama told me when I was young, we are all born superstars..."*

Kurt pulled out his phone out of his pocket and glanced down at the screen. "It's Mercedes," he said. "I'm gonna take this. Good luck coming up with a fabulous gift for me by tomorrow morning!" He winked as left the room, closing the door behind him.

Blaine sat in silence for a few seconds, when suddenly, he had a stroke of inspiration. "Yes," he hissed as he lunged for his cellphone, which was sitting on the bedside table. *Blaine Anderson, sometimes you have the best ideas.*

A wide grin spread across his face as he scrolled through his contacts and hit the 'call' button. The phone rang four times before a familiar female voice answered.

"Blaine, darling! How are you? It's been far too long since we caught up."

Blaine laughed. "Tell me about it! Did you get my email before I left the city?"

"I did. I'm so proud of you for doing this. You deserve some good luck after all the shit you've had to deal with."

"Thank you. I'm feeling really optimistic, for the first time in a long time. Promise we'll hang out when I get back?"

"I can't wait. I still owe you about a million dollars worth of caramel lattes."

Blaine grinned. "Actually...I was kinda hoping you might do me a favour, if you can spare 10 minutes tomorrow at around 10am? Then we can totally call it even on all the lattes."

"I'm sure I can escape from family Christmas for 10 minutes for you, hun. Now what's this all about?"

"I'll send you an email explaining everything. Read it and let me know, yeah?"

"Of course."

"Thank you so, so much. You're the best."

"It's no problem at all, that's what friends are for. Merry Christmas, Blainers!"

Blaine laughed loudly, his heart bursting with happiness and excitement. "Merry Christmas, Gaga."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Christmas Pt.1

Kurt woke up on Christmas morning to the feeling of the air being unceremoniously knocked from his lungs by the weight of a gigantic, over-excited, pyjama-clad teenage boy who apparently thought that Kurt would appreciate being *jumped on* in his *bed* at 7am.

"Finn!" Kurt groaned, clutching at his stomach and gasping for air as Finn bounced happily on the mattress next to him, his signature goofy grin firmly in place.

"Dude, wake up, it's Christmas!" Finn said with a happy laugh, jostling Kurt's elbow in an effort to get him out of bed faster. Kurt shrugged his brother's hand off and glared at him as viciously as he could through unfocused, sleep-filled eyes.

"Kuuu-uuuurt," Finn whined, tugging on his brother's blankets, "get up, I want to have breakfast so then we can open presents!"

Despite his best efforts, Kurt found it difficult to remain angry at Finn, who really was quite lucky to have retained his child-like excitement over Christmas even after learning that Santa wasn't real. "You are five years old," Kurt mumbled, throwing his blankets off his body in the most dramatic way possible before clambering out of bed in an uncharacteristically awkward fashion.

"I'm gonna go wake Blaine up now," Finn declared, leaping off the bed and dashing towards the door. Kurt lunged forwards and grabbed Finn by the back of his pyjamas, stopping him in his tracks.

"I will wake up Blaine," Kurt said sternly. "I don't think he's used to your sort of wake-up call. Why don't you go help C with breakfast?"

Finn shrugged. "Okay," he said. His face lit up. "Maybe she'll let me lick the bowl when she's done making the waffle batter!"

As Finn tore from the room, Kurt smiled fondly, and then remembered that he was supposed to wake up Blaine and Finn would no doubt be back upstairs in 10 minutes to ensure that he had done so.

Kurt rushed into his ensuite bathroom and began fixing his hair. Although he usually preferred a fully-styled, elegant coif, after years of experimentation he had also learned the art of creating a 'just-woke-up' style that looked stylish and effortless and could be perfected in approximately 5.2 minutes with the right hairspray (which of course, he always had on hand).

After styling his hair, a quick smell-check revealed that he could put off his morning shower for a couple of hours. Kurt debated whether or not to change his clothes, but he knew that the rest of his family would all be in their pyjamas. He felt slightly self-conscious in the loose-fitting sweatpants and white undershirt that he usually wore to bed, but he also didn't want to look like he was trying too hard. After a quick once-over in the mirror, he determined that the undershirt did, admittedly, make his arms look quite good, and that sealed his decision.

After hastily dabbing on a little cream to lighten the circles under his eyes, Kurt made his way down to Blaine's room, a twist of nervousness in his stomach.

Kurt knew exactly why he was feeling so anxious. During his lifetime, Kurt had had to deal with losing two of the people that he loved with all his heart, and last year, when his dad had that heart attack – for a couple of very long days, while his dad was in a coma, Kurt had started to believe that he may have to live the rest of his life completely and utterly alone.

But then, Kurt's dad had woken up, and life had gotten back to how it was before. But Kurt remembered what it felt like when he thought that he had no-one he could count on, and he knew that he would never be able to forget that feeling. And then Blaine had come back.

The re-appearance of Blaine had tilted Kurt's world on its axis. It was so sudden and unexpected and glorious and horrible and it brought back so many feelings of love and betrayal and friendship and abandonment and family, and it hurt *so much* to not know what might happen next. When he was a child, Kurt would never have believed that Blaine – beautiful, perfect, wonderful Blaine – would ever abandon him. But he knew better now. Blaine was capable of breaking his heart, he'd done it before, and it had left Kurt damaged in a way that he hadn't been able to fully comprehend until very recently. He knew that he couldn't go through that again, so now he was faced with two choices. He could either keep up his defences and refuse to let Blaine in again – or, he could open his heart to the man, and run the risk of being completely and utterly crushed if Blaine decided that he wasn't enough.

The problem was, every time Blaine smiled or laughed or spoke to Kurt in his smooth, perfect voice, Kurt found it harder and harder to keep him at a distance. He wasn't sure how much longer to keep it up, and in case in his walls decided came crashing down around him – Kurt needed to do his best to make sure that Blaine stayed.

Despite all his doubts and insecurities, doubts, Kurt couldn't help but hope that maybe, if today was perfect – if Blaine could really see how much everyone in this family *loved* him...he just might choose to stay.

Kurt realised that he had been standing in front of the door to Blaine's room for several minutes. He took a deep breath, steeling himself before reaching out and gently easing open the door.

Kurt's eyes fell on Blaine's sleeping figure. His head of thick, tousled curls was poking up out of the blankets which were pulled tightly around his body. His long, curved lashes fanned out beautifully across his cheek, and his full lips were slightly parted, curled up in just the barest hint of a smile.

Kurt felt a swell of emotion in his chest and – *damn it* – a lump beginning to form in his throat.

It had been so long since he had had one of those moments – those moments where you see something that's just so beautiful you want to *cry*. Of course it would be Blaine that would make him feel that way. Of *course*.

Kurt hated the amount of power that Blaine had over him, just by existing. Being around Blaine constantly made him feel so alive, but so vulnerable. It was both exhilarating and exhausting, and Kurt didn't want to think about what that meant. Not right now, while things were still so fragile.

Letting out a long, shuddering breath, Kurt approached the bed, and reached out a hand to rouse Blaine. His hand lingered over Blaine's form for a moment. The desire to run his fingers through Blaine's curls was startling, but Kurt pushed the impulse away, instead settling his hand on Blaine's shoulder and shaking gently.

"Blaine," Kurt whispered. "Blaine, wake up."

Blaine let out a soft, adorable snort as he blinked his eyes open blearily. "Kurrrr...?" He mumbled, nuzzling the pillow under his face. "Wazzup?"

Kurt's heard skipped a beat in his chest.

"It's Christmas," Kurt said with a smile.

That information seemed to rouse Blaine pretty quickly, and he let out a happy snuffle as he rolled over onto his bed and grinned up at Kurt from under the blankets. "Merry Christmas," he said, an excited twinkle in his eyes.

"Merry Christmas, Blaine," he chuckled. "You better get up, Carole's made waffles and they smell delicious. You should get them while they're hot."

"I'm up!" Blaine exclaimed, immediately pushing the blankets off his body and struggling to his feet. Kurt smiled softly to himself as Blaine followed him out of the room and down the stairs.

Breakfast was delicious, as always.

Carole's waffles were the thing of legend, and she had laid out a rich spread of toppings including fruit, syrups, ice-cream, and bacon (at Finn's insistence).

Kurt could feel his stomach expanding as he polished off his fourth helping of waffles, his pyjama bottoms feeling a little snuggier than they had earlier. He wiped syrup from the corner of his mouth, and looked up to see Blaine staring at him from across the table, eyebrows raised.

Kurt raised his own eyebrow in response. "What?" He asked. "Do I still have syrup on my face?"

"No, no," Blaine said with a smile. "I'm just impressed. You managed to eat almost as much as Finn."

"Well, Christmas is the day for indulgence," Kurt responded, reaching across the table and plucking a raspberry from the bowl on the table, and popping it between his lips. Blaine stared for a moment before blushing and averting his gaze.

"Oh, by the way, Kurt," Burt said, "your aunt and grandmother called. Your aunt's on her way, and the weather's cleared up in California so your grandmother managed to get a flight. They'll both be here in time for a late lunch." Kurt perked up immediately. He got along amazingly well with both his aunt Kathy

(his dad's sister) and his grandmother Evelyn (his mom's mother). Kathy was definitely more laid-back and playful than his grandmother, but Evelyn was kind and elegant and her skin was practically wrinkle-free at age 75, and he aspired to one day be as fabulous a senior citizen as her.

"Oh my god, I'm so glad they're coming!" Kurt said, resisting the urge to jump up and down in his seat in excitement.

"I like Kathy," Finn said with a grin, and Kurt glared at him across the table.

"You're disgusting."

"What?" Finn asked, affronted. "I just said I like her!"

"You like her because she wears shorts and crop tops all year 'round and calls you 'hot stuff'. You do realise that she's a lesbian, right?"

"Yeah," Finn sighed wistfully. "She's still awesome though."

Kurt threw a blueberry at him.

Blaine and Carole watched the exchange with matching amused expressions. "Okay, Is everyone finished?" Burt asked. "I think it's time to open presents now."

"YES! PRESENTS!" Finn yelled, bolting out of his seat and into the living room.

As much as Kurt loved the emphasis on family at Christmas time, he'd be lying if he said that he didn't love the presents.

Not just receiving presents, either, although that was also pretty great – Kurt also loved giving presents. He loved shopping for people and picking out what they'd like, and seeing the happy look on their faces when they opened their gift.

And he was a pretty fantastic gift giver, if he did say so himself.

As the family settled in the living room to open their gifts, Kurt sat next to Blaine and leaned over into his space to whisper in his ear.

"Where are yours?" He asked, seeing only the familiar pile of gifts under the Christmas tree, no new ones in sight.

"They're, ummm...kind of hard to wrap," Blaine whispered. Kurt scrunched up his nose in confusion, his curiosity piqued by what Blaine could have gotten him that would be 'hard to wrap'.

Finn was quick to dive into the pile of Christmas presents, taking it upon himself to divide the packages up into individual piles and hand them out to their recipients.

"Alright," Burt said, addressing the entire family, "As always, the youngest person in the room gets to open the first present."

Finn grinned happily as he grabbed a large and heavy-looking parcel, before tearing into the wrapping paper enthusiastically.

The gift ended up being a mini-fridge for Finn's bedroom, from Carole. Finn let out an excited whoop, looking overly chuffed at the idea at the idea that he wouldn't have to walk all the way to the kitchen to get sodas anymore.

"I knew I'd end up regretting that one," Carole muttered, as Finn hugged her enthusiastically.

The present-opening soon continued, and Kurt was very pleased to see that everyone seemed to have put quite a lot of thought into the gifts this year – including Finn.

Finn also received a new fishing rod from Burt, as Burt and Finn had recently started going on fishing trips together. They got along really well, and Kurt had been a little jealous at first, but he'd changed his mind as soon as they first came home smelling like fish and dirt.

Kurt had gotten Finn a large pile of new X-box games, when he had chosen based on how violent they appeared (the more violent, the better). Finn seemed to be more than pleased with Kurt's selection if the enthusiastic bro-hug he received was any indication.

Kurt himself ended up receiving a year's subscription to Vogue from his father, and a large box of his favourite skin-care products from Carole. Kurt had been dropping hints about those gifts for the last month, and he was glad that his family had picked up on them.

Finn's gift, however, had made Kurt laugh out loud when he opened the lid of the box to reveal several ninja stars and a large dartboard.

"Are those...ninja stars?" Blaine asked, eyes wide as he peered into the box over Kurt's shoulder.

"Mhm," Kurt hummed, a slightly smug grin on his face. "I've been meaning to try these out for a while now. Thanks, Finn," he said, and Finn raised his hand for a fist-bump which Kurt obliged.

"But...why?" Blaine asked, still looking adorably confused.

"Dude, Kurt's a total ninja," Finn said, as if stating the obvious. "You should see him with his Sai swords. He could kick some serious ass."

Blaine's eyebrows shot up into his forehead. "Seriously?"

Kurt rolled his eyes. "Finn's exaggerating. I'm no Jackie Chan, but I can handle Sai Swords, yes. And I've been looking to expand on my 'ninja skills'. I'll give you a demonstration later, if you want?"

Blaine nodded his head enthusiastically, and Kurt blushed.

Kurt was a little nervous when it was his dad's turn to open presents. He had found his dad particularly difficult to shop for, mostly because he knew that his dad would love whatever he got him, as he was a big sentimental sap. You'd think this would make the whole ordeal easier, but Kurt liked having some boundaries to work with.

Deciding to appeal to his dad's sentimental side while still giving him something he could use, Kurt had decided to make his dad's gift from scratch. After rummaging through his closet he managed to find an old brown leather shoulder-bag that he no longer used. He cut up the bag to save the perfectly good leather and, using his sewing machine and creative skills, Kurt managed to put together a functional (and very fashionable, if he did say so himself) wallet, as his dad's old wallet was falling apart (and had a *Velcro strap*, for God's sake). As a final touch, Kurt embroidered his initials inside the wallet in gold thread, which he knew his dad would appreciate.

Predictably, his dad loved the wallet, and he examined it thoroughly, commenting on how talented Kurt was and how he would keep the wallet forever even when Kurt was a famous designer and it was worth thousands of dollars. Kurt accepted his dad's hug with a proud smile on his face, and he didn't even protest when his dad ruffled his hair, completely ruining his earlier efforts.

As well as the wallet, Burt also received a new watch from Finn (as his old one was caked in grease and always ran a few minutes slow), and season tickets to the Buckeyes from Carole. Burt and Finn high-fived when the tickets were revealed, already anticipating attending the games together.

Finding a gift for Carole had been comparatively easy. Kurt had found a pair of gorgeous red designer heels on *Roux La La* for a very reasonable price. He knew that they would match at least two of Carole's nicest dresses, and make her legs look fantastic. Carole squealed when she opened the shoebox and decided that she she wanted to wear the heels immediately, despite the fact that she was still in her pyjamas.

Much to Kurt's surprise, Finn got his mom a bottle of beautiful designer perfume that he had picked out all on his own. Carole hugged Finn and kissed him on the cheek, and he grinned proudly when Kurt gave him a nod of approval.

When it was time for Burt to give Carole her gift, Kurt expected him to present her with a jewellery box of some kind – but the actual box was much bigger. Carole looked surprised, obviously thinking along the same lines as Kurt. When she opened the box and peered inside, she let out a soft gasp before pulling out a gorgeous antique porcelain doll.

"*Burt*," she said, her voice filled with awe as she held the doll in front of her. "Where did you *find* this?"

Burt laughed sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "It wasn't easy," he mumbled. "Frank from work is friends with a guy whose wife collects them. She said that she bought this one for \$10 in a garage sale a couple of years ago, even though it's probably worth thousands. I showed her the picture and explained the situation, and she was very understanding, and sold her to me for a pretty decent price. "

"Wait, what am I missing here?" Kurt asked, gesturing from the doll to Carole.

"I had a doll just like this one when I was a little girl," Carole explained. "Her name was Lily. She'd been in the family for generations. My grandmother and I were very close, and on my 5th birthday, she gave me

the doll. Lily was one of my most prized possessions throughout my childhood, and she meant even more to me after my grandmother passed away. But when I was 18, our house was broken into, and a bunch of stuff was stolen, including Lily." She looked down at the doll that was resting in her arms. "I had a picture of her that I showed your father." She looked up at Burt with pure love and adoration in her eyes, which were shining with unshed tears. "This doll looks just like her."

"You know," Kurt said thoughtfully. "This doll might actually *be* Lily. I mean, she was stolen in Lima, right? And that's where you found her again. Besides, I've heard that it's rare to find two antique dolls like that that are exactly the same. I think that's probably Lily that you're holding right there."

Carole looked down at the doll with wide eyes, running her fingers over her hair gently before letting out a soft sniffle. Burt reached over to wipe a tear off Carole's cheek before tilting her head up for a soft kiss. Kurt smiled at the sight.

When Burt pulled back, Finn asked Carole if he could take a closer look at the doll. Finn, Blaine and Burt were soon sufficiently distracted and Carole took the opportunity to lean over and whisper in Kurt's ear.

"Just goes to show," Carole said, "sometimes the things you love come back to you, even when you think you've lost them forever." She glanced over at Blaine knowingly, and Kurt's heart lurched in his chest. He drew in a shuddering breath. "Yeah," he whispered, "but what if they get lost again?"

Carole smiled sadly. "You can't love something without running the risk of losing it. But if you live your life in fear, you will never know what could have been."

Kurt looked over at Blaine, watching the way his golden eyes widened as he examined the doll in his hands. He looked up and caught Kurt's eye, and grinned happily. Kurt blushed slightly, smiling shyly in return.

"Well, dad," Kurt said, tearing his gaze away from Blaine, "I'm impressed. Finding the doll that Carole lost as a child, just from an old picture? Ridiculously romantic."

"Hey, I can be romantic!" Burt insisted. "I used to bring your mom flowers *every day* after work."

Kurt's eyes widened. "You did? I can't believe I don't remember that."

"I remember," Blaine interjected, smiling at Kurt. "I always thought it was wonderful. My parents were never really the cute, romantic kind."

"Well, Burt's just a big old teddy bear inside, even though he likes to appear tough with his grease stains," Carole giggled.

"Hey, I'm tough!" Burt protested, puffing out his chest exaggeratedly.

Kurt glanced pointedly down at his dad's reindeer-covered pyjamas, and everybody burst into laughter while Burt glared.

"Hey, Kurt," Finn said, pointing at Burt, "*that's* where you got your bitch glare from."

"Hey!" Burt and Kurt protested in unison, and everyone broke into giggles once again.

"Yeah, yeah, let's just open the rest of the presents," Burt grumbled, smiling despite himself.

Blaine had yet to open any of his presents. The first one that he opened was from Finn, who had bought him a Gollum mask and 5 tickets to see The Hobbit in 3D. Blaine stared at the presents in surprise when he opened them.

"Dude, I know it's kind of weird," Finn said, "but I didn't know what to get you because you have loads of money. But then you said how much you wanted to see The Hobbit, and I know that you have stay hidden and not let the media know that you're in Lima, so I figured we could all go see it and you could wear the Gollum mask and nobody would be able to recognize you, they'll just think you're a really big fan."

"Oh my god, Finn, are you kidding me?!" Blaine said. "This is AWESOME!" He pulled the mask over his head, and proceeded to do a scarily accurate impersonation of Gollum's voice which made Kurt shudder and beg Blaine to take it off.

Next up was Burt and Carole's turn to give Blaine a present.

"Well, Blaine," Burt said, handing him a small box, "Carole and I had a hard time thinking of what to get you. Like Finn said, you pretty much have everything. But we hope that this will be something that will make you happy."

Blaine's eyes were wide and curious, and he carefully opened the box in his hands, pulling out a silver key. "A key...?" He asked, brow furrowing in confusion.

"To the house," Burt explained. "We wanted you to have it so you always know that this is your home. Don't ever feel like we don't want you here, because we always will."

Kurt noticed the way that Blaine's eyes started to glisten at Burt's words, and he felt his own throat beginning to tighten.

"Thank you," Blaine whispered, stepping forward to accept a hug from both Burt and Carole. "Thank you both so much. You don't know how much this means to me."

"You're very welcome, honey," Carole said, planting a kiss on Blaine's cheek.

"GROUP HUG!" Burt yelled, and Kurt and Finn both threw themselves at Blaine with more force than necessary, doing their best to squish him. Blaine let out a surprised squawk, and Kurt muffled his laughter in somebody's shoulder.

"Okay, okay, let the poor boy go," Carole said with a chuckle. "He still hasn't opened Kurt's gift."

Kurt found himself feeling anxious as everybody broke apart. Finding a good gift for Blaine had been to next to impossible. The guy could afford *everything*, and so once again, Kurt decided that maybe he ought to opt for the sentimental route and make something with his own two hands.

The only problem was, Blaine had professional, world-renowned fashion designers *lining up* to design clothes for his events, of which there were many. All his clothes were worth thousands of dollars, Kurt wouldn't be surprised if one pair of Blaine's underwear was worth more than Kurt's entire wardrobe. He was always meticulously dressed for public appearances, his outfits perfectly colour-coordinated and marketing Blaine as the suave, sexy young artist that the record label was trying to sell.

And, therein lay the secret. Because Kurt, and the rest of the Hummels, knew the truth about Blaine. They were the only ones clued in to his secret identity as a closet dork with an unshakable love of cheesy bowties.

And so, Kurt had got to designing the cheesiest bowties he could possibly come up with, while still making them sort of awesome in a completely Blaine kind of way. In the end he ended up with 5 bowties designed

specifically for Blaine. The first was red and green and patterned with Christmas trees, for the occasion. The second was red and yellow and covered in little lightning bolts, because Kurt remembered how much Blaine loved Harry Potter. The third was pink, and covered in tiny little candy canes and ice-creams and pieces of cake, because Kurt knew all about Blaine's sweet tooth. The fourth was mint green and covered in little replicas of the Lima Bean coffee cup, because Kurt remembered how much Blaine loved coffee and how he would always show up after school with a Lima Bean cup in hand.

The final bowtie was the one Kurt was most nervous about, and he wasn't even sure that Blaine would understand the reference. When Kurt was 6 years old, he came home from his first day of school crying because a couple of boys had thrown mud on his favourite Disney princess scarf and called him a girl. Burt had comforted him, letting him know that there was nothing wrong with his scarf and that those boys were just being mean. After Kurt stopped crying, Burt went into the kitchen to make him a cup of warm milk, and Blaine, who had come over to play, came and sat next to Kurt. Kurt remembered the way Blaine had tilted his chin up and wiped away the last of his tears from his face, before pulling him into his lap for a cuddle and whispering the word 'courage' into his ear.

That word had stuck with Kurt for his whole life. The very next day at school, the boys had tried to pick on him again for his sparkly shoes, and Kurt had put on his best glare and yelled that there was nothing wrong with his shoes, and that they were mean, stupid boys with bad haircuts. The girls nearby had laughed at the mean boys who then left in an embarrassed huff, and not only did the boys never pick on Kurt again, but the girls, Mercedes and Rachel, asked him to play with them – which was the beginning of two very long friendships.

When Kurt's mom got sick, he remembered that word – 'courage'. When she died, and he missed her like crazy, he remembered that word. When Blaine himself left, Kurt still remembered that word, and clung to it like a lifeline. It got him through the more persistent brand of bullies that he encountered in high school, and it got him through his dad's heart attack.

Which is why the final bowtie was a plain, crisp white, with the word *courage* embroidered in burgundy thread in the corner. Kurt knew what sort of struggles Blaine was likely to face in the future and he hoped that he could also be helped by the very advice that he gave Kurt all those years ago.

When Blaine opened the perfectly wrapped box of bowties, his face lit up. "Kurt," he whispered, drawing out the *r* sound, conveying so much in that one word. "Kurt, these are amazing. They're perfect. Thank you so much."

When he reached the last bowtie, he stared at it for a long moment before looking up and meeting Kurt's eye. He gave a barely perceptible nod, letting Kurt know that he understood. Kurt opened his arms to offer a hug, which Blaine returned with great enthusiasm, squeezing Kurt tightly until Burt interrupted with "Geez kid, you must really love bowties."

Once all the gifts under the Christmas tree had been opened, Blaine cleared his throat. "I have some gifts for you guys, too," he said, "but they aren't wrapped."

"Oh, you didn't have to, Blaine," Carole said. "It know this was all very short-notice for you."

"No, no, I wanted to," Blaine said. "I mean, I *really* wanted to. You guys have just done so much for me, and I could never repay you for your kindness. But I just...hope that this might be a start."

Blaine paused for a moment. "Umm...I left some stuff in my room, I'll be right back."

Blaine left the room in a hurry, and Kurt smiled at the sight of Finn practically vibrating with excitement. He could tell that Burt and Carole were excited too, although they seemed to be trying to hide it. Kurt couldn't wait to see their reactions when they found out about the honeymoon.

"Your present should be here any minute now, Finn," Blaine said, and Finn cocked his head in confusion. As soon as the words were out of Blaine's mouth, his cellphone rang, and he pulled it out of his pocket and answered it.

"Hello...yes, this is him...oh, that's great, thanks! Yeah, just leave it there. The payment's all taken care of, right? Awesome, thank you very much. Okay. Bye!"

Blaine hung up and reached into the small cloth bag, pulling out a set of keys and holding them out.

Finn stared at the keys in Blaine's hand for a moment before reaching out and tentatively plucking them from his fingers. "Blaine..." he said, staring with wide eyes at the keys, "Are these...?"

Blaine grinned. "You should take a look outside."

Finn's eyes widened and he immediately turned on his heel and sprinted from the room. Kurt heard the front door open, followed by a shrill squeal that he didn't think Finn was actually capable of producing. He made a mental note to tease him about it later.

At the sound of Finn's excited cry, Burt dashed out of the room behind him, and Kurt quickly followed him, eager to see Finn's new car - which is obviously what the gift was. Kurt had worked at Hummel Tires & Lube in the summer for several years, and he had recognised the Mercedes-Benz logo on the keys as soon as he saw them. Kurt heard Blaine and Carole following behind as he burst out of the front door, letting out a gasp of excitement when he saw the shining, steel-grey SUV that was parked in the driveway.

"This is amazing!" Finn shouted from where he was standing near the car. He had a hand reaching out delicately over the door, but not touching; as if he was afraid that he might break it. "Oh my god, Blaine, this is the coolest car...truck...thing, ever. What is it exactly?"

Blaine grinned happily as he observed Finn's enthusiasm. "Well," he said, "I don't really know anything about cars, but I saw a picture of this one in a magazine and I thought it looked like something you might drive...? So, I scanned the picture and sent it to my friend Sebastian, who organized everything. It's an SUV, I think."

"It's a Mercedes Benz," Kurt interjected. "A G550, to be exact. It's worth about \$120,000, Finn." Kurt knew, of course, because he had seen pictures of it in magazines himself. It was usually being driven by celebrities, and he was maybe a little – okay, a lot – jealous right now. He'd definitely be asking Finn if he could drive it at some point in the near future.

Kurt took a step back in shock as Finn suddenly bounded past him, pouncing onto Blaine and pulling him into a tight hug. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Finn exclaimed, jumping up and down, sounding like a twelve-year-old girl whose daddy had just bought her a pony. Kurt snorted, and Finn released a surprised Blaine, running back to the SUV and this time actually opening the door and jumping into the driver's seat.

"Do we need to drive anywhere?" Finn called. "Mom, do we need any more milk? I can go to the store! Or, Kurt, do you wanna go to the mall? I'll drive you to the mall! I'll -"

"Finn, relax!" Carole called out. "It's *your* car now, you'll have plenty of chances to drive it. Come back inside."

Finn reluctantly clambered out of his new car, sidling up to Blaine and throwing his arm over his shoulders, and Kurt followed them as they headed back inside.

"I seriously can't believe that you spent 120 grand on me, man," Finn said seriously. "That's like...a lot of money. You've known me for less a month, dude."

Blaine shrugged. "I'm rich, remember?" he said nonchalantly, and Finn burst out laughing.

"I like having a rich brother."

Kurt's head snapped up to stare at Blaine at the same time as Blaine's head snapped up to stare at Finn. Kurt saw Blaine's Addams apple bob as he swallowed, his eyes wide. Finn seemed completely oblivious to the fact that he had just inadvertently adopted Blaine.

"Boys!" Burt called out from the living room, poking his head out into the hall, "hurry up. The sooner we're done here, the sooner we can go for a drive in Finn's new car."

As they entered the living room, Kurt noticed Blaine glance up at the clock above the fireplace, which read 9:40am.

"Okay," Blaine said, pulling out an envelope from his bag and turning to Burt and Carole. "This is for you two," he said. "You guys deserve it more than anybody I can think of. I really hope that you like it."

He handed the envelope to Carole, and Burt peered over her shoulder as she carefully opened it and pulled out the piece of paper inside. Her eyes scanned over it quickly before she gasped, a hand flying to cover her mouth, her eyes wide in surprise.

"*Blaine,*" Carole gasped, "this is a receipt for tickets for a 2-week *Caribbean cruise.*"

Blaine nodded, smiling nervously. "Do you...like it?"

"Of course we like it, you idiot!" Burt bellowed, stepping forward and pulling Blaine into an enthusiastic hug.

"B-but it's so much," Carole stammered, looking conflicted. "How can we possibly accept this?"

Burt let out a long, pathetic whine as he released Blaine from the hug and turned to Carole, pouting like a child.

Carole regarded Burt for a moment, and Kurt could see her resolve crumble. "Oh, alright," she conceded, rolling her eyes and fixing Burt with a playful glare. "But that's the last time I'm falling for your dirty tricks, Burt Hummel."

Burt let out a whoop of joy before grabbing Carole and pulling her into a tight embrace. "I love you!"

Kurt stole a glance at Blaine, and was shocked by the expression on his face. He looked even happier than Burt and Carole at that moment, as he took in their excitement. It was as though he couldn't even believe that he could bring someone so much happiness.

Kurt was determined to show Blaine that he didn't need money in order to do that. Just being there was enough.

Kurt's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Finn squawking in excitement.

"Hey, mom! Burt!" Finn said, "I just realised...if you're gonna be on a ship in the Caribbean, will that make you guys pirates of the Caribbean?"

Burt went still, his eyes widening as he took in Finn's words. His face split into a grin as he began to sing. "Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me!"

"Hmmm," Carole said with an amused smile, "as much as I enjoy a good pirate ballad, I think pirates have to be thieves, honey."

Burt turned to Carole with a serious expression on his face. "So I'll steal a towel from our room, and then I'll officially be a pirate of the Caribbean."

Carole giggled. "Okay, sweetie."

"Captain Burt Hummel."

"Aye aye, Captain."

"Now, where's me booty?" Burt reached around Carole in an effort to grab her butt, but she squealed and ducked out of the way just as Kurt and Finn let out matching groans of protest, and Blaine buried his face in his hands.

Suddenly, they were interrupted by the sound of Blaine's phone buzzing loudly in his pocket. Blaine grabbed the phone and glanced quickly at the screen. His hands were shaking slightly as he typed out a reply.

"Blaine?" Kurt asked, concerned. "Is everything okay?"

Blaine smiled nervously at him. "Yeah...yes," he said, fumbling as he pushed the phone back into his pocket. "Everything's fine. Umm...it's time for me to give you your present now, if that's okay with you?"

"Oh," Kurt said, smiling eagerly. "Yes, of course."

"Okay," Blaine said, grabbing his laptop from a nearby coffee table and sitting on the couch. "You might want to come and sit next to me."

Kurt raised his eyebrows, taking a seat next to Blaine as he opened the laptop and signed into Skype. Kurt's confusion was growing by the second, and it just made him all the more eager to find out what Blaine had planned for him.

A ringing sounded from Blaine's computer, and Kurt saw that he had a Skype call from 'GG'. Whoever 'GG' was, they clearly had fantastic taste in shoes, as their icon displayed a truly incredible pair of diamond-studded, spiked pumps with some of the highest heels he'd ever seen. Blaine picked up the laptop and placed it in Kurt's lap. Kurt glanced at him in confusion.

"Blaine, what...?"

"Answer the call."

"Wait, what? Why?"

"It's a surprise."

"Blaine, I don't want to video-chat with a random person, I'm in my pyjamas -"

"Trust me, Kurt. You want to answer this call."

"But -"

"KURT!"

"Alright, alright, don't get your panties in a twist," Kurt snapped, shooting Blaine an irritated glare. "I'll answer it."

He hit the 'answer' button, and 2 seconds later, released an ear-splitting screech.

CHAPTER NINE

Christmas Pt.2

Oh my god.

Oh my god, oh my god, holy grilled cheesus that is Lady Gaga.

Kurt could barely hear anything over the sound of his own pounding heartbeat as he stared at the computer screen, where *Lady Gaga* sat. Her long, blonde hair fell perfectly onto her shoulders, and she was wearing a plain t-shirt but her make-up was *perfect* and she was laughing and waving and *holy hell what was happening?!*

"Oh my god," Kurt croaked, his voice hoarse from the loud shriek he had emitted a few seconds earlier. "Am I...what...I don't understand, I -"

"Take a deep breath, sweetie," Lady Gaga said with a chuckle. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Kurt opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water, turning his gaze to Blaine, who was smirking back at him, eyes twinkling mischievously. Things slowly began to click into place in Kurt's head.

"You...?" He asked, gesturing wildly between Blaine and the computer screen.

"Blaine and I are old friends," Lady Gaga explained. "He asked me for a favour, and I was more than willing to meet the famous Kurt that I've heard so much about."

Kurt made some sort of strangled choking sound.

"Oh, right, I almost forgot," Lady Gaga said with a happy smile, "Merry Christmas, Kurt."

And suddenly it was like a wall broke down in Kurt's brain, and words were pouring out of his mouth and he couldn't seem to *stop them*. "Oh my god, oh my god, it is such an honour to meet you, your highness – I mean, your excellency – I mean - "

Kurt was interrupted by the sound of Lady Gaga's delighted laugh, and he could feel his face burning from embarrassment. "Call me Gaga, sweetie," she said, and Kurt nodded his head frantically.

"Of – of course, yes, Gaga. I mean, I don't know why I said that, it's just that you're so...so..." Kurt made a wild flail motion with his hands. "You're so amazing, I *worship* you. Not in a creepy way though! There are no altars in my room or anything, I just think you're *incredible*, you're so innovative and unique and inspiring and I look up to you so much, and your outfits are gloriously outrageous and I just...I love you."

Kurt had forgotten to breathe throughout his entire spiel, and he panted for breath, his heart racing and face flushed as if he had run a marathon. He sort of wished that he could sink into the ground and disappear forever because he had just made a total fool of himself in front of his Idol.

Much to Kurt's surprise, however, Gaga was smiling happily at him, not looking the least bit perturbed. "You're so kind, thank you so much," she said, and Kurt could tell that she was genuinely grateful for his somewhat stalker-ish compliments, even though she must have heard the same thing from thousands of other fans. He felt his embarrassment beginning to ebb.

"You know, Kurt, you remind me a lot of myself when I was in high school."

Kurt's eyes nearly popped out of his head, and Gaga chuckled.

"It's true! And I'm not saying that to put myself up on a pedestal. But it's important to remember that nobody is born in the spotlight - you have to work for it. Blaine showed me some of your performances in your school's Glee club, and I saw immediately that you are very talented on that stage. But even if performing isn't what you want to do for the rest of your life, when I was watching you perform, I could see the way that you exuded confidence, strength and charisma. And call it a hunch, or an intuition, but I just know that you're going to be incredible at whatever you choose to do, because you have that sort of raw ambition and drive that fuels itself. That's what got me to where I am today. You've got to be unique, and different, and shine in your own way – and I don't think that you will *ever* have a problem with shining, Kurt."

Kurt sat in stunned silence, his whole body trembling. He willed himself not to start crying. "Thank you," he whispered, swallowing around the lump in his throat. "That's – I mean, I – wow. Thank you."

"You know, I kind of feel like Blaine tricked me," Gaga said.

"What?" Kurt asked, a little thrown by the abrupt turn in conversation.

"Blaine asked me to Skype with you on Christmas," Gaga explained, "but I think he knew all along that this would happen."

Kurt was completely lost. "...That what would happen?"

"That I'd fall a little bit in love with you and demand that you come and see me in New York."

Kurt very nearly fell off the couch, letting out a rather undignified squawk as he grappled with the laptop before it toppled off his lap.

Gaga just grinned at him through the screen. "How about I send you a couple of tickets to my show at Madison Square Garden next month? With backstage VIP passes, of course."

There was a long pause before Kurt felt capable of speaking again. "Really?" He asked, his voice soft and trembling.

Gaga smiled affectionately. "Yes, really. I'd love to meet you, Kurt."

"That would be so, so amazing," Kurt said breathlessly. "Thank you so, so much."

"And I hope you like coffee," Gaga added, "because you, Blaine and I are going out for lattes afterwards."

Kurt had a coffee date with Lady Gaga. Was this a dream? Had someone slipped drugs into his food?

"I'm...I would be honoured," Kurt said. "I...thank you. This is the greatest gift that anyone's ever given me."

"Well, I think you should thank Blaine for that," Gaga said with a wink.

Gaga turned around as a woman shouted to her from another room in Italian. She shouted something back, before turning back to the computer with a smile.

"I think I better get back to my family," she chuckled. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Kurt. I'll see you soon?"

"Yes, yeah, I'll...I'll see you soon."

"Bye, sweetie."

"Bye, Gaga."

The call ended, and Kurt burst into hysterical tears.

As soon as Kurt started crying, Blaine dropped to his knees in front of him and gently took the computer from Kurt's lap, closing it and putting it aside. Kurt looked into Blaine's large hazel eyes, filled with concern, and blurred by the tears clouding Kurt's vision.

"Kurt? Are you okay?" Blaine asked, and Kurt let out a small sob before launching himself off the couch and effectively ending up in Blaine's lap on the floor. He threw his arms around Blaine's shoulders and sobbed into his shoulder, and he felt Blaine tense beneath him for a moment before wrapping his arms around Kurt and hugging him in return.

"You – you - " Kurt sobbed, having difficulty producing words, not quite sure what he was trying to say anyway.

"Shhh," Blaine whispered soothingly in his ear.

"I can't believe..." Kurt choked.

"What?"

"*Lady Gaga.*"

"Yeah."

"I love her."

"I know. You *worship* her, apparently."

"*Blaine.*"

Kurt pulled back to see that Blaine was smiling, *smirking* almost, and Kurt glared at him through his tears. Blaine bit his lip, obviously trying to hold back his laughter.

"Stop it," Kurt said, pouting. "It's not funny."

"It is," Blaine said, a small giggle escaping his lips.

"Don't laugh at me!"

Blaine's shoulder's shook with silent laughter. Kurt glanced around the room to see the rest of his family looking back at him with matching expressions of amusement. Kurt attempted to disentangle himself from Blaine, but *he wouldn't let go*.

"Blaine! Let go of me!"

"Yes, your highness. I mean, *your excellency*," Blaine said, letting go of Kurt just in time for the whole room to dissolve into fits on laughter while Kurt let out a cry of indignation.

Kurt brought his hand up to cover Blaine's mouth in an attempt to stop his laughter, only to pull it back a second later with a squawk when Blaine, who was apparently five years old, *licked him*.

"Did you just lick me?" Kurt asked, scandalised and slightly disgusted. Blaine just laughed harder.

Blaine laughed so hard that his face started to turn slightly purple and, okay, he looked kind of funny with a purple face. Purple was definitely not his colour. Kurt bit his lip to stop himself from smiling, but he failed.

Blaine pointed at Kurt in triumph when he saw his grin. "Aha!" He exclaimed.

"Shut up," Kurt said, grinning widely at this point. "I'm laughing *at* you, not with you. Your face is purple."

"Admit it, you love me."

Kurt bit his lip. *Yeah, I do.*

Blaine seemed to notice the change in expression on Kurt's face because he stopped laughing, wiping tears from his cheeks and shuffling slightly closer to Kurt.

"In all seriousness, Blaine," Kurt said, "*thank you*. That was...so amazing, and thoughtful, and *amazing*, and sweet, and...thank you."

Blaine smiled and held open his arms, inviting Kurt for another hug, which he accepted without hesitation.

"You're welcome," Blaine whispered.

Over the next few hours, the family managed to pick up all the wrapping paper from the living room floor, do the dishes, set the table for lunch, and change out of their pyjamas into more appropriate afternoon attire. Kurt dug into the back of his wardrobe and pulled out an oversized, colourful woollen Christmas sweater that was decorated with reindeer and snowflakes and holly. It was a very Rachel Berry-esque item, and not the sort of thing that Kurt would usually wear, but his granny Anne (Burt's mother) had knitted it for Burt when he was a teenager. Granny Anne had passed away when Kurt was quite young, and Kurt had fished the sweater out of the back of his dad's closet when he got a bit too plump to fit into it anymore. He liked the nostalgia behind it, and he had to admit that it had a certain....festive charm. Plus, it was the warmest and most comfortable thing he owned, so there was that.

Kurt paired the sweater with a pair of skin-tight white jeans, and as soon as he managed to get the button done up, he heard the doorbell ring.

Kurt realised how childish it was, but he figured he was already wearing a reindeer sweater – he didn't have much dignity left at this point. He bolted out of his room and down the stairs, cutting his dad off at the bottom in an effort to be the first one to answer the door.

He flung the door open to reveal his grandmother and aunt, smiles on their faces and arms laden with gifts, their suitcases at their feet. His grandmother looked as radiant as ever, and at least 25 years younger than her true age. Kathy was, as always, dressed in tiny denim shorts and a red crop-top, despite the fact that it was practically freezing outside. Her long brown hair was swept up into a loose ponytail, and her lips were not even slightly purple. Kurt was slightly convinced that the woman must be cold-blooded.

"Kurt!" Evelyn exclaimed, "My dear boy, despite that rather horrendous sweater, you look about 10 times more handsome than I remember. You've been taking those vitamins I sent you, haven't you?"

Kurt laughed. "Of course, gran. I can only hope that I'll always retain my youth as well as you have."

"That's not the vitamins, dear, that's just my natural pizazz," his grandmother said, leaning in to kiss Kurt on the cheek. "Katherine, doesn't Kurt look handsome?"

"Handsome? More like totally bangable," Kathy said with a wink, reaching out to tweak Kurt on the chin. "Let me tell ya, kiddo, you didn't just get hit with the puberty stick – you got beat up with the puberty stick. The puberty stick made you its *bitch*."

Kurt laughed and rolled his eyes. "Thanks, Kath," he said.

"Kathy? Are you harassing my son again?" Burt's voice bellowed from inside the house.

"Brother of mine!" Kathy yelled, pushing past Kurt to get inside. "Where are you? Come here, let me love you!"

"Kurt, dear, would you mind giving me a hand with some of these bags?" Evelyn asked. "I must find Carole and thank her for inviting me." Kurt quickly jumped in to retrieve the suitcases as her feet. He carried them hastily up to his room where they would be out of the way, and he was descending the stairs when he heard an ear-splitting shriek coming from the kitchen.

Kurt's heart leapt into his throat and he bounded down the remaining stairs, sprinting into the kitchen. Kathy was standing there, staring at Blaine, who was looking back at her with wide eyes as he stirred a pot on the stove.

"You!" Kathy cried out, pointing at Blaine, her tone *vicious*. "You're *back?!'*"

"I – uh - " Blaine stammered, dropping the spoon into the pot and stepping away from the stove. "Surprise?" He said meekly.

Kurt looked at Kathy and winced when he saw her eyes narrow into a dangerous glare. "Surprise?" She hissed. "*Surprise?* You fucking brat! You little shit!" She stormed over to Blaine and Kurt saw him *cower* in

terror. Kurt stepped forward to intervene just as Kathy reached Blaine and grabbed him by the front of his shirt, pulling him forward into a hug.

Blaine stilled in shock for a moment, before he seemed to realise that he wasn't being decapitated, and relaxed into the embrace. "It's good to see you again, Kathy," he mumbled, and Kathy let out a somewhat hysterical laugh as she pulled away.

"It's way too fucking good to see your stupid, charming, attractive face, Blaine Anderson," she said, clapping him on the shoulder. "God. I'm so mad at you. But I'm so happy that you're back. I'm so conflicted."

"Well, I'm not conflicted," Evelyn said, stepping forward. "Merry Christmas, darling boy," she said, leaning in to kiss Blaine on the cheek. "When did we last see each other? Was it Christmas of '04?"

"'03," Blaine answered, looking guilty.

"Ahh yes," Evelyn said with a nod. "Good year. You're still as cute and short as you were back then."

Blaine beamed. "And you're just as radiant as ever, ma'am."

"Oh, none of that 'ma'am' nonsense," Evelyn said with a disapproving frown. "You don't have to be a stranger just because we haven't seen each other for a while. You can either call me Evelyn, or you can start calling me 'grandmother'. I will also accept 'gran' or possibly 'nan', although I would like to point out that I am far too young to *really* be your grandmother."

Blaine chuckled. "Of course, Evelyn."

There was a moment of silence before the room was suddenly filled with the sound of Kathy's stomach rumbling loudly. There was a collective laugh, and Carole quickly ushered everybody into the kitchen for lunch.

Over an hour later, and Kurt's stomach was once again full-to-bursting, and he felt lazy and contented as he leaned back in his chair, picking at the remnants of his Christmas cake.

In the past, Christmas lunch had usually involved a lot of champagne and a very tipsy Kathy, and it was the one day of the year when Burt would let Kurt drink with the adults. This year, for obvious reasons, they had forgone the champagne in favour of sparkling grape juice. However, Kurt still felt pleasantly buzzed, and Kathy and Carole were still giggling as loudly as ever. Kurt figured that it must be the presence of family that caused such an effect, rather than the alcohol.

"So, how long are you two staying in town?" Burt asked Evelyn and Kathy.

"Well, I'm currently staying at the Hilton," Evelyn said. "It's very comfortable. I packed enough for a week. I thought I might stay until New Years."

"I'm shtayin' 'till noo yearsh, too," Kathy said through a mouthful of cake.

Burt cocked an eyebrow at his younger sister. "And I'm guessing you're crashing on our couch, right sis?"

"Yup," Kathy said, obnoxiously popping the 'p' on the end of the word.

Kurt beamed. He was going to start off the new year with all the people who he loved most in the world. He had a feeling that 2013 was going to be a great year.

Later that evening, the whole family found themselves sitting in the living room watching *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, Kurt's favourite Christmas movie. They all had mugs of Kurt's signature peppermint hot chocolate in their hands, and the fire was lit, and Burt had pulled the softest blankets out of the back of the cupboard, and Kurt could feel Blaine's thigh pressed against his on the couch, and it was so warm and cosy and homey that Kurt was kind of overwhelmed by it all.

The family had spent the afternoon laughing and exchanging stories. Blaine had fit right back into the family like a missing puzzle piece, and it was wonderful. Kathy and Evelyn had given everybody gifts, and they were all very nice (Kurt had procured a gorgeous white faux-fur coat from Evelyn, and a black bondage shirt and leather jacket from Kathy. His fashion sense was nothing if not diverse). However, once Evelyn and Kathy had found out about Blaine's extravagant gifts, they had complained that theirs could never match up (and Kathy complained that she didn't receive a gift of her own. Blaine promised to dedicate a song to her at his next concert, which she was more than happy with). Finn had then driven Kurt, Blaine, Kathy and Evelyn around the block in his new SUV. When Kathy heard about Kurt's Skype call

with Lady Gaga, and the backstage tickets, she had positively seethed with jealousy, although Kurt could tell from the twinkle in her eyes that she was happy for him.

When the movie finished, Evelyn reluctantly bid everybody farewell before heading back to her hotel. Kurt suddenly realised how *tired* he was. Eating his weight in high-calorie foods and feeling about a million emotions in one day really took its toll on a person.

After offering to do the last of the dishes, Kurt decided to retire early. He retreated to his bedroom to begin his lengthy night-time skincare regimen, but as soon as he sat down in front of his vanity, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in!" He called, and Blaine entered the room, once again clad in his pyjamas (*adorable*). It was obvious that he'd just showered, if the mess of damp curls on his head was any indication (*so, so adorable*).

"Hey," Blaine said, shutting the bedroom door behind him. "I don't mean to bother you, I can come back later if you're busy..."

"No, don't be silly, it's fine," Kurt said with a smile. "You can visit me in my room whenever you want." Kurt blushed once he realised how that sounded.

"I – I mean, that is to say," he stammered, "I don't mind...having company. And umm...yeah, but you should knock first of course, in case I'm changing or something, but you should feel free to - visit." Kurt was pretty sure that his face was bright red at this point, but when he looked up at Blaine, the boy was just smiling at him with fondness and amusement.

"I might take you up on that offer," he said, and Kurt breathed a sigh of relief, trying to ignore the fluttering in his stomach.

"So..." Kurt squeaked, looking for his bottle of moisturizer, "what can I help you with?"

"Umm..." Blaine said, awkwardly perching himself on the edge of Kurt's bed, "I guess I just wanted to check and make sure that you were honestly happy about your...present. I know I kind of just sprung that on you, which in hindsight may not have been the best idea. It must have come as a shock to you."

Kurt looked up at Blaine with his eyebrows raised. "Seriously, Blaine?" He said, incredulous. "You honestly think I could be anything other than *ecstatic* about meeting the woman who has inspired me in so many

ways? I *loved* it. I mean, don't get me wrong, I wouldn't have minded a little hint so I could fix my hair and put on a shirt, but really – it was perfect. *Perfect*. I really don't have the words...it was just so..."

"-Perfect?" Blaine interjected, a cheeky twinkle in his eye.

"Yeah," Kurt said, his mouth quirking up into a smile.

"I'm really, really glad that you liked it," Blaine said. "It was really important to me, that you...knew how grateful I am that you let me back into your life. And I think I also just wanted to prove to you – and myself – that I can still make you happy."

Kurt's heart *ached*.

"Anyway, thank you, Kurt. So much. For giving me that opportunity – and for the bowties," Blaine added with a grin. "They're awesome. I didn't know that I needed a Harry Potter bowtie until now."

Kurt laughed. "You're welcome. And if you ever need any more custom-made bowties, I'd be more than willing to design for the famous Blaine Anderson," he said with a wink. "I hear he's somewhat of a fashion icon."

"Really? I heard he's secretly a bit of a dork," Blaine said, frowning down at the floor. "And a sell-out. He's a total mess, really, and a terrible role model. Your bowties deserve better."

Kurt frowned. "You know what I think?" He said. Blaine shrugged.

"I think he's an amazing, kind, extraordinarily talented guy who got dealt a really terrible hand. And he let it get to him, and he made some mistakes. But everybody makes mistakes. There's not a single person on this earth who manages to go through their whole life without hurting themselves, or someone else." Kurt bit his lip, a lump beginning to form in his throat. "But I know that he has a family who loves him, who will give him all the love and support he needs. I know that he has millions of adoring fans whose lives he has touched, and some whose lives he has saved. I know that he's one of the bravest people I've ever known, and that I will always want him in my life. And I know that he makes me happy in a way that no-one else can."

Kurt noticed Blaine's eyes shining with tears. He got up to join Blaine on the bed, sitting close beside him and reaching out to clasp one of his hands tightly between his. Blaine squeezed back even tighter.

"I hurt you so badly," Blaine whispered. "I hurt you – and Burt – so badly. How can I ever forgive myself for that?"

"You're right, you did hurt us," Kurt whispered, and Blaine stiffened next to him, as if bracing himself. "But do you know why it hurt when you left, Blaine? It hurt because *you matter to us*. More than you know. And in order to forgive yourself, you need to *trust* yourself. You're always so worried about hurting us again that you can't allow yourself to just be happy, here, with us."

The intonation of Kurt's voice rose with every word that he uttered, his emotions bubbling to the surface and tears pooling in his eyes. He *needed* to get through to Blaine. He needed to make him believe him.

"Blaine," Kurt continued, hot tears spilling down his cheeks, "you need to believe that you won't make the same mistakes again, because you are *not* a bad person, Blaine. Do you hear me? You're not bad, and you're not weak, and you're not worthless or pathetic or any of the other things you think you are. You're wonderful. And *I love you*."

Blaine's head snapped up, and he looked at Kurt with, shocked wide eyes. "You l-love me?" He asked, voice breathless and shaking.

Kurt's heart raced in his chest. *Shit. Shit shit shit shit shit*. Kurt forced out a choked laugh, reaching up to hurriedly wipe the tears from his cheeks.

"Of course I love you," he said, trying to keep his tone even and not let his anxiety show. "You're family." *I'm not in love with you. I'm not in love with you*. If he repeated in his head enough times, maybe he'd believe it. *I'm not in love with you*.

Kurt could have sworn that he saw Blaine's shoulders slump slightly, in relief, or...disappointment?

"I love you, too," Blaine said softly, giving Kurt's hand another tight squeeze.

Kurt felt his stomach flip. *He just loves you like a brother. Don't look into it too much. Don't get your hopes up. Don't let your heart be broken again*.

They fell silent, hands still clasped too tightly between them. The air felt charged with something that was almost tangible, and Kurt was afraid to break the silence.

After several long minutes, Blaine finally released Kurt's hand and got to his feet, breaking the spell.

"I guess I should get going now," Blaine said. "Thank you, Kurt. For...you know, listening to me, and saying the things that you said." He paused. "I'm going to try my best to believe them."

He turned around to leave.

"Wait!" Kurt exclaimed, a little too loudly. Blaine turned back around, his expression questioning.

"How often do you exfoliate?" Kurt blurted out. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he felt his cheeks heat up. *Smooth, Hummel.*

Blaine raised his eyebrows. "Umm, I...don't?"

Kurt was horrified. "*Never?*"

"No...?" Blaine replied, looking a little nervous. "Why? Is there something wrong with my skin?"

"No, no, of course not," Kurt assured him. "You have lovely skin. But you need to start preparing early, Blaine, or you'll regret not doing so when you're sixty. Come here, we can go through my rigorous skin-sloughing regimen together."

Blaine's jaw dropped. "You're letting me use your skincare products?"

Kurt rolled his eyes, but smiled fondly. "Yes, Blaine, you can use them."

Blaine beamed, and sat back down on the bed. Kurt grabbed an array of products from his vanity, eagerly unscrewing the lid off one of the pots.

"Now, listen closely, because this is very important. I'm going to teach you the basics of exfoliating."

CHAPTER TEN

Hope

The week leading up to New Years was probably the happiest week of Blaine's life. His cravings for alcohol were rare, and when they came, he found them much easier to overcome than he had in the past. He figured it was because, for the first time in many years, he really didn't feel like he had to drink in order to feel normal. He was with his family, they were all together, and everyone was in extra high spirits because of the holidays.

Blaine had also noticed that, since their talk on Christmas, the dynamic between he and Kurt had shifted. It was as though their conversation in Kurt's bedroom had cleared the air between them, and gotten rid of some of the lingering tension and uneasiness that had been present since Blaine's return into Kurt's life.

Since then, their recent interactions had become far more...playful, and light-hearted. If Blaine didn't know any better, he'd say that they were even a little *flirtatious*. It was both confusing and exhilarating and while Blaine still wasn't sure what to make of it, he knew that he definitely did not want it to stop.

He first noticed it on Thursday morning. He went downstairs without gelling his hair first, purely due to laziness and an immediate need for coffee first thing in the morning. (Also, it was 7am, and he didn't think anybody else would be up yet. But apparently Kurt was a morning person.) Kurt was in the kitchen making French toast, as soon as he saw Blaine's bed-head, he gasped.

"Oh, my god," he said, grinning in delight. "Blaine, your *hair*."

Blaine winced, running his fingers through his hair self-consciously. "I know, it's bad," he said.

"No!" Kurt exclaimed, "No, it's not bad! It's ridiculously cute. I love it. I mean, it's a little *bushy* – you could probably stand to put a little bit of lighter product in it, but I love the curls. Can I touch it?"

Blaine raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Um, y-yeah? Sure," he conceded. Kurt reached up and ran his fingers through Blaine's hair. Blaine very nearly moaned.

"This is great," Kurt said. "You should definitely gel less often. You have such lovely hair, Blaine, so many people would kill for your natural curls. I don't know why you hide them under a gel helmet. God, I don't want to stop touching it, it's so *fluffy*."

Blaine blushed and grinned, his stomach giving an odd jolt. "You can keep touching if you want...it feels nice."

"Yeah?"

"Mhm."

Unfortunately, that was when Kathy decided to join them, and they stepped apart when they heard the sound of her singing as she descended the stairs. Kurt reluctantly extracted his hand from Blaine's locks, and Blaine decided that he would happily give up gel forever if it meant that Kurt would keep touching him like that.

Later that evening, Blaine found himself sitting cross-legged on Kurt's bed, while Kurt got changed in his walk-in closet. He was trying to decide on an outfit to wear to his friend Rachel's New Year's Eve party, and he'd ask Blaine to be his fashion critic.

Blaine was a little nervous. He knew some things about fashion, but his personal style was quite different from Kurt's. He wanted to sound like he knew what he was talking about, but honestly, Kurt had walked out in 3 different outfits already, and all Blaine knew was that Kurt looked fantastic in *all* of them.

"Okay, what about this one?" Kurt asked.

Blaine turned around and he was pretty sure his jaw hit the floor.

Kurt was wearing a pair of unbelievably tight, black, *leather* pants, oh dear sweet merciful lord. They left very little to the imagination, and he had paired them with tall black boots with *heels*. They were covered with silver buckles and decorative fastenings and they made Kurt's long legs look like they went on forever.

He also wore a slightly loose black top that hung off one shoulder, and oh *god*, Blaine didn't think he had ever been attracted to a *shoulder* before, but there you have it.

To top it all off, Kurt had put on dark eyeliner, which brought out the piercing blue of Kurt's eyes, and made him look positively sinful. Blaine let out some sort of choking sound.

Kurt raised a (perfect) eyebrow at him. "Sorry, didn't catch that."

"I - I like this one," Blaine stammered. "This is my favourite so far."

"Hmm, are you sure?" Kurt asked, turning around to examine his ass in the mirror, and *okay that was so not fair*. "You don't think I kind of look like a hooker?"

"No!" Blaine exclaimed immediately. "You look hot."

Fuck. Yup, I just said that out loud. And immediately, all the blood that had been previously concentrated in Blaine's dick decided to change course and head straight for his face. Awesome.

Much to Blaine's surprise, however, Kurt didn't look disgusted or creeped out at Blaine's assessment. He *beamed*. "You really think so?"

"Y-yeah," Blaine stammered. "Totally. The pants..."

"Hmm, they do make my butt look quite good, don't they?" Kurt asked, running his hands over the back of the pants.

"Yep!" Blaine squeaked. "They're very...tight."

"That's the idea," Kurt teased, winking at Blaine.

His thoughts were somewhere along the lines of *Asdfhghjdfajlkd!Ofnfvhf?*

"Okay, I guess that's settled then!" Kurt exclaimed, heading back into the closet. "Thanks for your help, Blaine."

"Yeah," Blaine said meekly. "Not a problem."

Over the next couple of days, things escalated further. Kurt started touching him a lot more – he would casually brush his hand across Blaine's shoulder as he walked past, or pause to straighten Blaine's bowtie for him. He'd even started curling right up into Blaine's side on the couch, and it hadn't taken long for

Blaine to gather up the courage to return the snuggles. He liked snuggles. He was a snuggly sort of guy, especially when Kurt was involved. And if he left his hair ungelled, Kurt would gently twirl his curls around his fingers while they watched TV. It was unbelievably comforting, and kind of made Blaine's insides feel like they were made of warm melted chocolate.

The first few times they'd snuggled on the couch, Blaine had half-expected Burt to jump out of his armchair and declare Blaine a sick pervert before kicking him out on his ass. But nobody in the family seemed to find the behaviour particularly unusual. Blaine had caught Kathy looking at them with a calculating expression a couple of times, but she hadn't said anything, so Blaine figured he was probably just reading too much into things. He tended to do that.

Blaine wondered whether Kurt acted this way with all his family members.

He hoped not.

On Sunday, Evelyn and Kathy decided that they wanted to take Kurt shopping.

Blaine may have pouted. He wanted to go shopping, too.

"Stop it with that face," Kurt said, rolling his eyes. "Since when do you even *like* shopping?"

"Since I've spent the last month cooped up in this house without being able to leave," Blaine grumbled.

Evelyn frowned. "Is it really that bad? You can't just...wear sunglasses and a big hat?"

Blaine sighed. "No, I'd still get recognised. My fans are very observant. They can recognise me from the shape of my ass."

Kathy laughed loudly. "Anderson, did you make a secret tumblr?"

Blaine glared at her. "...Yes."

"And did you go through the 'Blaine Anderson' tag?"

"...Maybe."

Kurt snorted. He knew what was in that tag.

"I was bored, okay?" Blaine whined. "I needed something to do."

"Well, it's good to see that you're using your time productively," Kurt teased.

"Hey, I've been productive!" Blaine protested. "I finally got around to watching *Game of Thrones*. And I finished reading *Les Misérables*, which is a really long book, let me tell you."

Kurt patted Blaine on the shoulder sympathetically. Blaine tried not to lean into the touch.

"Well," Kathy said, buttoning up her coat, "if you can't come with us, we'll have to find a way to bring the fun to you. C'ya later, Blainers."

"Bye," Blaine sighed, as Kathy, Evelyn and Kurt swept out of the room.

Kathy's idea of 'bringing the fun to Blaine' apparently involved returning home with a karaoke machine, several board games, and about 10 different flavours of ice-cream & toppings.

"You, me, Kurt and Finn are going to have a sleepover in the living room!" Kathy announced. "First we'll play games, and then we'll eat our weight in ice-cream, and then we'll play karaoke, and then we'll all sleep in the lounge and it'll be super fun."

Blaine stared at her incredulously. "You do realise that I am a 29-year-old man, not a 13-year-old girl, right?"

Kurt laughed. "I told you he wouldn't go for it, aunt Kath."

"I don't care!" Kathy argued. "We're doing it anyway. I haven't had a chance to properly bond with my nephews. This is happening. Don't fight it."

"Wha's happenin'?" Finn asked as he strolled out of the kitchen, mouth stuffed with potato chips.

"We're having a sleepover," Kathy said. "Tonight. You're coming."

"Sorry, I can't," Finn said, not looking very sorry at all. "I promised Rachel I'd take her to Breadstix. She hates when I cancel dates. But you guys have fun!"

Kathy glared at him. "Well, fine then, ditch us for your stupid girlfriend. But we're totally not saving you any ice-cream."

"Okay, time to play Monopoly!"

Kurt groaned loudly in protest, but Kathy was already setting up the board.

"You know we won't be friends anymore after we've played Monopoly, right?" Blaine said. "It's a fact. Monopoly ruins friendships."

"Only when sore losers play. Are you a sore loser, Blaine?"

"No."

"Good, then it won't be a problem, because I'll be kicking your ass. I call dibs on the ship."

Much to Blaine's surprise, he rolled lucky numbers during the game, and managed to win in less than an hour.

Kathy was not happy.

"It's not enough that you get to be a superstar with a shit-tonne of REAL money, but you have to beat me at Monopoly too? You're an asshole, Anderson," Kathy complained.

Blaine just grinned smugly. "Maybe some ice cream will cheer you up."

Half an hour and several helpings of ice-cream later, Kathy was definitely looking happier.

"Is it time to play Twister yet?" Kurt asked, licking the last of his White Chocolate ice-cream off his spoon (Blaine was trying very hard not to stare, and failing).

This time, it was Kathy's turn to groan. "Noooo, not Twister," she whined. "I hate twisting."

"Well, I want to play Twister, because I know for a fact that I will beat you two," Kurt said, pointing to Kathy and Blaine.

"Oh, really?" Blaine asked, challenging. "We'll see about that. Kathy, you can spin."

20 minutes later, Blaine was greatly regretting challenging Kurt and putting his pride on the line.

Kurt was very, *very* good at Twister. He switched between various awkward positions as if it were effortless, and he somehow managed to make it look graceful. Blaine, on the other hand, was sweating profusely, and his legs were *killing* him.

To top it all off, Kurt had decided to go and change into a pair of tight yoga pants before playing. It was highly distracting, especially when Blaine and Kurt ended up pressed together on the mat. Blaine had tried to avoid getting too close and personal with Kurt, but it was proving to be quite difficult, and he suspected that Kathy might be cheating in order to make the game as difficult and awkward as possible.

Blaine was thankful, at least, that Evelyn had left a couple of hours ago, and Burt and Carole had decided to go out to dinner and a movie. He didn't need anybody else to witness his embarrassing defeat.

He also wasn't sure that he would ever be able to look Burt in the eye again if Burt could see the way in which Kurt's thigh was currently pressed up between Blaine's legs - at an angle that could possibly result in a very embarrassing situation if Kathy did not spin that damn arrow immediately.

While the next spin got Kurt's thigh away from the danger zone, it also resulted in Blaine having to lean over Kurt and stretch his leg over him, putting their faces so close together that he could feel Kurt's warm, sweet breath on his face.

Blaine wasn't really sure where to look. His eyes flickered to Kurt's, who grinned up at him.

"Just give up, Anderson," Kurt said, his eyes twinkling. "You know you're going to lose. I do yoga. I'm very bendy."

Blaine quirked an eyebrow at Kurt's wording, and Kurt immediately blushed.

God, he was so pretty when he blushed.

"Aren't you a little old to be turning everything into an innuendo?" He asked.

"I didn't even have to turn that one into an innuendo. It was already an innuendo."

"No it wasn't. I've said it before and I'll say it again, you have a dirty mind."

"Kurt, it is actually impossible to tell someone about your bendiness without it sounding dirty."

"Blaine?"

"Yes?"

"I'm bendy."

"Oh god."

"Very bendy."

"Please stop."

"Do you want to see me put my legs behind my head?"

"...You can do that?"

"Yup."

Blaine gulped. "There's no way you can do that."

"I totally can."

Kurt was grinning at him mischievously, and although Blaine knew that he was just teasing, he was starting to get uncomfortably turned on, and he could feel Kurt's gaze on him.

"Would you like me to give you boys a moment alone?"

Blaine, having completely forgotten that he and Kurt were not alone in the room, startled with a yelp, and immediately fell over. Of course, he ended up taking Kurt with him, given that their limbs were almost completely entangled.

They turned around to see a smirking Kathy, looking much too happy for Blaine's liking.

"Fuck off, Kathy," Kurt said bluntly, and Blaine let out a startled laugh.

"Tsk ts," Kathy said, "don't let your dad hear you using such language. He'll think I'm a bad influence on you."

"You are," Kurt muttered, clambering to his feet and straightening his clothes before offering a hand to Blaine, who allowed Kurt to help him to his feet.

"I won that, by the way," Kurt said. "You fell and took me down with you."

Blaine was too flustered to argue. "Fair enough. I think you are definitely better at that game than I am."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Kurt teased. "You're not exactly lacking in flexibility yourself."

Blaine blushed.

There was the sound of a throat being cleared pointedly behind them. Blaine was rather impressed at Kathy's ability to retain her smirk under the force of Kurt's glare.

"Okay, time for singing!" Kathy declared, as she polished off the last of the strawberry ripple ice-cream.

"How on earth did you manage to finish off 5 cartons of ice-cream within an hour?" Kurt asked in awe. "Even Finn would have trouble with that. And you're *tiny*."

"I have a fast metabolism," Kathy said, stacking up the remaining ice-cream containers. "And a sweet tooth. Now, are we doing this thing? Because I have a professional fucking singer here," she gestured at

Blaine, "whose concerts usually cost upwards of a hundred bucks. Since he neglected to get me a Christmas present, he can *at least* give me a free show."

Blaine smiled sheepishly. "I'm really sorry about that," he said. "But maybe when I'm back in New York I'll buy you a plane ticket to visit me sometime. Maybe I'll even take you as my date to one of the awards shows. You might even get to meet Katy Perry."

Kathy's jaw dropped, and her eyes practically glazed over. "I love Katy Perry. She's so *hot*."

Blaine laughed. "Don't think I don't know the way to your heart, Kathy Hummel. And hey, I hear that Katy kissed a girl once and she liked it. You might actually have a chance." He winked, and Kathy lunged at him, proceeding to plant a wet, cold, ice-creamy kiss on his cheek. Blaine wrinkled his nose, but he knew better than to protest.

"I knew I liked you, Anderson!" Kathy exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air with an excited whoop. "And I'm totally holding you to that promise."

"Hey!" Kurt exclaimed, folding his arms across his chest, "How come she gets to be your date? I want to be your date!"

He blushed as soon as the words were out of his mouth. "I – I mean, that is to say, I always wanted to attend one of those awards shows," he said, flustered. "And besides, I make you breakfast almost every morning. Kathy demands that you bring her breakfast in bed. I am clearly the more deserving family member."

Blaine bit his lip nervously. "W-well, I'd love to take you, Kurt, really," Blaine said. "But the thing is...my publicists don't let me take male dates to awards shows."

The playful atmosphere in the room quickly evaporated. Blaine stared at the floor in shame, refusing to meet Kurt's eye, not wanting to see the pity and disappointment that he was sure he'd find there.

"Well, fuck them, then," Kathy said sharply, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "You should totally fire their asses, Blaine. You don't need to pretend to be straight to be successful."

Blaine shrugged, his body tensing.

Kurt, apparently realising that Blaine didn't want to talk about that right now, quickly changed the subject. "Right," he said, picking up one of the microphones from the floor. "I'm singing the first song. I might not be famous," he said, grinning at Blaine, "but I can still take you, Anderson."

In an instant, all the tension was gone. Blaine smirked.

"You're on, Hummel."

The first song that Kurt chose to sing was *Like A Virgin* by Madonna. His voice was amazing, and as he sang, he incorporated some cute butt-jiggling dancing that had Blaine smiling and laughing in delight, especially when Kurt made eye contact with him while grinning playfully.

The song may have caused Blaine to wonder about whether or not Kurt was actually a virgin, but that was neither here nor there.

Kathy sung next, performing an energetic version of *Living on a Prayer*. She was surprisingly good, if not a little *too* energetic.

Blaine decided to sing *Don't Stop Me Now* by Queen, which was one of his favourite songs. He danced around at random, twirling and jumping on furniture, and he thought he must look a bit stupid but Kurt grinned at him throughout the entire performance and clapped enthusiastically at the end, so he figured he must have done okay. He felt an unusual swell of pride.

Kurt took the floor next with an *amazing* rendition of *Blackbird* by the Beatles. Blaine's jaw dropped when Kurt started singing, and he was aware that he was staring, but he couldn't bring himself to tear his eyes away. Kurt sang with the perfect balance of soulfulness and simplicity, and Blaine was awe-struck. He felt like something was shifting – as he listened to Kurt sing, he was hit with a moment of pure clarity and realisation. For a few seconds, he felt freer than he ever had before.

When Kurt finished the song, reality hit Blaine like a punch to the gut. Blaine clapped softly, but avoided eye contact with Kurt for fear that his expressive eyes might give all his thoughts away.

The performance left him distracted and emotional, and it certainly wasn't helped by the fact that Kathy decided to sing REO Speedwagon's *Can't Fight This Feeling* as her next song, and the lyrics were so frighteningly applicable to his current situation that he worried for a moment that he might do something stupid, like cry, or grab Kurt and kiss him right there in the living room.

And, there it was. There was no sense in denying it any longer. He had desperately tried to ignore the fact that his feelings for Kurt were growing stronger and stronger every day. But ignoring the way he felt was becoming impossible. At first, he was able to put the nervous jitters and spikes of arousal down to confusion over finally seeing Kurt as a man, instead of a child. But he could no longer ignore the way that just Kurt's presence in the room made him feel a million times lighter, and made him forget about all his worries and fears. There was no other explanation for why his heart soared every time Kurt smiled at him with that perfect pink mouth and twinkling eyes.

When he first started feeling those things, he had been shocked – then guilty, and then scared.

Currently, it was a combination of the three, along with something else he couldn't quite put his finger on.

But, he was attracted to Kurt. And not just physically. He was attracted to every single part of him, body and soul.

He loved him. He was *in love* with him.

Blaine's heart raced in his chest.

I'm in love with Kurt.

The declaration was final. He felt absolutely, completely sure of what it was that he was feeling, but that knowledge didn't do a whole lot to dispel his worries. He knew that acting on his feelings would be crazy. Kurt was *seventeen years old*. Blaine was almost thirty, and, okay, he'd always believed that age was just a number, but his history with Kurt made it far more complicated than it normally would be.

He'd known Kurt since the boy was five years old. At the time, Blaine had been about the same age that Kurt was now. He could still remember curling up with little Kurt on the couch, back when all he felt for the boy was an innocent brotherly fondness, and sense of protectiveness. It was alarming, even to him, that the nature of his feelings could have changed so much.

And then there was the fact that Blaine had hurt Kurt, had broken his trust in a way that most people would consider unforgivable. Kurt had given him a second chance, but he would always remember the fact that Blaine had abandoned him, and treated him as though all those years of friendship and family had meant nothing. If Kurt and he were ever together...*like that*, how could Kurt ever truly trust Blaine again? And how could Blaine ever trust himself, not to hurt Kurt again?

Blaine remembered the words that Kurt had said to him during their conversation on Christmas.

"In order to forgive yourself, you need to trust yourself. You're always so worried about hurting us again that you can't allow yourself to just be happy, here, with us."

Blaine remembered something else that Kurt had said that night.

"I love you."

Of course, that was a phrase that people said to each other every day. It could mean anything. It probably just meant that Kurt loved him like a friend, or like a brother.

But when Kurt had said it, his hands had been shaking. His eyes had been shining, and his voice had been trembling. It was an emotionally charged moment, for sure.

So maybe, just *maybe*...

"Hello, earth to Blaine!"

Blaine jolted in his seat, to the sound of amused laughter.

"Spaced out, much?" Kathy teased. "Whatcha thinking about?"

Blaine gulped. "Umm, nothing...nothing important."

"Well then, it's time for us to do that duet you promised me!" Kurt declared, grabbing Blaine's hand and dragging him up from the couch.

"Anything in particular you want to sing?" Kurt asked. Blaine moved to shake his head 'no', but at the last minute, he changed his mind.

He needed to sing something meaningful right now. He felt overwhelmed with emotion and he needed a safe outlet.

"Come What May," he blurted out, before he could think himself out of it. "I want to sing 'Come What May'. If you're okay with that, that is."

Kurt raised an eyebrow at him, looking slightly surprised at his song choice, but then he smiled.
"That's...that's my favourite love song of all time, actually," he said softly.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Let's do it."

Blaine gulped, and then Kurt found the song, and the music began to play.

Blaine ignored his racing heart and did what he did best. He sung.

"Never knew I could feel like this,

Like I've never seen the sky before.

Want to vanish inside your kiss,

Every day I love you more and more.

Listen to my heart, can you hear it sings?

Telling me to give you everything

Seasons may change, winter to spring

But I love you until the end of time.

Come what may

Come what may

I will love you until my dying day."

Then Kurt joined in, and when they sang together, it was as though it was meant to be.

Blaine looked right into Kurt's eyes as he sang, and he meant every word.

As the song finished, Blaine barely even registered Kathy's clapping. His heart was pounding too loudly in his chest.

When he sat down on the couch, Kathy reached out and gently squeezed his shoulder. It felt like an offer of support. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it, but he was grateful nonetheless.

They all fell asleep on the living room floor at around 3am, buried under piles of blankets and pillows.

At some point during the night Kurt and Blaine gravitated towards each other, and when Kathy poked them awake at 10am the next morning, Blaine was surprised and a little embarrassed to find that he had one arm thrown over Kurt's waist, Kurt's back pressed against his chest. How they ended up spooning when they had fallen asleep at least 6 feet away from each other was a mystery to Blaine, but he liked it.

He quickly got up before Kurt woke up properly and realised just how much he liked it.

Finn came stumbling down the stairs not long after they had all settled down with toast and coffee, and Kathy asked if Finn had plans for the day.

"Nope," he mumbled around a mouthful of toast. "Why?"

"I was thinking all four of us could do something fun," Kathy said, "but Blaine can't really go anywhere, so our options are a bit limited."

Finn perked up immediately. "Hey, dude, we still haven't used those Hobbit tickets and Gollum mask I got you!"

"Yeah," Blaine said, "I think your guys' parents wanted to come too, though."

"I'll text them to meet us at the theatre, we can pick up some extra tickets," Kurt said. "And we'll take Nan too. She looks like she only watches Audrey Hepburn movies, but I know for a fact that she can appreciate some good battle scenes."

"Good, that's settled then!" Kathy said cheerily. "We'll leave in half an hour."

Blaine quickly put his dishes away before hurrying upstairs to get ready.

The movie was fantastic.

Blaine had drawn a little attention in his Gollum mask, but for the most part, everything had gone very smoothly.

Kurt had even put on fake ear-tips and a long wig to make himself look like an elf, so Blaine didn't seem so out of place. Blaine wanted to kiss him.

When the movie was over, Evelyn got a ride back to her hotel with Burt and Carole, while Blaine, Kurt and Kathy all clambered into Finn's car.

10 minutes into the drive home, and Kurt was glaring at everyone in the car as they pleaded with him to sing some more.

"Kurt, please? Just one more time!" Blaine begged shamelessly.

"Blaine, come on, I've already done it about 8 times since we left the theatre."

Finn grinned at Kurt in the rear- view mirror. "But it's *awesome*," he added.

"Eyes on the road, Finn," Kathy added from the passenger seat. "This car is worth more than all of my exes combined – and I have a lot of exes. And Kurt, please just sing the song again and shut these two up."

Kurt let out a loud, put-upon sigh, but he was smiling, so Blaine knew that he wasn't really annoyed at their persistence.

"*Fine*," Kurt sighed, and then he began to sing, in an astoundingly deep voice.

"Far over the misty mountains cold,

To dungeons deep, and caverns old

We must away, ere break of day

To find our long forgotten gold.

The pines were roaring on the height,

The winds were moaning in the night.

The fire was red, it flaming spread,

The trees like torches blazed with light."

Blaine and Finn broke out into enthusiastic clapping as soon as Kurt finished, and Kurt smiled proudly.

"Your range is seriously unbelievable," Blaine said, and Finn nodded in agreement.

Kurt grinned at Blaine. "Flattery will get you everywhere." Blaine blushed, and Kathy let out a loud snort.

"So," Kathy said, "Fili and Kili were pretty hot for dwarves, huh?"

Blaine laughed. "Definitely. Thorin, too."

"I prefer Martin Freeman," Kurt interjected. "He's adorable."

Blaine raised his eyebrows. "Bilbo? Really?"

"He's *adorable*."

"I think that's his type," Kathy snickered. "Older guys. Short and cute, with thick curly locks."

Blaine choked on air, and Kurt let out a spluttering noise on the seat next to him. "That is *not* my type," he squawked, his face bright red. "I don't *have* a type."

"Mhm, sure honey," Kathy said knowingly, winking at Blaine.

Blaine's heart raced, and they fell into awkward silence.

"What did I miss?" Finn blurted suddenly, annoyed and confused. This sent Kathy off into a fit of giggles, and Kurt stared very deliberately down at his lap, refusing to meet Blaine's eye.

Blaine felt an odd fluttering feeling inside his chest at the implications of Kathy's teasing.

It felt an awful lot like hope.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Misunderstandings

Blaine frowned at the clock on the living room wall. *10:42pm*.

It was New Year's Eve, and it was safe to say that he wasn't really feeling the excitement.

Kurt had left a couple of hours ago to go to Rachel's New Year's Eve party. Apparently her dads were out of town, so she had ordered all the Glee kids to come over. Everybody was staying at her house overnight, so Blaine wouldn't be seeing Kurt until morning.

He wished that he'd been able to go to the party with Kurt. Sure, he would be forced to hang out with a bunch of teenagers, but he didn't think he'd look too out of place considering the fact that Finn looked about 30 years old even though he had yet to graduate high school.

But then there was also the fact that everyone would recognise him, and God knows a bunch of teenagers would never be able to keep a secret like that.

He just wished he could get out of the house and *do things*. He should be able to go to a New Year's Eve party if he wanted to. He was sick of feeling that a teenager under house arrest.

He had to admit, however, that his bad mood also had a bit to do with the fact that Kathy and Evelyn were leaving the next day. He liked Kathy, a lot - she was a lot of fun, and her happiness was contagious. Evelyn was sweet and caring, like the grandmother he'd always wished that he had. He would miss the both of them when they left.

Then, of course – and Blaine had tried his best to avoid thinking about this – there was the fact that Kurt went back to school in a couple of days. Which basically meant long days spent alone in an empty house, with nobody to keep him company or distract him when things got... difficult.

He sighed, absentmindedly picking at his fingernails.

"Why the long face, kiddo?" Burt asked, strolling into the room with a mug of coffee in his hand. "Do you miss your friends in New York?"

Blaine shrugged. "Some of them," he conceded. "I don't have a lot of really close friends, but yeah. I usually hung out with Wes, David and Sebastian on New Year's."

"Sebastian...he's your boss, right?"

Blaine shook his head. "His dad's my boss, in a non-traditional sense of the word. I mean, he's the president of Smythe records, so he basically gets to tell me what to do. Sebastian's the VP, so he's kind of my boss, but really he's more of an...adviser. He sort of took me on as his personal project." Blaine frowned. "He's a friend too, though. We get on each other's nerves a lot, but at the end of the day, we still care about each other."

There was a pause while Burt seemed to think Blaine's words over. "Are – are you and him, you know...?"

Blaine looked up in surprise. "No! No, we're...it's not like that."

"Uh huh," Burt said, obviously not buying it. Blaine nearly laughed. *If only he knew the truth.*

"I think that Sebastian might...want that. With me. But, it's never going to happen. We're not...he's not the guy for me. He's great and everything, but...no."

Burt nodded. "Okay," he said, sounding slightly disappointed. "I just think it would be good for you, to have someone like that. I think mostly I just wanna know that there'll be someone there in New York to look out for you, when you feel ready to go back. I worry, y'know? I don't want you to be lonely, or to be too far away from your support system."

Blaine nodded. "Yeah, I get that," he said. "I don't want you to worry about me too much, though. I have some really great friends in New York, who definitely try their best to look out for me, when I let them. Sebastian included."

"Well, that's good, kid. Make sure you let them next time, yeah?"

"I will. I promise."

They sat in silence for a minute before Kathy burst into the room, her arms laden with what appeared to be several large, fluffy blankets.

"Come on, sad sacks, we're getting out of here," she said, dumping the blankets on the couch. "It's New Year's Eve and I'll be damned if I'm going to sit here in the living room, drinking sparkling grape juice and watching re-runs of *Seinfeld*. Let's go."

An hour later found Blaine, Burt, Carole, Kathy and Evelyn seated on top of a tall, deserted hill, overlooking the city.

Everybody was curled up in the blankets that Kathy had had the sense to bring, and Blaine was seated between Kathy and Evelyn, sipping at a mug full of hot chocolate from one of the several thermoses that Carole had packed. They would have a perfect view of the fireworks that would be let off at the start of the new year, but right now, Blaine was just enjoying the view. There was something amazingly peaceful about sitting outside at night and looking up at the stars.

"About five minutes to go, guys," Kathy said. "What're your New Year's resolutions? Mine is to finally quit my lame ass job and pursue acting, like I've always wanted."

"Good for you, sweetie," Evelyn said. "I keep telling you to get a move on with that. Lord knows you won't be 24 forever."

Kathy affectionately punched Evelyn on the shoulder. "Yeah, you'd know all about that."

"You watch yourself, miss."

Kathy grinned. "Okay, so what's your resolution then, granny?"

"Hmmm..." Evelyn said, "My New Year's resolution is to spend more time with my grandchildren, and less time working. What about you, Burt?"

"I'm gonna try harder to stay healthy, for my family," he said gruffly. "I complain when Kurt makes me eat rabbit food, but I get how important it is. I wanna be the best dad I can be, for as long as I can."

Carole smiled at her husband fondly, and crinkled her nose in thought. "Hmm, I really can't think of anything I want to change. I'm very happy with my life right now, but if I have to choose a

resolution...well, I've always wanted to do charity work - something with kids or teenagers, preferably. In the past it always felt like I never had enough time. This year, I'm going to make time."

Burt smiled at his wife, and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek.

"What about you, sweetie?" Carole asked, turning to Blaine.

Blaine bit his lip, suddenly shy. He knew that everyone was probably expecting him to say something about staying sober, but he felt like he needed to do better than that. Sure, staying sober would be hard as hell, but he didn't just want to not be an alcoholic anymore – he wanted to become a better person.

Suddenly, the memories came rushing back to him.

A small, tearful little Kurt Hummel looked up at Blaine as he stood in the airport. Blaine gently cupped Kurt's tiny face in his hands, and wiped the tears from his cheeks. "I'll never say goodbye to you," he whispered. "I promise."

Fast forward to 2012, and Blaine had just returned home, and Kurt had hugged him for the first time in 6 years. Kurt was staring at Blaine intensely, his arms crossed defensively over his chest. "I want you to promise that you will never drink another drop of alcohol ever again."

"Yes."

"I want you to say it, Blaine."

"Kurt, I promise that I will never drink another drop of alcohol ever again."

"Blaine?" Burt asked, and Blaine jumped slightly, startled. "You got something, bud?"

"Yeah," Blaine said. "Yeah, I do. My New Year's Resolution is to always keep my promises."

The others looked slightly surprised, but they smiled, and Blaine smiled back. It wasn't a New Year's Resolution, really. It was more like a lifetime resolution, but he'd always heard that it was best to break big goals into smaller milestones. And no matter how hard it may seem, no goal was ever achieved without starting somewhere. He was glad that he was starting back here, with his family by his side.

Suddenly, the sky lit up, and the sound of exploding fireworks and distant shouts rang out. Everybody whooped and cheered and hugged each other, and Burt kissed Carole happily, and Kathy pulled Blaine into a hug and kissed his cheek. It was 2013. For the first time in so long, Blaine felt optimistic about the year ahead.

But at that moment, he wanted nothing more than to have Kurt by his side.

It was 3:23am, and Blaine couldn't sleep.

This wasn't unusual – he often had trouble sleeping. But it was still frustrating, especially because he felt physically exhausted, yet for some reason his mind refused to shut off for the night.

The bedroom door opened.

Blaine sat up so suddenly he felt dizzy. Kurt looked back at him from the doorway in surprise, clad in his party clothes and looking like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Kurt?" Blaine asked, frowning slightly, "what're you doing here? I thought you were staying the night at Rachel's?"

Kurt bit his lip. "I, umm...I was going to," he said. "I left. I couldn't sleep."

Blaine's eyes widened. "Kurt, you didn't...you didn't drink and drive, did you?"

Kurt shook his head. "No, of course not. I don't drink."

Because he's seen what it's done to me, Blaine thought. He didn't say it out loud.

"Can I come in?" Kurt asked.

Blaine nodded, and Kurt shut the door behind him, before coming to sit next to Blaine on the bed. He started fiddling with his hands restlessly, and he wouldn't meet Blaine's eye.

"Kurt, is there something wrong?"

Kurt looked up at him nervously. "I couldn't sleep," he whispered.

"Yeah, you said that."

"I couldn't sleep because I missed you."

Blaine's eyes widened in shock, and his heart beat quickly in his chest. "You m-missed me?"

Kurt nodded. "It's just," he said, his voice raising in pitch, "It's New Year's. And I was at Rachel's, but I wanted to be with you. And I just felt like...I needed..."

"I missed you, too," Blaine blurted.

Kurt stared at him, his mouth opening and closing like he was trying to form words, but couldn't.

Concerned, Blaine reached out and touched Kurt on the shoulder. "Kurt? Are you okay?"

Suddenly, Kurt was moving forward, and Blaine jerked his head back in surprise just as Kurt pressed a quick kiss to the corner of Blaine's mouth.

It was over in a moment, and Kurt pulled back immediately, staring at Blaine with wide, frightened eyes. Blaine stared back at him in shock, the corner of his mouth still tingling, and he lifted his hand to press his fingers to the place where Kurt's lips had met his.

Blaine had moved his head at the last minute – he hadn't meant to, but Kurt had taken him by surprise – it had happened so fast, and Kurt had obviously missed the intended target, but Blaine wasn't sure whether Kurt had been aiming to kiss him on the lips, or on the cheek.

"I'm so sorry!" Kurt gasped, sounding completely horrified.

Blaine's heart sunk. *Shit.*

Kurt had obviously intended to kiss him on the cheek. Of course he had. But then Blaine had stupidly moved, and now Kurt was completely freaked out and...disgusted. God.

"I didn't – I'm -"

"Kurt, *Kurt*, it's okay," Blaine said quickly, a feeling of panic beginning to rise in his chest. "Really, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. It was just a misunderstanding. You took me by surprise, I'm sorry. We can just...forget this ever happened."

Kurt let out a soft whimper. He looked like he was about to cry.

"Kurt," Blaine said, his voice pained, "Kurt, please don't worry about this, it's not a big deal, really -"

Blaine reached out a hand to comfort the boy, but before he could make contact, Kurt practically leapt off the bed.

"I've got to go," Kurt said, his voice trembling. "I'm so sorry."

As he rushed out of the room, Blaine thought he heard the sound of a broken sob.

Blaine lay back on the bed, and curled himself up into a little ball. He eventually fell asleep with Kurt's horrified face in his mind, unable to believe that he could have been stupid enough to think that he actually stood a chance.

When Kurt closed his bedroom door behind him, he finally allowed the tears to fall.

He couldn't believe that he had been stupid enough to think that he actually stood a chance.

At Rachel's party, when midnight rolled around and all the couples had kissed, Kurt had felt an unbearable urge to be with Blaine. He needed him by his side. It was the start of a brand new year, and he couldn't shake the feeling that they should be together.

A couple of hours later, after everyone else had fallen asleep, Kurt continued to lie awake in his sleeping bag, restless and lonely. He wanted to see Blaine so badly.

Unable to take it anymore, he had got up, quietly packed up his things, written a note for Rachel, and tiptoed out of the house. He'd driven home on autopilot, his body thrumming with nervous energy.

He'd headed straight to Blaine's room. He figured that Blaine would be asleep – he just wanted to see him. He *needed* to see him.

But Blaine had been awake, and Kurt had had to come up with an explanation as to why he'd driven back from Rachel's house at 3am and come into Blaine's bedroom.

Kurt found himself telling the truth – saying the words '*I missed you*', and Blaine had looked so surprised. But then he had said it back, looking at Kurt with those big, earnest eyes. Blaine's full lips were pink and inviting, and his face was so close, and Kurt could have sworn that in that moment, Blaine wanted him in the same way that he wanted Blaine.

And that's when Kurt completely messed up.

In a surge of courage and affection, he had tried to kiss Blaine. He leaned forward with the intent of finally, *finally*, learning the feeling of Blaine's lips against his. But a second before their lips could meet, Blaine had pulled away from him. He had moved, and Kurt had ended up awkwardly kissing the corner of his mouth, while Blaine stared at him in shock.

He knew, immediately, that he had gotten it horribly wrong. The attraction that he had seen in Blaine's eyes wasn't real. It was wishful thinking – it had *always* been wishful thinking. Every time Blaine had touched him, or looked at him, or playfully teased him – none of it had been real. Kurt had made the whole thing up in his head.

How could he have been so stupid? Of course Blaine wouldn't want him. Blaine was a full-grown man, a *celebrity* – he probably had thousands of gorgeous, successful men who would fall at his feet in an instant. Who was Kurt? Just some boring, regular teenager with absolutely nothing to his name.

And now Blaine knew. He knew about Kurt's stupid fucking feelings, the ridiculous crush (no, so much more than a crush) that he'd harboured for Blaine since before he was even old enough to know what he was feeling. It was pathetic. He was pathetic, and now he'd completely fucked everything up.

"I'm so sorry!" Kurt gasped.

And then Blaine was trying to comfort him, trying to assure that it was *okay*, that it was just a misunderstanding and they could just forget that it had ever happened.

Kurt wanted to cry. As if the whole situation wasn't embarrassing enough, Blaine just wanted to sweep the whole incident under the rug. Apparently it wasn't even worth *acknowledging*. He was obviously so disgusted and creeped out by Kurt's feelings that he'd rather just pretend that they didn't exist.

"Kurt," Blaine said, his voice pained, "Kurt, please don't worry about this, it's not a big deal, really."

It's not a big deal. Of course it wasn't a big deal. Just a stupid kid with a stupid crush – not a big deal at all.

Kurt wanted to be mad at Blaine, but he wasn't. It was his own fault for being so naïve.

"I've got to go," Kurt said, his voice trembling with the effort to hold back his tears. "I'm so sorry."

He ran from Blaine's room as fast as he could.

And when he curled up beneath the blankets on his own bed and finally let himself dissolve into deep, aching sobs, he was once again reminded of how painful it was to love.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Love

In the days following the incident in Blaine's bedroom, Kurt could barely look Blaine in the eye.

When Blaine entered the room, Kurt left. When they were forced to communicate with one another during family dinners, Kurt did his best to keep the subject matter to small talk. He was all too aware of the giant elephant in the room, and it was humiliating and painful to even be in Blaine's presence right now.

He just wanted to curl up in a ball under his bed and stay there forever.

Blaine felt awful.

Kurt could barely even look at him without flinching, and it was all Blaine's fault.

Furthermore, it was becoming increasingly obvious to Blaine that Kurt's discomfort towards him went beyond just embarrassment and awkwardness. Blaine figured that, when he and Kurt had accidentally kissed, Kurt must have realised that Blaine had feelings for him. Perhaps he even thought that Blaine had turned his head *on purpose*, as if to take advantage of Kurt in a vulnerable moment.

Blaine wanted to assure Kurt that he would never do such a thing – and he tried to get Kurt alone so that they could talk, but Kurt was making it nearly impossible.

It was obvious that Kurt felt completely disgusted and repulsed by what had happened, and by the knowledge of Blaine's attraction towards him. Blaine was deeply hurt, but not exactly surprised. He knew that he must come across as a creep, or some kind of sexual predator. A 29-year-old man pining after a 17-year-old boy....It was pathetic. Of course Kurt would be disgusted.

What hurt the most was the fact that Kurt was avoiding him, and keeping an emotional distance every time they were forced to interact around the family. Yes, it was difficult to come to terms with the fact that Kurt would never love him back, but what was worse was knowing that he had probably destroyed the friendship and trust that they had managed to rebuild over the last few months.

He wanted his best friend back.

When Kurt went back to school, Blaine was almost relieved. He missed him, of course, but at least he had a few hours to himself, where he didn't have to see the look of discomfort and repulsion on Kurt's face every time they were near each other.

With the house all to himself, Blaine had a lot of time to think. He thought about how he could fix things with Kurt, and convince him to trust him again. He thought about Burt, and all the ways that he had broken his trust by allowing himself to fall for Kurt. He thought about his career, and his fans, and his friends back in New York.

He thought about drinking, and how much he would love to take a long swig from a bottle of vodka. How it would burn his throat so sweetly as it went down, and fill his stomach with warmth. How it would make everything fuzzy and simple and unimportant.

The cravings had been growing a lot stronger lately, and Blaine was scared. He had no question as to why the cravings had returned in full force – in the past, he had always drunk when he felt depressed, or lost, or guilty. It was his escape.

In New York, he had felt that way nearly all the time.

This was the first time that he had felt that way since his return to Ohio. And he couldn't lose the last semblance of his control now. He was barely hanging on.

Blaine decided to call Sebastian.

His finger hesitated over the 'call' button for a long moment. Sebastian had made it very clear before Blaine's departure that he didn't want Blaine thinking about New York at all, or worrying about work. He had told Blaine not to contact him unless there was an emergency - but this felt like an emergency, and Blaine needed a friend.

Sebastian picked up after the third ring. "Blaine?"

Blaine let out a sigh of relief at the familiar sound of his friend's voice. "Hi, Seb."

"Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Sebastian's voice was tense with worry.

"I'm fine, Seb. Really," Blaine assured him. "I just missed you."

"I missed you too, killer, but I know that's not why you're calling. What's going on? How's the family?"

Blaine sighed. "They're not my real family, Seb."

"Really? Could have fooled me, with the way you used to talk about them in your drunkenest moments. Which was more often than you probably remember."

Blaine stayed silent.

"Well? How are they? "

"They're....they're good. Burt's married now, to a woman named Carole. She's great. Kurt is...really great."

"Really? I thought he'd be pissed at you."

"He was, at first. But we worked things out."

"I guess he missed his big bro."

Blaine winced. "Don't say that."

"Don't say what?"

"Don't call me his...brother. I'm not his brother. We're not related."

"Not technically, but his family practically took you in when you were a kid."

"Yeah, but we're not brothers. I didn't even get to see him grow up."

"Why are you so bothered by this?"

"I'm not!"

"Yeah, you are. Blaine, what's with the defensiveness? I thought you loved these guys."

"I do. Of course I do."

"So...?"

"So...Kurt's not a kid anymore." Blaine paused, his heart pounding. "He's seventeen. He's...different."

There was a pause. "So...what?" Seb asked, confused. "Do you not like him anymore? Did he turn into an asshole? Fuck, is he a *homophobe*?"

"No! God, no, nothing like that. He's gay, too."

"Oh. Okay, so not a homophobe then. Is he a brat?"

"No, he's perfect."

"...What?"

Blaine knew he should probably shut up now, but he was suddenly filled with an unbelievably strong desire to gush about Kurt, to tell Sebastian everything that he had been holding inside for months. It was suffocating to not be able to share something so huge, and Blaine wanted to let it out. And besides, perhaps Sebastian would have some advice.

So Blaine talked.

"Kurt is...amazing, Sebastian. *Amazing*. He's so brave, and kind, and funny, and smart. He's an incredible singer and performer, I've never met a more underappreciated talent in all my life. And he's so...strong, and beautiful, and Seb, he *made me bowties for Christmas*. He grew up into the most amazing guy, but..." The huge smile that had spread across Blaine's face quickly melted away as he remembered the reality of the situation. "But, as usual, I messed up. I messed everything up between us and now he hates me."

There was a long, tense pause before Sebastian spoke again. "Blaine...what did you do?"

Blaine swallowed dryly. "I fell in love with him."

"*Fuck*," Sebastian hissed, his voice harsh and biting. "Jesus fucking Christ, Blaine. Are you fucking kidding me right now? Is this a joke?"

Blaine winced, immediately regretting opening up to Sebastian. He should probably have gone to David instead. Seb could be judgemental at the best of times.

Blaine had learned long ago that, with Sebastian, it was best to fight fire with fire. "No, it's not a fucking *joke*, Smythe," Blaine spat angrily.

"He's *seventeen fucking years old*."

"Yeah, and what? It's not like he's twelve, Sebastian, he's not a child anymore. Don't even pretend like you haven't had your share of barely legal guys."

"That's not the same, and you know it! Those were one night stands, but apparently, you're *in love* with the kid."

Sebastian spat out the word *love* like it had personally offended him, and Blaine clenched his teeth together in frustration.

"Look," Blaine said, trying to remain calm, "I know that the age difference is a little problematic -"

"*Christ, you think?*"

"-BUT, I can't help how I feel. So don't bother with the lecture. I seriously do not have the fucking energy for this right now."

Sebastian's voice softened a little. "I'm only trying to help you."

"Yeah, well, if you really want to help me, then please, just...tell me how to fix this. Because I'm going out of my fucking mind here."

Sebastian paused for a moment. "...Does he know?"

Blaine exhaled slowly. "Yeah. I didn't tell him, but...he knows."

"And I'm guessing he didn't throw himself into your arms and declare his undying love."

"Yeah, not exactly. He's been treating me like I have some contagious disease. He won't even *look* at me."

"Fuck. Blaine, you and I both know that the last thing you need right now, while you're trying to recover, is another fucking heartbreak. Why couldn't you have picked someone your own age? Someone who could deal with your job, and your past, and who *knows* you?"

And there it was. More judgment. Blaine felt anger bubble in his chest. "You mean, why couldn't I have picked *you*."

Blaine regretted his harsh words as soon as he said them.

Shit. Shit shit shit shit shit *shit*.

"Fuck, Sebastian, I...I'm so sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Yeah," Sebastian said, his voice uncharacteristically soft and vulnerable. "Yeah, you did."

"Seb, I'm sorry. That was cruel, and uncalled for."

"Yeah, it was."

"Fuck. I'm so fucking sorry."

"Just...stop apologizing," Sebastian said with a sigh. He sounded completely exhausted. "Blaine, it's no secret how I feel about you," he continued, and Blaine had never heard him talk like this before. "I haven't been very good at hiding it. I just didn't expect you to throw it back in my face, especially since you seem to be experiencing a little unrequited love yourself."

Blaine sniffled, trying his hardest not to cry. "It fucking sucks."

"Yeah. It really does."

At that moment, Blaine knew that Sebastian understood. And for the first time, he felt like *he* understood, too.

There was a long pause before either of them spoke again.

"You should talk to him," Sebastian said.

"I've tried, but he won't -"

"Try harder! Lock him in a room with you if you have to. Just be honest with him, make sure he listens. Let him know that you don't want to make him uncomfortable, and you'll stay away, if that's what he wants. If he's a halfway decent guy, he won't hold your feelings against you."

"I *never* -"

"I know you didn't, Blaine. I know you didn't. That's not what I meant."

Blaine bit his lip. "Okay. I guess I can do that."

"Good."

"Seb...thank you. So much."

"Don't mention it."

"No, really. You're...you're a great friend."

"...Yeah. I'll catch ya later, killer."

"Bye."

He hung up.

Blaine barely had a moment to breathe before his phone rang again. He almost dropped it in surprise. Assuming that it must be Sebastian calling him again, Blaine answered immediately, schooling his tone into the one he usually used for their playful banter.

"Did you forget to tell me about your latest conquest? Don't worry, Seb, I can live without hearing all the gory details of your sex life."

"...Blaine?"

Blaine's blood ran cold.

"Blaine? Is that you?"

"...Cooper?"

Kurt was actually quite enjoying being back at McKinley. 2 years ago, he never would have thought he'd say that, but 2 years ago he didn't have Glee club, and his friends.

He loved them like crazy – *all* of them, even Santana. Most of the time.

What had surprised him the most was how close he had recently become to none other than Rachel Berry, who had been pretty close to his arch rival the first year that they'd joined Glee. She was his biggest competition, but he didn't really mind that – what he minded was the fact that she had basically monopolised the solos throughout the first year of Glee club.

Singing was Kurt's passion, and he was damn good at it too. He wanted solos, thank you very much.

But lately, Rachel had been a lot more generous than she had in previous years. She had finally seemed to realise that the New Directions were a team, not the Rachel Berry ensemble. She and Kurt had grown quite close as a result, and she often hung out with him and Mercedes, his other best girlfriend (and, as far as talent went, Mercedes could definitely give Rachel a run for her money if the mood struck her).

Kurt was having lunch with the New Directions when it happened. Kurt was skilfully deflecting Puck as he attempted to steal Kurt's French fries, when his phone rang. He regretfully let Puck have the fries so he could answer it.

"Hello, this is Kurt."

"...Kurt," a voice said, soft and weak and trembling. Kurt's stomach immediately dropped into his feet. He would know that voice anywhere.

"Blaine," he said, "Blaine, what's wrong?"

At this point, he had the attention of everyone at the table, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Blaine was in trouble.

"Kurt, please, I need you, please,"

"Are you hurt?" Kurt struggled to keep his voice in check.

"No, but it's....Cooper, he called, and...Kurt, my dad is dead."

Kurt froze. "I'm coming home."

"You don't have to -"

"Blaine, I'm coming. I'm on my way right now. Just *talk* to me, okay?" Kurt got up from his seat and swung his messenger bag over his shoulder, prompting a series of questions from everyone at the table.

"Who's Blaine?"

"Kurt, what's going on?"

"Where are you going?"

"Shhhh!" Kurt hissed at them, covering the mouthpiece of his phone. "It's...a friend of mine. I gotta go, I'll explain later."

He rushed out of the cafeteria as fast as his legs could carry him, the sound of Blaine's heavy breathing in his ear.

"Blaine, talk to me," Kurt said, stumbling in his bag with one hand in search of his car keys.

"My dad is dead, and all I can think about is the bottle of brandy at the back of the cupboard," Blaine said.

Kurt stopped dead in his tracks. He used that brandy to cook sometimes, and he internally cursed himself for forgetting to get rid of it. He hadn't even remembered that it was there. "Blaine, no. Don't."

"I can't..."

"*Don't*. I will be home in 5 minutes, I have to drive. *Do not* touch that bottle. I'll see you soon."

Kurt was pretty sure he broke every speed limit on the way home, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He was lucky enough not to run into any speed cameras or police cars, and arrived home in under 5 minutes, hurriedly parking his car and sprinting into the house.

"Blaine?" Kurt called out, frantic and worried. "Blaine, where are you?"

"Kurt?"

Kurt followed the sound of Blaine's voice into the kitchen, where he was seated on the floor, his legs pulled up to his chest.

Kurt gingerly approached Blaine, whose face was blotchy and tear-streaked. He looked so young at that moment, and Kurt's heart ached for him.

"Did you drink any?" Kurt asked. Blaine shook his head, and Kurt quickly pulled the bottle from the pantry before unscrewing the top and pouring the remainder of its contents down the sink.

Kurt slowly lowered himself to the floor next to Blaine, and reached out to put his arm around the man's shoulders. "I'm proud of you," he whispered.

"Why?" Blaine asked, his voice cracking. "I nearly drank it. I was so close, Kurt, you have no idea. I didn't even trust myself to pour it down the sink, I was sure that if I opened it, or even *saw* it, I would have drunk it. I'm weak."

"But you *didn't* drink it."

"Because of you."

"What?"

"I made you a promise."

Kurt felt his throat close up, tears welling in his eyes. He didn't know what to say, so he just tightened his arm around Blaine's shoulders.

"It was a stroke," Blaine whispered, his voice trembling. "He died in his sleep."

"I'm so sorry," Kurt said, wishing he could do more than offer empty words of condolence.

Blaine shrugged, his body tense and hunched up. "We weren't close."

"Maybe not, but he was still your father. I almost lost my dad once, and it was the worst thing I've ever felt."

"You can't compare the two," Blaine said. "Burt is amazing, and you've always been close. It wasn't like that with my dad at all. I never...I hadn't talked to him in *years*, Kurt. I always hoped that we'd get a chance to fix things, but we never did. I never even told him that I'm gay. And now he's gone, and I just feel like..."

"Like what?"

Blaine sighed. "I don't know. Just...hollow. Hollow and sad and disappointed and guilty."

"Don't feel guilty. You always feel guilty. You need to stop that, it will eat you up inside."

Blaine looked at Kurt with wide, bloodshot eyes. "It's my own fault that I keep screwing things up. I screwed things up with my parents, with my friends, and with you and Burt. I screwed up my whole life pretty magnificently, and then just when I thought I had fixed things between *us*, I screwed up once again."

Kurt felt rage bubble up inside him, but not at Blaine. He felt rage at the whole world, for dealing Blaine such an unfair hand.

"Okay, a few things," Kurt said sharply, and Blaine looked as if he were bracing himself for impact. "You didn't screw things up with your parents. *They* are the ones at fault. They're the ones who refused to support you, and only showed up when it was convenient for them. Parents should show their children unconditional love and acceptance. I was lucky enough to have that, but you weren't – and that is *not your fault*, Blaine. You're an incredible person. Second of all, you need to let go of the past. The guilt over what

you've done – drinking, isolating yourself from my dad and I – it's still hurting you, and it's going to continue to hurt you until you forgive yourself. I certainly forgive you, as does my dad. We understand why you did it, and all we want at this point is to keep you around, and keep you happy and healthy. Also, you need to give yourself more credit, Blaine. I know that you think you're weak and cowardly, but you could not be more wrong. You're the bravest and strongest person I know, and you have heart of gold, and you have been through hell and still come out of it alive. That's amazing, Blaine. Others would have given up a long time ago."

Silent tears were openly streaming down Blaine's face, and Kurt just wanted to wrap his arms around him and let him cry into his shoulder until he felt better. But there was one more important thing that he needed to address.

"But, Blaine..." Kurt asked tentatively, "what did you mean when you said that you screwed things up between us *again*? As far as I know, I'm the only one who's screwed anything up since you came back here."

Blaine blinked at Kurt, furrowing his brow in confusion. "I'm talking about...the way that I feel. About you."

Kurt stared at him, confused.

Blaine sighed. "Kurt, I know that you figured it out. I'm guessing the accidental kiss was the catalyst, and I can't even begin to tell you how sorry I am that I made you feel uncomfortable. I completely understand how inappropriate it is for to have feelings for you, and I can't promise to stop feeling that way, at least not right away. But Kurt, please believe me when I say that I would never want you to feel uncomfortable in your own home. If you need me to, I...I can leave. I can go back to New York, or maybe I can even go to LA and stay with Cooper for a bit. I would miss you like crazy, but the most important thing is that you're happy, and I would like to do my best to salvage what remains of our friendship...if you'll let me, that is. I wouldn't blame you if you didn't."

Kurt was silent, staring at Blaine with wide, shocked eyes. "What?" He stammered, "Blaine, I don't - I don't *understand*. What 'feelings', exactly, are you talking about? Why would I want you to *leave*?"

Blaine smiled sadly. "You're going to make me say it, huh?" Kurt just stared at him.

Blaine sighed. "Kurt, what I feel for you...It's more than just an infatuation. I know that you probably think I'm just a pervert with some kind of innocence kink or something, but that's not how it is. I'm in love with you."

Kurt inhaled sharply, the sound of his own heartbeat loud in his ears.

"I love you, so much. I love everything that you are, every single thing about you. I've never felt this way about *anyone* before – I have been in love before, but never like this. It was never this all-consuming, and certain, and terrifying. And I know how hard this must be for you to hear, and to think about living in the same house as me when you don't feel the same way - which is why I'm offering to leave. I'd hate to go, but I think it might be for the best. I don't think I could ever stop loving you if I stayed. I might not be able to anyway."

Kurt exhaled slowly. His mind was slowly starting to put the pieces together.

The glances, the touches, the heartfelt conversations and admissions of affection and the love in Blaine's eyes – he hadn't made it all up in his head.

It was real. Blaine loved him. Blaine was *in love with him*, he had said it himself.

Kurt's heart was racing, and he felt like it was about to burst from his chest at any second. He opened his mouth to say something, but instead what came out was a bright, joyous laugh.

Blaine looked confused for a second, before his face crumpled in hurt. He scrambled for a moment as if to get up, but Kurt quickly lurched forward and held him in place. "We're a couple of idiots, you and I," he said.

Blaine looked at him in confusion. "What?"

"I love you too," Kurt said, and another laugh burst from his throat. "God, I never knew...I am so fucking in love with you, Blaine Anderson, you wouldn't *believe*."

Kurt watched as the expression on Blaine's face transformed from confusion to wide-eyed disbelief. He witnessed the moment where Blaine realised what Kurt was saying, and his eyes crinkled in the corners as he smiled the most brilliant, dazzling smile Kurt had ever seen in his entire life.

"You love me?" He asked, still with a touch of uncertainty.

Kurt reached out and cupped Blaine's face in his hand. "More than anything."

Staring deeply into Blaine's earnest, wet eyes, Kurt suddenly realised what was about to happen. He swallowed nervously, subconsciously darting his tongue out to moisten his lips. Blaine's eyes widened further, and his eyes flickered down to Kurt's lips and back up before he leaned in slightly and then stopped, giving Kurt the opportunity to pull away if he wanted to.

Fuck. That.

Kurt cupped Blaine's face in his hands and quickly closed the distance between them, a soft whimper of bliss escaping his lips when he finally, *finally*, pressed his lips against Blaine's in a *real* kiss.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Family

Blaine's couldn't hear anything over the sound of his heart pounding in his chest.

Kurt's tongue darted out to moisten his parted lips, and Blaine's followed the movement, his stomach twisting hotly at the sight.

Blaine felt as though his whole life had been leading up to this moment. Suddenly, nothing else seemed to matter other than the boy in front of him, the person who had saved him so many times. Blaine loved and trusted him more than he could have ever thought possible, and now here they were – this was it, the pivotal moment. Kurt's expression was both nervous and inviting, and Blaine couldn't hold back any longer.

He leaned in and paused, giving Kurt the opportunity to pull back – or push forward.

He didn't have to wait long. Two hands quickly came up to cup Blaine's face, and then soft lips were pressed against his. Blaine gasped against Kurt's mouth, the world around him seeming to disappear and come together all at once.

Kurt's lips parted beneath his, and Blaine's whole body shuddered, his stomach twisting and burning as he tasted the hot, sweet warmth. It was still just a simple kiss, a chaste pressing of mouths – but it felt unbearably erotic, and it rocked Blaine to his very core.

"Kurt," Blaine moaned, breaking away for just a moment, just long enough to catch a breath. Kurt whimpered, pulled Blaine back in, and it was as if a dam had broken. Blaine's hands found their way to clutch at Kurt's narrow waist, and Kurt scrambled somewhat awkwardly until he was straddling Blaine's lap, neither of them allowing their mouths to part for more than a second.

They kissed deeply and passionately for an indeterminable amount of time, varying between fast and slow, frantic and hesitant. Blaine could tell that Kurt had never done this before, but he didn't hold back, didn't shy away. Instead, Kurt gently pulled on Blaine's hair, tilting the man's head back so he could kiss him even deeper.

Blaine pulled Kurt closer against his body, and realised a moment later that they were both aching hard. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew that he should probably slow things down, pull back so that they could both take a moment to breathe, but it was just too good, *too fucking good*, and it had been such a long time coming. They deserved this.

They kissed and kissed and kissed, and Blaine never wanted to stop.

Kurt's phone rang.

Their mouths parted with a loud *smack*, and Blaine nearly lost it when he caught sight of Kurt, staring back at him with wide eyes. He looked messy and debauched, his face flushed and hair mussed. His lips were red and wet and swollen, his pupils dilated so wide that Blaine could barely see the blue of his irises.

With the way Kurt was staring back at Blaine, he figured he must be in a pretty similar state.

Kurt's phone was still ringing.

Blaine glanced at Kurt's bag, and Kurt hastily scrambled to find his phone. His eyes widened almost comically when he looked down at the display.

"It's my dad," Kurt said, his voice breathy and hoarse.

Blaine felt a brief moment of panic, before realising that there was no way Burt could know what had just happened on his kitchen floor. It didn't stop his heart from racing.

Kurt cleared his throat before accepting the call. "Hi, dad!" He greeted, even more high-pitched than usual. Blaine winced.

"No, no, I'm fine," Kurt said, his eyes flickering over to Blaine. When he spoke again, his tone was weary. "Yeah. I'm at home. Blaine had some bad news and he called me at school. His dad passed away last night, he had a stroke...yeah, he's right here...okay."

Kurt held the phone out to Blaine. "He wants to talk to you," he whispered.

Blaine felt another irrational stab of panic, but he took the phone from Kurt and held it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Hey, bud." Burt voice was gentle and caring and fatherly, and Blaine swallowed uneasily. "I heard about your dad. I'm so sorry, kid. How are you holdin' up?"

"I, uhh..." Blaine said, glancing briefly at Kurt, "I'm okay. I'll be okay. I'm sorry for calling Kurt out of school."

"Don't worry about it. You shouldn't have to deal with this alone, and I'm glad that you and Kurt have gotten closer lately - close enough that you would turn to him for support when you need it."

Oh god.

"Y-yeah," Blaine stammered. "I...I feel a lot better, now that he's here."

"I'll try to come home soon, see if I can get one of the guys to cover for me -"

"No!" Blaine exclaimed, a little too loudly. He grimaced, lowering his voice before he spoke again. "Burt, you don't need to leave work early. You can stay, I'm fine, really. I have Kurt." Blaine eyes flickered over to where the other boy sat, smiling reassuringly back at him.

"Are you sure?" Burt asked, sounding reluctant. "I'll probably be stuck here until about 7."

"That's fine," Blaine said. "Kurt and I will make dinner."

"You don't have to -"

"I want to. Cooking helps me calm down when I'm stressed. Really, Burt, you don't need to worry about me."

Burt sighed. "Okay, if you're sure. Hang in there, kid. I love you."

Blaine's hand tightened on the phone. "I love you, too," he mumbled, almost certain that Burt would be able to hear the guilt in his voice.

"Can you put Kurt back on the phone for a minute?"

Blaine handed the phone back to Kurt, who talked to his dad for a few more minutes, promising to take care of Blaine and let Carole know what was going on. Blaine stared at the floor, silent. His whole body was thrumming, his hands were shaking, and he had so many thoughts and emotions flying around in his head that for a second he felt as though he might explode.

Eventually, Kurt hung up the phone, and immediately moved towards Blaine as if sensing his distress.

"Hey," Kurt said, and then there was a hand under Blaine's chin, tilting his head up to meet Kurt's gaze. "What's wrong?"

Blaine exhaled a shaky breath. "It's just...it's a lot."

Kurt nodded in understanding. "Of course, I'm sorry, I haven't exactly helped -"

"No, no, don't apologize," Blaine said quickly. "Please don't be sorry about what happened. I'm not."

Kurt smiled. "No, I'm – I'm not sorry for what just happened. But it was the wrong time. I shouldn't have pushed you into telling me something that huge when you were trying to deal with so much already. I've completely overwhelmed you and I'm really, really sorry, it was the last thing you needed right now -"

"Kurt, stop," Blaine said firmly. "There is no right or wrong time for this. You don't have anything to apologize for. Yes, it has been one hell of a day. I'm feeling so many things at once that I can't even begin to make sense of most of it. But there's one thing that I'm sure of, and that's that you *always* make me feel better. And something tells me that you'll always make me feel a million different emotions at once, but I don't care. I love it. I love you. I have spent far too long feeling nothing at all other than pain and regret, and I'm done. I'm through with that. This is the best day of my whole fucking life and I intend to enjoy it."

Blaine leaned forward and pressed his lips to Kurt's in a firm, close-mouthed kiss. When he reluctantly pulled away, Kurt grinned widely, his eyes crinkled and twinkling.

"Blaine Devon Anderson, you sure know how to make a convincing argument."

Kurt got to his feet and extended a hand to Blaine to help him up off the floor. He didn't let go once they were both standing.

Blaine was suddenly aware of how disgusting he felt. His earlier panic had caused him to sweat profusely, and his damp shirt was now cooling and sticking to his skin. The sweat had also loosened the gel on his hair, and stuck his curls to his forehead. He was pretty sure that his eyes were still blood-shot and he seriously needed to blow his nose. He couldn't believe that Kurt had willingly made out with him in this state.

"I need a shower," Blaine said, wrinkling his nose.

Kurt quirked an eyebrow mischievously. "Is that an invitation?"

Blaine's jaw dropped, and Kurt let out a giggle that made Blaine's stomach swoop. Kurt was flirting. They could flirt now, apparently.

Blaine smirked, grabbing Kurt's waist and pulling him close against his body. "Oh, I see how it's gonna be," he teased. "Should I expect this level of cheek all the time, now that we're together?"

Kurt's eyebrows shot up, his body tensing in Blaine's arms. "Is that we are?" He asked. "Are we together?"

Blaine swallowed nervously. "I – I'd like us to be," he said honestly, desperately hoping that he and Kurt were on the same page. "I know that we couldn't really broadcast a relationship all over Facebook or make out in the back of the movies like a normal couple, but...I want to be with you."

Kurt smiled softly, wrapping his arms securely around Blaine's waist. "There's no such thing as a 'normal couple'," he said. "I know that this would be a somewhat...unconventional relationship. There's the fact that you're...well, famous. Not to mention our rather unique history and the whole age difference thing. But I just want to be with you. We don't need to be like every other couple out there. We can just be ourselves – Kurt and Blaine."

Blaine leaned forward and pressed his lips against Kurt's in a soft kiss. "Kurt and Blaine," he mumbled against Kurt's mouth. "I like the sound of that."

"Mmmm," Kurt hummed, ducking his head to press gentle kisses across Blaine's jaw and under his ear. "I want to be your boyfriend," he whispered.

"I want to be your boyfriend, too," Blaine gasped, his hands tightening on Kurt's waist when the boy began sucking gently on his neck – not hard enough to leave a mark, but enough to make Blaine's toes curl. "Of

course," Blaine said, his voice breathy, "we should really have a very long, very thorough talk about all of this. What this means, and how we intend to...to deal with...you're really distracting, you know that?"

Kurt chuckled as he pulled away from Blaine's neck, rubbing his nose against Blaine's in an eskimo kiss. "Sorry," he murmured. "I've just wanted to touch you for so long, it's hard to keep my hands to myself now that I'm *allowed*."

"I know exactly how you feel, *believe me*," Blaine whispered, hands skimming up and down Kurt's back. "But we really do need to talk."

"I know," Kurt said, reluctantly extracting himself from Blaine's arms. "Go have your shower. We'll talk after."

"Okay." Blaine leaned in to place a final peck on Kurt's lips before heading upstairs. It took serious effort not to break out into song.

Blaine showered as quickly as possible and made it out in record time. He threw on the first clean pair of jeans and t-shirt that he could find, not bothering to re-gel his hair. He wondered for a moment whether he should make more of an effort to look presentable for his new *boyfriend*, but he was too anxious to get back to him. And besides, past experience had taught him that Kurt seemed to have a thing for his un-gelled curls, even if Blaine thought that they made him look like a straggly puppy.

After getting dressed, Blaine made his way to Kurt's bedroom. He felt the urge to pinch himself to re-affirm the fact that this was *actually happening*. Kurt loved him, he loved Kurt, and they were actually *together*. In a relationship. Boyfriends. A couple.

Blaine took a moment to be glad for the fact that he had skipped lunch, because he kind of felt like he might puke with nerves and excitement.

Kurt's door was open, and Blaine walked right in to find Kurt lounging on his bed, a wide a genuinely happy smile on his face. Blaine couldn't help but smile in return.

Kurt patted the bed next to him, and Blaine swallowed nervously. He had lain in that bed with Kurt many times throughout his life, but there was suddenly a new layer there – new possibilities, new things that they could explore in that bed.

Deciding that those thoughts would best be saved for a later time, Blaine anxiously made his way over to the bed and slid into place next to Kurt, who quickly curled into his side. Blaine instantly relaxed at the contact. They leaned back into the pillows and cuddled, and it was comfortable and familiar but also brand new and exhilarating.

"So..." Kurt said softly, reaching down to entwine his fingers with Blaine's, "you wanted to talk."

Blaine nodded. "Yeah. But now that we're here, I just...I don't even know where to start. How are you feeling?"

"Honestly? I don't think this whole thing has totally sunk in yet. Today almost feels like a dream. Even lying here next to you right now, talking about this...I'm half expecting to wake up at any minute."

Blaine smirked. "If this is a dream, I will kill the man who tries to wake me."

Kurt snorted and rolled his eyes. "*A Game of Thrones* reference. You are such a dork."

"Hey, you understood it."

"And you're lucky I did, or else you would have sounded like a crazy person."

They stared at each other for a moment, giddy smiles on their faces. Eventually Blaine's smile faded as he realized that they would soon have to get to the serious stuff, even if he'd much prefer to bury his face in the sand and pretend that they were floating on a cloud, miles away from anyone else.

"I'm scared," he said, squeezing Kurt's hand tighter.

Kurt sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. "I know. I'm scared too."

"You do know what you're getting yourself into, right? I mean, Kurt...we can try to keep this private for now, but assuming that this lasts – and I *really* want it to – there's no way that we could keep our relationship under wraps. Definitely not once I get back to New York."

"Because of the media."

Blaine nodded. "I don't want to have to hide you, Kurt."

"I don't want you to hide me."

"But...*God*," Blaine said, "the media, the industry, the whole thing...it's just *brutal*. Completely and utterly brutal. They'll make up their own mind about me, about us, and the reality won't even *matter*. I mean, I haven't even come out yet. Once I do, 'gay' will become the key feature of my personality and my career, in their eyes. Any articles about me will read 'Gay singer Blaine Anderson'. My sexuality will be brought up every time my name is mentioned and I *hate* that, but I could deal with it. I will deal with it. But..." Blaine groaned in frustration, and Kurt squeezed his hand gently, reassuringly.

"...But?" Kurt prodded.

"But there's also the age thing," Blaine said. "It will make everything a million times worse."

Kurt frowned. "Our age difference...does it bother you?"

Blaine sighed, rolling onto his back and frowning at the ceiling. "No, it doesn't bother me. I don't even notice the age difference when we're together, but other people will care. They'll definitely judge me – judge *us* – and I want to be able to say that I don't care what anybody else thinks, but...the media will paint me as some kind of sexual predator, and there will be people who will play on the fact that you're a *teenage boy*, and that bothers me. I hate the thought of being labelled as a pervert for loving you. I want people to see us the way that I do, but I'm not naïve enough to think that that will ever happen."

Kurt didn't respond. Blaine turned his head to see a tear rolling down Kurt's cheek, and his lower lip was trembling as if he were trying to hold back sobs.

"Hey, hey," Blaine said, hurriedly rolling over to pull Kurt into his arms, "why are you crying? Stop that, I've done enough crying for the both of us today."

Kurt let out a soft sob, burying his face in Blaine's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so, so sorry. I don't want you to have to go through that because of me. You don't have to, Blaine. I understand if you don't want to be with me. I won't be worth it."

"No," Blaine said firmly. He grabbed Kurt by the shoulders and pushed him back so that he could look him in the eye. "No," he said again. "You are worth *everything*. God, Kurt – I have lived on this earth for almost 30 years. I've met a lot of men – attractive, talented, intelligent men, who are amazing in their own right – but none of them have ever made me feel even a fraction of what I feel when I look at you. I don't want to scare you away when I've only just got you, but...I'm pretty sure that you're it for me. You're the love of my life."

Kurt stared at Blaine as he spoke, his eyes wide and glistening eyes, lips parted in shock. Blaine forced himself to push on and say everything that he so desperately needed to say.

"Kurt, you are seventeen years old. I know that there is a very real possibility that you could change your mind about wanting to be with me. You could find someone that you like better, or find that you can't handle the pressure, or simply decide that you'd rather be single, and that's fine. But having said that...you told me that you love me, and I believe you. And that's why I'm telling you these things now – I'm preparing you for what it will be like to be with me, because that's what I want. I want a future with you. I'm not asking for a lifetime commitment, but I am asking that we try. *Really* try. Will you...will you do this with me? Please?"

Kurt's cheeks were flushed and tear-streaked by the time Blaine stopped talking. He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. And then he lurched forward and kissed Blaine *fiercely*, and he knew that the answer was yes.

"God, I love you," Kurt murmured against Blaine's lips, looking at him through his lashes. "We're really doing this?"

Blaine just grinned, and kissed Kurt again.

"We need to talk about my dad," Kurt said.

Blaine pulled back from where he had been sucking a hickey onto Kurt's collarbone. "We really, really don't."

Kurt chuckled and gently pushed Blaine back onto his side of the bed. Blaine let out a whine of protest, and frowned when Kurt buttoned the top of his shirt back up.

"Blaine," Kurt said, "we can't keep this from him."

Blaine stared. "You want to *tell him*?"

"Well, we don't have to do it *right now*," Kurt said, sitting up next to Blaine and resting a hand on his chest.

"But yes, Blaine, we *will* have to tell him eventually. I can't lie to my dad about something this huge."

"He's going to kill me," Blaine said, terrified.

Kurt snorted. "Are you kidding? He loves you just as much as he loves me."

"Okay, first of all, he doesn't love me as much as he loves you. Second of all, he's going to kill me, and third of all, *he's going to kill me*."

"Stop being so dramatic," Kurt said, rolling his eyes. "He's actually very reasonable. He *knows* you, he knows that you would never manipulate me or force me into anything. I really don't think he'll be angry."

"I'm *twelve years older than you*, Kurt!"

"If it doesn't bother us, it shouldn't bother him."

"Cute idea, but he let me move back here out of trust and the kindness of his heart, and I repay him by hooking up with his teenage son. And you think he's going to bake me a cake saying 'congrats on the sex'?"

"*First of all*, I think this is quite a bit more serious than 'hooking up', don't you? Second of all, what sex? Third of all, he can't bake to save a life, so that won't be a problem. But there's no way that we could keep up a secret relationship under his roof for long. And I don't want to. We need to tell him."

Blaine groaned and buried his face in a pillow.

"Blaine, I swear to God, if you don't let me finish mashing these potatoes I will mash them on your *face*."

Blaine let out a *hmmm* of acknowledgement and tightened his arms around Kurt's waist, sliding his hands up the front of the front boy's shirt to rest on his toned stomach. Kurt wiggled in protest, but Blaine just continued his ministrations on Kurt's earlobe.

He had discovered that kissing and sucking on Kurt's ears made him turn into a quivering mess, and he was having fun putting his new knowledge to use.

"Blaaaaaaine," Kurt whined, his voice trembling with arousal, "my dad's going to be home in 20 minutes. It was your idea to make dinner, so if you want to eat tonight, I suggest that you make yourself useful and start cooking the steaks."

"*Fine*," Blaine conceded, letting out a put-upon sigh as he extracted himself from Kurt and put a pan on the stove. "Even though I'd much rather eat *you*."

"That is called cannibalism, my dear, and is in fact frowned upon in most societies."

"Aha! Who's the dork now?"

Somehow, miraculously, they did manage to get dinner finished by the time Burt walked in the door.

Burt made a beeline for Blaine and immediately pulled him into a tight hug. Blaine instinctively melted into the hug, and everything about the gesture was completely comforting and safe. Blaine realised, with a start, that although he had lost his father – he still had a *dad*.

Of course, Burt Hummel had always made it clear to Blaine that he was considered a part of the family. Blaine had appreciated it – and believed it, to an extent. He had always seen Burt as a fatherly figure in his life when his own dad was absent – but he had always retained a level of distance. He had never quite treated Burt like most people treated their fathers – had never argued with him over something stupid, or nagged him about eating healthy the way that Kurt did. He had never really sought comfort from Burt when the man hadn't first pushed for him to do so.

But what else could he really be, if not a dad? Burt was the person who had been there for Blaine all those years back, when he'd felt as though he had no-one at all. He had welcomed him into his home with open arms, into the home where he lived with his wife and son. Blaine had never once felt out of place among

them, and when Elizabeth had passed away, he had mourned by Burt and Kurt's side. He had hurt them, and pushed them away, and made mistakes – but Burt's support had been there anyway. He had always *been there*, to give Blaine the support he needed when he felt like he could never get back on his feet.

That's what families did. They loved each other, and sometimes they made mistakes that wound up hurting each other. But at the end of the day, they were okay. They supported each other through fucking alcohol withdrawals, and relapses, and dramas, and deaths.

That was the meaning of family. Family weren't always the ones who shared your genes. Families, above all, are the people who show you unconditional love, acceptance, and understanding, even when it doesn't come easily.

And that was the moment, clinging desperately to Burt Hummel in the middle of the kitchen, that Blaine knew that it would be okay. He hadn't lost his dad. His dad was right here, holding him tightly, his actions speaking louder than a million words ever could.

Blaine knew what he had to do.

After taking a few deep breaths, Blaine gently extracted himself from the hug and placed his hands on Burt's upper arms to keep him in place. He needed to do this before the doubt and fear returned.

"Are you okay, kid?" Burt asked, concerned. "You're white as a sheet."

Blaine's throat felt like it was closing up, but he forced himself to push forward. "Burt, there's something I have to tell you." He glanced at Kurt briefly, trying desperately to convey his intentions, giving Kurt the opportunity to give him a signal to either go ahead or stop. The panic in Blaine's eyes must have showed, because Kurt swallowed nervously, gave a barely perceptible nod, and immediately rushed over to his side.

"There's something *we* have to tell you," Kurt said, looking his father dead in the eye. Blaine's insides squirmed in a mixture of anxiety and pride.

"Dad, you...you might need to sit down for this."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Surprises

"Dad, you...you might need to sit down for this."

Burt glanced from Kurt to Blaine and back again, his brow furrowing into a concerned frown. "You two are freaking me out," he muttered as he made his way into the living room, taking a seat in his favourite armchair. After a short pause, Kurt and Blaine sat down on the sofa opposite him, their sides pressed close together.

"Okay, what's this all about?" Burt prompted, after a long moment of tense silence.

Blaine exhaled audibly. "This isn't easy to say," he said, his voice trembling. "And I understand how crazy it is going to sound. Believe me, it's been crazy for me too. But I need to be honest with you, Burt. You've always been there for me and supported me, even when I didn't deserve it. You've been like a dad to me, and I owe you the truth."

Burt didn't respond. His stomach was heavy with the feeling of foreboding as horrible thoughts began to run through his head. *Was Blaine drinking again? Was he sick? Was he leaving again, for good this time?*

"Burt, coming back to here is the best decision I have made in a long time. In a lot of ways, things are just the way they used to be. The acceptance and support, the sense of family, the Friday night dinners...they all make this place home, for me. But there are also some things that have changed a lot since I was last in Lima."

"Wait," Burt interjected, "is this about Carole or Finn? Are you guys not getting along?"

Blaine shook his head quickly. "No, no, nothing like that," he assured. "Carole and Finn are wonderful."

Burt was relieved for a moment, before he felt even more confused. As far as he knew, Carole and Finn had been the only major change in the household since Blaine's departure six years ago.

He motioned for Blaine to continue speaking.

"Umm," Blaine started, twisting his hands in his lap nervously, "one of the first things I noticed when I got back here was Kurt, and the fact that he wasn't a child anymore. I'd missed six years of his life, and I was suddenly faced with an amazingly mature, smart, and kind man. It was...a shock, to say the least."

Burt nodded, smiling understandingly. "I've always said that Kurt was an old soul," he said. "But I still have no idea where this is going."

"Just, um...just give me a moment, okay?" Blaine asked, looking as though he was about to have a panic attack. Kurt rested a hand on Blaine's shoulder, offering comfort and reassurance, and Blaine seemed to calm down a little at the touch. He took a deep, shuddering breath before speaking again.

"The dynamic between Kurt and I changed when I came home," Blaine said. "We were on an even ground that had never really been there before, since I'd only ever known Kurt as a child. We became close friends – very close friends, as you know. But then I started to develop...feelings. Feelings that I didn't know how to deal with." Blaine reached out and took Kurt's hand in his.

Burt's eyes widened in surprise. Oh. *Oh*. Fuck.

"...What sort of feelings?" Burt asked cautiously, trying not to let his voice convey his internal panic.

"...Romanic feelings," Blaine said, his voice soft and terrified. Burt just stared, his mind having trouble computing the words that he had just heard.

"I didn't even realise what was happening at first," Blaine continued, the words tumbling out of his mouth in a rush. "But as Kurt and I got closer, it got more and more difficult to ignore. And now, I...I love him. I'm in love with him, there's absolutely no doubt in my mind."

"I love Blaine too," Kurt quickly interjected. "We want to be together. We know that it will be difficult, but it'll be worth the effort."

"Jesus," Burt muttered, glancing between the boys. His head felt surprisingly blank, his mind buzzing dully like the static on an old TV. He was so shocked he didn't even know what he was feeling – or what he *ought* to be feeling in this situation. There wasn't exactly a manual for what to do when your pseudo-adopted 29-year-old alcoholic celebrity kid announced his love for your 17-year-old son. Then again, Kurt had brought home some pretty interesting pamphlets from his guidance counsellor in the past...maybe she'd have one for this situation too. Burt chuckled at the thought.

"Are you *laughing*?" Kurt asked, incredulous.

At the matching expressions of shock and confusion on his kid's faces, Burt couldn't help but laugh even harder. Kurt and Blaine glanced at each other as if they couldn't believe what they were witnessing, and Burt buried his face in his hands and tried to get himself under control.

After a couple of minutes, the laughing fit subsided, and Burt wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Well, I can safely say that I wasn't expecting that reaction," Kurt said, his voice cautious, as though he thought that Burt had snapped and was about to have some sort of mental breakdown. Which could very well be the case, come to think of it.

Burt snorted, shaking his head disbelievingly. "This day's just full of surprises, huh?"

Blaine winced. "I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?" Burt asked, frowning.

Blaine stared. "For...for everything! For breaking your trust, and for disappointing you – I know you must hate me, but -"

"-Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up," Burt said, cutting Blaine off with a glare. "Have you two been sneaking around behind my back?"

Blaine shook his head vehemently. "No, no, we only just figured everything out, I promise."

Burt nodded. He *hated* seeing that look on Blaine's face - the look of guilt and shame that he was all too familiar with. Regardless of how shocked he was by this whole...*thing*, Burt knew intuitively that it wasn't Blaine's *fault*.

"That's what I thought," Burt continued. "And are you *sorry* for..." he took a deep breath as the reality of the situation really began to set in. "Are you sorry for loving Kurt?"

Blaine's eyes widened and he turned to look at Kurt. For a moment, Kurt looked terrified. "No," Blaine said. "I could never be sorry for loving him."

Burt found himself breathing an internal sigh of relief. "Then I really don't see why you're apologising," he said. "You're *constantly* apologising to somebody, Blaine. It needs to stop. You take on too much guilt, and blame yourself for things that you have no control over. There hasn't been any deceit here, kiddo. You haven't broken my trust. And I am *not* disappointed in you. I'm not gonna lie - I'm shocked. I'm still processing this. But I'm not *angry*. I don't hate you. I could never hate you."

Blaine's relief was palpable, his whole body slumping as he let out a long, shuddering breath. Kurt smiled next to him and kissed him on the cheek. The gesture seemed so natural that Burt almost didn't even notice.

"Well, I'm going to go and take a shower and get changed," Burt said, getting to his feet and stretching. "And then we're all going to have dinner and discuss this calmly and maturely, without any more apologies." He looked pointedly at Blaine. "Understood?"

Blaine nodded. "Understood."

Dinner was awkward, at first.

Nobody spoke for the first ten minutes, the sounds of forks clattering on plates making their silence even more pronounced. Burt watched Kurt and Blaine as they ate their dinner, their eyes fixed firmly on their plates. They were clearly uncomfortable, and Burt would be lying if he said that he wasn't a little amused by the way they kept trying to sneak furtive glances at one another, attempting to communicate through not-so-subtle nudges and eyebrow waggles.

He'd taken a longer-than-necessary shower, using the time to think about what had just happened. And the more that he thought about it, the more it made sense, considering Kurt and Blaine's intimate history. He couldn't deny the uniqueness of their circumstances, but if nothing else, Burt prided himself on being accepting and open-minded. However, he was definitely concerned about what would happen when Blaine moved back to New York and his life was once again under the microscope. He was worried about how the boys would deal with the backlash that they'd undoubtedly receive. Kurt would most likely be fine. He was extremely strong and resilient, and when he committed to something, he committed to it with all his heart. Blaine, on the other hand...

Burt knew that Blaine was stronger than he thought. A *lot* stronger. But he was also very prone to self-doubt, and extremely sensitive to criticism. His defence mechanisms weren't the best – when faced with a challenge, he tended to cope via escape tactics. Burt was concerned that it would all be too much for him – that he might start drinking again, or withdraw from Kurt and isolate himself.

Then again, Blaine had certainly been through a lot of personal growth since his return to Lima. Although he still had some problems, he'd managed to give up alcohol, and Burt knew that Blaine was actually very proud of himself for that accomplishment. The fact that Blaine had sat in the living room and held Kurt's hand and told Burt that he could never apologise for loving him – that gave Burt hope.

As far as the whole...Kurt and Blaine being *in love* thing. Well. They weren't related, despite the fact that Burt felt like they were both his kids. They'd never related to each other as *brothers*, despite their consistently close bond, so...now that he considered the idea, it almost seemed like a natural progression for their relationship to take a romantic turn. There was a significant age gap between them, but that was honestly the least of Burt's concern. Kurt's mother had been eight years younger than himself, and Burt had always believed that if two people have a strong connection, they shouldn't let a thing like that go over something as arbitrary as *time*. From his experience, the amount of living that someone has done has remarkably little to do with their age. Kurt and Blaine were compatible in all the ways that mattered, and Kurt certainly wasn't a child anymore. Burt still liked to think of him as his little boy, but to call him a child was an insult to the depth and breadth of his experience and understanding of the world. He was an adult, a remarkable young man, and more than capable of making his own decisions about life and love. And honestly, Burt couldn't possibly ask for better partners for both of his boys. They both deserved the absolute best – so it was actually pretty fitting that they had managed to find that with each other.

Still, Burt knew that he had to be absolutely certain that they both knew *exactly* what they were getting themselves into.

Burt cleared his throat pointedly, the corners of his mouth twitching in amusement when the boys jumped in their seats.

"So," Burt said, chewing on a bite of steak while Kurt and Blaine shuffled nervously, "You two do realise how complicated things are about to become, right?"

Kurt bit his bottom lip, chewing on it nervously. "Yeah, we do," he said. "Blaine and I have talked about it. We're both aware of the...*reality* of the situation. I know how many roadblocks we're likely to face, and I'd

be lying if I said I wasn't scared...but I'd never forgive myself if I gave up on this before it even started. When you love someone, you have to at least *try*."

Burt smiled. Elizabeth would have said the exact same thing.

The table fell back into a slightly tense silence, and Burt felt the need to lighten the mood. "I guess you never really got over that childhood crush, huh?" Burt asked, smirking at his son and throwing him a sly wink. Kurt choked on his iced tea, coughing and spluttering while Burt grinned and handed him a napkin.

"What?" Blaine asked, frowning in rather endearing confusion, glancing from Burt to Kurt while Kurt wiped his mouth.

Burt turned to Blaine. "Kurt was a bit smitten with you when he was a kid. You were oblivious, but it was pretty cute. It lasted for *years*, come to think of it. He started telling me about your wedding plans when he was three, and by the time he was eight he was scowling the TV every time you took a young lady to one of your awards shows."

"*Dad*," Kurt whined, his face bright red, "can you not?"

Blaine was blushing too, but the soft smile on his face showed that he was more pleased than embarrassed. "That actually makes a lot of sense," he said, grinning at Kurt. "You never liked Tom very much."

Burt let out a bark of laughter. "Hey Kurt, you remember what you said about him the first time Blaine brought him back here?"

Kurt glared at his father. "No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"You told me that his scarf looked like it was made from cat hair and he smelt like the back of an old lady's underwear drawer."

Blaine laughed loudly, turning to grin at Kurt.

"He didn't *actually* smell," Kurt said, smiling hesitantly back at Blaine. "I was just bitter."

"It's okay," Blaine said with a shrug. "I always hated his scarves."

"I thought I'd gotten over that silly childhood crush," Kurt said, reaching out to grab Blaine's hand on top of the table. "But when you came back, I realised that it had always been you." He leaned forward and rested his forehead against Blaine's, closing his eyes with a soft sigh. "You've always been my prince charming."

And that...wow. That was something. That was definitely love, right there, and Burt recognised the way the boys looked at each other – there was a wedding picture on his mantelpiece upstairs, in which he and Elizabeth were looking at each other the exact same way.

Burt coughed loudly. He hated to break the moment, but the boys seemed to have forgotten his presence entirely, and he felt like he was intruding on a private moment. They snapped out of their daze, smiling sheepishly.

Burt's stomach twisted nervously at the thought of what he had to say next. There was really only one thing about this that made him have serious reservations. He needed to make sure that they understood why he was concerned – he needed it to stick.

"So, boys," Burt said, taking a sip of his water, "We need to be serious for a sec."

Immediately, the smiles faded from the boy's faces, replaced with looks of solemn determination. *They think I'm going to try to talk them out of it*, Burt realised. When he spoke, he chose his words very carefully.

"I need you boys to remember that relationships can be messy, and sometimes things just don't work out. That's okay, it happens. But I want you both to promise that you'll always be good to each other. I know that seems like it goes without saying, but you two are going to have to be extra cautious, because you're not just a couple, you're family. The fact that you're not related by blood doesn't make that any less true. And even if you guys break up, that connection is not going to go away...at least not if I can help it." Burt paused, taking another sip of his water. Kurt and Blaine were listening to him with rapt attention, and Burt was pleased to see that they weren't panicking or getting defensive – just listening, and from the looks of things, understanding.

"I'm not going to say that you two won't make mistakes," Burt continued. "Of course you will, you're only human. But be careful, because I don't ever want to have to choose sides, and I don't ever want there to be any tension or hostility between us. We – me, you two, and Carole and Finn – we're a family, and a damn good one at that. You can get mad at each other, and have ridiculous fights and say stupid things you don't

mean and do all those things that normal couples do, but at the end of the day, I want you both to remember who you love and why you love them, because I'm not giving either of you up. Ever."

If Kurt had been anything like Burt was as a teenager, he would have responded to his dad's advice with an eye-roll, a statement along the lines of, "yeah, dad, *I know*," and a flippant gesture of reluctant acquiescence. But Kurt was different. When Burt met his gaze, Kurt looked back at him with a hard resolve and an understanding that went far beyond his years. He gave Burt a small, barely perceptible nod – a gesture that said *I understand, dad. Try not to worry too much - I'll be okay*. And Burt believed him.

"Burt?" Blaine said, softly. Burt turned his attention to the other boy.

"I promise that I will always try to do what's best for Kurt," Blaine said. "I would *never* intentionally hurt him. I love him so much, and I truly believe that our bond is strong enough to keep us together forever – whether that be as lovers, friends, or something else entirely. I can promise you that, whatever happens in mine and Kurt's relationship, I will never shut either of you out again. I will always consider myself a part of this family."

Burt met Blaine's gaze, and the conviction in his eyes spoke volumes. He gave Blaine a firm nod, not trusting himself to speak around the lump in his throat.

"Well," Burt said, after taking a moment to compose himself, "now that that's settled, the important thing for me to say is – I approve. And I give you my...blessing, I guess."

The smiles on Kurt and Blaine's faces were almost *blinding*. Burt grinned.

"Okay, come on, let's hug it out. Family hug." The boys were out of their feet in seconds, quickly enveloping Blaine in too-tight hugs, and Burt embraced them back just as fiercely.

When they broke apart, Burt noticed that both their eyes were wet, as were his. He surreptitiously attempted to wipe them on his sleeve. "Right, well," he said, clapping Blaine on the shoulder, "It's been one hell of a day. I'm gonna turn in early." He paused. "If you two wanna share a room, that's okay with me, since I trust that you're both mature enough to make wise decisions." He looked pointedly at Kurt. "But if I hear anything– and I mean *anything* – that I shouldn't be hearing, I will not be afraid to embarrass the both of you at the breakfast table, you hear?"

Blaine spluttered helplessly, blushing scarlet, and Kurt groaned, burying his face in his hands. "We get it, dad," he mumbled, and Burt snickered as he carried his plate to the sink before heading upstairs. The sound of Kurt and Blaine's hushed, ecstatic whispering followed him all the way to his bedroom. When he crawled into bed ten minutes later, he fell asleep quickly, happy and content.

Blaine could hardly believe what had just happened.

Seriously, how was this day even *real*? How had he gone from sobbing on the floor with a bottle in his hand, to kissing the man of his dreams, to getting Burt's *blessing*?

Blaine pinched himself, hard. It hurt.

Letting out a burst of hysterical laughter, Blaine ran his hands through his loose curls and span on his heels, making his way out of the bathroom.

Kurt was already in Blaine's bed, clad in white silk pyjamas, and he looked so beautiful and perfect that Blaine had to take a moment to just *breathe*.

Kurt raised an inquisitive eyebrow at him. "You alright?" He asked, smirking.

Blaine grinned, probably looking absolutely ridiculous, and clambered onto the bed to hover above Kurt. "Mmm," he said, leaning down to kiss Kurt softly on the mouth. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I heard you laughing to yourself like a crazy person," Kurt said with a cheeky grin.

Blaine chuckled. "I'm just really happy," he sighed. "I actually can't believe how amazingly this day has turned out, considering the way that it started. Your dad, he...wow. He was amazing."

"I told you so," Kurt said, booping Blaine on the nose. "I can't believe you thought he'd hate you. He loves his family with every fibre of his being, and as far as he's concerned, you're his son. He really, *really* loves you."

Blaine smiled, nuzzling Kurt's neck. His skin smelt like vanilla and coconut. "I don't think I really believed that, until today."

Kurt turned his head to capture Blaine's mouth in a deep kiss, and Blaine kissed back eagerly, before pulling back and letting out a huge yawn. Kurt threw his head back, laughing, and Blaine pouted at his body's rude interruption.

"Sleep," Kurt said, gently rolling Blaine over to his side of the bed before shuffling closer so they could curl up together. "You must be exhausted."

"Mmm," Blaine hummed, pulling Kurt closer to his body and resting his hand over his heart. His eyelids began to droop immediately. "Will you still be here in the morning?"

"I'll be here *every* morning," Kurt mumbled. "Just you wait and see."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Discoveries

Finn was in a really, *really* good mood.

He'd gone over to Rachel's house the previous day, and after some pretty awesome making out, Rachel had announced that he looked tired and offered to sing him to sleep.

He *had* been pretty tired, and he loved it when Rachel sang him to sleep.

The problem was, Rachel had fallen asleep too, and they'd slept way past Finn's curfew.

Finn was sure that he'd be grounded. He knew that his mom was working the night shift at the hospital, but Burt always enforced Carole's rules. However, when Finn got home after midnight, all the lights were off, and Burt seemed to have gone to bed.

Finn knew that Burt would never have gone to bed if he'd been aware that Finn had broken his curfew. He must have been really distracted, or tired enough that he'd gone to bed early.

So yeah, he was pretty pleased to have dodged that bullet.

He'd also slept enough at Rachel's house that he'd been able to stay up all night playing CoD, which Kurt would murder him for if he knew, but if there was any time to stay up all night eating Doritos, drinking energy drinks and playing video games, it was when you were young – right?

So it was now 6am, and Finn was standing in the kitchen, eating leftover pasta for breakfast and feeling buzzed from all the sugar he'd consumed in the past 6 hours.

Suddenly, Finn heard the sound of Kurt's high-pitched giggling coming down the stairs. Finn stuffed his mouth full of pasta and quickly shoved the container back into the fridge before Kurt could catch him. He heard the sound of two pairs of footsteps enter the living room, and Blaine's voice whispered something. Kurt giggled again, and there was a weird shuffling, and heavy breathing.

Finn frowned. Kurt and Blaine were *up to something* – otherwise, there'd be no reason for both of them to be downstairs this early, whispering and giggling. Not that the giggling was particularly unusual. They

tended to do it a lot, usually when they were together. Finn figured that they were probably telling jokes that he didn't understand. He didn't understand half of the things Kurt said, most of the time. Kurt talked about fashion a lot, and people Finn had never heard of. But sometimes Kurt would listen to Finn talk about Rachel or football, and Finn liked that. He also really liked the warm milk Kurt made him. It was never as good when he tried to make it himself.

Finn kind of wished that Kurt would join the football team again. He was *really* good, and Finn thought it would be good for the team to be around someone different. They might learn to be more accepting and understanding of other people - like what happened to Finn when he joined Glee club. Finn was really glad that he had joined Glee club. If he hadn't joined he wouldn't have any real friends, or a girlfriend, or a step-dad and a brother. Well...maybe two brothers, if Blaine counted.

Finn liked Blaine a lot. He bought him a *car*. And he always made Finn sandwiches when he made his own, and sometimes they'd play video games together. He even answered all of Finn's questions about Rachel, and for a gay guy, he seemed to know a lot about girls. His romantic advice had helped Finn get a lot of action, so...yeah, he was like a super-cool, super-rich, super-short older brother. Even though Finn was kinda jealous that Kurt seemed to like Blaine more than him. Ever since Blaine came back, Kurt hung out with Blaine all the time. He still hung out with Finn, but Finn knew that he and Kurt didn't have the same closeness that Kurt and Blaine had. It kind of stung.

The giggling in the living room seemed to have stopped, and Finn wondered for a moment if Kurt and Blaine had gone back upstairs. But...no, they were still there – he could hear faint whispering, and a soft shuffling sound. Finn frowned, and walked over to the doorway that connected the kitchen and the living room.

"Hey, what are you guys – WHOA! *OH MY GOD!*"

Finn stumbled backwards, away from the shocked faces of Kurt and Blaine, who had been...*kissing!* On the *mouth!*

Kurt scrambled up from where he had been straddling Blaine's lap on the couch. "Finn!" He gasped. "I...we didn't think you'd be up this early."

"I was hungry," Finn whined. "But now I'm regretting eating that pasta because I think I might puke."

"FINN! I was saving that pasta for lunch -"

"SO NOT THE POINT HERE, KURT!" Finn exclaimed, flailing his arms about widely and attempting to avoid eye contact with Blaine, who was standing in the background, looking nervous and embarrassed.

"You two were *kissing*," Finn said, gesturing between Kurt and Blaine. "Like, *kissing* kissing. What the hell, guys? Isn't that like, insects?"

Kurt blinked at him. "Finn," he said slowly, "do you mean *incest*?"

"Yeah, that," Finn said. "Because you two are like...brothers."

"We are *not* brothers," Kurt said, glaring at Finn icily. Oh, man. Kurt was scary when he glared.

"Okay, okay, you're not brothers!" Finn amended quickly. "Even though you're both kind of *my* brothers. Which means you're like brothers twice-removed, or something." He frowned. "I'm confused."

Kurt sighed, rubbing a hand over his face.

"That's not right, is it?" Finn asked.

"No," Kurt mumbled into his hand. "Not quite. How about you think of me as your brother, and Blaine as your sort of...pseudo-brother in law?"

Finn's eyes widened. "You're *married*?!"

"What? No! I said *pseudo*. We're just dating. Well, there haven't been any dates yet, but we're...together. Not married."

"Oh," Finn said, and grinned. "That's good, dude, because you're not allowed to get married unless I'm the best man."

Suddenly, a thought struck him, and Finn frowned again, turning to Blaine. "Does Burt know that you two are together? Because no offense man, but you're kinda old. He might freak."

"Hey!" Blaine protested. "I'm not that old. That lady at the movies thought I was younger than you."

"That's because you're short, and you were wearing a *Gollum mask*," Finn said, snickering. "She asked you if you wanted a child ticket."

Blaine pouted as Finn and Kurt chuckled. "Man, it's cool," Finn said, walking over to Blaine and clapping him on the back. "That you're dating Kurt, I mean. You're a really cool *pseudo*-brother in law."

Blaine smiled brightly. "Thank you, Finn. It means a lot to me that you would trust me with Kurt, even after...everything."

"Dude, you've been nothing but awesome since you got here," Finn said with a shrug. "Of course I trust you. But seriously, how are you going to tell Burt about this?" He grinned with sudden glee. "Can I tell him?"

"He already knows," Kurt said with a flippant shrug. "We told him last night."

"What? Damn!" Finn exclaimed, with an irritated huff. "I missed it? That sucks dude, what happened?"

"He took it really well," Kurt said. "And he didn't accuse either of us of incest."

Finn grinned. "Sorry 'bout that."

Kurt glared, but it wasn't scary this time, and Finn reached out to ruffle his hair. And, whoops, there was the scary glare again.

Finn's face lit up. "Oh my god, can I tell my mom?"

Kurt groaned.

Rachel cornered Finn after second period.

"Hey, babe," she said with a too-innocent smile, her voice strategically casual. "What's going on with Kurt? He won't tell me anything about his mystery friend 'Blaine' and why he had to rush out of school yesterday. And he keeps smiling and zoning out during class."

"Umm," Finn said, his heart rate picking up. He was notoriously bad at lying, especially to Rachel. "I don't know?"

Rachel frowned. "Don't lie to me, Finn Hudson."

"Umm," Finn said, his palms beginning to sweat, "Blaine is...his boyfriend? Yeah, that makes sense. I mean – um – Blaine is a boy. Who Kurt is sort-of dating. That's – yeah."

Rachel's eyes lit up immediately, and she smiled brightly. "I *knew* it! A boyfriend! This makes so much sense...but why didn't he tell me about him?" She frowned. "He knows I have two gay dads, I wouldn't have a problem with him having a boyfriend. None of us Glee kids would mind. Why is he keeping this a secret? It doesn't make any sense..."

Rachel was doing that thing where she talked *at* him rather than *to* him. Finn didn't mind it usually, because it meant he didn't have to listen to everything she said, but right now he was beginning to worry that he'd made a big mistake.

"Blaine doesn't go to this school!" He blurted. "And he's not out yet. So Kurt doesn't want anyone to know. You can't tell anybody." He paused. "Also, don't ask Kurt about it. He's really protective of Blaine and he'd get mad that I told you."

Rachel's face softened in understanding. "Oh, no," she said. "Poor Blaine. If he's having trouble coming out, maybe he could talk to my dads?"

"No!" Finn exclaimed. "That's...no. Seriously, Rachel, *nobody can know about him.*"

Rachel pouted, and Finn turned away from her quickly, determined to keep his resolve. "Nope, that's not working on me this time. Blaine's been talking to Burt. He'll be fine."

Rachel sighed melodramatically. "*Fine*," she said, "but just know that I don't approve of all this secrecy. In fact, I find it highly suspect that my best friend and my boyfriend felt the need to keep me in the dark about this, *despite the fact* that I have proven myself to be a loyal and trustworthy person who would never stoop so low as to spread idle gossip."

"I'm sure Kurt will say something eventually," Finn said, in an attempt to soothe Rachel, whose face was scrunched up in frustration and hurt. "Just give him time to figure this whole thing out, okay? This is his first relationship, and it's kind of a complicated situation. He's got a lot to deal with right now."

Rachel's face softened, and she pushed herself onto her tip-toes to kiss Finn on the cheek. "You're a good brother, Finn," she whispered. Finn grinned.

When Kurt and Finn arrived home after school, they were immediately enveloped by the smell of freshly-baked cookies. Finn moaned as he dumped his bag by the door and wandered into the kitchen.

Blaine was in there with Finn's mom. The kitchen bench was cluttered with ingredients and mixing bowls, and two trays of chocolate chip cookies were cooling by the stove. Blaine was scraping raw cookie mixture from a bowl with a spoon, and he grinned when he caught sight of Kurt and Finn.

"Hey," he said with a grin, skipping over to Kurt and grabbing him by the waist. He placed a quick kiss on Kurt's lips, and Kurt's eyes widened along with Finn's, as they synchronously turned to look at Carole.

Carole smirked at Kurt and Blaine knowingly, her eyes twinkling happily. "You two are absolutely adorable," she cooed, and Finn's jaw dropped. "Don't think you're getting out of helping me clean up though, Blaine."

Blaine grinned. "Yes, ma'am," he said, coming back around the kitchen bench and allowing Carole to pinch him on the cheek fondly.

Finn whined. "You said I could tell her!"

Blaine laughed, shrugging helplessly. "Sorry, man," he said. "She *knew*."

"*How?*" Kurt asked, turning to Carole. "How could you possibly ...did my dad tell you?"

Carole chuckled as she began to put the baking ingredients back in the cupboard. "Your dad is at work, he didn't tell me anything, sweetie," she said. "Sometimes it's easier for an outsider to see what's going on between two people than it is for those people themselves. From my perspective, you were both rather obvious. You boys didn't see the way that you stared at each other when the other's back was turned."

Neither of you ever seemed to notice the way that you both laughed slightly louder and freer in each other's presence." She smiled fondly, and beckoned Kurt towards her. He was quickly enveloped in a tight hug.

"I'm really glad that you both figured it out," she said as she squeezed Kurt tightly. "We've already seen the proof that you two are good for each other."

"Well, now I feel dumb for not noticing sooner," Finn mumbled around a mouthful of cookie.

Carole snorted. "Of course you didn't notice, dear. You're not the most observant person in the world. I, on the other hand, am fully aware of the fact that you missed curfew last night and then proceeded to spend all night playing video games and eating junk food." She plucked the half eaten cookie out of Finn's hand.

"On second thought, Blaine, I think Finn can clean up this mess," Carole said, eating the remaining half of Finn's cookie with an evil smile. Finn groaned and grabbed a dishcloth while his traitorous mother linked her arms with Kurt and Blaine's, and lead them into the living room.

"Rachel, are you sure this is a good idea?" Mercedes asked, hesitating on the doorstep. "Maybe he just wants to be left alone."

"Finn said that Kurt's had a lot to deal with recently," Rachel said, hitching her unnecessarily large night bag higher onto her shoulder. "He's been keeping to himself a lot; we've all noticed. How long has it been since we've had a girl's night in?"

Mercedes frowned. "True," she said, "but don't you think we should have called first?"

"No," Rachel said with certainty. "Kurt likes surprises. And it's Friday night. I want to hang out with my best friends." She pouted dramatically, and Mercedes sighed.

"Fine," she conceded. "But if Kurt gets annoyed at us, you're taking the rap."

"Deal." Rachel reached up to ring the doorbell.

After a few moments, the door was flung open to reveal a surprised, pyjama-clad Finn. Rachel smiled brightly. "Hey, babe," she said. "Mercedes and I are here for a sleepover!"

"Not with you, sorry to disappoint," Mercedes said, pushing past Finn to get inside.

"We're here for Kurt," Rachel explained, and stood on her tip-toes to whisper in Finn's ear. "Don't worry," she said, "I haven't said anything about you-know-who. I know how to keep a secret."

Finn gawped at Rachel, and noticed that Mercedes was beginning to make her way upstairs, pillow in hand.

"Wait!" Finn exclaimed, halting Mercedes in her tracks. "You can't come in here," he said, lowering his voice. "Kurt's...Kurt's not here! He's...at Blaine's."

Rachel frowned. "No, he isn't," she said. "The lights are on his room and his car's in the driveway. I can hear him laughing from here."

Sure enough, Finn heard a faint trace of high-pitched laughter echoing down from upstairs. *Shit*.

"Fine, okay, he's not at Blaine's, but he doesn't want to see you guys, okay?" Finn said, getting more and more flustered by the second. "You need to leave. Seriously. Now is really not a good time."

Suddenly Finn felt himself jerked around by a strong pair of hands, and he was face-to-face with Mercedes' murderous glare. "If something is wrong with my Boo," she said, "you had best tell me right the hell now, Finn Hudson, or so help me, I will tell your mother about that time that you and Puck took photos of each other dry-humping a -"

"WHOA!" Finn exclaimed, holding his hands up in surrender. "That's not – no! That's not necessary. Kurt's okay, I promise, I just – I should get Burt! Yeah, I'm gonna go get Burt. He'll explain everything. Don't move."

Finn turned on his heel and rushed off down the hall.

Rachel and Mercedes turned to each other. "Something's going on," Rachel said.

"I don't like it."

"Are we going to Kurt's room?"

"You bet your ass we are."

The girls bolted for the stairs at the same time, sprinting as fast as they could before Finn returned and started acting weird again. They burst through Kurt's door without bothering to knock, stumbling into his room and coming to an immediate halt.

"Holy sweet lord in heaven," Mercedes whispered.

There was a man sitting in Kurt's bed. A man who was *decidedly not Kurt*, a man whose face Mercedes was intimately familiar with, and whose signature golden-hazel eyes were currently trained on her and Rachel in wide-eyed shock.

Rachel let out a shrill scream behind Mercedes, which was also the moment when Finn and Burt came bursting into the room, and Kurt rushed out of the ensuite in a flurry, still donning a mint-green facial mask. His mouth dropped open in shock when he caught sight of Mercedes and Rachel, and his eyes flitted over to the bed in panic.

"Kurt," Mercedes said, her voice surprisingly calm even to her own ears, "why is Blaine Anderson in your bed?"